African American women and tenant management of public housing: A case study of Stella Wright

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African American Women and Tenant Management of Public Housing: A Case Study of Stella Wright Homes

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences Eastern Michigan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Abstract

This thesis explores the theories and praxis of struggles for community-control of public housing in the era of Black Power through a case study of the Stella Wright Rent Strike. From 1970 to 1974, tenants of the Stella Windsor Wright Homes in Newark, NJ, waged the longest rent strike in the history of public housing in the United States. Following in the wake of the 1967 Rebellion and the election of Kenneth A. Gibson as the city’s first Black mayor in 1970, Newark’s poor and working-class Black tenants blended grassroots militancy with political savvy as they successfully fought for community control of public housing from the high-rises to city hall to Washington, D.C. Building upon social networks and indigenous leadership within the project, tenant organizers translated effective organizing into a successful model of tenant management.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the people who’ve been my most valued educators. The unnoticeable and unnamed—my bus stop mentors, and street corner tutors. The stoops that were my classrooms of life and people. Teaching me that we all have a story worthy of telling. Those who gave me hope in the wake of adversity. The warmth of faces in apartment house hallways offered greetings of encouragement and support. And most importantly an acknowledgment of gratitude for the opportunity to have crossed paths with so many scholars whose life’s classroom poured into me the unwavering devotion to tell their stories. Thank you.

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And lastly to my beloved mother and father whose personal sacrifice allowed me to go beyond their achievements and “Jump for the sun!” It was through this community of support that I can humbly submit this thesis to you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

All low-income Americans have battled for sustainable, affordable housing, but for African Americans specifically, this battle has been impacted by a dialectic history rooted first in slavery and then in post-slavery racialized policies. The reoccurring theme which becomes the backdrop of the African American experience is rooted in housing inequity—beginning before emancipation and maintaining long after. The conditions in which the first Africans lived, slave housing, attributed to their severe illness and ultimate premature demise. The same has been historically true for African Americans. Whether it be in the captive conditions of enslavement housing of the South or the economically oppressed conditions of Black families forced to live in segregated northern cities, African American were exposed to conditions that shortened lives and raised anxieties. The housing options most African Americans found in industrial cities fostered similar conditions to those in the South. The cramped and often dangerous substandard housing Blacks accessed exploited meager incomes and enriched landlords.

The 2008 housing crisis resulted in the most significant reduction of African American homeownership rates since the Fair Housing Act (1968) was legislated to promote the American Dream of homeownership. As a result, many lower incomes African Americans have been placed in the throes of housing inequity. Post-Great Recession incomes, income, and credit requirement, and rapidly increasing rents in gentrifying urban centers have exacerbated housing disparity in places like Brooklyn, NY, and Los Angeles, CA. The gritty urban center remade has enticed a generation of what economist Richard Florida termed the “creative class,” college-educated, high-income-earning, suburban white millennials to cities throughout America. This cohort of high-income earners, along with contemporary planning and economic development policymakers, have contributed to a sharp spike in rent and the cost of living as they have remade
cities in their own image. This phenomenon has resulted in an ever-increasing trend of homelessness and destabilization of Black communities, resulting in many scholars reevaluating the historical and contemporary need for public housing.

In restoring the value of public housing, scholars have debated the myriad causes that have worked in concert to create housing inequity amongst Black communities. Gentrification has accelerated housing inequity amongst poor and working Black and Latino renters competing for available market-rate apartments and left with little-to-no options in the absence of public housing. The proliferation of thirty years of gentrification has left a tangible mark on American cities, forcing many would-be occupants of public housing further from the city cores and often, after eviction or apartment application denial, seeking temporary living arrangements with family members, or non-profit run shelters for women with children, and for many single men and women, a worse fate awaits them: homeless.

These phenomena began in at the dawn of a new millennium, when developers shifted their sights to majority-Black cities like Newark, New Jersey. A study conducted by Rutgers University, in downtown Newark, illustrated the gap between wage and median rent in the city during this period: From 2000 to 2015, median rents in Newark rose by 20 percent while wages fell by 10. The crisis of Newark's residents was captured in the report in a single statement cited in a *New York Times* article: "The risk of displacement—even in the absence of traditional gentrification—is real for most Newarkers."¹

The paradoxical peculiarities of falling wages and housing costs have adversely impacted already marginalized residents in cities like Newark. Of the city's 100,000-plus households, one-

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fourth are living in poverty. Of these households, women ages 25-44 years old overwhelmingly represent Newark's residents living in poverty. Additionally, a vast majority of these families are African American and faced with the threat of housing instability and displacement due to gentrification.

Notwithstanding the motives of displacement and alienation of poor renters in Newark, the outcomes contemporarily have long-standing, systemic histories. The migration, containment, and displacement of African Americans in Newark, NJ, has been a point of contentious struggles between local, state, and federal agencies. This historical paradigm manifested in activism during the Newark Rebellion and the Stella Wright Rent Strikes within Newark's Central Ward. The spatial racism which created the dense community was where much of the city’s public housing and African American population were located—including the Stella Windsor Wright Homes housing project built in 1959. The gradual demolition of much of the Central Ward’s public housing in favor of free-market, low-income, and market-value apartments displaced the community beginning of the 21st century.

The dismantling of Newark's public housing stock and Black community, one of the largest in the nation, was a recalcitrant effort by government to allow developers to capture and capitalize on public land. The Federal Housing Authority and Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) deviation from subsidizing local housing authorities to supporting privately held apartment conglomerates was birthed with the election of President Richard Nixon and continues till this day.

In the years between, slum clearance and demolition of public housing, Newark residents waged dynamic struggles for more humane conditions, greater investment and accountability, and eventually tenant representation and control of public housing resulting in tenant-
management of Stella Wright Homes. From 1975 to 1992, the resident-led tenant management of Stella Wright Homes—won through the longest public-housing rent strike in US history—became the national model for how public housing could be successful. One of only eleven public housing tenant-management-organizations in America, Stella Wright Homes was resident-created model, which became a template for housing authorities nationally.

Since the Great Recession, many scholars have reevaluated public housing as a viable solution to contemporary housing inequity. Additionally, with a burgeoning shift towards taking a people-centric approach, engineering communities have also emerged in the urban planning profession. But within the confines of these conversations, very little focus has been placed on the previous successes of tenant management of public housing. Moreover, absent from this academic and political discourse is an acknowledgment of people who called public housing home and their struggle to collectively improve the conditions of their environment. In throes of change, tenants were unwittingly, fighting against a rising tide of neoliberal federal policy—the residents of Stella Wright Homes challenged systems on local, state, and national levels, attempting to regain control of the devolving and divestment of Newark Housing Authority while actively advocating to create a functional model for efficacious in tenant management nationally.

The purpose of my research is to re-center the narrative of public housing on its successes, its value as a cohesive community of people, and how those women worked diligently to preserve the homes by taking an active role in their management. The example of these successes was illustrated in the residents of Newark's Stella Windsor Wright Homes. With limited resources, poor and working-class Black women organized against systems that sought to scapegoat them for the failures of America. In an attempt, to dismantle these toxic tropes, I will
identify the sociopolitical, economic, and structural challenges the Stella Wright tenant organizations were met with and how the Black-female-led coalition successfully navigated those barriers. Reinforced by evidence of these successes and tenant management, I will be discussing how the residents of Stella Wright employed grassroots methods, created during its rent strike, to structure tenant management and how this model became a template for other public housing communities nationally. The female tenant organizers improved the physical structure and the lived experience of residents living in those public housing units.

Conversely, many argued in favor of defunding and dismantling public housing in favor of the free market subsidized by the federally funded Section 8 voucher program. From 1980 through 1996, three presidential administrations employed slanderous motifs attempting to delegitimize the humanity of people living in public housing and justify their marginalization. Conjunctively, the American media propagated the narrative in the nightly news, police dramas, and movies of the decaying black metropolis and fixed squarely on the televisions of American voters. Supporting these understandings, which informed the victim-blaming of the African American poor, was the engineered visual decay and perceived dysfunction of public housing. This divestment and deterioration were the foundation of Stella Wright's rent strikes which manifest into tenant management of the complex.

Recapturing agency, the primarily African American women led organization, created a model to empower residents. The actions of residents at Stella Wright inspired subsequent public housing residents nationally to gain control and improve their building. This depiction of agency, activism, and enduring spirit most representative of its public housing residents is one least represented amongst scholars of planning, housing policy, and historians. The purpose of my research is to reshape the dominant narratives of public housing and its people—its successes,
and its value as a cohesive community of people. And, how those people, Black women, worked diligently to preserve their homes by recapturing their agency via tenant-management.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In countless films, television shows, and news programs, America has shaped a narrative absent of the essence of a determined cohort who just so happen to be living in public housing. This paradigm is reflected in much of the research conducted regarding public housing. Diverging from the imagery of a hardworking multigenerational family living in Chicago's infamous “kitchenette apartments” in Lorraine Hansberry’s seminal play *A Raisin in the Sun*, a revisionist, less-complex narrative has emerged: the nihilistic, non-pro-social poor taking advantage of the taxpayer. Connected to this narrative, yet marginalized in popular discourse, are the deficiencies related to the design and management flaws of public housing. In essence, it captures a less complete story of the lives and people who called public housing home and has reinforced policies of disinvestment and dismantling of public housing.

In my research, I examine varying perspectives to find a story most reflective of the truth about resident life in public housing, primarily Stella Wright Homes. To fully understand the historical and political climate that produced the rise and fall of the Newark Housing Authority's Stella Windsor Wright Homes, I will incorporate research peripheral to the housing project to draw parallels nationally in public housing policy. This literature review will give a synopsis of sources I will draw from to illustrate how residents of public housing in major cities attempted to leverage their activism to improve the subpar living conditions engineered by federal and local policymakers and reshape the narrative regarding public housing.

appendages of racialized housing policy in both the public and private sector, with a keen focus on single-family homeownership, federal incentivization of upholding segregation, and the systematic denial of access of African Americans to obtain quality housing and the American dream. Rothstein effectively makes a case for how racialized housing discrimination shaped the geographical landscape of America, most closely associated with the contemporary polarization of communities today. Within this analysis, however, Rothstein spends little time discussing public housing or the lived experiences of African Americans impacted by the institution.

The nature of housing inequity related to impoverished Americans, especially African Americans, is strongly affixed to the country’s history and persists today. Bookended between single-family homeownership and denial of access of African Americans to obtain the American Dream, is the legislation, federal funding, construction, occupation, abandonment, and demolition of public housing. In this, much of the struggle for agency and the resulting activism represented at Stella Wright Homes—like many public housing projects—is lost or simply unaccounted for. This narrative is a necessary inclusion to comprehensively understand how deeply devoted policymakers, both federal and local, have been in upholding racism, gender roles, and class stratification.

Largely since the political shift away from direct federal subsidization of housing, more specifically government-managed public housing, scholars have begun to turn their attention to the histories of public housing. While other scholars have focused on the policy implications and national contexts of public housing, my thesis draws from the work of scholars like Rhonda Y. Williams in centering the lived experiences of residents of public housing projects. Williams injects the gravitas of the human condition of public housing in her 2004 work titled *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality*. Williams precisely
identifies the key issues that shaped public housing in the City of Baltimore and parallels those of the residents who lived at Stella Wright Homes. Framed in the broader context of dominant narratives that demonized poor Black women living in public housing, Williams offers a counter narrative of Black womanhood. She accomplishes this by deconstructing such harmful myths and inserting in their place a concise account of systematic inequality and the intersectionality of class, race, and gender that further marginalized the agency of poor and working-class Black women.

Williams masterfully and painstakingly addresses the factors which resulted in how our contemporary understandings of public housing have been shaped. In her work, she also discusses the successes and ultimate decline of tenant organizing and management of public housing projects, including the Stella Wright Homes. Told in a nonlinear work, Williams magnifies the landscape of grassroots activism and how that phenomenon had been informed by its existing infrastructure of strong interconnectivity between public housing residents. These systems were necessary to preserve dignity while navigating the bureaucratic nature of social programs inclusive of housing. Using her work as a template, I will draw parallels between Stella Wright Homes framing it as a case study of the broader landscape of Black women and public housing activism.

Diving deeper into the local political and social phenomena that warranted a rent strike by the residents of Stella Wright residents was Julia Rabig’s 2016 book, The Fixers: Devolution, Development, and Civil Society in Newark, 1960-1990. The text takes a linear, historical overview of the political systems that oppressed many of the city of Newark’s Black and Latinx residents. In this overview, Rabig walks readers through the issues and actions of residents living in Newark’s public housing and the Stella Wright Homes. The book offers readers a contextual
historical account of both pre-and post-rent strikes, what policies lead to its decline, and how residents galvanized their efforts to challenge the systemic apathy and corruption of the Newark Housing Authority. With exacting precision, Rabig documents residents’ sentiments from move-in day at Stella Wright (1959) throughout its and the city's decade-long decline.

Rabig identifies key players in the Stella Wright Rent Strike, its engineered mismanagement, and its decay. Hovering over the racialized and economic climate of the city at large, Rabig frames her work in a much greater narrative of Black urban oppression and Black liberation struggles. *The Fixers* does an excellent job of explicating the tentacle nature of public housing and its bureaucracy, while posing Black women as the solution to its dysfunctions. Outlining each organization that played a significant and minor role in activism, Rabig grants readers a roadmap to activism and a detailed historical account of Stella Wright from inception to implosion. I will be incorporating Rabig's foundational knowledge to expand upon the topic of how Black women residents of Stella Wright Homes challenged the patriarchal nature of social welfare, public housing policy, and the systems that attempted to usurp their agency. Rabig work identifies key players in Newark’s activism from a professional-class perspective, which minimizes the heavy lifting required of poor and working-class grassroots tenant organizers. My work seeks to elevate the importance of sustaining housing activism-by illuminating the people most impacted by inequity and how their efforts moved the needle on the odometer of change in a positive direction.

The events of 1967, the year of the Newark Rebellion, became the mooring of Black radical activism and began on the threshold of Newark’s most marginalized residents living in the city’s Central Ward. Although long a center for Black activism and resistance, the city’s rapid economic decline and equally pernicious segregation of its African American residents
further exacerbated tensions between city leadership and African Americans. This shift away from the status quo means of activism widely adopted in the early 1960s in exchange for a more radical approach was illustrated in Ron Porambo’s 1971 book, *No Cause for Indictment: An Autopsy of Newark*, which diagnoses the city’s failures and identifies the entomology of crisis which resulted in the Newark rebellion. The uprising, which began adjacent to the Hayes Homes and nearby Stella Wright Homes, and the oppressive conditions which made Newark a powder keg of radical activism buttressed the organizational efforts of tenants in public housing, primarily Stella Wright. Porambo outlines the nature of a racially polarized city whose policies led to the rapid exercise of white flight and the departure of resources that followed.

*No Cause for Indictment*, although peripheral to my research topic, offers keen insights into a period that was the catalyst for Black liberation movements in the city, like the Stella Wright rent strikes. Gritty and often challenging to read, its summation of the actions that led to Newark’s decline by the old-guard of leadership undergirds the need for activism. I will be using the book to familiarize readers with the conditions that birth housing activism, tenant organization, and subsequent successful tenant management at Stella Wright Homes.

Also incorporating the memories of Newark residents and activists, Junius Williams helped ground my thinking placing in perspective the many residents who played active role advocacy. His 2014 memoir, *Unfinished Agenda: Urban Politics in the Era of Black Power*, affixes itself centrally in Newark’s Black liberation struggle. Canvasing the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement and post-civil rights era, *Unfinished Agenda* creates a roadmap for how grassroots activism yields transformative results. Foundationally speaking, the rent strikes and subsequent tenant-management of Stella Wright are a culmination of the observed and participated activism that become nationally visible after World War II. The revolutionary
actions of its residents were deeply steeped in the core tenets of the Black Power Movement, including racial pride, self-determination, and institution-building. Also serving as centers of activism in Newark were the religious institutions of the Central Ward, including The Nation of Islam’s Temple No. 25 and Queen of Angels Catholic Church, which become hubs of grassroots activism for its residents.

And lastly was Robert Curvin’s 2014 book, *Inside Newark: Decline, Rebellion, and the Search for Transformation*, chronicling the odyssey which is the political structure of the City of Newark. *Inside Newark* invites readers to understand the structural nature of oppression that increased alongside the city’s rising Black population following the Great Migrations. The work is an indispensable compendium towards understanding the geopolitical climate of the city and moreover, the Central Ward, where Stella Wright Homes was located. Curvin journeys through the plot work of how the city constructed and maintained racial oppression and the systematic alienation of its Black residents. This resulted in the national trend of urban rebellions taking place throughout the country. The book also makes tangible the conditions that fostered the city's instability and seeks to provide a template towards rectifying these issues. This work will be an indispensable part of my work to identify the climate that made the activism of the residents of Stella Wright Homes necessary to recapture the agency of Newark's most disenfranchised citizens.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Employing the analytical tools and methodologies of the interdisciplinary field of Africology and African American Studies, I will create a counter-narrative about public housing through a local study of tenant organization in the Stella Windsor Wright Homes during their 1971 to 1974 rent strike, via the auspice of their successful activism, the Stella Wright Housing Project in Newark, NJ, cultivated community engagement and successful tenant management of public housing in the city of Newark, NJ. As a result of a major rent-strike, which took place from 1971-1974, residents of the Stella Wright Housing Project-mostly working poor, primarily Black women, created the first tenant-led management organization in the history of American public housing. My body of work will build upon the research of other scholars such as Rhonda Y. Williams, Julia Rabig, Richard Rothstein, Nicholas Bloom, and Ben Austin. My thesis argues that the public housing residents leveraged their collective oppression produced by a system entrenched in assumptions of the inhabitants of public housing to justify the institutional racism being plied on their community.

To substantiate my claim, I will use both qualitative and quantitative data to support my thesis. I will examine an array of primary and secondary sources, including works discussed in my literature review. Additionally, in using data from primary sources from federal, state, and local housing authorities, I will outline the history of Stella Wright Homes and its engineered demise. Adding a layer to my research, I will be using information from local periodicals published during both the rent strike and the success of tenant management. To support the nature of my work, the residents of Stella Wright Homes lived experience will be incorporated by overlaying oral histories as an integral component.

Through a close analysis of such sources, my thesis will create a counter-narrative that
responds to the assumptions made by popular media and city planners: that people living in poverty are the mechanism for the decline of federally sponsored public housing. To achieve this goal, I will compile research and data that deviates from historical and contemporary thoughts regarding resident life in public housing who live in poverty. The overarching goal will be to dismantle the myth of the popular "Welfare Queen" archetype of the negligence used to justify the systematic apartheid of American citizens who just so happened to be poor, Black, and female. Informed by the research of Rhonda Y. Williams’ book The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality⁵ I attempt to dismantle this longstanding stigma. Williams, in a series of interviews, outlines the recapturing of agency via tenant organization and activism.

This paradigm transcends the Baltimore City Public Housing community she researched and mirrors the activism of the residents of Stella Wright. In further exploration of similar research, I am incorporating another of Williams' contributions to the study: Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality and Social Policy. In this 2015 work, Williams attacks the myth that public housing residents are powerless. She contends that the mainstream media uphold this myth and that poverty and lack of power are mutually exclusive and thus denied to public housing residents.

As Williams dissects this myth, she walks readers through the tentacular nature of housing policy, racial segregation,³ and economic marginalization and the activism that emerged from this trifecta of oppression. Williams's counter-narrative is a necessary adjunct in supporting my thesis of the role of Black women in the successful battle for equity in public housing. An

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essential companion to Williams is Lisa Levenstein's contribution to the same titled book in which she discusses the personal investment Black women made to their public housing communities to improve their communities.\textsuperscript{4} In this, Levenstein, similar to my goal, addresses the myth of apathy in maintaining both public and private spaces of public housing.

Contributing to my foundational research are the oral histories of various residents of Newark's Stella Wright Homes whose experiences parallel that of others who live in public housing nationally. I have incorporated in my research supporting documents related to effective tenant management of Stella Wright Homes and its distinguished designation of becoming the first tenant managed housing projects in America in addition to, due to the rent strike, a more community-based approach to planning low-income housing communities in Newark.

My underlying motives for researching and thus writing about public housing, more specifically tenant activism and tenant-led management, is the paradox of economic growth of urban cities like Newark and housing disparity. The paradox, not dissimilar from sociologist Fredrich Engel’s\textsuperscript{5} “the housing question,” which examined the disparities produced by the dawn of the industrial revolution and its impact to affordable housing, is a similar phenomenon that has occurred from Richard Florida’s “Creative Class.”\textsuperscript{6} The uptick in housing disparity and homelessness produced by gentrification has prompted many planners and scholars to redress the viable nature of public housing as an alternative to free-market subsidies like Section VIII.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid, 223-234.

\textsuperscript{5} In his 1872 The housing question, Friedrich Engels addressed the housing problems faced by the proletarian migrant workers in major industrial centers.

\textsuperscript{6} “The creative class is the posit of American economist and social scientist Richard Florida for an ostensible socioeconomic class. Florida, a professor, and head of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, maintains that the creative class is a key driving force for economic development of post-industrial cities in the United States” 2010 Eaton Jul 1, “What Is the Creative Class?,” Briarpatch Magazine, accessed March 12, 2022, https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/what-is-the-creative-class.

\textsuperscript{7} The Section 8 program allows private landlords to rent apartments and homes at fair market rates to qualified low income tenants, with a rental subsidy administered by Home Forward. “Section 8” is a common name for the
I will also discuss the governmental strategies that informed popular thought of public housing residents and interrupted the sustainability of tenant management. In identifying these histories, in a series of examined lived experience, media perception, and legislative policies, I will illustrate the barriers created by the government-engineered demise of progressive-era low-income housing. Through research, I discovered how various governmental agencies such as the United States agency of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), championed the successes of Stella Wright Homes tenant-lead management organizations, which created a public housing model nationally.

I will also examine the almost twenty years since the demolition of much of America’s public housing stock, including Newark’s Stella Wright, and the impact that phenomena have had on communities nationally. In this, I will discuss how a free-market model has exasperated housing inequity since “The Great Recession” of 2008 and has incumbered many low-income families from renting in the free-market due to income disparities and draconian credit requirements. In investigating these social, economic, and political factors, I hope to unpack two things: how unhoused persons and families have been adversely impacted by the dismantlement of public housing and how the removal of social safety nets like public housing have caused a deleterious uptick in housing disparity.

Contemporarily, municipal planners, non-profits charged with managing the current housing crisis, and local governments have applied micro-level solutions to the national phenomena. With an ever-expanding unhoused population stretching beyond its traditional

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center city boundaries, many larger metropolitan areas have turned to these micro-level solutions in the form of the “tiny house”\(^8\) model as a temporary solution to a chronic national housing epidemic. These contemporary “Hooverville’s”\(^9\) reflect a misinterpretation of the full weight and scale of inequity produced by free-market housing speculation coupled with wealthy competition for affordable housing in the form gentrification. This will create a springboard for dialogue that justifies and the present and dire need for progressive and sustainable housing models, like tenant management of public housing in 21\(^{st}\) century America.

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\(^8\) The tiny-house movement is an architectural and social movement that advocates for downsizing living spaces, simplifying, and essentially "living with less."

\(^9\) In 1930s, New York City's Central Park was home to a small shanty town that residents experiencing homelessness built. The ramshackle town was a "Hooverville," named after Republican President Herbert Hoover. Americans held him responsible for not doing enough to alleviate the Great Depression.
Chapter 4: The Making of Housing Activism at Stella Wright Homes

The core of housing, any housing, shack, or castle, is the people who occupy those residences and the lives they live. These lives define a structure and become melded in the identity of both the building itself and those who reside with the confines of those four walls. This connective social tissue is what makes leaving one's home so complicated, so wrought with internal conflicts. Our homes become interwoven in defining who we are. In everything we touch, every moment, every person we encounter, peoples’ homes become indivisible components of the built environment.

It is these indelible fragments of daily life that ground us to our surroundings. Even in conditions that otherwise would not be conducive to living vibrant, full lives, the unwavering desire to mend and remain in place is one that is innately humanistic. Agency over one's present and future self is the foundation of what all human beings seek. The autonomy to choose whether one comes or goes or even remains in place—the freedom to set the roughed-out parameters of their daily lives. The independence to set down roots where one chooses, free of the interference of other opinions is quintessentially American. It is what inspired Robert Treat in 1666 to defect from his native Connecticut and establish what became the city of Newark. It is what brought many huddled masses of disenfranchised ethnic whites from Eastern Europe to Newark’s Central Ward in the 19th century, and it is what brought African Americans from the oppressive Jim Crow South to Newark, NJ, during the Great Migrations.

Seeking a better way of life and greater economic prosperity, African Americans began arriving in Newark in the late 1800s. The steady growth between the first and second World

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10 Robert Treat and the Colony of Connecticut in 1666 moved to New Jersey, where he and several others purchased land for what became the town of Newark. He served as the Newark town clerk for a year and as Newark’s delegate to the New Jersey colonial legislature from 1667 until 1672.
Wars grew the city’s Black population from 34 percent in 1950 to 54 percent by 1970. The waves of migration increased the city’s Black population drastically and reshaped it geographically, culturally, and politically. The racial reshaping of Newark made the city one of the epicenters of Black life in America—its Black community a close network of people sharing similar experiences.

It was under these circumstances that the origins of the Stella Windsor Wright Homes were born. The shared experiences and spatial environments fostered the connectivity necessary for tenants to stage the nation’s longest rent strikes (1970-1974) and create the first tenant-managed public housing projects in America. This collectivism stands in direct contrast to the conventional tropes regarding public housing and its residents. Many Americans believe that the responsibility for the failure of public housing lie solely with its occupants, and not policy makers. Or that its high-rise design engineered a pathology of poverty and apathy of its residents. But, the organized efforts of the residents of Stella Wright Homes supports a very different narrative of Black people living in public housing. The communities of activism created at Stella Wright Homes informs us of a deeply connected group whose goal was to preserve their homes and community.

This activism emerged from decades of housing discrimination, displacement, and economic disenfranchisement via deindustrialization. Understanding the conditions that

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motivated residents to challenge systems on a local and national level is essential in understanding how tenants organized, the significance of the Stella Wright Rent Strike, and the resultant tenant management. Additionally, it is important to examine how the political context of Newark, with its long history of revolutionary Black activism, arresting per-block population density, and history of racialized housing policy punctuated and informed this tenant movement. But to understand the circumstance which made protest necessary, we must first understand the origins of the crisis.

The Origins of Crisis

The migratory landing place for many African Americans fleeing the Jim Crow South was Newark's Third Ward—later renamed the Central Ward—and the future location of Stella Windsor Wright Homes. Geographically situated, close to downtown and the city's historic ethnic communities, the Central Ward became synonymous with decay and low quality of life, citing its aged housing stock. Before the waves of Black migration had arrived, the ward played host to Newark’s Jewish American community, who steadily migrated south to the city’s Weequaic neighborhood. Between the first and second World Wars, Newark's African American population increased. So, in 1940 when Newark's first Black mayor's family arrived from Alabama, Kenneth Gibson, the ward’s Black population had increased to dramatically. The lack of housing options for Blacks migrating to Newark’s Central Ward placed more stress on this stock, which rapidly become blighted and dangerous—apartments with deficient heating and plumbing were standard and apartment house fires were a common occurrence.

Further exacerbating housing shortages amidst population growth were the collapses of Newark's industrial and feeder employment during the Great Depression and early white flight. In the 1940s shallow suburbanization began to increase as Newark’s white residences began to
move farther away from the core of the city and the Central Ward to neighborhoods like Vailsburg and Ivy Hill—and to cities like Irvington, Hillside, and East Orange. As populations left the city, industries and businesses followed suit, draining the city of badly needed jobs for new arrivals. This period of economic decline propelled the Central Ward neighborhoods into slum conditions due to the deferred investment in the neighborhood. The segregation of northern de facto housing policy allowed landlords to price gouge tenants due to the lack of available and accessible housing for Black Newarkers at that time. The African Americans who migrated to Newark found themselves with little options or means to negotiate quality affordable housing. This was a reoccurring theme for Blacks throughout America’s urban centers, ushering in a wave of slum clearance and public housing construction for the next two decades.

From its inception, public housing was seen as an institution to help propel low-income families from instability to stable—its goal being to provide families with affordable rents until they could stabilize their economic situations and transition to homeownership. This was how public housing function for its first waves of white residents. It provided an economic springboard allowing many to become homeowners post WWII with the support of racially discriminatory federal housing subsidies. The vacuum of lower-income whites leaving public housing were filled by the influx of African Americans who migrated to urban centers during WWII for employment. During this period, even following the Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelley vs. Kraemer* (1948)\(^\text{13}\) which outlawed racially restrictive covenants, many Black families were denied the opportunity to become homeowners. These are the foundations of what became a

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\(^{13}\) “Shelley v. Kraemer (1948) is a U.S. Supreme Court case that held that restrictive covenants in real property deeds which prohibited the sale of property to non-Caucasians unconstitutionally violate the equal protection provision of the Fourteenth Amendment.” “Shelley v. Kraemer (1948),” Legal Information Institute (Legal Information Institute), accessed March 12, 2022, [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/shelley_v_kraemer_%281948%29](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/shelley_v_kraemer_%281948%29).
community brought together by virtue and fate—the public housing of Newark’s Central Ward, in comparison to the substandard, free-market housing it replaced, became the center of Black Newark post-war.

In a steady stream from 1950 onward the white population, including the Jewish American families who shared the Central Ward with African American during the first half of the 20th century, began to move to white suburban enclaves. The exodus of white families was followed by the exodus of industry—the jobs African Americans had migrated to Newark for were leaving as rapidly as its white residents. This loss of employment and the lack of Newark’s open-housing laws created a densely populated Central Ward of African Americans living on the fringes of poverty—making public housing an ever-increasing necessity for many of Newark’s Black residents. Initially designed as a springboard to propel families from poverty to stability, public housing became a trap of necessity for many of its Black residents. With little options and even less political representation in city government and housing authorities the Black residents of public housing had little means of arbitration for its declining conditions through the 1950s and 1960s.

As housing conditions created by racial segregation and capitalist exploitation were worsening in the Central Ward, federal programs administered by local authorities under the name of “urban renewal” displaced African American citizens through the weaponized usage of slum clearance programs. Upsetting the previous organic functions of a community, slum clearance actively worked to remove African American Newarkers from their homes, businesses, institutions, and communal ties. An instrument, slum clearance and its adjunct of public housing,

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14 “By the 1960s, Newark was a poor urban center surrounded by but disconnected from its middle-class suburbs. As its white population shrunk from 363,000 in the 1950s to 158,000 in 1967, its black population grew from 70,000 to 220,000 during the same period.” POV, “Newark: A Brief History: Street Fight: POV: PBS,” POV, January 17, 2005, http://archive.pov.org/streetfight/newark-a-brief-history/.
became a weapon to reinforce Black poverty and segregation. The Federal Housing Authority’s power to reshape local communities like Newark’s Central Ward was borne from the Wagner-Stegall Housing Act of 1937. The act was designed to redirect federal dollars to municipalities for slum clearance and construction of public housing. The Wagner-Stegall Act reads as follows:

(4) The term “slum clearance” means the demolition and removal of buildings from any slum area. (5) The term "development" means any or all undertakings necessary for planning, financing (including payment of carrying charges), land acquisition, demolition, construction, or equipment, in connection with a low-rent-housing or slum-clearance project, but not beyond the point of physical completion. Construction activity in connection with a low-rent-housing project may be confined to the reconstruction, remodeling, or repair of existing buildings. (U.S. Statutes at Large (75th Cong. 09)

The exchange for modern public housing reshaped the geographical and racial makeup of Newark. This local control with little Federal oversight regarding civil rights or discrimination created lasting systemic impacts of Newark’s Black residents—foreshadowing abhorrent segregation in Scudder, Fuld, Wright, and Hayes Homes and a catalyst for the Newark Rebellion in 1967.

Within a couple decades, after the Central Ward’s public housing stock was constructed, however, the issues most closely related to the “slums” they had been intended to replace had been replicated. The deferred maintenance, abysmal economic opportunities and overall bleak outlook initially associated with free-market slum housing had been replicated in public housing. This replication was not from the sole actions of the people living in public housing, but the structural web of racialized policies of the Newark Housing Authority and the federal department of Housing and Urban Development. A 1968 investigation of the Newark Housing Authority’s Central Ward public housing projects found that the management actively upheld racial segregation throughout its 17 public housing complexes. The investigation conducted by the New Jersey Advisory Committee to the United States Commission chartered by The United
States Commission on Civil Rights (April 1968) reported that “Although approximately 40 percent of the families living in public housing in Newark are white, they constitute approximately 5 percent of the residents of the four public housing projects in the Central Ward. (235 white families, 4,300 Negro families).”\(^{15}\)

From 1937, flush with tax-dollars appropriated by the United States Federal government through the auspice of the Housing Act, Newark, as much of America did in the era, engaged the monumental act of slum clearance, spatially restructuring people living in poverty while simultaneously dismantling racially diverse communities—often replacing substandard housing with public housing. The act established local control as the supervisory custodians of these federal housing projects, which would colloquially become known as the “projects.” America’s major metropolitan areas thereby captured the much-needed dollars for slum clearance and Works Progress Administration jobs to do the work they were required to replace antiquated structures with modern apartment units. The latter necessity reshaped the landscape of cities like Newark and its Central Ward.

**Closed Housing Makes Public Housing a Necessity**

A secondary phenomenon promoted both the economic and racial segregation of African Americans in the policies that would go on to create post-war suburbanization. The neighborhoods of the Central Ward before 1937 were vastly more integrated than after. Constructed 22 years later, the community of Stella Windsor Wright homes was majority African American. The systemic denial of access produced by restrictive covenants, redlining, and public housing construction had created hyper-segregation neighborhoods. Informed by the Federal Housing Authority concessions to southern Dixiecrats support for segregation during the

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New Deal era, which established the Federal Housing Authority in 1934, the 1944 GI Bill continued the practices of housing discrimination pigeon holding Black veterans and their families.16

Eisenhower’s appeal to congress to expand housing access to meet rising demand stood in direct conflict previous federal housing policy that had historically denied African American access to quality, low-interest homeownership. The call for more single-family housing construction came ten years after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed into law the “Servicemen Readjustment Act” commonly known as the GI Bill. The bill included 2.5 million17 African American men who had served WWII. The GI Bill provided an array of programs including Veteran Administration (VA) subsidized home loans. Although the bill entitled them to access low-down-payment/low-interest mortgages, discriminatory lending practices prevented Black families from occupying newly constructed single-family homes. Borrowing from previous Federal Housing Authority (FHA), loan to developers and builders of VA housing had stringent guidelines upholding housing segregation. According to scholar Richard Rothstein, “The Veterans Administration, established under the GI Bill, adopted all the FHA racial exclusion programs when it began to insure mortgages for returning veterans. Big developments like Levittown or south of San Francisco, Daly City, or any other large subdivisions like that that were built after World War II were financed by the Veterans Administration, not necessarily the Federal Housing Administration, with the same racial restrictions.”18

These policies of slum clearance and closed housing prevented Black Newarkers from

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accessing home ownership post-war when suburbanization was cheap and expanding rapidly. Even as many white Americans left behind quality housing that many African American families could readily afford, discrimination prevented access to these homes and largely placed Black families in positions of dependency on public housing for safe, affordable housing. As deindustrialization encroached, and cost of ownership became out of reach for many low-income families, discriminatory rental practices prohibited Black Newarkers from obtaining rental units peripheral to the Newark Housing Authority. This was a common trend producing public housing communities like St. Louis’ Pruitt-Igoe and Chicago’s Cabrini-Green. Although Shelley vs. Kraemer and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 attempted to remedy this disparity, by then African American urban wages were declining rapidly with many exchanging low-wage employment for chronic unemployment.

This paradigm bolstered a belief that public housing, and not the phenomena of deindustrialization, produced poverty—Newark’s public housing was a response to a need the social conditions and material needs of a group of people denied access to quality housing and employment. Scholars have often ignored these conditions in favor of supporting a free-market solution by scapegoating Black residents to cover up the failures of American capitalism to provide equitable access to opportunities to all its citizens. The 2015 book Public Housing Myths challenges these popular narratives of the pathology people living in poverty in public housing, spatial placement, and failure of the built environment.19 It first identifies the flawed logic of Harvard public policy scholar Howard Husock, who claimed that “everyone knows how quickly…housing projects…in big cities turn into dangerous, demoralizing slums.”20 These

narratives engineered the public opinions necessary to shift federal policy from progressive federally funded housing in the form of public housing towards free-market subsidies in the form of Section 8 vouchers in the years to follow—creating a new market for privatized housing development.

An episodic series of cause and effect forced Black Newarkers were forced to deal with the realities of life in a deindustrialized, racist, once-booming metropolis. Black people occupying public housing became targets of critics of federally subsidized programs who indicted its residents by honing-in on Black unwed mothers to ground the racist theory that low-income housing promoted personal apathy and demotivated its residents to seek individualized solutions. In this, is the absence of the systemic racism that prevented public housing from becoming the same springboard of economic mobility it had been for white Americans. In response cities leverage federal dollars to cope with the changing racial landscape of their cities to facilitate urban renewal, and public housing—the Black community responded with revolutionary political activism in tandem with the Black Freedom Movement.

**The Beginning of the End for the Progressive Era: New Federalism and Public Housing**

As the sun set on the presidency of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Republicans seeking to regain power concocted a strategy that would usurp the federal power wielded by the Johnson administration to enforce Civil Rights legislation by returning that power to southern states. The policy ended earmarking federal dollars for specific local projects, and awarding states block grant funding with diminishing federal oversight. The strategy impacted larger federally sponsored programs like public housing. Equally pervasive was Richard Nixon’s weaponization of block grant funding to interrupt War on Poverty programs that had been leveraged by local
communities for Black activism. When Nixon was elected in 1968 via the “Southern Strategy,” the federal government directly funded programs like public housing. These specifically earmarked funds allowed a steady funding source which could not be used for any other purpose. This began the assault on New Deal programs in favor a federal free-market funding solution. Nixon was successful at legislating this new funding system known as “New Federalism.” This new federal funding model bundled federal dollars allocated to states as a series of administered “block grants”. It was a move to appease southern states which wanted to uphold discrimination outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by obscuring historically specific earmark federal dollars—which was the means of federal enforcement of Civil Rights legislation. This created a QUANGO apparatus which reduced the funding funneled to local agencies like the Newark Housing Authority and its Stella Wright Homes, while eliminating federal fiscal oversight. As Black political autonomy began to manifest itself, evidenced by the election of Newark’s first African American mayor in 1970, block grants played a greater role—allowing a mostly white state government to control local access to federal funds. Absence of a steady and stable stream of cash to maintain housing authorities, the decline of quality of life began to accelerate as conditions worsened. These worsened circumstances became the nexus of poor people’s activism and the genesis of public housing resident activism a Stella Wright Rent Strike in 1970.

**Implicating Systems and Not People: How Housing Policy Impacted Stella Wright Homes**

Scholars and planners rarely identify the systemic sources of decline related to how

21“‘The Southern strategy was a Republican Party electoral strategy to increase political support among white voters in the South by appealing to racism against African Americans.’ “Nixon's Southern Strategy 'It's All ... - The New York Times,” accessed March 12, 2022, https://static01.nyt.com/packages/html/books/phillips-southern.pdf.
22 “New Federalism” is a political philosophy of devolution, or the transfer of certain powers from the United States federal government back to the states. ... As a policy theme, New Federalism typically involves the federal government providing block grants to the states to resolve a social issue.” “New Federalism,” DBpedia, accessed March 12, 2022, http://dbpedia.org/resource/New_Federalism.
23 QUANGO is a description, normally pejorative, of an organization to which a government has devolved power, but which is still partly controlled and/or financed by government bodies.
funding decreased and residents pivoted to offset the adverse impact of neoliberal policy creation beginning in the 1970s. The residents of Stella Wright Homes are an example of people navigating these changes and the resilience of individuals who challenged the systems. Viewing public housing through the lens of its residents' lived experiences, activism, and advocacy can help shape housing policy today. Understanding the political barriers more effectively aids in a comprehensive dialogue of how economically and socially marginalized people are viable contributors to communities.

It is arguable that strategies like block grants and private low-income housing investment coupled to federal housing vouchers promoted federal disinvestment at Stella Wright Homes. Equally apparent is that the epic historic absence of federal oversight on the local level, exacerbated racial segregation and enumerated construction quality issues in the Newark Housing Authority’s housing projects. These massive residential complexes were poorly constructed due to lack of oversight, racial and economically polarized because of lack of oversight, and rapidly deteriorating because of lack of federal dollars. This lack of local federal oversight and participation predicated long-term systemic outcomes of deferred maintenance, broken windows and broken families identified in many federal housing reports.

Without intentional planning or federal oversight, public housing like Stella Wright Homes replicated the disparities that it was designed to mitigate. These policies, common on a national level, cemented African Americans in hyper-segregated environs and generational poverty. For example, the federal government created stringent income guidelines for housing authority recipients. These rules made it impossible to economically stratify families—as a family’s income increased the likelihood of maintaining residency in public housing was impacted.
The federal mandates maximum income guidelines prevented housing authorities from retaining or capturing low-income families with dual income households where both parties are contributing, or multiple generations of working adults living together. As many family’s economic circumstances improved, they were forced out of public housing even if they didn’t have the means of purchasing a home. Subsequently, occupancy rates were reduced and housing authorities like Newark’s sought residents with little or no income to fill vacancies. The Federal Housing Act of 1949 deferred to the guideline previously established by the Housing Act of 1937 more than a decade prior. The act defined the nature of “low-income” families in very narrow ways, eliminating how many non-nuclear families cohabitated prior to public housing—many Black families migrating to the northern cities shared an apartment spanning multiple generations. The act also set income guidelines of how much families could make while sharing a single public housing unit.

Most apparently obsolete in 1949 and definitively antiquated today, these prescriptive income measures are still present in the language of the Housing Act and its amendments to this day. Further measures to create economic hegemony, and thus concentrate Black poverty, were legislated during the first year of the Nixon administration. For example, the Brooke Amendment passed in 1969, “capped rents at 30 percent of tenants’ income and provided operating funds, but made public housing less attractive for working families with higher incomes.”24 The effects of promoting and committing housing authorities like Newark’s to income restriction engineered the precipitous decrease in much-needed operating revenue. Julia Rabig’s book The Fixers notes the impending crisis of revenue plaguing the NHA: “Subsidized units must not compete with the private rental market…nor could public housing siphon from the market of working-and lower-

middle-class renters.” The fix was in, without increased federal aid and/or the ability to attract working class renters public housing spiraled. Further complicating these issues was the stagnation of the 1973-197525 recession—sacking public service budgets systems and further deferring maintenance and exacerbating the safety concerns of residents at Stella Wright Homes.

The epicenter of housing activism was related to one project, Stella Wright Homes. The last high-rise project built in Newark in 1959 and revered for its post-war modernity, Stella Wright had deteriorated so rapidly that by 1969 residents of the building began to challenge the Newark Housing Authority demanding change.26 Named for a well-known African American social worker who had served the community,27 Stella Wright Homes with its post-modern design became a safe, desirable place to live when it was constructed in the Central Ward. The upgrade in life was noticeable and noted by its original residents—new ranges and refrigerators, heat and hot water in a modern fireproof apart seemed like a godsent for many. Erected to remedy blight and overcrowding in the Central Ward, Stella Wright Homes added 1,200 units to NHA’s public housing stock. Residents marveled at its amenities on move in day, viewing it as an improvement from available housing options in the city.

Existing in this vacuum of local control and federal funding with little resident input created the prefect environment for decline. It wasn’t until 1968, a year after the Newark Rebellion, that the Federal Government investigated the negligence of the Newark Housing

Authority and Stella Wright. The report, mentioned above interviewed NHA’s then Executive Director, Louis Danzig,\(^{28}\) who denied that discrimination, which had been outlawed on the Federal level by 1950, was a legitimate accusation: “The Housing Authority has always been sensitive with respect to civil rights”\(^{29}\) This lack of oversight produced a cavalcade of political quagmires which incentivized its rapid deterioration necessitating the activism resulting in Stella Wright to rent strike.

Although public housing in Newark for most of its existence was racially divided, the city as a whole enforced integration in its public spaces by the late 1960s. Stella Wright Homes, along with Scudder, Hayes and Baxter were centrally located nearest to the city center—its geographic location made its land value a valuable asset and will be discussed in Chapter 3. In the 1950 United States census, Newark was a densely populated metropolis with 438,220 residences living in less than 25 square miles.\(^{30}\) A year after Stella Wright Homes construction was completed, the 1960 census illustrated a trend that remains for much of the 20th century—Newark’s population shrunk, becoming more impoverished and racially hegemonic. Although this trend remained, a constant the political machine which governed Newark and its public housing remained largely white.

United States Congressman (1949-62) turned mayor Hugh Joseph Addonizio\(^{31}\) (1962-1970) represented the racial divide between city government and an evolving Black metropolis.

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\(^{28}\) Louis Danzig was the Executive Director of the Newark Housing Authority from 1947-1969


\(^{30}\) Located at 40° 44' 14" north and 74° 10' 55" west, Newark is 24.14 square miles (63 km²) in area. It has the second smallest land area among 100 most populous cities in the U.S, after neighboring Jersey City.

\(^{31}\) “Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio of Newark was sentenced to 10 years in prison and fined $25,000 in Federal Court here today for conspiracy and extortion. Convicted of sharing in the proceeds of extorted kickbacks totaling $1.5 million from contractors on city water and sewer lines, Addonizio stood impassively with his head bowed as Judge George H. Barlow declared that his crimes were of 'monumental proportion' that 'tore at the very heart of our civilized society and our form of representative government’” Sullivan, Ronald. "Addonizio Given a 10-Year Term," The New York Times, September 23, 1970.
An administration mired in graft and corruption, the Newark Housing Authority Addonizio oversaw was writhe with bloated payrolls and little fiscal oversight. This lack of oversight was not synonymous to solely the city’s public housing, but other divisions of city government that served the Black residents of the Central Ward. Martland General Hospital, also known as City Hospital, was also writhe with mismanagement and poor medical care—locally known as the “butcher shop.” This community resource that served a majority of Newark’s Black residences had experience several administration turnovers since Addonizio took office as mayor in 1962. The successive leadership changes adversely impacted the quality-of-service in patient care resulting in appallin healthcare outcomes of Black Newarkers.

**Justification for Action: The Makings of the Stella Wright Rent Strikes**

This phenomenon, as documented in Ronald Porambo’s *No Cause for Indictment*, illustrates the connection between the conditions of Newark’s Black residents experienced leading up to the Newark Rebellion and foreshadowed the Stella Wright Homes rent strikes. Porambo cites a 1967 Human Rights Commission report implicating Addonizio in the mismanagement of Medical Center resulting in “shortages of staff, inadequate equipment, shortages of eating utensils and food, lack of staff doctors, and hospital security, roaches in rooms, bats flying in the hospital, lack of bedside curtains exposed patients.”

The engineered demise of the Martland Medical Center, coupled with the abysmal healthcare outcomes of Black Newarkers who made up 65% of Martland’s patients (but just 34% of the city’s population), contributed to the highest levels of “venereal disease, mother/baby mortality and tuberculosis” in the nation. These healthcare disparities and mismanagement disproportionally impacted African Americans living in the Central Ward and in many ways mirrored the mismanagement of

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the NHA properties.

In “ghettoizing” the Central Ward, in the words of NHA director Lou Danzig, Black Newarkers, like the residents living in Stella Wright Homes, became the posterchildren of the failures of progressive era program like public healthcare and public housing. Lacking a comprehensive understanding, however, has allowed Americans to place too much emphasis on the individual and not the systems that created the disfunction. As Newark’s racial makeup rapidly evolved into a predominately Black metropolis, municipal governance weaponized this narrative to recuse itself of responsibility. Its engineered failures attempted to lay blame on its Black residents who had not shared in shaping the city’s policy. Forced to live in segregation and lacking a political voice made grassroots activism a must for poor and working-class Black Newarkers.

Foreshadowing the Newark Rebellion and the Stella Wright Rent Strikes were years of failed housing policy, economic and racial alienation, and the overarching systematic oppression. This oppression took root in the Central Ward through the Newark Housing Authority and its surrounding services like Martland Medical Center. These lived experiences by Black Newarkers’ engineered the necessity of launching a rent strike. The lack of representation and agency in improving conditions at Stella Wright Homes motivated residents to act and organize grassroots efforts to provide solutions to both the NHA and HUD. Examining the historic issues that informed understandings and shaped activism in Newark is required to fully understand the issues that plagued public housing and to reorient the critique of its failures towards their governing bodies and its successes on the community of people who called public housing home.
Chapter 5: The Residents of Stella Wright Demand Change

Historically, public housing provided an economic springboard for its residents. Its relatively low fixed monthly cost, with utilities included, offered a viable and much desirable alternative to free-market housing available to people living in poverty, more specifically African Americans. In the years after WWII, with rising wages, declining inflation and overall economic growth, lower-income public housing tenants were able to stabilize their lives, grow savings and potentially become homeowners. Blocking many African Americans from exiting public housing during these years of economic growth were the pernicious housing policies associated with buying a home in the new, affordable suburban communities of Newark. Pigeon holed by policy, many Black families remained in Stella Wright Homes, seeing it as a safe haven from the indignity of attempted integration of these mostly white communities.

By the time the Fair Housing Act was passed and mortgage lending to African Americans purportedly became more equitable, the economic growth opportunities of a generation of Newark public housing residents had all but evaporated. Further economically stifling Black Newarkers incomes were the devastating economic impacts of the Newark Rebellion of 1967, which accelerated white flight and the promise of economic opportunities in the process. Seeking housing and economic justice within segregated communities in the mid-1960s, Black Newarkers organized for better housing conditions and economic opportunities.

Traditions of Tenant Organizing

Foreshadowing the Stella Windsor Wright Homes was the New York City Rent strike of 1963-1964. Although this was not the first of the region’s rent strikes, with earlier iterations in 1904, 1918-1920 and 1930-1932, these short-lived, loosely organized strikes were hegemonic of sorts—taking place on NYC’s Lower East Side by its Jewish residents and arbitrated by
Tammany Hall’s Jewish elected official and landlords. This familiar connectivity may have attributed to these rent strikes being negotiated and settled in a relatively short period of time. One of the standout victories for tenant activism on NYC’s Lower East Side took place at the Knickerbocker Village creating their own tenant association and staging their own rent strike in the 1930s.

In Harlem, another epicenter of Great Migration Black life during the period, African American tenants working with labor organizers of the Communist Party were engaged in tenant organizing during the Great Depression. The Harlem Tenants League (HTL), a collective of Black Harlemites working with Communist Party member Richard Moore, was formed in 1929. The HLT, which accurately connected the exploitative practices of landlords with labor exploitation, sought to elevate both practices to remedy the structural racism related to housing. In 1934 the HTL worked with the middle-class Black residents living in a modern mid-rise apartment on Edgecombe Avenue in Harlem. The previously all-white building had rapidly integrated and in response the landlord sharply increased rents and deferred repairs and maintenance. The tenants organized, protested, and won victories—with their greatest achievement being the Civil Practice Act, creating rent-control of apartments and was the precursor to more expansive tenant protections in the city. The activism related to housing and labor organized by the Communist Party brought tangible changes in tenant-landlord rights in New York City.

The connectivity of workers and tenant rights has its origins in the dawn of the Industrial

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34 Ibid.
Revolution. In Europe, as agricultural communities waned economically, urban centers like London and Paris became the primary economic drivers for those nations. Following employment, the provincial masses migrated to cities for employment. As urban populations increased workers’ wages decreased as rents increased placing undue economic stress of poor people—this is a process that continues till this day.

Historically, tropes of scarcity bolstered by class standing, income disparity, and race, segregated renters in specific sections of cities allowing them to be economically exploited by unscrupulous landlords. Observing this phenomenon, Friedrich Engels, philosopher, and Marx contemporary, authored—The Housing Question—in 1872. Engels suggested in his research that housing should be owned communally by the working classes. Engels saw collective ownership of housing as a mechanism to stave rent gouging and foster sustainable communities, as well as a step toward broader social transformation. Fast-forward to the Great Depression and subsequent housing crisis the trifecta of rent gouging, spatial proximity to employment and low-wage workers has been a reoccurring theme. At the helm of resistance were cohorts of labor and tenants’ organizations formed in partnership with revolutionary thinkers and low-wage workers. This tenant activism reflected the interweaving of rent and labor exploitation and how similar activism came together to make strident changes.

On December 3, 1963, eleven families who staged a rent-strike against the landlord of their 117th street apartment housing appeared in the Manhattan Superior Court. The strike was part of the collective efforts of many tenant associations throughout Harlem whose efforts had been organized by the Community Council of Housing (CCH), formerly known as the Lower

Harlem Tenant Council. Years of displacement due to Federal slum clearance projects, which reduced available housing stocks while interrupting Black people’s ability to move freely to affordable, better housing, ignited the ire of African American tenants forced to live in squalid conditions. Expanding on the activism that began Uptown in Harlem, tenants participated in a city-wide rent strike from 1963 to 1964. Among the many notable outcomes of the rent strike movement, tenants in the Lower East Side compelled a slumlord to turn over the building to them and enlisted the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) to run mismanaged building. The Newark Community Union Project (NCUP), an affiliate of Students for a Democratic Society’s (SDS) Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), learned from these campaigns and organized tenants and coordinated rent strikes in 1964 through 1965. This strategy would later be realized in public housing through tenant management at Stella Wright Homes in Newark, NJ.

**Tenant Organizing in Newark**

In Newark, fanning the flames of tenant frustrations were the frequent abuse many Central Ward residents had experienced at the hands of the Newark Police Department. This internalized anger ignited on the hot night of July 1967. The culmination of decades-long racist abuse of the residents of the city's Central Ward by the Newark Police Department began a chain of events that accelerated several phenomena that would shape the city for the rest of the 20th century. Witnesses observed Newark police dragging a bloody and bludgeoned Black cab driver named John Smith into the 4th Precinct adjacent to Newark Public Housing's Hayes Homes. Protests outside the precinct evolved into open conflict when police responded violently to non-violent protests, sparking five days of uprisings in the city. Much like the Watts rebellion in 1965, the Newark rebellion drew national attention and spurred long-term activism of the city's Black residents. Newark became a touchstone for Black nationalism and an epicenter for Black
Power activism in the years after the uprising. This activism would inform the residents of Stella Wright Homes, which was adjacent to the Hayes Homes, and inspire them to challenge the Newark Housing Authority systematically. From 1970 to 1974 the residents of Stella Wright organized a rent strike inspired by previous housing activism in Newark and New York City.

In 1969 many residents living in Newark’s projects began to meet informally to discuss the issues plaguing their community and the apathy of the Newark Housing Authority (NHA). That year, then-president of the Newark Public Housing Joint Tenant Association (JTA), Glady E. Dickinson, led a conference at Rutgers University’s Newark campus to create a working list of demands—becoming the precursor to the tenant-led rent strike. Tenants long-standing concerns over public safety, NHA housing policy, deferred building maintenance and on-site access to public health were compiled by the committee.38 In response, the city’s more established civil rights organizations, the NAACP’s Larrie Stalks, her brother Councilman Calvin West and Mayor Addonizio brokered an ill-fated deal by promising to improve the conditions in the city’s public housing projects.39 Attempts to broker a deal to alleviate the tension between public housing tenants and the NHA fell short of solutions, whereas the repairs funded by the HUD modernization grant may have satisfied residents by improving conditions at Stella Wright Homes. Instead, those repairs were never materialized and tensions mounted.

The soft response to the long-standing negligence of the NHA was not received well and prompted an exodus from the NHA and JTA of those who wanted immediate change. With the departure of Constance Washington for the more militant National Tenant Organization (NTO), Newark tenants rebranded themselves in attempt to unshackle their activism from stereotypical

39 Ibid.
catchphrases often associated with antipoverty campaigns of the era. The Poor and Dissatisfied Tenants Association (PDTA) was thus formed in 1969 and endorsed more radical actions in pursuit of restorative housing justice.

**Federal Policies Impacting Public Housing under Nixon**

Public housing residents nationally were outraged by the new federally mandated public housing rent increase made law by the Housing Act of 1970. With Nixon’s New Federalism\(^\text{40}\) in full swing, tenants already beset in paying 21.3 percent of their incomes in rent were now required to pay nearly a ten-percent increase totaling 31 percent. The increase of rents while employment and wages waned, was viewed as a direct attack against poor working people by the SWTA. In response, many of the previously autonomous tenant organizations merged in an attempt to challenge Addonizio and the NHA director, Joseph Sivolella.

Following a national trend in public housing activism, Black and Chinese residents of the San Francisco Housing Authority were previously involved in their own struggle. From 1966 to 1967, the tenants of the Hunters Point Housing Project redirected rent payment to repairs while residents in St. Louis’s public housing protested rent increase via rent strikes.\(^\text{41}\) The residents of public housing on a national level leveraged their collective efforts to enforce policy changes and physical improvements.

This national shift of low-income tenants to activism was spurred by a change of how New Deal and Great Society programs like public housing were funded on a national level.

When President Nixon took office in 1969, America’s local public housing authorities were

\(^{40}\) “New Federalism” is a political philosophy of devolution, or the transfer of certain powers from the United States federal government back to the states. ... As a policy theme, New Federalism typically involves the federal government providing block grants to the states to resolve a social issue. The last federal public housing rent increase of 9 percent was in 1959—the first year of occupancy of Stella Wright Homes.” “New Federalism,” DBpedia, accessed March 12, 2022, [http://dbpedia.org/resource/New%20Federalism](http://dbpedia.org/resource/New%20Federalism).

directly funded by the federal government. In 1972, the Nixon administration was successful at passing a key pieces of New Federalism legislation, the States and Local Assistance Act of 1972. This policy was a reward to southern states that deeply resented the power to the federal government to enforce Civil Right laws like desegregation of public schools and housing.

Nixon’s move was a departure from the historic direct funding model to one based on loosely regulated block grant funding to states marked the beginning of the end for progressive era social programs like public housing. From its inception, public housing was directly subsidized by federal dollars supervised locally. The federal government specified how those dollars could be allocated and spent by states and local housing authorities—this guaranteed a healthy revenue stream for social programs like public housing. The goal was to reduce the scope and overall power of the federal government returning that power to states.

This was a direct afront to Civil Rights legislation previously enforced by federal dollars. Block grants allowed for states and cities via a process of revenue sharing to determine how and where federal dollars went in their communities. In conjunction with federal fiscal policy changes was a devolution of support for progressive era programs—the ideology of the role of federal government shifted from a bottom up towards a top-down approach. This top-down approach favored programs administered by local for-profit and not-for-profit entities to construct affordable single-family housing and renovate available blighted housing stock towards a long-term goal of subsidizing free-market enterprise.

Shifting from the Federal government being a direct landlord towards subsiding private property ownership created dire consequences for the Newark Housing Authority. Already grappling with 18 projects, most in need of major repairs and maintenance, the reduction of federal dollars eviscerated its budget and worsened its hazardous living conditions. With more
than 14 percent of Newark’s population living in public housing, most of them being low-income African Americans, public housing was on precarious footing and an uncertain future. Further complicating issues with Newark Public Housing were the conditions much of its residents were living in: issues of flooding, lack of heat, inoperable elevators, and overall quality of life concerns ignited frustrations amongst its residents.

Peripherally, the city’s remaining white residents were hostile and resistant to Black Newarkers who attempted to move out of public housing. After being approved by the Newark City Council in 1972, a housing development called Kawaida Towers, designated to be built in the predominantly Italian North Ward, was fiercely protested against halting its construction. On the heels of the Newark Rebellion, economic recession, and growing racial tensions eliminating the option of exodus from NHA, protest became the sole remedy at the hands of the Stella Wright Tenants Association (STWA).

**The Poor and Dissatisfied Black Women Became Activists**

The remedy materialized when the tenants of Stella Wright Homes and other housing projects amalgamated their efforts and allies. Early in 1969, Constance Washington, Toby Henry and Fr. Thomas Comerford, pastor of the Queen of Angels Catholic Church located in the Central Ward, worked with tenants to throttle the Stella Wright Rent Strike into action. Additionally, NHA was one of the nation’s largest public housing authorities beginning almost with the inception of the model in 1938. The sheer scale and magnitude made its efforts

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cumbersome, leading organizers to solicit national organizations to help structure their efforts. The National Welfare Rights Organization, led by a Black woman, Johnnie Tillmon, who previously worked with tenants of the Los Angeles Housing Authority.⁴⁴

The tenants’ rights movement organically emerged from a growing movement of Welfare Rights in response to the subjugation and scapegoating of African American women living in public housing nationally. The growing scrutiny of low-income, Black single head of households punctuated public opinion of social welfare recipients and public housing residents. A major contributing factor to these conversations was the scathing racist indictment of Black families by the Moynihan Report (1965), which was conducted by Daniel Moynihan working with the Office of Policy Planning and Research. The report debuted a year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law. Scholar Rhonda Williams outlines how in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, how vehemently Black women were attacked during the 1960s. Williams provides a counter narrative of Black womanhood living on welfare in public housing. Deconstructing the “The Black ‘matriarchal’ family systems of Black poverty,” Williams rejects these stereotypical tropes and helps refocus the conversation on the intersectionality of oppression experienced by black women living poverty.⁴⁵

Nationally, these stigmas were being dismantled primarily by Black women living in poverty and on welfare. The Welfare Rights movement was just one example of how socio-economically marginalized women organized to rally for change. This movement emerged from the similar bureaucracies and alienation experienced by Black women living in Newark’s Central Ward. These women were often subjected to humiliation and blame by the systems designed to

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uplift them and began to hold those institutions directly accountable. Organized by localized small groups of dissatisfied Black women receiving federal cash-benefits, known then as ADC, later known as ADFC funds, these funds decreased when the Federal Food Stamp Program was introduced—for every one “dollar” a recipient received $0.30 was subtracted from a recipient’s cash benefits. These draconian policies infuriated women who had been dejected from society and written off as irresponsible.

Organizing was the sole means of remedying these inequities. In a radical act, Black women on welfare created a national coalition to boost advocacy and awareness. In the book, *The Battle for Welfare Rights Politics and Poverty in Modern America* author Felicia Kornbluh cites the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) as the single-largest Black feminist organization in American history. At its peak, NWRO represented the interests of twenty-five thousand women. Johnnie Tillmon, who was a skilled activist, working to improve conditions at her home in Nickerson Gardens, a public housing project Los Angeles, was also tethered to the NWRO and aided in the organizing of the Stella Wright Rent Strikes. Tillmon gave hope to the SWTA in staging a rent strike through her successful strategies to challenge federal welfare

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46 Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was established by the Social Security Act of 1935 as a grant program to enable states to provide cash welfare payments for needy children who had been deprived of parental support or care because their father or mother was absent from the home, incapacitated, deceased, or unemployed. “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) - Overview.” ASPE. Accessed March 12, 2022. https://aspe.hhs.gov/aid-families-dependent-children-afdc-temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf-overview#--text=Aid%20to%20Families%20with%20Dependent%20Children%20(AFDC)%20was%20established%20by%20home%20incapacitated%20and%20deceased%20or.


49 Nickerson Gardens is a 1,066-unit public housing apartment complex at 1590 East 114th Street in Watts, Los Angeles, California. Nickerson Gardens is the largest public housing development west of the Mississippi River.
policy and the Los Angeles Housing authority, respectively—the convergence of these intersectional identities, poor, black, women helped galvanize the activism of residents.

In this period, African American women began a national movement to force change in public housing. In the late sixties, tenant rent strikes began to gain momentum nationally. In a national trend to increase rents in public housing, St. Louis public housing tenants staged a rent strike in 1969. Kindling existing tensions between the blurred lines of the St. Louis Housing Authority and the city’s federally-funded Urban Renewal programs. Even though their efforts were fraught with division resulting in the ultimate failure and demolition of a majority of the city’s public housing—it had produced a template of public housing activism.

**On the Eve of Action: The Emergence of the Stella Wright Rent Strike**

At the dawn of the Stella Wright Rent Strike, several organizations were engaged in negotiations with the Newark Housing Authority. Having identified consistent hitches in NHA policy, modernization funding that had not been applied to repairs and the myriad of safety and health issues, the organizers of the Stella Wright Tenant Association drafted a press release to the city council. On June 23, 1970, the open letter from Toby Henry, Juanita Short, Louise Brummel, and Edward Satterfield to the Newark Housing Authority (NHA) and the city council outlined the episodic nature of navigating the bureaucracy of NHA to no avail. Speaking as a collective voice for the 1,200 families and 6,000 people living in the thirteen, fourteen-story buildings comprising the project, the SWTA shattered stereotypes and set the wheels in motion for what would become the nation’s longest tenant-led rent strikes in American history.

Mirroring the strikes that took place a year prior in St. Louis, and as noted by scholar Clarence Lang, the women were at the forefront of the conversation demanding “the right to

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respect, fair rents, and the ability to maintain autonomous households.” Although, in true white-patriarchal fashion, the media made Fr. Comerford the face of activism. Even though Comerford played an integral role in aiding efforts of the SWTA, along with Sr. Maureen McDonough C.S.C., the foundation of the movement were the Black women of Newark Public Housing. Creating alliances with several groups, the SWTA expanded support of the rent strike beyond their community cohort—the Black Catholic congregation of Queen of Angels church near Stella Wright and Hayes Homes, Operation Understanding, which merged with the Stella Wright Tenant’s Association in 1971, and later the suburban Concerned Citizens for Stella Wright rallied support for the rent strikes across racial, class and religious affiliation.

Lacking a fulfillment of their previous promise from the NHA and HUD to improve conditions, various organizations involved in activism consolidated activities at the urging of the NJ state department of Community Affairs in 1970. This galvanized the activism of the SWTA, which began to contemplate staging a rent-strike as their last alternative. Learning from the mistakes of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, the SWTA enlisted the help of several community stakeholders in Newark. To build a united front, Constance Washington, Toby Henry, Gladys Dickinson, and others built a coalition comprised of the NWRO, PDTA, and the Newark Public Housing Tenants Association. In the Fall of 1970, this coalition staged a rent strike across Newark public housing projects. Tenants played a grassroots role in structuring the SWTA and the formation of the rent strikes. Connecting to greater community support provided a

51 Ibid.
53 “Pruitt-Igoe consisted of thirty-three towers—each eleven stories high. In response, the Housing Authority filed eviction suits on seventy-three striking tenants and placed a lien on all overdue rents. By doing so, they effectively barred access to the collective accounts.” “Why Did Pruitt-Igoe Fail?: HUD USER,” accessed March 12, 2022, https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr_edge_featd_article_110314.html.
springboard to propel their cause. The initial press release, announcing the concerns of tenants to
the Newark City Council, was drafted by long-time residents of Stella Wright serving in
leadership roles. Meanwhile, each building enlisted residents to disseminate information about
the pending strike and collect rents and deposit them into an escrow account supervised by the
Newark Legal Services Project.

**From Heaven to Hell Hole: The “Unlivable” Conditions of Newark’s Public Housing**

Years of neglect by the Newark Housing Authority and overcrowding in the city’s
Central Ward housing projects caused the rapid deterioration of the quality of life. Tenants
historically used the prescribed methods to inform the housing authority to no avail. By 1970, the
same year of the beginnings of the rent strike promises of maintenance and modernization had
yet to materialize. In one housing project, the North Side, mostly Italian project of Columbus
Homes, the Newark’s Health and Welfare Department found in excess of two-thousand health
and safety violations alone.\(^54\) The violations at Central Ward projects like Stella Wright and
Hayes Homes far exceed those cited at Columbus Homes. This conditions residents at these
projects transcended the acute maintenance needs by 1969 and became a chronic, hazardous
reality of daily life.

By 1970, with the Nixon administration in full swing, residents of public housing were
fighting a changing tide as to how the federal government funded housing. At the beginning of
the SWTA rent-strike, the Nixon Administration’s HUD attorney Irving Welfield argued that
incentivizing homeownership\(^55\) as well as vouchers was a means to sustain the beleaguered,

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\(^55\) HUD official, Eugene Gulledge, the former president of the National Association of Home Builders suggested
that public housing was too “extravagant” and served “too few needy families” in August of 1970. Home ownership
continued to be the policy focused solution for low-income Americans through Great Recession of 2008. (Frank
2011).
hyper-politized program of public housing. Struggling to navigate shifting HUD funding policy, Mayor Gibson along with NHA Director Sivolella contended with aging housing inventories and angry tenants. Ultimately the residents living in NHA reaped the whirlwind of neo-liberal conservative seeking to dismantle public housing in favor of a free-market housing solution.

This shift away from progressive-era policy towards a free-market\textsuperscript{56} solution delayed much need federal dollars to repair NHA’s Stella Wright Homes and other NHA housing projects. Although the NHA stood to be the recipient of a $7 million HUD modernization grant, some funds were yet to be received and little more than half had been spent making renovations. The modernization grant had been awarded to NHA based on a prior HUD investigation which reinforced the concerns of its tenants. The barely 10-year-old Stella Wright Homes writhe with safety violations became a very visible beacon of decay and neglect. Just a decade prior they were hailed as a “panacea” to alleviate Newark’s chronic housing shortage—but years of woeful inattention to the people and buildings justified the rent strike.

Demanding that the housing authority make capital repairs and improvements to the eleven-year-old, seven building, thirteenth story structure each, the tenants withheld rents. Realizing that the issues at Stella Wright Homes stemmed from lack of tenant representation and direct participation the SWTA began to structure the foundation of what would lead to robust tenant management at the housing project. Leading the charge for change were the African American women residents of Stella Wright Homes. Until that point, society had largely deemed them ill-fit and unskilled, and incapable of contributing to their community. Entrenched in the rising tide of conservatism federally and publicly, the SWTA was met with fierce resistance by

\textsuperscript{56} The Experimental Housing Allowance Program (EHAP) was authorized in the Housing Act of 1970. EHAP tested the feasibility of a federally funded housing allowance voucher with eighteen-thousand families in about a dozen cities costing in upwards of $150 million in direct-pay dollars. The program did not begin until 1973. HUD, ND.
all parties concerned. The cash-strapped Newark Housing Authority already struggling to meet its fiscal obligations, Public Service Gas and Electric (PSEG), municipal water and sewage, and a litany of deferred capital improvement projects were sent into an economic tailspin by the SWTA rent strikes.

Having little recourse and even fewer options, the residents of NHA, starting with Stella Wright and Scudder Homes in the Central Ward, doubled down on protecting and improving the conditions of their homes and community. This level of pragmatism informed the strategies of the rent strikes. They keenly understood required levels of cooperation and collectivism necessary in order to be successful. In many ways, as an egress for change, the Newark Rebellion offered a pathway toward these efforts to leverage Black political autonomy to gain a satisfactory response for demands. Seeing themselves as “cities-within-cities,” given the population many were as large as most small towns, the SWTA operationalized their efforts treating local activist organizations as consultants to aid their exertions.

All the Agencies Men: How the NHA and HUD Reacted to the Rent Strike

Years of Federal and NHA maladministration of Stella Wright Homes and other projects projected a narrative of public housing itself being a failure, not the system which engineered its failures. NHA being the one of the twenty largest public housing authorities in the America became a banner of the progressive era housing social safety net. Incapable of ignoring these issues HUD, in 1971 issued a report that substantiated the claims of striking public housing tenants’ nationally—the Newark Housing Authority because of sheer size and national visibility because of the SWTA rent strikes was implicated in housing the HUD investigated drawing greater national attention.

Nearly a year into the Stella Wright Rent Strike, with the support of residents NHA wide,
the reports documented the conditions: “Work orders for leaking pipes, smashed windows, and broken doors had accumulated over the months, even years...halls and basements blocked by garbage and unwanted furniture. The ‘mutilated doors’ and smashed windows of Stella Wright Homes looked out on grassless lawns.”  

The HUD report also discussed the operational deficiencies of the NHA describing the agency as “Top Heavy” and “Wasteful,” requiring NHA to defer and request grant dollars to assist in the litany of repairs.

The HUD report also immediately recognized the impact of escrowed rents from the tenant rent strike’s impact on the operational budget of the NHA. This impact of the housing-wide rent-strike was realized when nearly all rent receivables were diverted from NHA to the SWTA collective escrow account. By December 1970, the total amount of all housing-wide receivables unpaid eclipsed $876,947.  

Alarmed by this HUD, who initial empathized with the tenant strike, began to float scenarios on how they could interrupt the striker’s collectivism.

By 1971, SWTA emerged from a myriad of tenants’ rights groups as the dominant voice of the strike by merging and consolidating power with Newark organizations like the PDTA and Operation Understanding in early 1971. In her well documented history of Queen of Angels Catholic Church (QACC), Mary Ward outlines this fact: “Stella Wright had emerged as the primary force in the Newark rent strike. The Stella Wright Tenant’s Association was highly organized, and its leadership was capable and committed.”

Being Newark’s first Black Catholic parish, and its proximity to Stella Wright and Scudder Homes, created a deep interfaith community connection between residents and the church. Previously strengthening the bond

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between the two was QACC’s willingness to house MLK Jr. “Poor Peoples Campaign” serving as its local headquarters in 1968. Via these relationships and consolidation of powers, the SWTA was prepared to meet its first challenge.

**On the Eve of Change: Resolutions and Outcomes of the Rent Strikes**

At the behest of the NHA and HUD the courts became increasingly suspicious of the legitimacy of escrowed rents. This concern motivated the courts to subpoena the SWTA and its chief organizers to “show case” as how those funds were being managed—the SWTA began to prepare for its day in court. In March of 1972, the SWTA brokered a deal with the Newark Housing Authority to depopulate allowing for repairs to be done and to increase security. After delaying the agreement HUD rejected the initial agreement. Choosing instead to litigate, the HUD authorities now working with NHA solicited the Superior Court of New Jersey to investigate the escrow accounts of the SWTA. After finding no malfeasance of the fund the court demanded a “show cause” ordering the tenants group to show proof of the escrowed funds—SWTA accurately accounted for $94,460 dollars of the rents collected from the residents living in Stella Wright Homes.

A report from Operation Understanding records these concerns after a hearing with Judge Ward Herbert on January 18, 1972. Accompanied by their legal consul Michael Callan, SWTA was prepared to make their case. Stalling, Judge Herbert delayed their hearing for nearly two-hours, allowed the representative for NHA to make their statement, and remanded the SWTA to a room within the superior court. Meeting them there, and leaving limited time for rebuttal, Judge Herbert met with the SWTA at 4:05 pm. After a brief discourse he attempted to simplify

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the complexities of the case summing it up in short: “It seems to be a very simple matter that he had to decide…to put the money allegedly held (by SWTA) into receivership.” When Michael Callan responded with a signed affidavit stating that the monies were accounted for and truly in escrow, Judge Herbert dismissed the group proclaiming that he was “tired” and (he) “had enough for today”—it was 4:10 pm. Worried with whether the courts would file an injunction to seize the escrowed rents SWTA was caught in a dilemma: to maintain the escrow accounts or return them to the residents. Anticipating the next move of the Superior Court of New Jersey and Judge Herbert, SWTA president Toby Henry, Fr. Tom Comerford (QACC), and Edward Satterfield each returned the collected rents to their respective tenants.

Conversely, the NHA was involved in its own upset of sorts. The initial HUD investigation at the onset of the rent strikes found egregious cost overruns and made several recommendations to remedy these fiscal issues. NHA was ordered to eliminate forty-five positions within the authority accounting for an annual cost savings of $500,000 and to create and implement a modified reorganization plan. Federally speaking, the once-empathetic courts who originally qualified the critiques of residents living conditions in NHA, appeared increasingly ambivalent about the negligence of the NHA and HUD being the “largest absentee landlord” vacillating in its support of the SWTA and supporting the fiscal concerns of NHA. Leveraging the HUD report in an attempt to reignite the vigor of the federal court’s support, SWTA grasped at the opportunity to get their demands met.

Focusing on issues highlighted by the report, like police/security patrols and buzzers and

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apartment/door intercom systems, tenants saw public safety as one of the most important components of creating a safe environment in public housing. Previously, propped doors at the entrances of building allowed for non-residents to commandeer stairwells and hallways creating “shooting pads” for heroin use. The Vietnam Era returned many servicemen with heroin addiction issues\(^63\) and abandoned apartment in public housing became “shooting pads” for the addicted.\(^64\) In 1970, for example, a woman who was waiting for her husband to come home, watched him cross the parking lot and drifted from sight. Nearly an hour later, having not arrived to their apartment, she became concerned and left their apartment to meet him. She found him robbed and beaten unconsciously at the back door of their building: he died a week later.\(^65\) These reoccurring themes of everyday life at Stella Wright were a common occurrence, but much like with any community, the responsible residents of Stella Wright and its surrounding community sought intervention to stave crisis.

An additional adjunct to securing the properties of NHA and making much needed repairs was employment creation. SWTA created a proposal outlining how these improvements could be implemented by hiring residents of the housing project to assist in public safety, janitorial—maintenance and repairs. The creation of this jobs program which harken back toward the New Deal era, was resonated by the United States Department of Labor. In 1973, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)\(^66\) was passed in response of chronic addiction issues.\(^63\) Alvin M. Shuster, “G.I. Heroin Addiction Epidemic in Vietnam,” The New York Times (The New York Times, May 16, 1971), https://www.nytimes.com/1971/05/16/archives/gi-heroin-addiction-epidemic-in-vietnam-gi-heroin-addiction-is.html.


\(^65\) Ibid.

\(^66\) “CETA funds were administered in a decentralized fashion by state and local governments, on the assumption that they could best determine local needs. The program offered work to those with low incomes and the long term unemployed as well as summer jobs to low income high school students. Full-time jobs were provided for a period of 12 to 24 months in public agencies or private not for profit organizations. The intent was to impart a marketable skill that would allow participants to move to an unsubsidized job. It was an extension of the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s.”
unemployment in low-income communities. By 1975, CETA would fund over a hundred workers in NHA—paving the way for effective tenant management of public housing. Moreover, CETA implemented at Stella Wright Homes, CETA aided in creating a nation model of how a tenant-worker cooperative could dismantle the chronic stigma of apathy most always associated with people living in housing projects.

As the strike continued on, particularly the years between 1971 and 1972, the intermittent squabbling, and overall dysfunctions of government on the federal, state and local level began to manifest themselves. Newly elected Mayor Kenneth Gibson was reeling from repeated strikes of teachers and transit workers, decreasing city revenues and a rejection of a payroll tax increase by City Council that further complicated the city’s economic issues. Governor William T. Cahill, not wanting to become mired in the rent strikes, steered clear of involvement. As HUD stalled and NHA capitulated over its mandated restructuring and required appointment of a new director after Sivolella’s departure, negotiations between NHA, HUD and SWTA continued to deteriorate.

With no recourse and having been shut-out of conversations with NHA, Mayor Gibson grew increasingly frustrated. The mayor that the Central Ward had helped elect voiced his frustrations in an inaccurate indictment of the SWTA strikers: “If this rent strike had occurred in the private housing it would have been over in four days” he angrily admonished, “but because it is public housing, some people believe they should live rent-free!”\(^{67}\) Mayor Gibson’s unfounded and insensitive statement focused more on the political dilemma imposed on his administration without applying any measure of logic—maybe in a captured moment of political grandstanding.

he forgot the people who had elected him, and the conditions they were forced to live in. This highlights the often-visible class divide between Black elected officials and constituents—Mayor Cory Booker\textsuperscript{68} turned senator would experience a similar challenge during his mayoral tenure in the 2000s and his failed attempted to overhaul Newark Public Schools.\textsuperscript{69}

In stark contrast to Mayor Gibson’s incendiary indictment, the residents of the rent strike had faithfully paid and deposited their rents in escrow accounts overseen by various groups. One of the most visible of these stewards was the Greater Newark Urban Coalitions then CEO, Gustav “Gus” Heningburg,\textsuperscript{70} who worked with Fr. Tom Comerford (QACC), and Operation Understanding spokeswoman, Pat Foley, who facilitated suburban white support of the rent strikes.

On November 17, 1972, the SWTA along with their legal representative J. Michael Callan were once again before Judge Herbert. Announcing that the escrowed funds had been returned to each tenant, Judge Herbert admonished Comerford and Henry before a cheering court room, calling their actions “flagrant, brazen and unequivocal defiance of the laws of this country.”\textsuperscript{71} In spite of the ending of escrowed funds for rents, the strike continued. Errantly believing the strike had ended, the NHA resumed evictions not stopping until strikers from Scudder and Archbishop Walsh Homes, in protest descended on the NHA offices and “smashed

\textsuperscript{68} “Cory Anthony Booker (born April 27, 1969) is an American politician, attorney, and author who has served as the junior United States senator from New Jersey since 2013. A member of the Democratic Party, Booker is the first African-American U.S. senator from New Jersey. He was the 38th mayor of Newark from 2006 to 2013, and served on the Municipal Council of Newark for the Central Ward from 1998 to 2002” Bioguide search, accessed March 12, 2022, \url{https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/B001288}.

\textsuperscript{69} Blanc 2019.

\textsuperscript{70} "Gustav Heningburg was the first president of the Greater Newark Urban Coalition, where he served in that capacity and as CEO for 12 years. “Black History Month: We Salute Newark’s Mr. Gus Heningburg,” RLS Media, February 20, 2021, \url{https://www.rlsmedia.com/article/black-history-month-we-salute-newarks-mr-gus-heningburg}.

windows and threaten to shut them down.”

One month later, Comerford and Henry appeared before Essex County Court Judge, Irwin Kimmelman for returning escrowed rents to tenants before the courts could seize them. In an attempt to redirect the focus on the living conditions due to the negligence of the NHA, Henry and Comerford cited broken elevators accounting for at least two-recent tragedies—one male tenant was found beaten to death, and another lost her unborn baby having to descend the stairs while in labor. Acknowledging these atrocities, and conditions in public housing, he could not ignore their infraction against the law and remanded both organizers to forty-five days in the Essex County Jail.

In January of 1974, with NHA’s request of emergency funding from HUD and on the heels of the previous year’s funding moratorium enacted by the Nixon administration, the agency was cash poor. With the NHA offering to relocate some tenants who had paid their rents (about 350 of Stella Wright Homes residents) to other NHA housing units and referrals for private-market housing, the strike was at an impasse. Costing in upwards of $6 million, increased legal fees and a threatened judgement of $1 million in payments owed to PSEG and other utilities, NHA suggested the rent-strikes had compromised the entire system. Even its ardent advocates were admitting defeat—Gustav Heningburg said in 1972, “The strike is over and nobody knows how to end it.”

Nearly three years into the rent strike, the SWTA had crippled the agency that attempted to ignore them. In April of 1973 local and federal bureaucrats and judges contemplated a resolution. Shining a national spotlight on the crisis taking place at Stella Wright Homes placed

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
curious attention of the growing issues of neglect in public housing taking place through America. In a final attempt to spur negotiations, Judge Joseph Walsh of the Essex County District Court, required tenants to pay $300,000 in April and May applying those same funds to building repairs. Additionally, the NHA’s new director, Robert Notte, encouraged the remaining tenants’ groups to work together to come to a “multilateral solution.” With 2,000 NHA tenants on notice—500 of whom were from Stella Wright Homes—and copious amounts of repairs, immediate action was paramount.

The actions of Judge Joseph Walsh of the Essex County District Court were a pivotal triumph for the SWTA. The actions of the amenable court were applauded by Toby Henry and others of SWTA. Judge Walsh provided a court-ordered injunction to prevent eviction of Newark’s public housing residents—a decisive action that opened a channel to mediate talks towards an equitable resolution. Judge Walsh also abated rents and utilities for strikers during the elapsed timeline of the strike. In a final attempt to bring both parties to the negotiation table, Judge Fredrick B. Lacy threatened to require tenants to pay back utilities and suspend the closure of Stella Wright Homes.

The suspended closing of Stella Wright Homes was based on the fact that the NHA had no tangible plan to relocate its tenants. Additionally, the NHA acknowledged that collected tenant rents subsidized the cost of tenants who could not pay which was the conventional structure of public housing. In a decisive measure, Judge Walsh ordered both parties to accept the plan to immediately renovate once the strike ended. Despite of the declaration made by the

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76 Ibid.
amenable Judge Walsh that high-rise housing “has failed miserably in the City of Newark,” no immediate and suitable replacement existed to relocate the residents at Stella Wright. This was so apparent that U.S. District Court Judge Frederick B. Lacey issued a stay on the proceedings to dissolve the Newark Housing Authority until the NHA commissioners convene a hearing while threatening residents at Stella Wright to pay their utility bills. According to Rabig, this strategy brought both parties closer to negotiations while preserving Stella Wright for another generation.

The acknowledgement of Judge Lacey, who in his summation couldn’t justify the closure of Stella Wright Homes absent of an adequate alternative—while also acknowledging the legitimacy of its strikers—prevented the displacement of its residents and moved the needle towards a robust tenant management organization in the Newark Housing Authority. The settlement favored the SWTA and released $1.3 million in HUD funding via the Federal Targeted Projects Program including aid earmarked for training of tenant management and an additional $41 million to NHA to facilitate repairs at Stella Wright Homes. In exchange, SWTA would transfer nearly $100,000 of tenant rents being held in escrow by the Greater Newark Urban Coalition.78

Nearing the end of the strike in 1973 amidst swirling in Black Nationalist motifs of self-empowerment and Nixon era rhetoric of individual accountability, the SWTA was successful in brokering a deal that achieved their initial goals of improving the overall conditions at the housing project. Tangible achievements aside, the SWTA also made real their intended vision of representation and participation in public housing. These goals were summarized in the report of the Stella Wright Rent Strikes authored by the Greater Newark Urban Coalition: “The terms of

the agreement hold some promise for expanding the whole concept of tenant management of public housing, increased citizen participation on boards responsible for the running of such housing, and more community involvement, through citizens' task forces, in dispute settlement and overseeing of agreements.”79

Conclusion

Seizing the moment that politically supported tenant-management and capitalizing on a federal policy funding shift, the SWTA initiated organizing the beginning of tenant-management. The previous nearly four-years allowed SWTA to hone the skills needed to be effective at managing the daily functions of building maintenance. The learned legal protocol, housing policy on the local and state level, and these efforts were bolstered by a $1.3 million HUD grant to create tenant-management organizations in public housing. Although a long way from being resolved, the tenants of Newark Public Housing, specifically Stella Wright Homes, struck an effective blow and created meaningful change for themselves and others living in public housing nationally.

The residents of Stella Wright organized a rent strike inspired by similar housing activism conducted by the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP) that had organized tenants and coordinated rent strikes in 1964-65. These resident-led strikes, in conjunction with activism models developed by MLK’s Newark Poor Peoples Campaign housed at Comerford’s QAC inspired SWTA to effectively created working cooperatives between residents, clergy, policymakers, and community activist. Their demands were reasonable and would have gone unheard, as they did for many years, if the strike had not occurred. Demanding that the Newark

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Housing Authority use HUD funding to make capital improvements and ensure the safety and health of their public housing stock, the tenants leveraged their economic and political autonomy to build support and induce action.

During this period, the foundation of what would lead to tenant-led public housing management were born. Leading the charge for change were the African American women residents of Stella Wright Homes and the Newark Housing Authority. Prior to that point, these were women had been deemed social pariahs, considered ill-fit and unskilled, and incapable of contributing to their community. Yet—these Black women organizers successfully brought about real change to public housing which created a national model of viable tenant-management beginning in 1975 and lasting until 1992. In the process, the Black women and men of Stella Wright Homes created a model for how public housing could thrive for all low-income communities nationally.
Chapter 6: Denying Success and Diminishing Returns: The Rise and Fall of Tenant Management at Stella Wright Homes

At the dawn of the 1970s, with America’s old industrial hubs reeling from the rapidly evolving racial, economic, spatial environments, public housing throughout the nation was in crisis. Beleaguered with mismanagement, racial segregation and the overall public opinion that the “project” was an experiment in housing low-income people that had failed miserably. For white and some middle-class Black suburbanites who surveyed the massive complexes from the birds-eye view of the newly constructed highways, or their brief interactions with its residents while on social work or public service visits to housing projects, it was a logical assessment.

Reinforcing public opinion was the portrayal of the fictional Evans family in the classic Michael Evan created, Norman Lear produced American situational comedy—*Good Times*. — The television program in its first season highlighted the failures of the aging high-rise public housing structures purported to be a part of the Chicago Housing Authority. The common themes of broken elevators, no-heat, and the overall challenges of living in public housing often mirrored those of the very real lived experiences of residents. Layering the bureaucracy of the housing authority, pandering alderman, and inept social welfare and maintenance personal, —*Good Times*—offered a fictional glimpse into the lives of people who called public housing home. In the very real melodrama of the years of the Stella Wright Homes rent strikes (1970-1974), residents realized a tangible solution to mitigate these issues highlighted in media.

Following a model that had begun at Boston’s Bromley-Heath Housing Project, a mixture of high-rise and low-rise building housing about 1200 families, and later St. Louis’s Carr Square (1973), Darst (1973), Clinton-Peabody (1974), and Betha Gilkey’s Cochran Gardens
the SWTA had models to remedy the issues that historically plagued management of Newark Public Housing. Aiding in the creation of tenant-management at Stella Wright Homes were several political and social factors realized during the rent strikes. The creation of the New Community Corporation—a community and social service organization created in the wake of the Newark Rebellion—began to plan its own low-income housing. The group purchased land for redevelopment in the Central Ward to build affordable housing incrementally changing the landscape of the city. Another housing-development project, embroiled in the racial hostility commonly associated with the city’s North Ward, Kawaida Towers and its developer Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) sought to transform collective living through a progressive and holistic model of housing development based on principles of cultural nationalism.

One of the conditions of ending the SWTA rent strike, which was supported by a federal grant, the tenants of Stella Wright Homes organized to effectively execute tenant management of the project. In 1974, with 684 tenants remaining at Stella Wright the courts settled the case, the Federal Targeted Project Program, released $1.3 million in aid, which, coupled with dollars from the Ford Foundation and oversight from HUD, made Stella Wright Homes one of the first eleven-public housing buildings in the nation to be tenant-managed.

Additionally, the settling of the rent-strike released $41 million into the nearly bankrupt Newark Housing Authority. Contrasting this win for the SWTA was the monumental work of structuring an effective tenant-management organization while simultaneously rehabbing Stella Wright Homes. The five-year freeze of federal dollars left many of the already

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dilapidated building in chronic disrepair. Benefitting from the organizational structure necessary to sustain a successful rent strike, the SWTA was prepared to capitalize on its previous win. In many ways the actions of low-income tenants, many of whom were single women-head-of-households, contradicted the popular narratives adopted by many middle-class Americans. Neither apathetic or accepting, the residents of Stella Wright dived into realizing their newly adopted role of tenant-management.

Preserving public housing and working in the favor of tenant-management were the policies and economic scenarios which played out during the SWTA rent-strikes. In October of 1973 the world economy was crippled by the first oil embargo in history.\textsuperscript{83} The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) placed the embargo on oil exports, causing per-barrel prices to increase from $3 to $12 a barrel, in response to America’s support of the Israeli military during the Yom Kippur war. This nearly 300 percent increase created a national shock wave causing fuel shortages and interrupting industries.

This interruption nearly halted construction of new low-income housing proposed to replace public housing in Newark’s Central Ward. Equally as impactful were shifting federal policy changes in the same year. President Richard Nixon placed a moratorium on all federal HUD spending further stalling development of much needed low-income housing construction. Even after the moratorium and the rent strikes ended in 1975, much of the available lands surrounding Stella Wright Homes had been sold-off to private developers.\textsuperscript{84} This absence of viable affordable housing options kept many residents living in Stella Wright Homes during the strike long after it had ended.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
Compounding the housing shortage in Newark and beyond, but correspondingly impacted by the OPEC crisis, was the lack of employment opportunities. By 1975, Black unemployment rates nationally were roughly 15 percent of the population nearly double that of white Americans. A 1971 *New York Times* article referencing these effective rates of unemployment in 1976 illustrated the disparity in Newark and nationally. “With a black unemployment rate of 17.4 percent last year, the Newark area was the sixth highest among 30 major metropolitan areas across the nation surveyed by the Federal agency. Milwaukee was the highest, with a jobless rate for ‘blacks and others’ of 19.8 percent, and Buffalo was fourth, with 17.9 percent. Philadelphia was second with 18.1 percent, Pittsburgh third with 18 percent, and Seattle-Everett with 17.5 percent.” With an ever-increasing retrenchment of well-paid jobs, affordable housing, and deindustrialization, the need to preserve public housing became more apparent than it had been historically.

Grappling with the social, economic, and political issues swirling around SWTA, they began their intended mission of tenant-management at Stella Wright Homes in 1978. By that time, eleven tenant-managed public housing projects existed nationally, with four of the eleven in the St. Louis Housing Authority that were the progeny of the Pruitt-Igoe rent strike in 1969. The model used to help structure tenant-management at Stella Wright Homes tenant association sought the help of St. Louis Housing’s tenant-management organizations who started its first tenant management housing project, Carr Square, in 1973. Nearly one year after the strike the Stella Wright Tenant Association had organized its tenant-management operations, hired and

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85 “Unemployment Rate - Black or African American,” FRED, accessed March 12, 2022, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/graph/?g=igW0.
trained its staff, with everyone from tenant managers, floor and building captains, and safety and laborers.

In 1975, the SWTA created a tenant’s handbook that they shared with all tenants of the project. The first page of the handbook began with a formal letter, welcoming tenants to their new homes: “We wish you Love, Peace and Happiness. This guide has been prepared to help you in answering questions you may have and in explaining what you may expect from us as well as what we expect of you. As it is part of your lease, it is important that you read it carefully and understand it thoroughly. We know that you will respond to our request and suggestions, and we hope that in turn you will feel free to give us your own ideas of how we may be of help to you.” This professional salutation not only greeted new tenants but communicated the necessity of cooperation between tenants and management to maintain quality of life at Stella Wright Homes. Of the initial tenant-management staff, a majority were African America women, including the resident manager, tenant selection interviewer, and social service directors, Mrs. Lynn King, Mrs. Nellie Wilson and Ms. Almetia McKie respectively, each of whom had been long-time residents. Leveraging their demands identified during the rent-strikes the committee created a staffing model that was adequate in meeting the demands of managing its building.

Beyond Stella Wright Homes, tenants were successful at appointing representation to the Newark Housing Authority as well. These tenant representatives were included in the original negotiations to end the strike in 1974. The creation of the systems necessary for building improvements while creating a sustainable model of management were captured in the introduction of the STWA handbook:

A dream, a desire, and a hope for poor but dignified tenants and prospective tenants. From its meager beginning in 1960, those of us who were forced from our homes due to urban renewal policies of the City fathers have continued to keep our residency in spite of the continual deterioration of our community. In spite of the rise of crime due to the lack
of police protection and unconcern on the part of other City agencies, we appealed to the Newark Housing Authority for a solution to our plight. However, due to an unenlightened Agency and unconcern and ignorance to our needs, we received no satisfactory response. Thus, in April, 1970, under the dynamic leadership of our President, Toby Henry, we underwent a long but effective rent strike. However, a new era of cooperation has come about with the Newark Housing Authority because of the strike. RESULTS - Today we can offer you - the public - the assurance of a NEW STELLA WRIGHT. Under the proposed Stella Wright Tenant Management Corporation, we offer tenant involvement in all aspects, i.e., socially, economically, educationally, and politically of our community-knowing that our power and success lies along these lines.”

Captured in those words is the journey from dejected and frustrated to empowered.

The Stella Wright Homes Tenant Association handbook typified the commitment of its residents to be respected and equal contributors to their environment and lives. Regaining years of autonomy lost through hostile social welfare, Newark Housing Authority policy and the apathy that generally maligned both programs, the tenants of Stella Wright Homes laid a foundation for not only dismantling the aforementioned, while simultaneously rejecting the myth of the “pathology of poverty” often associated with people living in public housing. Tenants participated comprehensively in the operations of its buildings. Financial management, rent collection, and maintenance were all supervised by tenants. Many of the residents that entered into tenant-management had been long-time members of Stella Wright Homes—many had resided there since its opening. Although their victory would be short-lived, it realized the vision or the visionaries responsible for public housing activism in Newark.

Temporarily defeating tropes of urban decay, criminality, and decline, the tenants bucked the previous disenfranchised status in a strident effort to sustain their home. Going from near condemnation six-years prior to a functional operation, while wading through miles of red tape and political bureaucracy, was no easy feat. Critics scoffed at replicating and expanding the

successful model created at Stella Wright Homes citing the extensive training and expense associated with mounting a tenant-management organization. Slow to start and structured differently from those in Boston and St. Louis, Stella Wright Tenant’s Association tenant management organization struggled to assert their position. Stella Wright Homes model departed from others in that it only would supervise building maintenance, deferring fiscal management of buildings to the Newark Housing Authority.\(^9\) Further complicating things were the initial setbacks of vandalism of the model apartment by ostensible non-residents of Stella Wright Homes.\(^9\) Gus Heninburg voice optimism alongside concerns of the sustainability of tenant management citing the need to increase tenant-occupancy as a sustaining revenue source for the housing project.\(^9\)

But as early as 1975, with full recognition by HUD be granted in 1976, the SWTA management organization had improved conditions. In a relatively short period, the SWTA had cleaned, painted, installed security systems, trained staff and implemented policies to ensure the sustainability of their efforts. Although they lacked the power to control the fiscal decisions related to the housing project, they organized a means to vet new tenants and improve quality of life.\(^9\) In making additional considerations for the social, and physical needs of their tenants, the Stella Wright Tenant Management Association leverage, HUD dollars to expand their existing daycare and social services centers housed onsite—meeting the needs of a people living in a

\(^9\) Ibid.
“city within a city.”

In its first eighteen months, the Stella Wright Tenant Management Corporation (TMC) filled 800 vacant units and increased per-unit-monies (PUM) from $42.00 to $92.00.93 The impact of the SWTA TMC was visible and fiscally felt by tenants and NHA alike. Reducing vacancies from 78 percent to a mere 2 percent was the standout achievement of the organization and tenants felt safer and more secure in the homes. In a 1979 HUD report, E. James Bradley, the TPP Coordinator at Stella Wright Homes, highlighted the achievements of SWTMC: “So in effect, what is occurring in part, is that higher (moderate) income residents are being moved in, rental income is increasing, low income households are not being directed to Stella Wright as frequently (thereby less housing opportunity) if at all and tenant management seems to be working well for these moderate income households.”94 With some resemblance of success, the SWTA was met with concerns by TPP and HUD regarding the increased PUM, and displacement of very-low-income tenants from tenant-managed public housing.

“Tear it down”: The End of Stella Wright Homes

The era after the SWTA rent strikes saw the initial reshaping of public housing and the beginning of privatization and sub-prime home ownership that led to the 2007-2009 housing crisis. President Gerald R. Ford, after Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974, appointed HUD’s first female secretary, Carla Anderson Hills in 1975. Hills oversaw the controversial demolition of Pruitt-Igoe—a fate that may had very easily been Stella Wright Homes in Newark. Although Hills had no experience in housing, she fiercely advocated and preserved much of the department’s budget from James Lynn, director of the Office of Management and Budget. Also

93 Alan Gary Morley, A STUDY OF TENANT MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC HOUSING. University of Rhode Island, 1979.
94 Newark, New Jersey, Newark Redevelopment Authority, E. James Bradley, The New Stella Wright Homes - Final TPP Report, (July 1978), Pg. 8.
creating an afront to any expansion of investment in public housing and tenant-management was the acceleration of the Nixon era Section 8 program that create vouchers for low-income families to enter the free-market. Equally as eroding to federally funded public housing was the creating of federally sponsored, mortgaged-backed-securities to incentivize banks underwriting loans to low-income homeowners—foreshadowing the issues which exacerbated the housing crisis more than three-decades later.\(^95\)

During the Carter administration, the federal government continued divesting from local housing authorities in favor of Nixon and Ford era public/private housing partnerships. The expansion of Section 8 vouchers and homeowners ignored the federal dollars needed by housing authorities to expand tenant-management that had proven successful to this point.\(^96\) Deferring to Nixon era “New Federalism,” these dollars were awarded to states and cities like Newark in the form of Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)—the Carter Administration attempted to soften the blow dealt to HUD and public housing with little success. Although, mostly in response to the economic crisis of 1977 coupled with the stagflation of the decade, the Carter administration did however expand of federal aid in the form of expanded food stamp and cash benefits to low-income welfare recipients.\(^97\) This left many housing authorities like Newark


\(^96\) “The Carter administration was successful in passing legislation delivering $12.4 billion over the next 3 years in the form of community development block grant program, again concentrated in older and more distressed communities. In the urban development action grant, which is designed primarily to stimulate private investment, there was an increase to $400 million a year with Section 8 subsidies constituting that substantial increase. 317,000 more families were housed under the Section 8 program, again stimulating primarily private investment into renovation and building of adequate housing.” G. Thomas Kingsley Karina Fortuny, “Urban Policy in the Carter Administration - Urban Institute,” May 2010. \(https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/28631/412091-Urban-Policy-in-the-Carter-Administration.PDF\).

\(^97\) “In an effort to overhaul the nation's welfare system, Carter called for a series of reforms that increased benefits to welfare recipients. The overhaul would call for the creation of 1.4 million jobs for low-income workers, reduced taxes for the working poor by $4.9 billion, and a $2.1 billion increase in state and local government fiscal relief. He made the food stamp program available to an additional 2.2 million Americans and raised the minimum wage, which would boost the earnings of 4.5 million Americans by $2.2 billion” G. Thomas Kingsley Karina Fortuny, “Urban
without the financial resources necessary to maintain their aging public housing stock. The Carter administrations continued a long tradition in policy making of viewing poverty in silos, which interrupted the comprehensive understandings that all material needs which create the foundation of basic human rights, what FDR referred to in his Second Bill of Rights (1944) must be tethered together to promote a balanced, sustainable life for families living in poverty.98

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, African American unemployment was at 14.6 percent, almost more than double America's white working-age population.99 By June 1983, as President Reagan was gearing up to run for reelection, African American unemployment had increased to 21.7% percent.100 Reagan, a long an advocate of limited government and a retraction of the supposed welfare state, seized the opportunity to legitimize his neoliberal agenda of privatizing and subsidizing housing for poor Americans. Departing from the expansion of the federal funding for private development of low-income rehabilitation grants to private developers and Federal Section 8 voucher program, the Reagan administrations exacerbated the already fragile low-income housing crisis. Absent of any consideration of the complexities of low-income workers’ lives, the Reagan administration never measured how the impact of crippling inflation brought on by Volker monetary era,101 coupled to one-in-five African Americans being unemployed through the election of his second term would impact one’s ability

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99 “Unemployment Rate - Black or African American,” FRED, accessed March 12, 2022, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/graph/?g=igW0.
100 Ibid.
101 In October 1979, Fed Chairman Paul Volcker announced new measures by the Federal Open Market Committee aimed at reining in the inflation that had afflicted the US economy for several years. ... However, in the face of higher unemployment, the Fed eased its policy before inflation had been fully contained. Bill Medley, “Volcker's Announcement of Anti-Inflation Measures,” Federal Reserve History, accessed March 12, 2022, https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/anti-inflation-measures.
to leave public housing projects like Stella Wright Homes and enter the free market.

Capitalizing on growing support for defunding and dismantling the "welfare state,"¹⁰² (Sprague 2016) inclusive of public housing, Reagan employed reoccurring motifs of the moral deficit, socially irresponsible black woman—the "Welfare Queen."¹⁰³ The American media leveraged both news, night-time dramas, and movies of the decaying Black metropolis and fixed squarely on the televisions of conservative suburbanites were the failures of public housing. Shaping these understandings of victim-blaming of the African American poor was the visual decay and dysfunction of the built environment and not the humanity of the residents of public housing.

At Stella Wright and other public housing projects, however, tenant management had proven to be an effective strategy to maintain safe and quality public housing. This reality was visible as early as 1983 when the United States Housing and Urban Development produced a report stating that "It appears that most people interested in housing issues are unaware that resident corporations currently manage at least 11 sizeable public housing projects in the country." Of these eleven public housing projects operated by tenant-management, HUD identified one example for efficacy—Stella Windsor Wright.¹⁰⁴ In illustrating these organizations' effectiveness, it is important to address the sociopolitical, economic, and structural challenges that tenant organizations experienced and their ability to navigate these barriers successfully.

¹⁰³ Often used and popularized by Ronald Reagan during his campaign, A "welfare queen" is a derogatory term used in the United States to refer to women who allegedly misuse or collect excessive welfare payments through fraud, child endangerment, or manipulation. Sprague 2016.
To counteract these successes, the Reagan administration built upon previous conservative strategies to dismantle public housing by selling the idea of tenant management of public housing to private companies. Upon sale, the individual units would be resold to tenants effectively making those same residents’ homeowners. Low-income homeowners could use federal subsidies to finance their purchase. The program was piloted at Carr Square in St. Louis and heralded by Republicans as “a very exciting chapter of a new civil rights revolution”\textsuperscript{105} and “an innovative way to let poor people have a taste of the American dream.”\textsuperscript{106} Democrats critiqued the program as a way for the government to shirk their New Deal social responsibilities to the poor. Republican Congressman Jack French Kemp was a champion of this program, passing legislation in the 1970s that allowed housing authorities to sell public housing units to tenants, which he parlayed into an appointment as the Secretary of HUD in 1989.\textsuperscript{107}

Notwithstanding the two decades of economic decline, deindustrialization and shifting American understandings of people living in poverty, the program lacked consideration of the nature of public housing. Offering a free-market solution of home ownership posed a conflict of paradigms: homeownership historically akin to the gainfully employed middle-class being offered as a solution to the economically permanent underclass seemed contradictory in essence. This sentiment was expressed by Rep. William L. Clay (D.Mo) during a 1990 House subcommittee meeting convened to discuss the matter: “For most people—especially those with


\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{107} Jack French Kemp (July 13, 1935 – May 2, 2009) was an American politician and a professional gridiron football player. A member of the Republican Party from New York, he served as Housing Secretary in the administration of President George H. W. Bush from 1989 to 1993, having previously served nine terms in the United States House of Representatives from 1971 to 1989. Stengel and Birnbaum.
no place to live—tenant ownership of public housing is a contradiction in terms."108 Ironically the tenants residing at Carr Square had a median household income of $6500 dollars.109

At Stella Wright Homes the success of its tenant-management could not beat back the rising tide of political changes taking place. Unlike its sister tenant-managed low-rise public housing projects, Stella Wright stood as the collective representation of a failed housing model—indifferent to their ability to effectively manage themselves. Aging rapidly, in the last report of tenant management produced by HUD in 1992, Stella Wright Homes was the only of the 11 remaining TPP sites still in need of extensive rehabilitation.110

Once again met with vacant units, vandalism, and deferred maintenance, the 1990 nonutility operating budget of Stella Wright crest at $4 million.111 Facilitating the decline of the SWTA was the shift from on-site to centralized tenant-management—effectively replicating the same deficiencies prior to 1970.112 High vacancies and high crime once again plagued Stella Wright, which were driven by a 36.5 percent reduction of staff. Six administrators and 27 building workers were left to manage the 1,200 remaining residents living in seven buildings with 40 percent of its residents living there less than five-years.113 The population reduction of would-be tenants, with low-wage, but stable incomes became the first recipients of Federal Section 8 vouchers. This created an exodus of these stable public housing tenants and left unfilled vacancies making Stella Wright Homes and destabilized the efforts of tenant-

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111 Ibid.
113 Ibid
management. This shift from stable to unstable, from a place where individuals created community and networks of survival marked the beginning of the last chapter of Stella Wright Homes.

Decline remained steady on the eve of President Bill Clinton’s election in 1992. In the years leading up to the depopulation, displacement, and privatization of poor-people’s housing, several key neoliberal policies were introduced by the Clinton administration: welfare-to-work legislation and the Hope VI grants. Fulfilling the Republican Party’s agenda to end social welfare and public housing by demolition in favor of privatization exact a toll on poor families living in public housing. The timing couldn’t have been worse for many of these families, as the social crises of the 1980s added additional layers of oppression to Black urban communities. The HIV/AIDS and crack-cocaine epidemics, particularly, further exacerbated the systemic oppression of communities and individual families living in poverty. The apathy of the Regan and Bush administrations, followed by the complicity of the Clinton administration, left Stella Wright Homes—and many other public housing projects without resources or allies.

Under the Clinton Administration and HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo came a wave of demolitions of high-rise public housing projects. In a 1999 statement on the Stella Wright

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115 “HOPE VI is a program of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. It is intended to revitalize the worst public housing projects in the United States into mixed-income developments. Its philosophy is largely based on New Urbanism and the concept of defensible space. The program began in 1992, with formal recognition by law in 1998. As of 2005, the program had distributed $5.8 billion through 446 federal block grants to cities for the developments, with the highest individual grant being $67.7 million, awarded to Arverne/Edgemere Houses in New York City. HOPE VI has included a variety of grant programs including: Revitalization, Demolition, Main Street, and Planning grant programs. As of June 1, 2010, there have been 254 HOPE VI Revitalization grants awarded to 132 housing authorities since 1993 – totaling more than $6.1 billion.” “About Hope VI - Public and Indian Housing - HUD,” HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 1992, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/hope6/about.
Homes, Clinton declared that “when public housing makes the statement of exclusion and isolation, tear it down and don't repaint it, put in new windows or new fences.” Tear it down is exactly what they did in 2002, when Newark Mayor Sharpe James used Hope VI federal funding to implode the remaining four buildings of the Stella Wright Homes. The legacy of nearly forty years of tenant activism, Black women exerting their agency and ability in wake of crushing federal policy, and the connectivity of a community was dismantled in favor of a free-market solution.

Right up till the end the tenants at Stella Wright maintained tenant control and representation. Long-time resident Doris McCray, for example, had moved into Stella Wright in 1968 and worked with the Newark Tenants Council before being appointed to the Newark Housing Commissioners. Fighting a rising tide of neoliberal policies and the broken social contract between a nation and its people resonated in the months before demolition of Stella Wright Homes. The privatization of low-income housing vanquished tenant control and representation, thereby ending an era of progressive era policy and placing its recipients in the throws of the next Great Depression: The Great Recession. The elimination of the federal safety net in the form of public housing allowed for a free-fall of the most marginalized Americans—promoting the rapid growth of the unhoused in an ever-retracting American economy.

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Chapter 7: Conclusion

The activism at Stella Wright Homes is a continuation of the socialist-labor movement that took place in the early 20th century. The common themes were the leadership of people who saw their experiences of economic marginalization in housing and employment as connected and organized to challenge systems of oppression. An additional component related to African Americans is the nature of structural racism and its impact on housing access and equity. The Stella Wright Rent Strike occurred at the convergence of the above-mentioned factors and how they became weaponized against people living in poverty, recipients of social welfare, and often the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. These intersectional identities of Black women living on public assistance and residing in public housing reflect the historic struggle for a collective agency from the inception of tenant-led rent strikes. Equally apparent are systems that interrupt the exercise of agency—public perception of people living in poverty, changing views of how middle-class Americans viewed the chronically impoverished, and the deeply rooted belief in the puritanical work ethic.

Lacking an ability to hone in on the material need of housing to the human condition, Americans embraced the misguided beliefs about the people living in public housing focusing very little on the policy decisions that aided its decline. In this, much of what has been written and documented about public housing has lacked the story telling required to humanize Black people living in poverty who exerted the agency and activism representative of its residents. Following a national trend of tenant activism, the ability of public housing residents to navigate the bureaucracy of the Newark Housing Authority and negotiate for control and representation demonstrate their roles as agents of change at Stella Wright Homes. Within the seven, 13-story buildings of the project, networks of people shaped community and created systems to insulate
their homes and family from the bureaucratic failures of a system which, in theory, was designed to promote their welfare and wellbeing. Never becoming full recipients of the intended mission of public housing to lift themselves and their families out of poverty, the Stella Wright Tenants Association designed internal systems for safe and just housing.

It was largely Black women, often with limited resources and social capital, who challenged NHA and HUD by leveraging networks of community activism in Newark. In this, they organized and were successful at rallying against the systems that sought to evict them from the only home many had known. Through this action, these residents began to construct organizations to manage Stella Wright Homes more effectively. Employing a grassroots method of tenant organizing and management, a method lacking in the municipal housing authority model, the female tenant organizers improved the physical structure and the lives of its residents.

Today, nearly twenty years after the demolition of Stella Wright Homes, Newark (along with much of the region) has been met with a new housing crisis proliferated by the expansion of gentrification. Although low-income housing was built in the wake of the 1967 Rebellion, like New Community Corporation, Georgia King Village, and NHA’s low-rise townhouse style apartments—and even median prices owner occupied Society Hill—housing inequity continues.

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118 “Founded in 1968, NCC is recognized as one of the largest, most comprehensive community development corporations in the U.S. Our vast array of services are provided “Under One Roof” and reach every stage of life. We offer affordable housing, early childhood learning centers, youth services, adult education, family transitional housing, mental health services, a long-term care facility, a one-stop resource center, a food pantry, a community newsletter and arts and cultural events.” “Home,” New Community Corporation, March 1, 2022, https://newcommunity.org/.
119 “Built in 1976, Georgia King Village in Newark, New Jersey, needed a makeover. The owners, L+M Development Partners, acquired the two 18-story affordable housing towers in July 2016. The complex was in distress needing various improvements to both individual units and the structural integrity” “Homepage,” Georgia King Village, October 6, 2020, https://georgiakingvillagenj.com/.
120 “In 1995, the opening of Society Hill, a 980-unit middle-income condominium complex in University Heights kicked off a recent housing boom. A $24.9 million HOPE I grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development resulted in the construction of New Community Hills, 206 townhouses completed in 2000 on the former location of the Hayes Homes public housing complex in the Central Ward. And the nonprofit, community-based organization, La Casa de Don Pedro, has now built 100 low- and moderate-income housing units in the city. These projects are part of a trend of replacing the high-rise public housing projects built during the ’50s and ’60s.”
continues to grow. Among the many contributing factors is that not enough low-income housing has been created to offset the losses realized through the demolition of Newark’s public housing stock. More concerning is the lack of consideration for non-family housing for an increasingly diverse group of unhoused people, particularly people with mental, physical, and cognitive disabilities, and many more underserved groups.

The convergence of years of neoliberal, conservative housing policies culminated in the 2008 Housing Crisis. The crisis alone resulted in the most significant reduction of African American homeownership rates since the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, pushing many subprime borrowers out of their homes and into the throes of a hypercompetitive rental market. The loss of homeownership coupled with rental market speculation and price exploitation has further displaced African American and overall low-income urban dwellers preventing them from securing housing. The rising rents and ever-increasing property taxation have economically pinched Black seniors who own homes and outpriced working Black families seeing to rent in urban centers. As a result, many lower incomed African Americans have experienced housing inequity, with neoliberal solutions of Section 8 vouchers being reduced and increasing backlogged waiting lists for assistance. Tethered to this, and often a barrier for low-income families and individuals, are pernicious income and credit requirements and background checks.

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121 “During Bush Administration, Unbalanced Priorities Weakened Housing Programs Over the past eight years, unbalanced federal budget priorities have placed pressure on low-income housing programs. The Bush Administration’s annual budgets accorded priority to tax cuts and large funding increases for defense and homeland security. When sizeable federal budget deficits emerged in 2003 and 2004, caused in part by the deep tax cuts, the Administration and Congress began to squeeze domestic discretionary funding.29 Low-income housing programs were among those affected. Following cuts in 2005 and 2006, total discretionary funding for HUD rose in 2007 but fell again in 2008 to a level $1.8 billion (or 4.2 percent) below the 2004 level, adjusted for inflation.” “CBPP Statement,” 2008, https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/2-24-10bud-stmt.pdf.
Rapidly increasing rents in nearby gentrifying urban centers like New York City has impacted rent increases in Newark. Black and Latino low-wage renters and home buyers are increasing vying with higher-income earners and speculators for housing. Motivated by the motifs of the “Gritty Urbane Metropolis” remade has enticed a generation, of what economist Richard Florida termed the “creative class” to center city neighborhoods. These college-educated, high-income earning, white Gen X’rs and millennials are capable of paying inflated rents. Newark’s downtown redevelopment strategy has invested heavily in constructing and rehabilitating housing to capture this cash flushed cohort of affluent elites. Gentrification has accelerated housing inequity amongst poor and working-class Black and Latino renters competing for available market-rate apartments and left with little to no options in the absence of public housing. The proliferation of thirty years of gentrification has left a tangible mark on American cities forcing many would-be occupants of public housing further from city cores and often into the streets. This phenomenon has resulted in an ever-increasing trend of displacement, destabilization, and homelessness of Black communities—challenging scholars, activist, and housing planners to reevaluate the need for public housing as a viable means of alleviating this contemporary crisis of the unhoused.

Most recently the crisis of the unhoused has been unveiled in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much like our public health response to the global virus that began in late 2019, the housing crisis has largely been ignored. As states closed and low-wage service labor grinded to a halt in March of 2020, many already on the fringes of economic crisis were faced with no-income and eviction. Notwithstanding the federal moratoriums on evictions, tenants were met with forced evictions or the fear of pending eviction and vacated apartments. In Newark, a report was completed identifying the crisis. A “point-in-time” count of homeless by the Monarch
Housing Association\textsuperscript{122} identified Essex County, and more specifically Newark, as having unhoused populations that grew by 85.9\% during the pandemic.\textsuperscript{123} It is reasonable to assume that if public housing projects like Stella Wright Homes had remained operational, a fair amount of its vacant units could have been allocated for emergency housing placement for the acute and chronically unhoused alike.

The need for safe and quality affordable housing has changed since the creation of the Federal Housing Authority and the Newark Housing Authority. The necessity of offering a public option has become an even greater moral imperative today. This moral imperative has all been ignored as we robustly fund private development that provides few low-income units. Even when units are available, the often do not meet the needs of large families. Stella Wright Homes offered tenant placement from two-to-seven rooms capable of providing shelter to one to eleven people per apartment. The lack of practical planning in low-income housing models contemporarily has also proliferated unhoused populations in Newark and beyond.

One of the primary lessons learned from the organizing of a successful tenant movement and formation of an effective tenant management organization at Stella Wright Homes, is that the people who live in low-income housing must be allowed to contribute to its design and management. This community agency is essential in creating sustainable communities. The residents at Stella Wright Homes proved that this model could work and should be applied to all low-income housing. A secondary piece is that the women, subjected to the intersections of race,

\textsuperscript{122} “NJ Counts 2021, New Jersey’s annual Point-In-Time (PIT) Count of the Homeless, provides a statewide snapshot of households experiencing homelessness in our communities; where they find shelter, what their needs are, and what factors contribute to making them homeless. The 2021 Count reveals important demographic and other information about families and individuals experiencing homelessness on the night of Tuesday, January 26th, 2021. These findings help to understand how to better allocate housing resources and services to prevent and end homelessness.” “New Jersey 2021 PIT Report - Monarchhousing.org,” January 6, 2021, \url{https://www.monarchhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/njcounts21/New%20Jersey%20PIT%20Report.pdf}.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
gender, and class-based oppression, living in public housing shifted the false narrative of passive acceptance of their situation towards the legitimate narrative of active participants. Through this active participation, Black women developed organizational strategies while challenging public perceptions of Black women living in public housing.
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