Place, People, and Power in City Building in Postwar America

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Abstract

When urban studies scholars examine issues such as the public versus private in cities, boundary making and breaking, and how democratic citizenship is reinforced or undermined, they tend to avoid the agency of individuals. Instead, they attribute these characteristics to urban environments in general, as circumscribed by place and time. This essay argues for the importance of investigating agency in city building and city living and does so through probing the career of a pivotal figure in American urban renewal in the second half of the twentieth century, Edward J. Logue. Through tracing Logue’s shifting strategies of urban redevelopment from New Haven in the 1950s to Boston in the 1960s to New York State and New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, new insights emerge. Urban renewal becomes a more improvisational and evolutionary approach to keeping post-World War II cities viable. Urban redevelopers have more complex and varied interactions with ordinary residents. And the concepts of the “public” and “boundaries” take on new significance. Rather than dismissing urban renewal, and urban renewers, with one condemning brush, this essay suggests that there is a great deal to be learned from both its successes and failures.

Scholars of the American city both historical and contemporary often ask how American cities have defined and redefined what is public and private in our society; how urban boundaries have been drawn and redrawn to include and exclude; and how democratic citizenship has been reinforced and undermined within ever-shifting, dynamic urban environments. As common and important as these questions are, their very phrasing often avoids assigning any agency within the city-building and city-living experiences. We are left with the depiction of an urbanization process intertwined with social and political change but missing a full understanding of the who, how, and why behind it.¹

In this essay, I will use my recent book, Saving America’s Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age, to

¹ This essay was originally delivered as the keynote address at the conference, “Bounded Democracy: Global Workshop on American Urbanisms,” at the German Historical Institute Washington, on 1 Mar. 2018.
probe how individuals with power over the physical environment shaped a historical period of enormous urban change, the era of urban renewal from the 1950s through the 1970s. This investigation of an influential figure in urban redevelopment during the second half of the twentieth century is a departure for me. My previous scholarship has engaged with cities, but mostly as revealing locales to observe important dynamics that have shaped American society over the last century, such as economic and cultural change, political realignment, shifting race relations, the ebb and flow of immigration, developments in the nature of public space, and much more. In this new book, however, I am interested less in the city as a fertile site for other historical explorations, and more as an ever-changing urban environment in its own right created by people in decision-making positions as well as the ordinary city residents they encountered. And central to this analysis is understanding both the opportunities and constraints that all historical actors, whether in authority or at the grassroots, experienced.

First, some background. After World War II, Americans increasingly equated building a prosperous modern society with suburbanizing the metropolitan landscape. The modern house, the modern school, the modern shopping district, the modern factory, modern transport all took a new suburban form. These modernist, suburban styles, moreover, served increasingly to brand what was “American” in a world rebuilding itself after the destruction of the Second World War, even to the extent of providing, in the so-called “kitchen debate” between American President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, a symbolic battleground for fighting the Cold War. At a model of a suburban-style American house at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in July 1959, these leaders competed over whose society provided a superior consumer life to its citizens. This postwar suburban imagery was a clear break with how modern society had been pictured in physical terms during the first half of the century. With a landmark building like the Chrysler or Empire State Building, a site of cultural experimentation like a downtown movie palace, or a literally groundbreaking innovation in transportation like the subway, modern meant urban.

Moreover, this postwar American shift from an urban to suburban ideal was not simply an aesthetic one. Demographically, almost all American cities outside of the newly emerging Sunbelt lost population to their suburbs after World War II, even as the nation’s overall population grew 50 percent from 1950 to 1980. Over the course of the 1950s alone, in the twenty largest metropolitan areas, cities would expand by only 0.1 percent, their suburbs by an explosive 45 percent (see Cohen, A Consumers’ Republic 195). It is particularly important to acknowledge the racial dimension of this metropolitan restructuring. Cities that lost in relative share of metropolitan residents were also attracting new minority populations. While Whites moved to the suburbs, African American migrants from the South and immigrants from Puerto Rico and else-
where arrived in American cities in search of more opportunity, often just as the good industrial jobs were also leaving town for new suburban locations out of reach to these populations. In time, of course, those factories would often move on again, first to the American South and then abroad to the developing world, where the costs of labor were cheaper. The modern, suburbanizing metropolitan landscape thus increasingly became a racially segmented and economically unequal one, further contributing to perceptions of urban decline and suburban rise.

Historians have emphasized how the postwar reality of urban exodus and disinvestment was built upon a series of federal actions. The Homeowners Loan Corporation of the New Deal era helped people hold onto their homes during the Great Depression, and the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1944 created many new homeowners after the Second World War. Both, notably, made mortgage money available only in areas deemed sound investments for banks, essentially “redlining” urban areas considered poor risks because their populations were either too black or too foreign. After World War II, the G.I. Bill thus steered returning white veterans and their new families into homes in booming suburban communities and away from many older, more diverse, urban neighborhoods (Cohen, A Consumers’ Republic 166-73; Jackson, 195-203; 209-18). The ideal American home increasingly became a new, single-family, owner-occupied house in the suburbs, an image that was reinforced everywhere from popular magazines to television sitcoms to Hollywood movies. Another national policy—the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956—similarly channeled the White middle class into suburbia by funding the construction of a 41,000-mile network of interstate highways that cut through farmland and forests, opening up areas surrounding cities for the development of homes, shopping centers, and even factories.

Often missing in the telling of this postwar history, however, is the extent to which the U.S. government also supported urban revitalization, first with the Federal Housing Act of 1949 and then its successors, such as the Housing Act of 1954, which aimed to improve on the original act. Faced with declining populations and economic activity, city leaders everywhere put up a fight, advocating for and then embracing what we have come broadly to call “urban renewal,” versions of which operated from the 1950s through the 1970s. Although there were shifts in emphasis over time, the basic concept in urban renewal involved the federal government making funds available to American cities to subsidize the demolition or rehabilitation of the old, assumed to be obsolete, and the redevelopment of the new to jumpstart the private sector’s confidence in, and investment in, cities. Once a city’s master plan was in place, federal monies, in a 2 to 1 match with local contributions, aimed to entice reluctant private developers to invest in urban housing and other projects by what was called “writing down” the costs involved in redevelopment. To address the serious shortage of decent housing that plagued the nation after decades of depression and war, money was made available as well
through various kinds of housing subsidies—for the elderly, for those at low- and moderate-income levels, and for cooperatives run by non-profit organizations. “Urban renewal”—a program carefully negotiated to satisfy public officials, housing reformers, planners, and the real estate and construction industries—sought to put federal dollars and authority to work revitalizing American cities as residential and economic centers. The goal was to transform cities from fading nineteenth-century industrial workshops no longer appealing to many Americans into more up-to-date places to live and work. In short, the federal government played a key role in seeding both suburban development and urban redevelopment in the postwar era.

Urban renewal has not, by and large, received good press. Partly that is because it has an uneven and controversial history. In too many places, it has been associated with insensitive clearance of poor, but still viable, neighborhoods, which were often recklessly condemned as hopelessly blighted slums, and bulldozing functioning, if shabby, downtown streets and replacing them with superblocks lined with large, modern commercial and civic monuments. Urban renewal has been remembered more often for how it dislocated city residents rather than for how it improved housing or brought back cities on the brink of economic decay. Much of this narrative is true, especially in the brash, early years of urban renewal. But that said, often little acknowledgment is made of any evolution in the way federal urban renewal was practiced over time and of any lessons that might have been learned when mistakes were indeed made. The story of postwar urban redevelopment is usually painted with one condemning brush, and, because of that, the whole experiment in federal investment in modernizing cities is thereby deemed a failure.

Another reason for this lack of more subtle analysis is the way urban renewal is often framed as a titanic struggle between the villainous Robert Moses and the saintly Jane Jacobs. This dichotomy oversimplifies these two twentieth-century giants of urbanism into symbols of rigid orthodoxies. In reality, they were both more complicated figures. Moses, who constructed crucially needed urban infrastructure in New York City and New York State, did more than tear down and build insensitively. And Jacobs in her influential critique of big planning from 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, taught the world important lessons in valuing the spontaneous life of the street and allowing city neighborhoods to evolve organically, but she promoted few tools for delivering more equitable housing or constructing much needed public works. In addition, the ideological retreat from federal investment in cities that began with President Nixon’s moratorium on spending for housing and urban programs in the early 1970s has encouraged a telling of this story of urban redevelopment in a way that has emphasized the negative over the positive. City building had always been a shared enterprise between the public and private sectors, but by the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first,
it became increasingly dependent on private initiative, not just private investment. The party in the driver’s seat shifted from the public planner, government official, or even city resident to the private real estate developer. With that reorientation has often come a dismissal of any positive outcomes from when the federal government—and government more broadly—played a critical role in city renewal and housing construction. And most importantly, I would argue, it has led to under-investment in public goods that might not appeal to private investors or yield significant profit, such as much needed mass transit, affordable housing, and a myriad of other kinds of urban infrastructure.

In *Saving America’s Cities*, I set out to probe shifts in policy, strategy, and implementation over a quarter century of urban renewal. In order to do this, I did not think it was sufficient to simply track changes in the appearance of the urban built environment. After a long career as a social historian, committed to bringing agency to ordinary people and social groups, I remained determined to understand the intention and impact of individuals. This time, however, I aimed to get inside the mind of a city builder in postwar America to better understand motives and actions as they varied over time and space. With this goal in mind, I focused the book on the career of a prominent figure in urban redevelopment in the second half of the twentieth century—a man named Edward J. Logue. His work, which spanned from the early 1950s until his death in the year 2000, brought him into contact with many cities. While not a traditional biography, this book is an investigation in which Logue serves as my main character and vehicle for tracking a half century of city rebuilding. Other secondary characters include the legions of staffers he recruited to his large redevelopment operations and launched into a thriving new public profession. Additional figures are his counterparts working in cities throughout the country and even the world, as urban renewers and their ideas circulated internationally; the public officials and local leaders he collaborated with; the architects and planners he hired to design hundreds of projects; and the diverse public—partners, allies, and critics, depending on the moment and the circumstance. Although Logue is not a household name today, nor was he ever as famous as Robert Moses or Jane Jacobs, in his day he was anointed a “Master Rebuilder” and credited with turning around cities and constructing thousands of units of housing, many of them subsidized (“Ed Logue”).

Logue began his career in urban redevelopment in 1954, at age 33, when New Haven’s newly elected reform Democratic Mayor Richard Lee appointed him to lead the city’s major new renewal effort. He came to that position as a Yale-trained lawyer with experience working for progressive causes such as labor organizing, civil rights, and academic freedom in the era of McCarthyism. Logue had just returned from India, where he had served as special assistant to Ambassador Chester Bowles and had closely observed the U.S. State Department’s and Ford Foundation’s development programs aimed at modernizing India’s vil-
lages. From his perch in the American Embassy, he watched reformers weave improvements in the built environment and infrastructure into their drive to promote a more democratic (and anti-communist) India. Building roads, wells, schools, homes, and clinics could not be separated, they believed, from efforts to reform land ownership, teach literacy, and introduce basic principles of citizenship. Logue returned home ready to apply lessons learned in what was then called the “third world” to his work turning around the struggling “first world” city of New Haven. As he wrote to Ford’s representative in New Delhi, “I am busy in a New England version of community development” (Letter to Doug Ensinger). Together, Logue and Mayor Lee attracted more federal re-development dollars per capita to New Haven than any other American city, as they aimed to make it a national laboratory for urban renewal.

After seven years in New Haven, Logue moved on to the larger city of Boston in 1961, where a new Democratic mayor, John Collins, recruited him to turn around a nearly bankrupt and fast declining city. As the head of a strengthened Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), Logue orchestrated, with an influx of federal dollars, the city’s turnaround into what was commonly referred to as the “New Boston”—an ambitious plan for downtown and neighborhood renewal. He remained in that job until the summer of 1967, when he resigned to run (unsuccessfully) for mayor. Soon thereafter, in early 1968, the liberal Republican governor of New York State, Nelson Rockefeller, recruited Logue to be President and CEO of a pioneering, powerful statewide urban renewal agency, the New York Urban Development Corporation (UDC). Rockefeller armed the UDC with a mandate to build badly needed subsidized housing and other industrial, commercial, and civic infrastructure; the political power to employ eminent domain and override local zoning laws and building codes; and an innovative financial strategy to skirt the state constitutional requirement that any public expenditure for subsidized housing be approved by voters through bond issues, which to Rockefeller’s frustration had repeatedly gone down in defeat.

For Logue, the UDC offered an alternative to quickly disappearing federal dollars needed to subsidize housing, as the Vietnam War gobbled up more and more of the national budget. And as a statewide agency, it provided him with a rare opportunity to undertake something he had long sought: metropolitan planning that spread responsibility for low-income residents to suburbs as well as central cities. From 1969 to 1975, the UDC gave Logue a big pot of money to spend: a combination of the shrinking federal dollars, state appropriations, and a unique authority to self-finance through issuing its own so-called moral obligation bonds, which the state assured private investors had its backing, if not the state’s legal “full faith and credit.” With this plentiful funding, the UDC undertook extensive building, including 33,000 new units of housing and Logue’s personal pet project—what became the car-free, deliberately mixed-income “new town” of Roosevelt Island in New York City’s East River (Figure 1).
Along the way, however, the UDC became caught in a life-and-death political struggle. Influential Westchester residents organized to block the UDC’s bold effort in metropolitan planning, what it called its “fair share” affordable housing program to build nine hundred subsidized housing units—one hundred in each of nine towns in one of the wealthiest suburban counties bordering New York City. The political backlash that followed first deprived the UDC of its extraordinary override powers and then brought it down altogether. The agency’s fate was made all the worse by President Nixon’s impounding of Congressionally approved federal housing subsidies in January 1973 and then the fiscal crisis overtaking New York City and New York State soon thereafter. When it was clear that the UDC would have to default on its bank loans, Logue was forced—very unhappily—to resign.

After three years of licking his wounds and trying to get back in the business of building housing and revitalizing cities, Logue was appointed to his last major job, by New York City Mayor Ed Koch: head of the South Bronx Development Organization, Inc. (SBDO), which he occupied from 1978 to 1985. The SBDO was a relatively small operation compared to the BRA or the UDC. It was mandated to help rebuild a South Bronx that had been ravished by poverty, arson, and abandonment—by landlords, by residents who managed to escape, and by President Jimmy Carter who famously came, saw, promised, and then walked away, to the great disappointment of New York City officials.

Here Logue became best known for an unusual and controversial project: Charlotte Gardens, a new neighborhood on the devastated land where Jimmy Carter had once tread, consisting of a hundred prefab-
ricated suburban-type houses, substantially subsidized for purchase by new homeowners. President Ronald Reagan’s era of private, market-oriented urban policies not only forced Logue to shift strategy, but ironically it also pushed him to collaborate more closely than he had in the past with grassroots community organizations, such as his scrappy partner in Charlotte Gardens, the nonprofit Mid-Bronx Desperadoes Community Development Corporation. This homeownership scheme also required a more conservative architectural approach than the more modernist, government-subsidized housing Logue had previously and proudly built. In this new funding climate of greater privatization in urban housing policy, Logue concluded that modestly priced, single-family subsidized homeownership would have great appeal to lower-middle-class New Yorkers eager to own their own homes. Although Logue acknowledged sadly that “this stuff will not win the architectural awards that I have so enjoyed receiving” (and in fact, the project was roundly condemned as too low in density and low-brow in taste by many architects and planners), he remained convinced that these houses and their financially and emotionally invested owners would provide badly needed anchors for revitalizing the South Bronx (Logue to Goldman). In the end, Charlotte Gardens provided just that boost and contributed in significant ways to turning around the South Bronx (Figure 2).

Figure 2. In collaboration with the local Mid-Bronx Desperados Community Development Corporation, Logue’s South Bronx Development Organization, Inc. developed Charlotte Gardens, ninety single-family, detached, prefabricated houses for purchase in the mid-1980s. They hoped this project would provide an anchor of homeowners for the revitalization of the devastated South Bronx. Courtesy of Peter Bray.
So if my interest in Ed Logue was to bring greater agency to the historical analysis of urban renewal over the postwar decades, what does his story teach us? I would like to make several observations.

First, although some of the critics of urban renewal have focused on how it either discriminated against poor and minority populations or directed public resources toward capitalist developers, it is important to remember that for Logue and many of his contemporaries, urban renewal began and often continued to be a liberal program aimed at achieving greater equity across race and class. Many of its practitioners were, like Logue, New Dealers who saw urban America as the next frontier requiring a helping hand from an increasingly activist and powerful federal government. Logue and others saw cities being outpaced by suburban development and were trying to find new ways of keeping them viable, particularly through providing affordable and attractive housing, good jobs, and high-performing schools. Throughout his career, Logue sought to create communities that were socially mixed in income and race, whether in urban neighborhoods in Boston, in “New Towns” in New York State, or in suburban communities in Westchester. And Logue and his colleagues saw federal subsidies not as a handout to capitalists but as a counterweight to the exit of private investors, whose dollars needed to be lured back to the city, they thought, from the more enticing, elysian fields of suburbia.

Second, despite what might have seemed like lofty goals, urban renewers like Logue made serious mistakes. Some of the charges of excessive displacement of residents and replacement of minorities with middle-class gentrifiers are true. But urban redevelopers sometimes learned from those mistakes and improved how they went about redeveloping cities. As one historian of the movement has put it, “[j]ust when they learned how to make federal urban renewal really work, the rug got pulled out from under them,” referring to Nixon’s New Federalism, which sought devolution in authority and decimation in funding (Fainstein). The point is that urban renewal was a dynamic process that changed over time, place, and circumstance and cannot be dismissed so simply.

We can see this dynamic of trial and error, failure and success, if we look closely at Logue’s career. In the first stage of urban renewal in the 1950s in New Haven, Logue and Mayor Lee practiced the worst excesses of urban renewal, tearing down poor immigrant neighborhoods because they considered them blighted and putting up apartment towers aimed at keeping the middle class in the city in their place. To compete with the new suburban shopping centers threatening the viability of downtown retail, they mimicked them and, in the process, they destroyed what made the urban pedestrian experience unique—and distinct from—more car-oriented, suburban commerce (Figure 3).
In 1961, when Logue got to Boston, which in the 1950s had experienced a similar kind of destructive urban renewal with the leveling of its heavily immigrant West End neighborhood, he vowed to find a different approach. Rather than trying to compete with suburbia as a place to live, Logue focused on keeping jobs and business investment downtown. Using the leverage of government spending as well as its physical presence, he developed a Government Center with new city, state, and federal office buildings to vastly expand the number of downtown jobs and to challenge private businesses to step up to the plate (Figure 4). Here he also came to appreciate the importance of saving historic buildings to create more of an urban collage of the old and the new. Despite stereotypes of urban renewers as insensitive to history, Logue was determined to preserve the historic Sears Crescent bordering Government Center, to revitalize the Boston waterfront, and to salvage a crumbling Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall, which eventually led, under the next mayor, Kevin White, to their reinvention as the first so-called festival marketplace, to be replicated in many other American cities.

In neighborhood urban renewal, Logue and the BRA had a more mixed record. They built much new housing to replace deteriorated structures and, in the process, pleased some community groups and an-
Figure 4. Government Center was the linchpin of Logue’s “New Boston” of the 1960s, a strategy to use the funding and physical presence of government at all levels to jumpstart private investment, which had long avoided committing to the city. Although the Scollay Square red-light district was demolished to make way for Government Center, some historic buildings surrounding the site were preserved. Aerial Photos of New England, courtesy of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners.

Figure 5. Logue's Boston Redevelopment Authority engaged in a complex negotiation with neighborhoods, where mobilized communities pressured the BRA to build more subsidized housing in return for their support. Here, activists in the South End during the late 1960s push for apartments on a site they occupied with a Tent City protest. Courtesy of the Boston City Archives.
tagonized others. But because the government funding came with clear requirements for a public review process, the outcome in Boston neighborhoods like Roxbury, Charlestown, and the South End was negotiations between the city and its citizens. Longstanding residents gained more of a voice, and ultimately more of the subsidized housing that they desired, than often happens in the highly privatized urban redevelopment of today (Figure 5).

When Logue moved to New York to head the UDC, he experimented with new ways of avoiding difficult confrontations with existing communities. His solution was to try to build on undeveloped land outside cities and on land within cities that had already been cleared but not built on. As Logue put it bluntly, “I don’t have to condemn it. I don’t have to relocate any families. I don’t have to demolish any buildings” (Interviews by Ivan Steen 1986, 6). Nor did he have to battle as many vested interests when no one was being displaced. One result of this strategy was a major initiative of New Towns, inspired by Scandinavian and British models, two in upstate New York and Roosevelt Island in New York City. He also tried to advance his longstanding goal of creating a less socially divided America by developing more integrated communities, including these new towns, where people of different incomes and races were neighbors and sent their children to the same schools and to play in the same parks. And he was finally in the position, given his employment by the State of New York rather than any one municipality, to solve urban problems with metropolitan-wide solutions like his Fair Share Housing Initiative. But the resistance to breaking down geographical and social barriers between city and suburb proved too difficult to transcend, due in part to the political lock that suburban representatives and their allies in upstate New York had on New York’s legislature.

Finally, in the South Bronx, Logue struggled over how to cope with the disappearance of the federal funding that he had so depended on previously. But, as before, he invented new approaches. He abandoned the priority he had previously put on creating new models of subsidized housing by experimenting with architecture and the latest building technology. Instead he built what private banks—now obligated by law to make mortgage loans to poor neighborhoods—and prospective consumers preferred: traditional suburban-style houses. But here he also, by necessity, worked more closely with local residents than ever before. He had long claimed that his operating slogan was “Planning with People.” But his approach to engaging the public shifted from what I call “Pluralist Democracy”—consulting with representatives of established interest groups—in New Haven during the 1950s to a more grassroots public consultation that I call “Populist Democracy” in the South Bronx during the 1980s. In the South Bronx, faced with the worst urban devastation that Logue had ever encountered and with the least amount of resources at his disposal, he interacted with local residents in a much more participatory way.
Logue’s work over three decades suggests that rather than one dismal failure, urban renewal was a more complex, evolving strategy in which redevelopers like Logue, committed to revitalizing American cities, may have made mistakes but also demonstrated resilience and improvisation in their efforts to save America’s cities and provide much needed affordable housing. The investment of federal dollars cannot, therefore, be simply dismissed as a misguided alternative to the private market solutions that fund most affordable housing today, through such programs as low-income tax credits, linkage payments collected from developers seeking new downtown ventures that cities then allocate for affordable housing elsewhere, Section 8 vouchers for tenants to take into the private rental marketplace, and inclusionary zoning that obligates private developers to designate a certain percentage of units in residential projects as affordable for low-income tenants. When they work, these private-market approaches are the best hope we may have today, but they should not be the only hope. They are hardly meeting the demand for affordable housing in most American cities; there are years-long waiting lists everywhere. And their effectiveness depends on the will, the whim, and the self-interest of private investors. Moreover, the United States still today depends on the thousands of units of housing that resulted from public housing and federal urban renewal projects from the 1930s to the 1970s.

I will conclude by asking what Logue’s decades-long career in urban redevelopment might suggest for two key concepts in urban studies: “the public” and “the boundary.” “Public” is most often linked to the issue of “public space.” I would like to urge that we include in the realm of the public not just spatial matters but also issues of funding, of planning initiative, and of voice in decision-making. As Logue took stock of his long career in urban redevelopment, he reached several conclusions. One was a regret that the federal government had retreated from investing in cities; Logue believed that “the basic responsibility for subsidizing housing for the low- and lower-income families is federal. It is everywhere else in the developed world. Used to be with us” (Interviews by Ivan Steen 1991, 39). Instead, by the 1980s, he watched much of the funding and redevelopment initiative devolve from the public to the private sector. Logue’s experience at the UDC had already taught him to be wary of investors putting profit above the public interest. There Logue had chastised private financiers for seeking “the freedom to fatten off America but not share in the solution of its problems” (Interview by Frank Jones). “I would never,” he repeatedly argued, “leave the development agenda to be set by the private development community” (Lucy 15).

When Logue returned to Boston after his stint in the South Bronx, he observed a troubling funding situation that has only worsened today. In recent decades, cities have faced the great challenge of meeting a growing need for subsidized housing with fewer and fewer public, particularly federal, dollars, forcing them to be reactive to the proposals of
private developers rather than in a position to take the initiative. And they have had to aggressively use tax incentives and other special deals to lure investors, which has drained municipal coffers of revenue and set off races to the bottom among cities. So it is my plea that when we consider “the public” in cities, we take into consideration the shifting balance between public and private financing and initiative-taking in the planning and redevelopment process.

The role of the public’s voice in decision-making around urban redevelopment projects is a complex one. Logue’s own progression from “Pluralist Democrat” to “Populist Democrat” came about as much by necessity as by choice, as he found himself increasingly dependent on the commitment and partnership of local organizations like community planning boards and nonprofit, neighborhood CDCs to make any progress in the South Bronx. But even in Boston in the 1960s, under what was still the federal urban renewal regime, public funding rather surprisingly had provided an opening for public participation in the negotiation between the BRA and neighborhood activists. The expenditure of public dollars had required a public process. South End community organizer Mel King had plenty of complaints about urban renewal, but he nonetheless credited Logue with “setting the stage for neighborhood groups to get involved in housing development” (“‘New Boston’”). The move from public to private leadership in urban redevelopment has thus endangered the public’s constructive engagement, often reducing it simply to the veto of NIMBYism, short for, “Not in My Backyard.”

The other concept I encourage us to reconsider is “boundary,” both in terms of constructing and crossing. The erection of boundaries in cities can include or exclude citizens, promoting or undermining a truly democratic city. Logue’s experience in city building reminds us that in the postwar period, neighborhoods differed greatly in the services and prospects enjoyed by their residents, including access to efficient transportation that put good jobs within reach, affordable and safe housing, or decent schools that delivered quality education and greater life options. Logue’s awareness that address dictated opportunity drove his desire to create more mixed-income and racially diverse communities as a strategy for achieving greater parity in American society. Otherwise, the better-off always got the best. This goal, however, proved more achievable through constructing a New Town like Roosevelt Island, where there were no entrenched interests or need to dislocate existing residents and where socio-economic diversity could be created from scratch. Many of the UDC’s private funders, however, strongly objected to Logue’s ambition to create socially mixed communities, even through New Towns. As Logue reflected bitterly later in his life, “it was too good to last and that’s why I so cordially dislike bankers. […] They felt threatened [that] […] I was engaged in—bankers said this—social engineering. As if that’s a mortal sin. I was very proud of the fact that Roosevelt Island was a total piece of social engineering” (Interview by
Frank Jones). As Logue learned the hard way, private actors were much less likely to value urban redevelopment for social rather than financial goals. Profit rested in constructing rather than reducing boundaries between classes and races.

It must be said that the sharpest boundaries of all in postwar America divided city and suburb, as Logue discovered when he tried unsuccessfully to build affordable, “fair share” housing in nine wealthy Westchester towns. Metropolitan areas were—and still are—crisscrossed with boundaries that divide residents by class, by race, and by an unequal distribution of social goods determined by wildly varying property values and local taxation rates. The growing dependence on the private sector in housing construction and development has only exacerbated this segregation and strengthened the boundaries that divide communities within metropolitan areas. The world we have created—one that prioritizes private profit over public obligation and constructs ever higher walls between diverse individuals and communities—has come a long way from the aspirational language of the 1949 Housing Act, which aimed to ensure all Americans “a decent home and a suitable living environment” (413). It is indisputable that urban renewal had serious flaws, but we should not forget that it also had a more positive charge: to assume public responsibility for revitalizing cities struggling for economic survival, to invest in neighborhoods lacking adequate resources, and to improve the prospects for those Americans poorly housed or, in the worst cases, homeless. In a career of notable successes and failures, but also of constant experimentation, that was Ed Logue’s ambition for urban renewal.

Works Cited


