Public housing conjures up images of rows of brick structures, open windows, and children playing outside. The media often emphasize the slum image of public housing, but to many Pittsburgh residents this community is a way of life. Why would a person choose to raise a family in a cluster of houses connected so closely that neighbors can hear every argument or sound of laughter? For many local Blacks, public housing issues play a long, dark history in their past. Through racial tensions, corruption, and greed, many of these communities were created as a direct result of the careful manipulation of the Black population by government agencies. From the 1950s through the 1960s, Blacks were forced out of their homes and had little choice concerning where they could live; nor did they have the power to resist the pressures that made it difficult for them to move into private homes. Through processes like Redevelopment combined with factors like prejudice, the Black population in Pittsburgh was intentionally steered to live in public housing, condemned to a lifetime of communal living or—more accurately—segregation.

In the 1950s, families could be required to move from their homes for two reasons. First, if a home was considered to be hazardous, a family would be required to move by government action. For any housing unit to be condemned and subsequently demolished, it had to be classified by the Urban Redevelopment Association as a “blighted area.” A 1952 report from the Institute of Housing said blight existed in urban areas if there was, “unsafe, unsanitary, inadequate or overcrowded conditions of the dwellings; inadequate planning, excessive land coverage or lack of light, air and open space; and defective design and arrangement of buildings, faulty street or lot pattern, or socially or undesirable land usage.” If an area was suspected of meeting any of these criteria, building inspectors were consulted. If they found any violations, the owners had thirty days to correct defects; on the thirty-first day, the building was condemned. Furthermore, tenants could be evicted within ten days if the home was found completely unfit for human habitation. In 1960, 4.3/10 Black occupied housing units were considered deteriorated, 1.3/10 were dilapidated, and 2.0/10 were overcrowded—all legitimate reasons to force people out of their homes.

The second way families could be forced out of their homes was by means of the Redevelopment Project. Introduced in 1963, Redevelopment was intended to be an experiment to create private housing in neighborhoods where new construction was stagnant. To enact an entire community rede-
velopment plan, the Planning Commission analyzed physical, social, and economic aspects; street and lot layout; land use; zoning; assessed valuation; and building permits. The Planning Commission then prepared a report, and, if the above criteria did not meet administrative standards, the Commission enacted a plan for redeveloping the area. The Urban Redevelopment Authority could also buy all of the dwellings in a blighted area, tear them down, and re-plan the area for different uses. Usually only residential buildings were demolished; churches and other "substantial buildings" were left alone. In 1952, the Planning Commission certified the redevelopment of over 500 acres of land in the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Point in Downtown Triangle</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>park/commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. East Carson Street at 31st Street</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>commercial/industrial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lower Hill District east of Grant Street</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>commercial/residential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 2nd Avenue at Rutherglen Street</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>industrial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hazelwood Avenue</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>industrial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Area #3 on the south to Bluff Street</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>residential, higher education, commercial, and special industrial purposes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that only twice were the projected plans targeted to residential purposes. Low-cost housing was clearly an insignificant element in the Redevelopment process. Government agencies clearly geared Redevelopment toward industrial developments, although 2,600 homes were destroyed in the process.

C. Ronal Woods, planning director for the Department of City Planning in 1952, commented that the focus of Redevelopment on Pittsburgh industry was for a "sounder economic base for the City." Yet while government agencies had their eyes on dollar signs, Blacks were left with a fistful of problems. Urban Renewal was intended to reverse deterioration and aid in the upgrading of neighborhoods. The ultimate goal was to preserve and continue the "sound growth" of cities while promoting development and maintenance of urban areas. President Eisenhower stated to Congress in 1954 that Urban Renewal should result in:

"First: Prevention of the spread of blight into good area of the community through strict enforcement of housing and neighborhood standards and strict occupancy controls;

Second: Rehabilitation of salvable areas, turning them into sound, healthy neighborhoods by replanning, removing congestion, provident parks and playgrounds, reorganizing streets and traffic, and by facilitating rehabilitation of deteriorated structures;
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Numbers show that relocatees were mostly Black as a direct result of Redevelopment projects. In the 1960s, four Black families for every one white family were forced out of their homes and relocated. This was a result of several factors. First, the areas that were part of the Redevelopment Project were mostly Black. For example, in 1960, the Lower and Upper Hill (3rd and 5th wards) and the Homewood-Brushton area (12th and 13th wards) alone contained 68.8% of Pittsburgh's Black population. Furthermore, these areas contained 29.5% of the city's dilapidated housing units, so Blacks were more prone than Whites to live in "unsatisfactory conditions" which were legitimate reasons for forced relocation. Lastly, as a result of careless management, homes in Black neighborhoods were often found in blight.

Relocating was both stressful and discouraging to Black residents because of the racial biases that surfaced when Blacks tried to buy private homes. As prejudice escalated, frustrations ran high and Blacks began speaking out against the discrimination. One of many court cases filed in the 1960s was an instance in which a Black woman was denied permission to view a home specifically because she was Black. The woman, Mrs. Mary Lou Blair, told the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission that Jack Marsh of Marsh Realty Co. said he would not "jeopardize his business by finding me a home." Only one instance of many, this was the first case the Human Rights Commission investigated that involved a Realtor and was called "a clear cut case of discrimination" in the papers.

In 1958, 74.4% of city blocks were White, 1.9% Black, and 23.7% integrated to various degrees. Also around this time almost half of the City's Black residents resided in public housing units. Keep in mind that "integration" at this time could mean that only one Black family was living in the neighborhood. Numerous cases of White opposition to integration were published during this time, and one survey by the Greater Pittsburgh Board of Realtors reported that city residents were "overwhelmingly against compulsory housing integration." The survey was a response to Gov. David T. Lawrence's Fair Housing Legislation which prohibited the denial of a sale because of race, color or creed, and the results showed that 50.3% of city residents were opposed to integration.

Although integration was mandated with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was not practiced de facto. Legislation attempted to correct this with President Lyndon B. Johnson's Civil Rights Act of 1968 which provided open housing and prohibited discrimination based on race, color, creed, and national origin. Initially, President Lyndon B. Johnson's original draft of the Civil Rights Act was seen as "impotent and uninspiring" to the nation's Black population. However, after the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., housing became an issue of human interest instead of mere politics. Previously, King, in coordination with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), undertook a movement in Chicago to overcome racial
injustices that often took the form of inferior housing. However, even after the Civil Rights Act of 1968 opened up 80% of housing to Blacks, some militant Blacks still saw housing as "out of the reach of most ghetto residents, and so nothing more than an unattainable luxury."

By the mid-1960s, Blacks in the Pittsburgh area were losing their homes on a regular basis. One Carnegie resident, an African-American named Jack Johnson, spoke for many when he told the press that he did not want to leave his home. Blacks were both outraged and frightened at the thought of relocating though they continued to lose their homes at an increasing rate throughout the 1960s. Johnson faced the harsh realities of relocation when he was forced out of his home because of Redevelopment. He, among others, said it was almost impossible to find satisfactory relocation housing and did not want to leave the home that took him fifty years to purchase. The various "improvements" from Redevelopment were not for the better interest of the homeowners, Johnson cried out to the public.

Did economics play a role in this subtle form of segregation? Facts show that segregation and housing expenditure were directly related. Although the housing authority offered Johnson $6,000 for his home, this was not nearly enough money to purchase the new homes being built. By 1967, homes under $15,000 had virtually disappeared from the market. By this time, the average home price was $24,850 and homes over $30,000 represented 27% of the market. Factors like family income had a limited influence on residential patterns. The median family income for Blacks in 1959 was only $3,862 compared to $6,400 for Whites, so Blacks already had a much lower chance of purchasing homes in White neighborhoods. Through Redevelopment, more expensive homes were frequently built which drove Blacks out of certain areas. With the average price of a Black-owned home at $9,000, the lack of housing within an adequate price range led to an increased population of Blacks in public housing. Because the median family income for Blacks was so much lower than Whites, the number of Blacks residing in public housing was disproportionately high. Thus, compromising 16.6% of the City's population, Blacks made up 47% of public housing occupants.

Cost variation from Realtors was another type of discrimination Blacks faced when trying to relocate to a private home. There were many cases which Blacks would pay more for the same home than Whites would because Negro neighbors were undesirable to Whites. In 1963, the Reverend W.D. Petett testified that he knew a Black person who paid $15,000 for a home in Homewood that wasn't worth more that $7,500. Furthermore, banks were hesitant to give Blacks mortgages. Bankers only made the safest investments and would not make loans to families unable to carry mortgages or to those who resided in blighted areas. As one official put it, "We are not social or welfare agencies." Blacks who wanted to buy a vacant piece of land were viewed as bad credit risks and were often denied. The reality of Redevelopment for Blacks was that their homes were torn down and turned over to
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Whites because Blacks could not afford the new middle-income housing which was being built.26

In some cases, Blacks did have the money to buy the new homes that were built but were still denied access. Racial intolerance was the main reason for this obstacle, and biases were deeply engrained in White Pittsburghers’ minds by this time. Whites were not only against Blacks buying homes in traditionally White neighborhoods, but they were also opposed to building more public housing units.27 In the late 60s, half of the Black families in Pittsburgh could afford public housing but were unable to find it. A report published by the Allegheny County Housing Authority in 1972 stated: “Mention ‘public housing’ and some people inevitably think of deteriorating projects and blighted areas. Thoughts of subsidized ghettos loom large in the minds of unknowing citizens. ‘Don’t build low-rent housing here; it will depreciate our property and will give rise to a concentration of minority groups and people on welfare grants,’ is usually what the uninformed taxpayer thinks when public housing is discussed.”28 Obviously, there were many uninformed White taxpayers at this time. Many White residents expressed fear that their homes would decrease in value if a public housing unit was built in their community.29 One White woman was quoted in the New Pittsburgh Courier as saying, “Our area has been integrated for years by well-to-do families. We like the Negro families but you will just turn the place into a slum with $35-per-month families in a housing project.” To avoid the slum image of low-rent housing, the Housing Authority focused its entire report toward elderly people. In the report, the Housing Authority totally ignored the Black population and barely even mentioned families in public housing units. “Isn’t this what retirement should be all about?” asks one caption under a senior citizen lounging in his public housing unit.

Prejudice was not only publicized, but widely accepted. In 1966, the Greater Pittsburgh Board of Realtors—led by Paul H. Rittle—blatantly opposed the Title IV of the Fair Housing section in President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Civil Rights Bill30 which guaranteed equal housing to all people regardless of race. Despite Rittle’s claim that the Board and its Realtors “have demonstrated its good faith toward achieving fair housing,” he stated that Title IV went beyond what is necessary because the choices concerning the sale of a home should be left solely up to the Realtor. Less than a year later, the NAACP withdrew from the Better Housing and Building Conference and cited Rittle’s “subtle type of racism within polished words” as the main reason for the severing of ties.31

Also during this time, the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission found two Mount Lebanon Realtors guilty of blocking the sale of a home to a Negro family. This type of manipulation was common during this time frame, and this case was only one of many examples that illustrated the accelerating racial tensions. The Realtors used racial tensions as a tool to achieve this block by urging residents in the neighborhood to hold “block
meetings” to stop the sale. Another instance of Realtor corruption was a case in which a Black doctor was restricted from purchasing a lot because he did not receive the signatures of approval from 20% of the other lot owners in the neighborhood. The doctor won the case in the end, and Judge Frederic G. Weir explained that he was “constrained to conclude that color alone has caused this controversy.”

In 1955, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission declared it unlawful to “sell, lease, finance or otherwise withhold housing or commercial property based on race or color.” Despite this proclamation, private homes were virtually nonexistent for Blacks during this time period. “Housing,” the US Commission on Civil Rights wrote in 1959, “seems to be the one commodity in the American Market that is not freely available on equal terms to everyone who can afford to pay.” In Pittsburgh, the real estate market for Blacks was not developed, and some Realtors refused to sell Blacks homes in traditionally White neighborhoods. Realtor corruption ran wide during this time, and this is illustrated by a statement by Thomas J. Lubbers, executive director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. He testified to the Post-Gazette that many homes on the market during the mid-1960s had a restrictive covenant that forbade the home to be sold to Blacks. Lubbers also disclosed to the newspaper that within the real estate business, “if anyone stresses fair housing or open occupancy he would be black-balled.” Other community leaders also publicized the discrimination against Blacks who wanted to buy private homes. Rev. Dr. David J. Wynne said that “Many Negroes are living in St. Clair Village because they can’t find the private housing they want. The real estate people say ‘Keep them in public housing.’”

To compensate for corrupt Realtors who blocked private home sales to Blacks, some organizations tried to intervene to help with the relocation process. Churches and religiously affiliated organizations bought approximately 900 new and renovated housing units for low to moderate income families in 1968. Organizations like these stepped into the relocation process because many large families in the low-income bracket were Black. A substantial area of concern was overcrowded conditions. Dr. Bryn Hovde, Ex-Director of the Pittsburgh Housing Association, reflected, “Segregation . . . suspends the operation of the law of supply and demand in that area. There develops an undersupply of houses for an oversupply of people who can’t leave the area. Therefore, they must overcrowd the buildings on that particular land and owners can derive an income without making improvements, and conditions get worse.” To curb this dynamic, groups like Interfaith Housing, Inc. provided direct grants or no interest loans to neighborhood groups who catered to the needs of large families with low incomes.

Even with the help of special interest groups and legalized integration, the problem of finding a home continued to be a grueling task for Blacks. Racial barriers not only restricted Blacks’ choice of private homes, but also
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restricted them by area. In the late 1950s, 70% of Blacks lived in the Hill District, East Liberty, or Homewood-Brushton. With few exceptions, the rest of the population was confined to the Lower Northside and Beltzhoover. The redevelopment of the Lower Hill only increased the difficulty of buying homes for Blacks because this led to an increased number of Blacks in certain areas such as the Hill District and Homewood. Local leaders began speaking out by the 60s saying that Blacks should be scattered, not concentrated in certain areas. Pittsburgh city councilman James Jordan disclosed to the Post Gazette that the reason there was an increased number of Negroes in areas like Homewood was because, “Banks won’t give Negroes mortgages for homes in new areas.” Furthermore, the Redevelopment to the Hill District added to the problem of overcrowding in certain areas, as two out of three new Black households were located in the areas mentioned above.

When homes were found for Blacks, the structures were often dilapidated—the very same reason they were often thrown out of their previous homes. This problem was addressed as early as the 1950s by President Eisenhower who stated to Congress that there was a “lack of good housing for Negroes.” This was a problem that continued for decades. In 1968, half of all Black families who were forced to relocate could afford private homes, but only 20% were placed in “acceptable” homes by Realtors. During the relocation phase of Redevelopment, four times as many Blacks than Whites were relocated, but 23 times more ended up in substandard housing.

During the 1960s, opposition to Blacks moving into traditionally White neighborhoods was widespread and violent. After the home he was offered to rent was burned down, one Black man told the Courier, “All I want is a decent place to reside in. . . . In order to find such a home site, as you well know, I am forced to go into neighborhoods peopled by Whites of the upper-middle class.” Thus, Blacks were subject to a practice called “blockbusting.” This was a process to block integration which occurred when a real estate agent informed residents that a Black family was moving into the neighborhood. The White families then sold their homes to real estate agents below market value, and the Realtors in turn sold the homes to Black families at inflated prices. This led to the ideology that “an integrated neighborhood exists for the time the first Negro family moves in until the last White family moves out.” Mary Klinkner, a white woman who moved into Pittsburgh’s Broadhead Manor in 1953, wrote from the standpoint of a public housing resident: “. . . Pittsburgh started demolishing the slum areas in the Hill District and the Manchester area on the North Side. Broadhead-Manor was singled out for the displaced people. As more and more Blacks were moved in the White population started to move out.”

While the flood of African-Americans into public housing was initiated during the 1950s and 1960s, the effects of this careful manipulation are still seen today. Because of a combination of Realtor corruption and prejudice, areas like the Hill and the West End are known for being primarily Black, while other areas like Shadyside are still traditionally White. The effects of
segregation were not left behind with the Civil Rights Act. We can witness the aftershock every day in Pittsburgh neighborhoods.

Endnotes

10. The Status of Housing.
11. Housing in Pittsburgh.
17. Ploski and Williams 151.
21. Lieberson 93.
24. Lieberson 93.
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29. “West End Residents.”
35. The Status of Housing.
41. Housing in Pittsburgh.
43. “Bias Narrows Choice.”
45. “Bias Narrows Choice.”
46. The Status of Housing.
47. “Bias Narrows Choice.”

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