

A l e x H e c h t

# HANDS-ON HELP

## HOUSTON GROUPS

### THAT WORK FOR

#### LOW-INCOME HOUSING

A number of concerned Houston activist groups are battling their city's legacy of inadequate low-income housing. "Housing is a basic human right," asserts Mathew Mapram, a member of the Mayor's Task Force on Affordable Housing and director of a local community housing group. "We have an obligation to strengthen our society, and low-income housing has traditionally increased the tax base and revitalized our community. And when people have something to protect of their own, they don't go out and destroy other people's property."

Perhaps the best-known housing group at work in Houston is Habitat for Humanity, an international nonprofit organization that builds houses for families whose incomes do not exceed \$19,000. A majority of Habitat's funding and volunteer labor come from corporations and civic organizations, but the families also pitch in, donating 300 hours of "sweat equity" to each Habitat project. A Habitat mortgage costs about \$40,000, with monthly payments of \$250 to \$300. Since the completion of its first Houston home on Christmas Eve 1988, Habitat has finished 78 houses, mostly in Second and Fifth wards, housing 316 people, including 222 children.

Advocates for Housing, a nonprofit agency created in 1990 to develop safe and sanitary housing for lower-income families, is considered the legislative watchdog for the affordable-housing issue. Advocates prints a monthly newsletter designed to keep its 500-person mailing list — which includes politicians, the boards of community development corporations, banks, architects, builders, developers, churches, and social service providers — abreast of policy changes that could affect affordable housing.

For the past two years, Advocates for Housing has been developing a proposal to create a nonprofit agency called the Land Bank, which would assist in the redevelopment of abandoned or severely tax-delinquent properties. According to James Neidinger, executive director of Advocates for Housing, the concept targets the thousands of vacated, deteriorating properties seized by the city and county taxing districts each year that must by law sit idle until the foreclosure sale on the steps of the county courthouse — a two-year minimum.



A NOAH crew works on rehabilitating a dilapidated house.

"In the middle of a block of nice houses in an otherwise stable inner-city neighborhood, you'll see a vacant shack, maybe a vacant lot, or some property that somebody obviously doesn't care about," Neidinger says. "The property just sits there for years and years. The Land Bank would act as an intermediary to help somebody, either a CDC or some neighbor, bring the property back up to standard."

ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) helps low-income families find funding to help them buy their own homes. In 1994 ACORN helped 836 low-income Houstonians secure mortgages. "We are a grassroots organization," explains Mathew Mapram, director of ACORN. "We don't want workers who are looking for name recognition, but people who want to revitalize their own houses or neighborhoods." Started in 1970, ACORN makes sure that banks follow the Community Reinvestment Act, which requires them to put 25 percent of their

banking deposits back into the community. According to Mapram, banks have historically avoided investing in lower-income areas, illegally redlining poorer, nonwhite neighborhoods. ACORN provides loan counseling for lower-income people who don't have traditional credit, don't know about mortgages, or are intimidated by the banks. "If a family has paid \$500 or \$600 in rent for the last five years but hasn't been paying their utilities on time," says Mapram, "why shouldn't they get a mortgage? They could afford a \$40,000 or \$50,000 home easily."

Within the past five years, 39 nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs) have started up in Houston, working to build new housing in the city's older neighborhoods. The largest, the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation, boasts more than 5,000 members and is currently constructing a 312-unit apartment complex. New Foundations for Neighborhoods, the result of a 1992 partnership between the United Way and the Local Initiatives

Support Corporation (LISC), helps CDCs in their mission of community building by providing ongoing training, from real estate projects to organization to structure; by offering loans and grants; and by providing retail initiatives for CDCs hoping to attract large grocery chains to their neighborhoods. "Instead of simply dumping money into a community," explains New Foundations director Marshall Tyndall, "you have ownership of a project by the community."

Private Sector Initiatives (PSI), a privately funded organization, repairs homes in lower-income areas one weekend a year. Using 5,000 volunteers from Houston-area churches and businesses, PSI works on 250 Houston homes a year, mostly in inner-city neighborhoods such as Sunnyside and Acres Homes.

On a smaller scale is the Neighborhood Organization for Acceptable Housing (NOAH), a seven-year-old nonprofit group that also repairs inner-city homes. NOAH president Gene Antill, one of the



founders of Habitat in Houston, was dismayed by the number of people who contacted Habitat searching for a simple rehabilitation, which Habitat does not provide. In 1988 Antill left Habitat and helped found NOAH. Operating out of Trinity Episcopal Church, it repairs between 30 and 35 houses each year. This past summer, working with St. James Episcopal Church, NOAH sponsored a work camp for kids in Third Ward that completed repairs on five homes.

For building materials, NOAH relies on donations from churches and materials from contractors demolishing houses in West University Place. For labor, NOAH works with another extension of Trinity Episcopal Church, New Creations (formerly called Lord of the Streets), a construction company that employs formerly homeless men. The eight regular workers are mostly recovering alcoholics and drug addicts, who are acting on the 12th step in their recovery process — "Give back what you receive."

George Burrell is a New Creations employee. In 1993 Burrell had been evicted from his apartment for not paying his rent and was living on the street. He was an alcoholic. He did not have a job. He sold his blood to stay in shelters on cold nights. After a seven-month stay in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, he found his salvation and sobriety in New Creations, which mandates Bible study each morning and a Sunday breakfast and Eucharist. With a background in carpentry and electronics, Burrell was immediately handy at the work sites. Today he holds a management position at New Creations.

"We're helping out in any way we can," says Burrell, on his way home from a job in Fourth Ward. He is driving through Montrose, past properties he has rehabilitated and others he wishes he could. "It amazes me how many houses and small apartment complexes are shut down that are not in really terrible shape. And two blocks down the street, when you go underneath the freeway you see four guys making a home under there. . . . It just blows me away. There is so much work to do in Houston." ■

#### Volunteer Housing Organizations

- Habitat for Humanity 521-3552
- Advocates for Housing/The Land Bank 224-5408
- ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) 863-9002
- New Foundations for Neighborhoods 759-6057
- Private Sector Initiatives 659-2511
- NOAH (Neighborhood Organization for Acceptable Housing) 748-1639
- New Creations (the Rev. Garrett Wingfield, Trinity Episcopal Church) 528-4109

#### "Our Mutual Friend"

(continued from p. 21)

Administration under Section 213, which provided for loans to cooperatives.

9 Residents paid a monthly fee to cover interest, amortization, insurance, taxes, maintenance and repair, vacancy reserve, and administrative expense. See "Homes Under 'Camden Plan' Not for Rent, Not for Sale," a supplement to the *Philadelphia Courier-Post*, 13 December 1941.

10 Westbrook's Mutual Ownership Defense Housing Division was not the only constituent of the Federal Works Agency that enlisted leading modern architects to assist with its program: in 1940 and 1941, the United States Housing Authority and the Division of Defense Housing also hired notable architects to design defense housing developments. Bauhaus architects Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer worked in New Kensington, Pennsylvania; Eliel and Eero Saarinen in Center Line, Michigan; Richard Neutra in San Pedro, California; George Howe and Louis I. Kahn in Middletown, Pennsylvania; and Clarence Stein in Shaler Township, Pennsylvania. Frank Lloyd Wright was hired to design a project in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, but it was never built. These and other defense housing developments were featured in articles in several architectural journals, including *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Pencil Points*, between 1940 and 1943. I examine the hiring of renowned architects to design defense housing in my forthcoming book, *Public Housing Goes to War: Federal Housing Policy and World War II*. The role of these architects in wartime construction is also examined in the exhibition *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed the Nation*, at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., November 1994–December 1995. The exhibition catalogue was recently published under the same title by the MIT Press.

11 "Village Called Only Signpost," clipping file, Audubon Park Mutual Housing Corporation, Audubon Park, New Jersey. See also "U.S. Speeds Village of New Homes for Defense Workers," supplement to the *Philadelphia Courier-Post*, 13 December 1941, and "Building for Defense . . . Government Housing in a Hurry," *Architectural Forum*, May 1941, pp. 341–44.

12 Kristin M. Szylvian, "Avion Village: Texas' World War II Housing Laboratory," *Legacies*, Fall 1992, pp. 28–34; "Built Fast But Last," *Dallas Morning News*, 28 July 1985, pp. 1C, 7C; Willis Winters, "Avion Village: Enduring Values of Community," *Texas Architect*, May–June 1988, pp. 24–29; clippings on Avion Village, Dallas Public Library; clippings on Avion Village, Grand Prairie (Texas) Public Library; clippings on Avion Village, Avion Village Mutual Ownership Corporation, 800 Skyline Drive, Grand Prairie; and correspondence between Williams and Neutra in David R. Williams Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Edith Garland Dupre Library, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, files 2–16, 2–17, and 2–18. See also David Williams, "Defense on the Home Front: Avion Village, a Park Living development of the Federal Works Agency," *Dallas Magazine*, May 1941, pp. 18, 21.

13 "Village Improves National Morale," Says Carmody," in "U.S. Speeds Village," supplement to the *Philadelphia Courier-Post*, 13 December 1941.

14 On prefabricated housing at Audubon Park, see "20 Prefabricated Houses per Day — Built by Joseph Day" and "Weigel Veteran at Rush Jobs," clipping file, Audubon Park Mutual Housing Corporation, Audubon Park, New Jersey. On Avion Village, see "Texas Workmen Build Finished Home in 58 Minutes," *Life*, 6 June 1941, pp. 59–60, 63.

15 Federal experimentation in building materials and techniques continued under Blandford because it offered economic promise to the private home-building industry. A small number of architecturally significant defense housing developments such as Neutra's Channel Heights, were built after the reorganization plan went into effect, but these were carryovers from the earlier period. These issues are examined in detail in my forthcoming book, *Public Housing Goes to War: Federal Housing Policy and World War II*.

16 For the growth of community identity in the defense housing developments sold under the Mutual Home Ownership Plan, see Kristin Szylvian Bailey, "The Federal Government and the Cooperative Housing Movement, 1917–1950" (Ph.D. dissertation, Carnegie Mellon University, 1988).

## BAVARIAN MACHINE SPECIALTIES



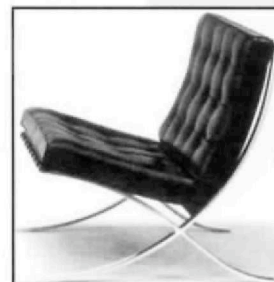
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