

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Hope VI: A New Urban Phoenix? [Place Debate: Pleasant View Gardens]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9t3280r5>

### Journal

Places, 12(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Saum, Christine L

### Publication Date

1999-04-01

Peer reviewed

PLACE DEBATE

# Lafayette Courts



Above: Residents watch implosion. Photo: R. B. Chapman, HABC

Right: Lafayette Courts at the start of implosion. Photo: *Baltimore Sun*

Background: Figure ground of Lafayette Courts and vicinity. Graphic: Torti Gallas/CHK

Opposite page, right: Pleasant View Gardens row houses. Photo: Torti Gallas/CHK

Opposite page, bottom: Pleasant View Gardens ribbon cutting. Photo: HABC

Opposite page, background: Figure ground of Pleasant View Gardens and vicinity. Graphic: Torti Gallas/CHK





# Pleasant View Gardens



A HOPE VI  
CASE STUDY



Lafayette Courts, looking south, with Baltimore's Inner Harbor in the distance. Photo: HABC

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development established the HOPE VI Urban Demonstration Program in 1993. The program responded to research showing that the physical and social conditions in public housing were creating severe distress for the people who lived there.<sup>1</sup> While physical shortcomings were not the sole source of public housing's woes, it was widely acknowledged that existing projects were inappropriately designed and poorly managed.

**The HOPE VI program was created for the purpose of revitalizing severely distressed or obsolete public housing developments.**

**This program has been a principal element of the Department's efforts to change public housing rules in order to achieve efficient development, sound management, good design and strong incentives for resident responsibility.<sup>2</sup>**

The HOPE VI program called for locally initiated proposals that included: demolishing obsolete public housing, redeveloping those sites with replacement housing that would minimize concentrations of very low-income tenants, and providing Section 8 vouchers for public housing residents displaced by demolition.

The transformation of Lafayette Courts into Pleasant View Gardens, a project that has reclaimed one of Baltimore's most troubled public housing projects, has

become one of HOPE VI's most visible accomplishments.

This project in particular is also an offspring of former HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros' love affair with the New Urbanism, and a signal demonstration of the Congress for the New Urbanism's effort to demonstrate its concern for rebuilding inner cities. In fact, the neighborhood plan and house designs for Pleasant View Gardens embrace many of the principles that CNU prepared in 1996 for HUD's Homeownership Zone program, another inner-city initiative.<sup>3</sup> These principles have been incorporated in many other HOPE VI projects.

One of the most jarring aspects of seeing Pleasant View Gardens for the first time is the fence—a tall, wrought-iron fence that separates it from the surrounding neighborhood. Pleasant View Gardens is a tiny residential island in a sea of gritty Baltimore urbanism. To someone who has railed against gated communities, this is a saddening sign of the times, vaguely disturbing, undemocratic.

Passing into the neighborhood, therefore, one feels like an intruder and almost expects to be greeted by suspicion, if not outright hostility. Then a subtle awareness begins to seep in—this place feels like Baltimore. The streetscape is spartan. The brick townhouses come right up to the sidewalk. Their concrete steps echo the famous marble steps of old Baltimore. There are no front yards, no street trees, but that is Baltimore's classic urban pattern.

On a chilly winter day there are few people on the sidewalk, but a curious eight-year-old sidles up on his Rollerblades to check me out. Down the street, the houses suddenly open up to surround a commons. This is obviously where the action is, and a group of adolescents hang out in the park under the watchful eye of a few adults from the surrounding stoops.

I am pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm with which my request to include them in my pictures is received, and amused by the speed with which they form an elaborate group pose, complete with gestures from rap and hip-hop videos. These kids are comfortable, proud of where they live and happy to



Top: Central square, Pleasant View Gardens, looking west, with downtown Baltimore skyline in the distance  
Photo: Torti Gallas/CHK

Above: Central square, Pleasant View Gardens  
Photo: Christine L. Saum

demonstrate their ownership to an obviously out-of-place outsider with a camera. I doubt I would have received a similar reception in Lafayette Courts.

An important element of HOPE VI is a commitment to including residents in the process. Former tenant-association president Linda Love is satisfied that the design team fulfilled that promise. "We really enjoyed working with CHK. They were just as nervous as we were at the beginning, but we were able to establish a good relationship. They asked us what we wanted, and we told them 'single-family homes, back yards, more control and a police substation.'" Sounds like a fairly simple program.

Another important element of HOPE VI is a strategy aimed at helping residents become self sufficient. This is where Love's enthusiasm flags. Other HOPE VI projects have hired tenants and contracted with tenant-owned businesses for services, but tenants of Pleasant View Gardens are still waiting for jobs. "The goal was to include residents [as employees] in the Boys and Girls Club, the day-care facility, in management. They're doing it at Lexington [another Baltimore HOPE VI project] but they're not doing it here," she says.

The HOPE VI agenda is an ambitious one. Pleasant View Gardens clearly represents a vast improvement for the residents who formerly inhabited Lafayette Courts, but it came at a significant cost: some \$105 million for 338 units of housing and related infrastructure. And the scale of HOPE VI is dwindling, from a high of 20,000 units in 1993 and 1994 to 7,000 units in 1999. There is not enough money or political will to make the commitment necessary to rebuild all the



Lafayette Courts in the country, and it is unclear whether local communities can undertake transformations like this on their own.

The articles in this "place debate" examine the transformation of Lafayette Courts, and HOPE VI's potential for influencing national urban policy, from several perspectives. Cheryl A. O'Neill, principal designer for the project, explains the reasoning behind the design, and Daniel P. Henson, III, executive director of Baltimore's housing authority, reports on the project as a matter of public policy. Jeffrey L. Soule considers Pleasant View Gardens as an element of a comprehensive, city-wide neighborhood investment strategy, and Charles Buki considers it as an element of regional identity. Witold Rybczynski, a frequent commentator on urban housing and on the New Urbanism, offers a critique of the design.

## Notes

1. In particular, the National Commission on Severely Distressed Housing, established by Congress in the late 1980s, documented that public housing and community development policies were incapable of dealing with increasingly dysfunctional urban neighborhoods.
2. Office of Community Planning and Development, Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Principles for Designing and Planning Homeownership Zones* (Washington, D.C.: 1996).
3. The Congress for the New Urbanism has been asked to prepare similar guidelines for HOPE VI projects. Excerpts from a draft of those guidelines appear in the CNU Forum pages, elsewhere in this issue.