

INEQUALITY AND ONE CITY



BILL de BLASIO *and*
the NEW YORK
EXPERIMENT, YEAR ONE

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and 40,000. These buildings have, historically, ended up owned by numerous different city agencies, with an utter lack of coordination characterizing the process.

The term "land bank" can make one's eyes glaze over. But, in fact, the land bank movement represents an important effort to tackle both urban blight and the ongoing impact of the foreclosure epidemic. And it has been embraced by New York State, Michigan and a number of other locales.

The Philadelphia Land Bank, which is the country's newest big-city land bank, could end up in charge of more than 8,000 buildings, creating a huge opportunity to regenerate long-neglected neighborhoods as well as to preserve affordable housing in gentrifying districts. It is backed by a \$4 million starting budget and brings together an array of community and business groups, as well as city agencies. And it has a comprehensive plan to convert these lots to uses that will benefit the community: affordable housing, community centers, urban gardens and so on. Rick Sauer, executive director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, summarized the goal: "Get the property to folks who are going to put it to productive use, and get the property back on the tax roll."

NEW ORLEANS'S JACK & JAKE'S AND CALIFORNIA'S FRESH APPROACH

ALTHOUGH THE BIG EASY IS ONE OF AMERICA'S great culinary centers, diabetes and obesity have long plagued the city and, in particular, its poor residents. Many parts of town, especially after Hurricane Katrina wiped out local businesses, are food deserts, lacking ready access to healthy foods.

Entrepreneur John Burns has sought to change this. With the help of funding from progressive social impact investors and the city, his company Jack & Jake's has opened several large wholesale outlets since 2011 that work with local farmers and fishermen to get healthy food into grocery stores and restaurants. In early spring, the company is set to open a 27,000-square-foot market-cum-food court in an abandoned schoolhouse in the Central City neighborhood. If the strategy works, it will open low-cost stores featuring healthy alternatives to junk food—both fresh produce and prepared local dishes—in poor, diabetes-ravaged communities throughout the South and Appalachia. "This model is attractive," argues Burns, "because it's not the traditional grocery store model."

All of this is part of a broader strategy to prioritize social impact investments in post-Katrina New Orleans and to convert disused warehouses, schools and other large spaces into hubs for economic activity in poor neighborhoods. Will it work? The Big Easy still has a long way to go. But if it can find a way to tackle the obesity and diabetes epidemics that afflict its impoverished communities, that will be its own kind of triumph.

With the same goals in mind, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other California metropolises have chosen a different strategy to get healthy food onto the plates of

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of creative programs and policy experiments being pushed in cities.



Millennium Park, which sits on top of two garages in Chicago, is considered to be the world's largest green roof.

low-income residents. The California Market Match Consortium's Fresh Approach programs take the economic sting out of buying fruits and vegetables by providing poor Californians with \$5 worth of free produce every time they spend \$10 of CalFresh benefits (the state's version of food stamps) at a participating farmers' market. In 2013, CMMC released a report showing that, since the program's inception in 2009, the use of CalFresh benefits at farmers' markets had grown by 171 percent. In other words, poor Californians are getting healthier food thanks to this effort.

AUSTIN'S SMART HOUSING PROGRAM

THE LONE STAR STATE'S PROGRESSIVE CAPITAL has bucked the car-centric, economically segregated design of other big Texas cities, promoting affordable mixed-income housing development anchored by easy access to public-transit systems. And, since Austin is now the second-fastest-growing city in the United States, that's no mean achievement.

Under SMART (which stands for Safe. Mixed income. Accessible. Reasonably priced. Transit oriented), the more units a developer sells or rents at prices affordable to a family earning less than 80 percent of the city's median income, the greater the percentage of fee waivers the city gives. Once 40 percent of units in a given development are "affordable," the city waives all of the developer's fees. What makes Austin's program more interesting, however, is that it's not just about affordability; it's also about access. Built into the SMART codes are requirements that SMART-qualified housing be within a half-mile of a bus route. That's a slightly less stringent requirement than the program initially had, but still one that keeps Austin a public transit-centered city as it expands.

ATLANTA'S EAST LAKE PUBLIC HOUSING REDEVELOPMENT

AUSTIN ISN'T ALONE IN PUSHING FOR CREATIVE, mixed-income solutions to the housing crunch. In Atlanta, the area of East Lake, once home to one of the city's largest public-housing tracts, has been redeveloped by a group called Purpose Built Communities (PBC). With a mixture of public and private funding, large swaths of desperately poor and dangerous public-housing blocks—the biggest contiguous swath of public housing in the South—have been replaced by low-rise, mixed-income neighborhoods, along with new schools and businesses.

The East Lake changes have been successful in large part because they have taken place with the support and engagement of local residents. How was that support won? By the city, under then-mayor Shirley Franklin, committing not to push the existing residents out of the neighborhood—as has happened elsewhere when public-housing tower blocks have been replaced by mixed-income, low-rise dwellings—and by a participatory process that brought local residents to the table when changes were broached. Franklin has since become president of PBC.



SALT LAKE CITY'S HOUSING PROGRAM FOR HOMELESS VETERANS

IN JANUARY 2014, SALT LAKE CITY, THE CAPITAL OF Utah—a state that is hardly known for its progressive vision—made history by becoming the second city in the country to end homelessness among military veterans. (Phoenix was the first.) How did Salt Lake City do it? While other urban hubs were busy passing laws to arrest people for panhandling or sleeping in public, Salt Lake City opted for the more humane, and ultimately more practical, approach of providing homes for its homeless vets. Inspired by the “housing first” philosophy, the program aggressively links homeless men and women with housing—by finding and building apartments—while also providing access to counseling and other support services.

Salt Lake City's experiment is part of a still more ambitious statewide housing first program, which is working to provide permanent homes to 2,000 chronically homeless residents, many in the urban environs of Salt Lake City. Somewhat counterintuitively, Utah has found that providing homes to the homeless, and then helping with mental health treatment and job searches, comes in many thousands of dollars cheaper than leaving homeless men and women to cycle in and out of jails, prisons, hospitals and shelters. According to the best estimates, the cost of housing a homeless person averages about \$12,000 a year, whereas the cost of leaving a person to the streets can climb to more than \$20,000 a year.

BURLINGTON'S CHAMPLAIN HOUSING TRUST

BACK IN THE MID-1980S, PROGRESSIVE POLITICIANS in Burlington, Vermont, began fearing that the influx of moneyed homeowners from the big East Coast cities was making their town unaffordable to local residents. So they decided to act: they formed a Community and Economic Development Office, which then put up \$200,000 in seed funds for a city land trust that began buying up local properties, selling them at subsidized rates and reinvesting profits in more properties.

The intent? To build up, over a period of decades, a large stock of homes rented or owned by low- and moderate-income locals at below-market rates, with the land trust putting up a percentage of the initial purchase price in exchange for a share in the profits when the owner eventually sells the home. To help maintain these homes, the housing trust also provides residents with low-cost loans for repairs and for environmental upgrades. And, to ensure that the homes stay affordable from one owner to the next, owners have to sell at a designated price: what they paid originally, plus 25 percent of the appreciation in value that the house would have had on the open market. In other words, say a house was bought originally for \$100,000, but is now worth \$200,000. When the owner sells back to the housing trust, the trust only has to pay \$125,000. Think of

it as akin to rent stabilization, but for homeownership. Roughly 2,000 individuals and families are now in the city's Housing Trust homes.

CHICAGO'S GREEN ROOFS

WHEN THE WORD “ENVIRONMENTAL” is bandied about, one doesn't immediately think “Chicago.” Yet when it comes to green roofs, the Windy City has led the way for more than a decade (though in recent years its dominance has been challenged by New York, Portland and Washington, DC). Its transformation began more than fifteen years ago, after Richard Daley, who was mayor, visited Europe in the wake of a heat wave in Chicago that had killed upward of 700 people. There he saw innovative urban environmental planning, including the widespread use of green roofs, and came back inspired to emulate some of the design ideas pioneered in Copenhagen and various German cities. His first big move was to transform City Hall's roof in 2001 into a garden made up of tens of thousands of plants. At the same time, the city enacted incentives for developers, from speeding the permit process to offering grants, and allowed green-roofed buildings to have additional floor space.

Citywide, there are now over 500 green roofs (amounting to 5 million square feet), and Michael Berkshire, the green projects administrator for Chicago's Department of Housing and Economic Development, says the city's heat-amelioration and water-absorption plans extend far beyond roofing, to the laying of permeable pavements, the planting of rain gardens designed to soak up excess water, and the growing of “urban forests.” “We're looking at all forms of green infrastructure,” Berkshire explains, “adding vegetation wherever we can within the urban landscape.”

Out of dystopia is emerging, in some neighborhoods, a strangely utopian social experiment.



Fresh Urbs! Thanks to the Fresh Approach program, poor San Franciscans can buy more healthy food at the Ferry Building Marketplace.

BOULDER'S CARBON TAX

NINE YEARS AGO, BOULDER, COLORADO, VOTERS passed the country's first carbon tax, electing to charge themselves roughly \$7 per metric ton. The tax covered all electricity usage in the city, although homeowners who use alternative energy sources, such as wind power, qualify for rebates. In 2009, the city increased the tax rate another few dollars per ton.

While the program hasn't been the financial windfall some predicted, generating less than a third of the anticipated revenue, it has still cut emissions by well over 100,000 metric tons per year. And the money raised has been plowed back into energy-efficiency investments.

Boulder's tax has been recognized internationally by climate activists, and modified versions of the program have been implemented in other US cities. The program remains popular: in 2012, 82 percent of residents voted to keep the carbon tax for five more years. In a uniquely Boulder-esque twist, the city recently responded to Colorado's legalization of marijuana by imposing an extra carbon tax on industrial-scale pot producers.