

# Public Housing and Private Property

## *Colombia and the United States, 1950-1980*

By Amy C. Offner

**D**URING THE YEARS after World War II, rural migrants flooded Colombian cities, fleeing poverty and political violence in the countryside. In the capital city of Bogotá, the need to house millions of very poor people inspired novel experiments, including large-scale public housing construction. By the 1960s, Bogotá and other growing Latin American cities produced a distinctively privatized form of public housing that came to influence policy in other parts of the developing world as well as the United States. The new housing initiatives were in fact homeownership programs that failed to serve the very poor. They not only diverted resources from the poorest people in the U.S. and Latin America, but they contributed to the marginalization of public ownership as a social ideal. These new initiatives suggested that the state's only public responsibility in housing was to orchestrate the expansion of private property ownership, and therefore appealed to right-wing opponents of traditional public housing. Mid-twentieth-century housing programs illuminate the international diffusion of social policies and simultaneously expose the origins of neoliberal housing policies after 1980.

As Bogotá's population exploded, homeless people, Communist Party leaders and low- and middle-income renters turned to illegal strategies to house themselves. Land seizures and illegal subdivisions were in fact the

most common routes to housing during the post-war period. In response, the government used legalization, property rights claims and housing policy to reclaim control of urban space. As part of this strategy, in 1961 the Colombian government secured international loans to build Ciudad Kennedy, the largest public housing project created in Latin America under the Alliance for Progress. Ciudad Kennedy was built on a swampy patch of land southwest of Bogotá. Originally conceived as an independent city to house 84,000 people, the project was ultimately absorbed by Bogotá's explosive growth and today it is the most populous of the city's twenty localities, with a population of nearly one million.

Public housing in Colombia was, by U.S. standards, hardly public at all: it was a private homeownership program backed by government loans. The approach was known as "aided self-help housing." The government provided mortgages, adjudicated property rights and supplied construction plans and supervision, but individual families built, owned and paid most of the costs associated with the housing. Under what were called "autoconstruction" agreements, families received fifteen-year mortgages with no down payments, the exterior shell of a house and the plans and materials to complete the homes on their own. The housing was located on cheap land far from the city center to minimize costs. Families lived in and worked on half-built houses for months while waiting for the city to install water, electricity and sewage systems.

Ciudad Kennedy brought together distinct Latin American and U.S. reform traditions. Within Colombia, the national housing authority that administered the program was the *Instituto de Crédito Territorial*,



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or ICT. It was a product of an earlier period of liberal reform, having been created in 1939 to finance rural housing for *campesinos*, and its history in the countryside oriented it toward fostering small-scale, private-property ownership. The Colombian government also embraced private homeownership because it had a woefully inadequate tax base and lacked the power to raise revenues in the short run.

These tendencies of the Colombian state were encouraged by international advisors who, during the 1950s, added the element of autoconstruction to national policy. In 1951, the Organization of American States established its International Housing and Planning Center, known by the Spanish acronym CINVA, in Bogotá to train housing officials throughout the Americas. CINVA was the brainchild of Jacob L. Crane, who had come out of the U.S. Public Housing Administration. Crane had first encountered aided self-help housing in Puerto Rico, where the policy had originated as a way to implement the U.S. Housing Act of 1937. This New Deal law made federal money available to local housing authorities. While officials in the continental U.S. used the funds to build subsidized public apartment buildings, Puerto Rican policymakers decided to turn poor people into homeowners. The idea was to reduce the cost of houses to an absolute minimum. The state would provide a site, public services and supervision, and recipients would do the rest. Crane participated in Puerto Rico's self-help program, and in 1947 he began working with the State Department to promote similar projects worldwide.

In Bogotá during the 1950s, CINVA and U.S. advisors presented autoconstruction not only as an economic necessity, but a social good. They celebrated the idea of families building houses together through “cooperative (social) action” and “the democratic process.” Community development and self-help became linked terms that suggested a natural relationship between two ostensibly distinct issues: on the one hand, mutual aid and democratic decision-making, and on the other, the mobilization of resources by poor communities in order to reduce the financial demands on national and international sponsors. Policymakers' concern with limiting state expenditures and willingness to make

onerous demands of poor people eliminated public construction and ownership from policy discussions.

In Colombia, self-help housing became the national public housing policy in 1958, when it was adopted by the new National Front government. By the time the Alliance for Progress was launched in 1961, plans for Ciudad Kennedy were already drawn up, and John F. Kennedy visited Colombia to lay the first brick. Kennedy declared that the field where he stood was “not just another housing site—it is a battlefield.” According to Kennedy, the success or failure of Colombian public housing would be the measure of “the capacity of democratic government to advance the welfare of its people.”

In fact, the Colombian government's inability to build publicly-owned housing prevented Ciudad Kennedy from serving very poor people. The minimum income requirements for ICT mortgage loans disqualified at least half of all Bogotanos, and Ciudad Kennedy therefore became a neighborhood for public employees looking to escape rental housing. These were hardly the most privileged people in Colombian society, but the narrow orientation of public policy toward their needs failed to solve the housing crisis for the poor.

Internationally, Ciudad Kennedy became the exemplar of Latin American public housing during the 1960s, a time when self-help was used throughout the region. Latin America in turn became a source of lessons for other parts of the world. Internationally, the best known proponent of aided self-help housing was John F. C. Turner, a British architect who had helped develop the policy in Peru during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Turner's career was extremely odd. As a young man he had admired the ideas of the nineteenth-century British socialist William Morris, a critic of industrial production who celebrated artisanship as the basis of a utopian society. Turner combined Morris's ideas with his own interest in anarchism to develop an argument for autoconstruction. In the mid-1960s, Turner attracted the attention of the World Bank, and together they promoted self-help housing throughout the developing world, arguing that autoconstruction freed poor people from oppressive state authority.

As Turner's career suggests, aided self-help created strange bedfellows. In the U.S. it took off during the 1960s precisely because its promotion of grassroots participation and its attacks on state action appealed to people with divergent political ideologies. By the time the War on Poverty began, veterans of Latin American programs were arguing that the U.S. had much to learn from the rest of the world. According to Harold Robinson of USAID, "Just as the Puerto Rican experience was able to be transferred to other countries, so their varied experience can be transferred back to Puerto Rico and this country." The Johnson administration responded to these calls, and in 1965, began funding aided self-help housing through six federal agencies. The first programs targeted rural areas. The Bureau of Indian Affairs promised to re-house forty percent of all Indians living on reservations. In California, the federal government launched autoconstruction programs among Mexican-American farmworkers who were leaving the migrant labor circuit.

The farmworker programs brought the U.S. government together with religious organizations that espoused radical social ideals. The first contract went to a non-profit called Self-Help Enterprises, Inc. Based in the San Joaquin Valley, Self-Help Enterprises was created by the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization committed to pacifism as well as racial and economic equality. The initiative also involved members of the Catholic Rural Life Conference, an organization that embraced a yeoman ideal and sought to preserve family farming through cooperatives, unions and mutual aid. Its members mistrusted large-scale government action, seeing it as inconsistent with Catholicism.

These Quakers and Catholics celebrated self-help housing for its participatory, cooperative process, which they described as an exercise in democracy. In truth, the War on Poverty's self-help programs permitted families very few choices about their housing: they could select among several floor plans, for instance, but they had no influence in decisions about financing or eligibility. Nonetheless, they did have more choices and collective responsibilities than public housing residents, and Self-Help Enterprises therefore presented itself as giving farmworkers a "voice" and helping them "organize." The suggestion that autoconstruction created genuine

power for poor people acquired some credibility locally because the leaders of the housing program supported the United Farm Workers, which was organizing at the same time in the very same communities.

By 1968 there were over one hundred rural self-help housing programs in thirty U.S. states. Simultaneously, the federal government had begun to sponsor projects in cities. These typically took the form of urban homesteading programs, where tenants rehabilitated run-down buildings and bought them at reduced prices. One of the country's best-known urban homesteading organizations, the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board in New York City, was co-founded by Don Turner, a veteran of Latin American self-help programs. In New York, urban homesteading not only gave tenants a path to property ownership, but it gave the municipal government a way to unload abandoned buildings during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Lacking the money to rehabilitate and manage public property, the City ceded the buildings to tenants.

These programs varied in important ways. While urban homesteading in New York fostered cooperative ownership among low-income residents, in other cities it became a strategy for individual homeownership by middle-class people. The rural programs ranged from honestly run initiatives in the San Joaquin Valley to programs administered by grower associations that had no interest in providing decent housing. What these programs shared was an inability to house all people no matter how poor. Even the best run programs needed to make sure that recipients could repay their mortgage loans, therefore excluding the poorest farmworkers. Some farmworker advocates insisted that the only way to make private homeownership truly affordable was to subsidize it exactly like public housing, with the government covering the entire cost of construction and much of the maintenance cost. That level of subsidy was never considered, however, and no one proposed actual public ownership.

Indeed, the other common feature of all these programs was their association of private-property ownership with ideals of democratic decision-making, community building, individual well-being and human freedom. Their proponents contrasted self-help



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programs not only to dreadful housing provided by agribusiness or urban slumlords, but to miserable examples of public housing. Aided self-help thus harmonized with the New Right's attacks on public housing and the welfare state, and it proved to be the housing policy that survived and grew after 1980.

These programs illuminate the complex lineage of policies and ideas that have displaced public construction and ownership as ways of housing people. During the 1930s, Puerto Rican officials made U.S. public housing law into a tool to foster private homeownership through autoconstruction. Throughout Latin America, Puerto Rico's experiment appealed to governments that lacked the tax base necessary to directly build or manage residential property. For the leaders of Colombia's National Front, advisors from CINVA and the State Department and John Turner and the World Bank,

the social experience of autoconstruction simultaneously promised to foster identification with the state and democratic self-organization. By the mid-1960s, Latin America had produced a semi-privatized model of public housing that purported to be both cheap and democratic. That was one way of describing a program that pushed tremendous costs and responsibilities onto housing recipients, and which in Bogotá proved too expensive for poor people to afford. Despite these shortcomings, Latin America's example inspired the U.S. government to adopt aided self-help housing during the War on Poverty, establishing what were to become permanent programs operating on a national scale.

The history of these housing programs illuminates lines of mutual influence between Latin America and the U.S. and suggests that mid-century reform, in unexpected ways, helped produce neoliberal practices. **P<sup>2</sup>**