

Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program: A Moral Responsibility to Right the Wrongs of Harmful Housing Policies and “Urban Renewal” Programs

On my way to sports practice each week, I drove past Levittown, Pennsylvania, an average working-class suburb on the outskirts of the northeast section of Philadelphia. The Bucks County census-designated place was forty-five minutes from my house, and I didn't think much of it beyond its proximity to Sesame Place. Needless to say, I was shocked when I opened the syllabus for the housing and urbanization course I took my sophomore year. Listed was a chapter written by historian Thomas J. Sugrue in the book *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, titled “Jim Crow’s Last Stand: The Struggle to Integrate Levittown.” The chapter introduced me to the difficult, and sometimes violent, struggle for residential integration and the government’s involvement in maintaining racial boundaries in a typical northern town. In this paper, I will discuss the ethics of both private and public entities contributing to residential segregation during the post-war period in order to spur economic development, and the recent moral impetus behind the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program.

Levittown, Pennsylvania is one of eight master-planned developments built by Levitt & Sons in the 1950s, a real estate company formed by Abraham Levitt and his children William and Alfred. Levitt & Sons pioneered the mass production of homes, providing affordable Cape Cod-style houses following World War II, a necessity for GIs and their newly formed families.¹ Levittown seemingly was the epitome of suburbia, the type of utopia you see in movies like *The Truman Show*, where the protagonist Truman lives in Seahaven Island, which is populated with architecturally homogeneous, pastel-colored houses evocative of the “American Dream.” Truman goes about his daily, ordered life unbeknownst to him that everyone in the town is an

¹Kenneth T. Jackson, “The Baby Boom and the Age of the Subdivision,” in *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

actor, and that Seahaven Island is a large soundstage under a dome in Los Angeles. Much like Seahaven Island, throughout the twentieth century Levittown was not the idyllic place it claimed to be.

Prior to 1900, white slave owners and their Black slaves in the American South interacted frequently.² Despite racial inequality, slaves often lived with or nearby their masters and maintained regular communication. Similar interracial contact was also present in northern cities, with dissimilarity indices - data used to quantify the distribution of different racial groups across geographic areas - showing that Blacks were more likely to live among whites as opposed to other Blacks. The two main factors leading to the emergence of the “ghetto,” an ethnically uniform area, were industrialization and the movement of Blacks from farm to city. Industrial production and the development of new technologies drew southern Blacks to the North, especially after the onset of World War I. The influx of Blacks to the North heightened racial tensions, resulting in the commencement of residential segregation. By World War II, the physical boundaries between white and Black life, referred to as “color lines,” were cemented. With the rise of suburbia in the post-war period, the lines of segregation expanded beyond the city. Despite the ebb and flow of immigration and large shifts in the population, the color line was maintained, ultimately cementing itself as a permanent feature of the post-war city.³ The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) was established during the Great Depression in 1933 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program. The HOLC provided funds to refinance homes in default and awarded low-interest rate loans to those families who lost their homes to foreclosure. Furthermore, the HOLC developed a four-category grading system to determine which neighborhoods were eligible for capital investment. The lowest tier

²The word “Black” will be capitalized throughout this paper in accordance with [AP guidelines](#)

³Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, “Construction of the Ghetto,” in *American Apartheid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

neighborhoods were often composed of mostly Black residents or were anticipated to have an influx of Blacks in the near future; they were considered “risky” areas for investment and were marked as red zones, thereby creating a practice of denying loans to Blacks known as “redlining.” In the subsequent decades, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) began a loan program that was the catalyst for rapid suburbanization, luring white families out to new master-planned developments such as the Levittowns. In *American Apartheid*, authors Massey and Denton note that “in the 1940s, the FHA recommended the use and application of racially restrictive covenants” in determining to whom it should loan.⁴ In Levittown, the FHA worked in conjunction with the Veterans Administration to underwrite low-interest mortgages for the purchasing of houses by white World War II veterans. The development’s covenant declared that “the use of these premises by persons other than Caucasians” was forbidden.⁵ These two government agencies not only published recommendations that *encouraged* racial discrimination in housing, but also provided the financial capital to private developers to implement these guidelines in newly built projects.

While cities like Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, and Greensboro are inherently linked to the Civil Rights movement, Levittown is an important actor in the history of racial reckoning in the North during this time. For over two decades, the Levitts restricted their developments to white buyers, and William Levitt declared that he has “come to know that if we sell one house to a Negro family, then 90 or 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community. This is their attitude, not ours. As a company, our position is simply this: we can solve a housing problem, or we can solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two.”⁶ Real estate was

⁴Massey and Denton, “American Apartheid” 54.

⁵Dianne Suzette Harris and Thomas J. Sugrue, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand: The Struggle to Integrate Levittown,” in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

⁶David Oshinsky, “A Powerful, Disturbing History of Residential Segregation in America,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, June 20, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/books/review/richard-rothstein-color-of-law-forgotten-history.html>.

viewed as an appreciating asset that could only maintain its high value when it was located in the “right” neighborhood, synonymous with the “white” neighborhood. Despite the momentous decision in the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* case, which outlawed racially restrictive covenants on the basis of violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Levitts continued to discriminate against non-white families looking to buy and even planned to evict two families in their Long Island community that had invited Black children over to play with their kids.⁷ After the NAACP’s victory in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, its legal defense fund seized the opportunity to file a lawsuit against the Levitts, FHA, and Veterans Administration. Led by Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP lost the ruling. Government agencies played a large role in residential segregation, and the United States legal system continually condoned their actions. Thus, in Levittown, the push for integration had to come from local activists. Levitt’s first mistake was building a development in southeastern Pennsylvania, the heart of the Quaker homeland. The American Friends Service Committee worked in conjunction with the Human Relations Council of Bucks County to find a “model” Black family to which a homeowner would sell. William (Bill) Myers, a veteran, his wife Daisy, and their two children became that family. The Myers family was denied a mortgage even though Bill had a steady job as a lab technician and was studying to become an electrical engineer while his wife held a college degree. As a result, the Myers were lent money from a wealthy New York City philanthropist.⁸ When it became public knowledge that the Myers family was moving to Levittown in 1957, uproar ensued. Hundreds of protestors assembled around the Myers home, breaking windows and spray painting the exterior.⁹

Throughout the following months, residents rented the property adjacent to the Myers home and

⁷Sugrue, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand: The Struggle to Integrate Levittown,” 175-199.

⁸Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 151.

⁹Sugrue, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand: The Struggle to Integrate Levittown” 175-199.

set up a “clubhouse” that flew the Confederate flag and served as the home base for rioters. Four years later, Bill and Daisy sold their home and moved back to a Black area in York, Pennsylvania.¹⁰

The segregation spurred by the Levitts is usually assumed to be de facto segregation, which is segregation resulting from the actions of private entities. In *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein argues that Levittown also endured de jure segregation, which is segregation that results from law and government legislation. The protests outside of the Myers home can be considered “unlawful intimidation” to which local police and government officials did not adequately respond and attempt to combat; certain police even found the riots comical and encouraged the protestors. The state troopers and local police dispatched had not only had a duty to protect the Myers family, but an ethical responsibility to ensure the safety of the family. When a property is purchased, the owner has a right to quiet enjoyment. This right was clearly violated, yet law enforcement officers stood idly by. As previously described, grassroots organizations endeavored to alter the racial composition of the neighborhood through advocacy, as attempting to do so through lawsuits proved unfruitful.¹¹ In 1956, Charles Abrams, the former head of the New York State Commission Against Discrimination and housing advocate, said that “the very enforcement of supreme court decrees throughout the history of the country has depended not upon executive reinforcement but upon the moral backing of the community.”¹² Equality can only be achieved when the people decide that it is a moral necessity. In the case of Levittown, the principles of Quakerism, such as the newfound desire for intercultural education, powered the housing integration movement. Over the following decade, although attitudes towards people of

¹⁰Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, 141.

¹¹Oshinsky, “A Powerful, Disturbing History of Residential Segregation in America.”

¹²“Charles Abrams,” WNYC - New York Public Radio (The NYPR Archive Collections), accessed 1AD, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/72277-charles-abrams/>.

color in the North began to shift, Levittown remained a mostly white, isolated enclave, and still does to this day. The 2020 Census data show that 89.1% of Levittown is white while only 4.9% is Black.¹³ In other parts of the country, the federal government continued to take actions to ensure that the same would hold true.

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Act of 1954 was passed, displacing Black families and relocating them to high-density public housing projects. Massey and Denton assert that public housing functions as a "second ghetto" by concentrating Black families in unsafe living environments, a comparison most visible in failed public housing projects such as the infamous Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis which was demolished in the mid-1970s.¹⁴ By implementing policies that restricted the flow of capital to oftentimes majority-Black neighborhoods, segregation was spurred, thereby isolating the Black community. The federal government indirectly created these Black slums that they could then completely redevelop and use for the construction of the Interstate Highway System, cloaking this tactic under the name of "urban renewal."

Throughout the 1950s, the federal government incentivized cities to construct freeways by paying for 90% of the associated costs.¹⁵ While dozens of communities were affected by the construction of the Interstate Highway System, the most notable include the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota; and Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana, among others. In Tulsa, a violent massacre by the Ku Klux Klan in 1921 destroyed the prosperous Greenwood neighborhood, then known as "Black Wall Street." After finally restoring the area to its former glory throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the

¹³"QuickFacts: Levittown CDP, Pennsylvania; Bucks County, Pennsylvania," United States Census Bureau, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/AGE295219>.

¹⁴Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, "Construction of the Ghetto," in *American Apartheid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁵"Claiborne Expressway," Congress for the New Urbanism, May 7, 2019, <https://www.cnu.org/what-we-do/build-great-places/claiborne-expressway>.

federal government funded the Inner Dispersal Loop, a component of Interstate 244, which was completed in 1941. One *Smithsonian Magazine* article describing the situation poignantly affirmed that “what the city could not steal in 1921, it systematically paved over 50 years later.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, north of Oklahoma in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota, properties were seized in 1956 under eminent domain to make space for Interstate 94, which ran right through the center of the thriving Black business district. The May 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis - located adjacent to St. Paul - prompted a nation-wide discussion of social justice, providing momentum for the organization Reconnect Rondo to advocate for a 22-acre land bridge, consisting of residential, commercial, and green spaces that would lay over a section of the highway.¹⁷ Similarly, in 1968 the Interstate Claiborne Expressway was erected through the historic Tremé section of New Orleans. Hundreds of oak trees lining long pedestrian walkways that housed some of the first Mardi Gras parties in the city were cleared, along with 500 homes. While a freeway section that would create greater accessibility for the riverfront areas of the city, called the Vieux Carré Riverfront Expressway, was originally proposed, it ultimately went unrealized due to the backlash garnered from its plan to pass through the extraordinarily expensive French Quarter.¹⁸ These highway projects led to the disintegration of Black residential and commercial districts, resulting in investment in white communities and disinvestment in Black communities.

While white families fled Philadelphia for suburbs in Montgomery and Bucks Counties such as Levittown, Black residents in the Nicetown neighborhood of North Philadelphia were

¹⁶Smithsonian Magazine, “Decades after the Tulsa Race Massacre, Urban 'Renewal' Sparked Black Wall Street's Second Destruction,” Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, June 2, 2021), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/black-wall-streets-second-destruction-180977871/>.

¹⁷Rachael Dottle, Laura Bliss, and Pablo Robles, “What It Looks Like to Reconnect Black Communities Torn Apart by Highways,” Bloomberg.com (Bloomberg, July 28, 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-urban-highways-infrastructure-racism>.

¹⁸“Claiborne Expressway,” Congress for the New Urbanism.

left to deal with the repercussions of the Roosevelt Boulevard Extension. Introduced in 1949, the 3.5-mile addition to the highway displaced about 1,750 people while 400 homes were razed, despite protest from the residents who formulated two alternative proposals for the extension. The population of Nicetown decreased by one-third, and the area was in despair by the early 1960s. In 1965, the City of Philadelphia's Planning Commission outlined another urban renewal plan in Nicetown. Noting that one major problem was the "division of the neighborhood into isolated quarters by major traffic arteries" the government decided to "rectify" it by demolishing six residential blocks surrounding the highway, in which the majority of residents were Black, deemed "blighted." Threatening to leave Philadelphia, the Link-Belt Engineering Company struck a deal with the city government to allocate this land to allow for the company's expansion. Urban renewal initiatives such as the Roosevelt Boulevard Extension are often economic revitalization plans, paving the way for wealthy suburbanites to easily access a city's central business district for commercial activity and to allow these commuters to keep working at city-based firms and companies.¹⁹

Across the country from Levittown, racially restrictive property covenants and government policy similarly worked in tandem to produce segregation in Portland. The need for workers at the Kaiser Shipyards during World War II resulted in an influx of Blacks to Oregon. Blacks worked in Portland but lived in Vanport, a wartime housing development directly across Vancouver on the Oregon side of the Columbia River. After Vanport flooded in 1948, Blacks moved to the Albina neighborhood, the only area of the city where they could legally purchase homes due to discriminatory real estate statutes ironically enumerated in a "Code of Ethics"

¹⁹Elizabeth Greenspan, "Nicetown," Places Journal, June 1, 2019, https://placesjournal.org/article/nicetown-inequality-in-philadelphia/?cn-reloaded=1#ref_17.

passed by the Realty Board of Portland in 1919.²⁰ Consequently, Albina became the epicenter of Black life in Portland throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However, housing was destroyed, and residents were displaced after multiple large development programs took place throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, predatory lending in the 1970s and 1980s made it virtually impossible for Blacks to obtain mortgage loans and repurchase homes in Albina. After a few decades of deterioration, white residents moved back into the area and began the process of redevelopment, commencing gentrification. Now, a place that was once the heart of Portland's Black community is devoid of a strong Black culture.

Four large projects significantly impacted Albina: an extension of Highway 99W along Interstate Avenue in 1950, the building of the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in 1959, the construction of Interstate 5 in 1962, and the expansion of the Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in 1972.²¹ In 1953, Robert Moses, a prominent public official known for his building and public works programs mainly in New York but also nationally, outlined and proposed a route for a new freeway in Portland, called the Eastbank Freeway. In the subsequent decades, the core of his plan was implemented as freeways sliced through Albina. The extension of Highway 99W added a mile-long section along the Willamette River, destroying housing along the waterfront and creating a wedge between the neighborhood and the water.²² Nine years later, 476 houses next to Interstate Avenue were demolished to make room for ample parking for the newly built Memorial Coliseum, a sports arena. The government leveraged eminent domain to “legally” destroy large stocks of housing to make space for these new projects, and between 1950 and 1970, the population of Albina plummeted from 14,000 to around 5,000. The freeway helped

²⁰Alana Semuels, “The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, July 22, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/racist-history-portland/492035/>.

²¹Joe Cortright, “How ODOT Destroyed Albina: The I-5 Meat Axe,” *City Observatory*, March 30, 2021, https://cityobservatory.org/how_odot_destroyed_albina_par2/.

²²Joe Cortright, “How ODOT Destroyed Albina: The untold story,” *City Observatory*, March 22, 2021, <https://cityobservatory.org/how-odot-destroyed-albina-the-untold-story/>.

transport middle and upper-class suburbanites to their jobs downtown but was not of any service to Albina residents. To this day it is apparent that the freeway benefits mostly the wealthy, even as the city debates widening the freeway with the proposed Rose Quarter Expansion project. Only one-third of the residents of Census tract 20.03 - the area around Interstate 5 where the expansion would take place - travel to work solely by car.²³

Government-sponsored urban renewal projects helped one racial group at the cost of another. After the proposal was announced for the second urban renewal project in Philadelphia that was previously mentioned, councilman John Kelly publicly spelled out this predicament: “The highway will benefit all of the citizens. Unfortunately, some must be hurt.”²⁴ The ethical dilemma at hand is how to choose a favorable location for the project while also keeping in mind what groups of people will be negatively impacted by that choice. Tragically, across the United States the pattern was the same, as Black residents were consistently harmed by these projects.

The location selection process could be justified by John Stuart Mill’s belief in classical utilitarianism - one should take an action that maximizes the happiness of the most people. In other words, the principles of utilitarianism, specifically the Greatest Happiness Principle, coined by Jeremy Bentham, dictate that an action that does the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people is inherently a “good” action.²⁵ Furthermore, Mill writes “the motive, that is, the feeling which makes him will so to do, when it makes no difference in the act, makes none in the morality.”²⁶ Applied to this case of infrastructure investment, Mill would argue that even if the government specifically chose to bulldoze Black communities for the insertion of new

²³Joe Cortright, “Freeway Widening for Whomst?,” City Observatory, March 6, 2019, <https://cityobservatory.org/freeway-widening-for-whomst/>.

²⁴Elizabeth Greenspan, “Nicetown.”

²⁵John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism,” accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.utilitarianism.com/jsmill-utilitarianism.pdf>.

²⁶John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 118.

highways, the action is not morally less than if the government were to build a highway that was designed to prevent the destruction of residential areas. I disagree with Mill's argument, as I believe that a motive for taking a "good" action can produce *known* negative consequences. In the case of highway construction, a strong ethical litmus test is how Black neighborhoods are *supported* by the government and *compensated* for both the economic and sentimental losses endured. While Mill argues that motives have no impact on the intrinsic value of a good action, I believe that it is how one grapples with the negative consequences of such an action that speaks to the ethics of the decision-makers. In an effort to revitalize the Black communities harmed by government highway projects, after decades of neglect, the recently passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act includes the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program, which grants \$1 billion over five years to remove or retrofit highways.²⁷

Segregated neighborhoods did not occur by chance; rather they are the direct results of racially restrictive property covenants, blockbusting techniques in which Black families were forced to sell their homes at below market-value prices, and post-war suburbanization projects like Levittown. Thus, Black communities were purposefully isolated even before the government instituted federal policies that continued to wreak havoc on them in the name of "urban renewal" and "slum clearance." Unlike Mill's evaluation of morality, we must not forget the intentions of the federal government in pursuing economic development at the expense of Black residents, but we should consider the approval of the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program as a moral recognition that we must right the wrongs of the past and take steps towards creating a more just future. In the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, advocacy groups spanning from

²⁷Bill Lucia, "\$1B For Urban Highway Removals On the Way, More Money Could Follow," Route Fifty (Route Fifty, November 8, 2021), <https://www.route-fifty.com/infrastructure/2021/11/highway-removal-funding-infrastructure-bill/186714/>.

Durham to Shreveport to Portland have lobbied for the removal of harmful infrastructure.²⁸ True to Charles Abrams's words, it has not been "executive reinforcement," but rather the "moral backing" of communities throughout the history of the United States, exemplified by the actions of the Quakers in mid-twentieth-century Levittown and of advocacy groups over the past few years, that have successfully pushed for equality.

²⁸Caitlin Dewey, "Advocates Rally to Tear Down Highways That Bulldozed Black Neighborhoods," The Pew Charitable Trusts, July 28, 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/07/28/advocates-rally-to-tear-down-highways-that-bulldozed-black-neighborhoods>.

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