Shortly after the Housing Act of 1949 was signed into law by President Harry Truman, the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency published a guidebook titled *The Housing Act of 1949: What It Is and How It Works*. In this publication, the committee declared:

> From any angle, citizenship, health, appearance, taxes, or property protection, it is better to pay now for the cost of clearing slums and thereby get rid of them than to continue paying the mounting costs of slums and suffer their destructive effects upon human lives and property indefinitely.1

The committee described the act as enabling “a comprehensive attack upon slums and blighted areas by local communities.”2 It accomplished this primarily through Title I of the act, which provided grants and low-interest loans to local governments across the United States in order to subsidize locally planned redevelopment projects targeting “slums and blighted areas.”3 Administered first by the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) and then by its successor, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), this program was used by 1,258 communities of all sizes between 1949 and its termination in 1974.4

At its beginning, the program that would eventually become known as “urban renewal” was defined by the confidence that policy makers, planners, and designers had in their ability to solve complex urban problems through technocratic expertise and the power of demolition. By the final years of the
program, urban renewal was widely seen as a failure, with many former neighborhoods having been replaced by parking lots rather than businesses or new housing. Even when redevelopment projects were considered successful in the sense that they were completed as planned, they were often made possible through the clearance of black, immigrant, and low-income neighborhoods whose residents were largely excluded from the planning process. As urban renewal took place during the height of the civil rights era, residents of many threatened neighborhoods vocally opposed redevelopment plans that were often discriminatory in character. For these reasons, along with many others, urban renewal became a lightning rod for public criticism. Far from solving the problems facing distressed urban communities, it frequently compounded them, disrupting the social, political, and economic networks that low-income households depended on to survive and simply pushing poor households deeper into poverty in other parts of the city.

While urban renewal has been the subject of significant scholarship since its inception, the country’s experience with this program was much more varied than that research might suggest, and we do a disservice to urban and policy history if we treat this narrative as complete. Current research is diversifying our understanding of urban renewal by developing new historical, cultural, and geographical lenses that can be used to view the program and its consequences for the country at large. This book is driven by several of these increasingly significant themes. For example, nearly three-quarters (74.7 percent) of the cities that used urban renewal funds had populations of fewer than fifty thousand people, yet their experiences remain largely absent from the academic literature. Urban renewal histories in the Southeast, Southwest, and West are also finally beginning to receive their due. Many of these new studies examine cities such as Austin, Texas, or Los Angeles, California—cities that were growing during this period, rather than suffering industrial and population decline. Another subset of studies documents the role of colleges and universities as partners in the urban renewal process, a practice that was made possible as a result of amendments to the act in 1959. The idea of examining urban renewal for its role in building rehabilitation, rather than clearance, has also begun to attract attention. These works have helped researchers identify variations in the use of urban renewal funds guided by local political culture, economic differences, and visions for the future. This trend is likely to continue, fueled in part by the increasing availability of data that match the nationwide scope of the program. Because this information has become more accessible, it is possible to better contextualize earlier research, contrast the experiences of diverse geographies, and identify trends or connections that cut across jurisdictional boundaries. Reflecting these shifts, this book presents the experiences of small cities, large cities, and suburbs, and it includes perspectives from state and territory levels as
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well. It also provides guidance for scholars seeking to expand the narrative of urban renewal in both novel and familiar places. With luck, it will encourage new research that allows us to better understand what was arguably the most significant urban policy of the twentieth century.

The Policy Context for Urban Renewal

The Housing Act of 1949 was not the federal government’s first foray into the housing market. In the early months of Franklin Roosevelt’s first term, he broke with the laissez-faire tradition of his predecessors and introduced a number of programs to produce affordable housing and stabilize a market that was essentially collapsing during the bleakest years of the Great Depression. Through its Housing Division, the Public Works Administration (PWA) produced approximately twenty-five thousand high-quality housing units across the country. These developments are regarded by some as being among the best public housing units the government ever built. Roosevelt’s first year also produced the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act and the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), both of which effectively took unregulated, poorly structured loans and converted them to modern, self-amortizing mortgages with regular monthly payments. If these programs looked backward to address old problems, the National Housing Act, passed in June 1934, looked forward to prevent them from occurring in the future. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) penned into existence many of the programs that would create the modern housing market and launch America’s identity as a suburban nation. Through the FHA and its mortgage insurance programs, the federal government took much of the risk of a mortgage off the local bank’s shoulders and created minimum standards for new residential construction. As a result, banks were more comfortable lending money for new construction. For all the considerable good they did to stabilize the housing market and encourage construction during the Depression, however, HOLC and FHA policies also played a central role in segregating America’s cities and suburbs. Supported by the actions of private real estate professionals, banks, local governments, and others, these policies set the stage for decades of white flight and equity building in suburbia while minimizing access to the major wealth-building opportunity of the twentieth century for African American and minority households. Instead, these marginalized groups were largely restricted to living in inner-city neighborhoods of declining value, building their own homes with limited resources, or buying their homes with less well-regulated financial instruments.

The 1930s were very active years for housing policy in the United States. Just three years after the passage of the National Housing Act, a new landmark housing act was passed, the Housing Act of 1937. Though it was far from
an unqualified success, the Housing Act of 1937 created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) and sought to expand the federal government’s role in producing affordable housing. The USHA was hamstrung by a number of issues, including a cap on the amount of money that could be spent per unit; the political necessity of local control of the projects, which encouraged segregation; and the onset of World War II. Because of its financial constraints, the housing units were neither as spacious nor as well built as their PWA predecessors, and they lacked many of the amenities that had made the earlier developments so popular. During World War II, the federal government became much more involved in housing production due to the demands of the defense industry. The Lanham Public War Housing Act was the primary vehicle that facilitated the construction of the housing and community facilities needed to support war workers. While most of the housing built through the Lanham Act was temporary, some was more substantial and remained in use after the war as public housing.

Following the war, President Truman sought to bring all the federal government’s various housing and housing-support programs together under one administrative roof. The Housing and Home Finance Agency was the result, and while it was essentially a collection of existing programs, its structure makes it clear just how involved in the housing market the federal government had become by the dawn of the urban renewal era.

Created in 1947, the HHFA consisted of three constituent agencies. The first agency was the Home Loan Bank Board, which oversaw the Federal Home Loan Bank System, the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, the Federal Savings and Loan Associations, and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation. The second agency within the HHFA at its formation was the FHA, which had been established through the National Housing Act in 1934. The third agency within the HHFA at its creation was the Public Housing Administration (PHA). The PHA was the new name given to the USHA. In addition to the work of the old USHA, the PHA had the responsibility of liquidating the assets of several wartime emergency housing programs, including those constructed through the Lanham Act.

The challenges facing the new HHFA were very different than those that had prompted the creation of its constituent parts. Instead of the crashing home values and limited credit of the Depression era, the country now faced a white-hot housing market struggling to keep up with demand. The situation in 1947 was described in the HHFA’s first annual report, published in 1948:

Despite substantial housing production achievements, it was apparent throughout 1947 that the Nation’s housing problems were far from being solved, and that we would be confronted for some time to come
with a severe housing shortage, particularly of rental and low and moderate priced sales units. It was also apparent that the problem could not be considered in terms of volume alone; much of the housing produced during 1947 was at prices beyond the reach of a great part of the potential market. The heavy demand for housing, however, meant a ready market for the homes that were constructed during 1947, although undoubtedly many persons bought at prices that will put a severe strain on their long-range financial capacity.22

Faced with these challenges, as well as the increasing evidence of declining urban environments nationwide, housing advocates, the real estate industry, city officials, and various stakeholder groups prepared what would become the Housing Act of 1949.23

The Housing Act of 1949

In the Declaration of National Housing Policy that begins the Housing Act of 1949, Congress called for

housing production and related community development sufficient to remedy the serious housing shortage, the elimination of substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas, and the realization as soon as feasible of the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.24

On the surface, these are noble goals. It is hard to argue against the idea of “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.”25 Over time, however, it became clear that achieving the dual goals of slum clearance and quality housing for every American family was beyond the administrative, planning, and financial capacity of the era, particularly given the significant limitations present in the Housing Act itself.

As has been noted elsewhere, the Housing Act of 1949 was drafted to obtain the support of competing interest groups who did not necessarily seek the same outcomes.26 The battles between public housing advocates and the real estate industry resulted in a housing act that could easily reduce the amount of housing available to low-income households, increase overcrowding in other low-income neighborhoods, and fail to find private-sector buyers for property once cleared.27 Yet despite its highly visible flaws, or perhaps because of them, cities saw the slum clearance program as a lifeline following decades of disinvestment during the Depression and the resource-scarce war years.
Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 allowed the federal government to provide loans to pay for two-thirds of the total cost of a slum clearance project, in addition to providing funds for initial planning. The local government was responsible for providing the remaining third of the project’s cost. In a typical clearance project, the local government, or its designated public agency, was obligated to prepare and obtain federal approval for a redevelopment plan for the project area and it was required to prepare a plan to rehouse the affected neighborhood residents. It could purchase the properties in the desired area or seize them through eminent domain. Once the local government had obtained ownership of all the parcels, removed the residents, bulldozed the buildings, and consolidated the properties, it then typically sold the land to a developer to actually build the project and put it into its new use. It then used the funds from the sale of the property to repay the loans it had received from the federal government. Thus, for a relatively small investment, the city would be rid of its slum neighborhoods and be rewarded with gleaming new apartments, office space, or institutional facilities on a scale that would never have been possible without federal involvement. Because of the fear of falling behind the suburbs, the hubris of political and technocratic elites, and the classism and racism that were endemic to political life in the American city, the idea of “saving” the city through demolition blossomed.

Not surprisingly, given the socioeconomic status of residents in neighborhoods targeted for clearance, many of the consequences of this approach were borne by the nation’s most vulnerable populations. While there were exceptions to this rule, urban African American and minority populations were largely excluded from the first wave of suburban expansion through a combination of federal and local practices and often had little choice but to stay in precisely the type of area that cities were engaged in clearing. Segregation, discriminatory lending, racially restrictive covenants, and exclusionary zoning made sure that the majority of African American families who moved from rural areas to cities during the Great Migration stayed in the cities and did not have access to the same suburbs as white families. And while the FHA-supported subdivisions popping up on the urban fringe were almost entirely closed to African Americans, circumstances within the urban core were hardly less restrictive. Redlining prevented significant FHA-insured real estate investment in minority or racially mixed neighborhoods, and in the racially segregated housing markets of the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was extremely difficult for growing urban African American populations to move into other neighborhoods. The resulting overcrowding, lack of access to capital from legitimate lenders, and reluctance on the part of policy makers to invest in infrastructure that would support those neighborhoods accelerated their decline. Within this context, minority neighbor-
Hoods were increasingly framed as nuisances for the rest of the city to suffer, making the idea of slum clearance all the more appealing to policy makers.33

From the outset, the Housing Act of 1949 was a vehicle for slum clearance with a poorly defined relationship to the production of affordable housing and a deceptively hostile relationship to the residents of targeted neighborhoods. “Redevelopment” in the context of the Housing Act of 1949 could have meant almost anything as long as it was part of a plan developed and approved by the local government. If the land had previously been used for housing, once cleared, it did not have to be used for housing at all, much less public or below-market-rate housing.34 And while the language of the Housing Act of 1949 required local public agencies to develop a suitable relocation plan before a project could be approved, those plans often consisted of little more than half-hearted efforts to move residents onto the waiting list for existing public housing.35 There was no requirement that displaced households be guaranteed new housing anywhere, only that there be a plan for relocation. Even when nominally successful in finding new homes, relocation typically meant a radical disruption of the social and economic fabric that had previously held those communities together. And the pace of construction of new public housing units was slow. While Title III of the act authorized the production of 810,000 new dwelling units, it would take twenty years before the 810,000 units promised in the 1949 act were built.36

While its reputation as a slum clearance program had been firmly established by the likes of Robert Moses, Ed Logue, and others, the practice of urban renewal did change over the course of the program’s existence in response to the lessons that planners and policy makers were learning. The 1954 amendments to the Housing Act, for example, allowed local governments to adopt rehabilitation as another tool for addressing blighted neighborhoods in addition to clearance. This led to the popularization of the term “urban renewal” rather than “slum clearance.” The experiences of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities demonstrated that rehabilitation could be a more effective way to approach neighborhood renewal than clearance.37 By using urban renewal funds to bring marginal buildings up to code, officials were able to rehabilitate the physical fabric of these neighborhoods rather than clearing them. Rehabilitation was far from a panacea, however, as a failure to address the underlying social issues facing these neighborhoods led many such efforts to quickly return to their preintervention states.38

Permitting rehabilitation also, somewhat paradoxically, laid the foundation for historic preservation activities to be supported by urban renewal funds, beginning with the 1959 College Hill Plan prepared by the Providence Preservation Society in Providence, Rhode Island, and occurring elsewhere in subsequent years.39 Though this type of urban renewal–based preservation success story was rare at the time, it helped open the public’s eyes to the pos-
sibilities of neighborhood rehabilitation and reuse. Speaking broadly, the heightened levels of community activism provoked by the threat of urban renewal and other mid-twentieth-century urban “improvements,” such as interstate highways, paved the way for greater appreciation of historic urban neighborhoods and landmarks. These grassroots advocacy efforts helped create an environment conducive to the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and to the rapid expansion of the historic preservation movement nationally. Although this perspective is most famously associated with Jane Jacobs and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and with New York City’s Landmarks Law following the clearance of Penn Station, it was an experience and response shared by activists in countless small and large communities across the country.40

The 1954 amendments also required local governments to prepare what was known as a Workable Program for community improvement and provided financial support for building local planning capacity through the Section 701 program. The requirement for a workable program was significant because it encouraged the adoption of land use planning, building codes, and other best practices for land development, more firmly entrenching the planning profession within the bureaucratic structure of local governments, both large and small, while also helping encourage the construction of safer buildings through standard codes.41 According to the 1961 HHFA guidebook on the subject, the Workable Program consisted of seven elements: codes and ordinances, a comprehensive community plan, a neighborhood analysis, administrative organization, financing, housing for displaced families, and citizen participation.42

Shaped in its later years by the advances of the civil rights movement, the various successes and failures of the war on poverty (including the Model Cities program), the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, urban renewal developed new programs and procedures that reflected the complex realities of America’s cities in the mid-twentieth century. Ever so gradually, Congress also moved in the direction of trying to address the financial toll of urban renewal and other programs on those households forced to move as a result of federal initiatives. While it did nothing to address the damage done during the first twenty years of urban renewal, Congress finally took meaningful action in the form of the Uniform Relocation and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970.43 This act significantly increased the amount of compensation households would be entitled to claim when federal projects required their displacement. The cost of urban renewal projects rapidly increased because the federal government was suddenly required to pay for something approximating the actual cost of relocation for the households and businesses it displaced.44
The End of Urban Renewal and an Assessment of Its Legacy

By the early 1970s, the expansive scope of urban renewal was increasingly at odds with the goals of the Nixon administration, which sought to minimize and decentralize the role of the federal government in local decision-making processes. This stood in stark contrast to the philosophy that had prevailed during the early Kennedy and Johnson years, when the federal government was seen as providing leadership on urban issues. This, combined with the administrative inefficiencies created by the federal government operating so many different legacy urban and anti-poverty grant programs, led to a reckoning of sorts for HUD. The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 formally ended the federal urban renewal program, along with Model Cities and five other federal grant programs. In their place, it channeled those funds toward the new Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program and ushered in the “community development” era of federal urban policy. This new approach gave local governments greater authority over how federal grant funds could be spent, required less onerous measures for federal approval and oversight, minimized direct federal involvement in local decision-making, and increased the capacity of local groups, such as community development corporations (CDCs) and other nongovernmental entities, to undertake neighborhood development projects.

Over the course of its existence, 3,284 projects or programs of different types were approved for funding under the auspices of Title I of the Housing Act of 1949. Funds were disbursed to all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam. By its conclusion, a program that began primarily as a vehicle for slum clearance had expanded to include eleven different categories of intervention, including code enforcement projects, general neighborhood renewal plans, community renewal programs, assistance for disaster areas, and traditional urban renewal projects, among other types of programs.

While grants ceased to be made under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 with the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, the lessons learned as a result of the federal urban renewal program heavily influenced its successor programs and in many ways still guide city planning practice today. The CDBG program, for example, has been in place for almost twice as long as the urban renewal program, and it remains very popular among local government officials. As would be expected given the program’s origins, CDBG bears the heavy imprint of the Housing Act of 1949 and its subsequent amendments. The specified “national objectives” driving CDBG, for example, include “activities which aid in the prevention or elimination of slums or blight,” and permitted activities include rehabilitation projects,
Among other successor programs, the lessons learned from urban renewal are even more apparent, if less explicitly articulated. The Choice Neighborhoods program, for example, approaches disinvested neighborhoods with high concentrations of public housing from almost the exact opposite perspective of the viewpoint that drove urban renewal. Far from trying to erase disinvested neighborhoods from the map, as was the intent in 1949, typical Choice Neighborhoods grant recipients recognize the many complex, interlinked systems that need to function in order to make an urban neighborhood better address the needs of its residents. These projects include high levels of community engagement in the planning and project management process, varied types of housing, enhancements to educational facilities and programs, public transportation improvements, and better access to high-quality jobs, health care, and other systems. The original Housing Act of 1949 targeted problem neighborhoods and sought a purely physical solution—clearance. Urban renewal was gradually transformed by policy makers to permit rehabilitation, increased levels of community involvement, and ultimately a greater recognition of the potential human cost of these projects. Its modern descendants seek to create quality neighborhoods that can be enjoyed by the residents who call the neighborhood home. Yet one is very much a product of the lessons learned through the other. New lessons can only be learned, however, if this period in urban history continues to be studied.

Contents of the Book

The chapters included in this book were originally presented at the “Reassessing the History of the Federal Urban Renewal Program: 1949–1974” conference on September 27, 2019, at the University of Kentucky. Supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the conference came about because of the reasons identified earlier in the introduction—new information was becoming increasingly available, and the interpretation of that information was prompting new questions about how urban renewal had shaped the American landscape. The chapters included in this volume provide an opportunity to understand the types of questions that are being raised by this data.

In the first chapter, authors Brent Cebul and Robert K. Nelson draw attention to the work of the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond and its newly released *Renewing Inequality* map. The map takes advan-
Excerpt • Temple University Press

tage of a range of formerly difficult-to-access federal data sources and presents, with stunning clarity, the scope of the federal urban renewal program, as well as its consequences for minority households, on a project-by-project basis for the entire United States through 1966. Just to draw attention to one of the data sources behind the map, the *Urban Renewal Directory*, published by HUD throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, provides a running list of all projects approved, along with the project names and identification numbers, financial information, and approval dates. The June 1974 *Directory*, which covered projects through the conclusion of the program, is essentially a complete list of approved urban renewal projects and programs for the duration of the urban renewal program. This list covers all cities, states, and territories that participated in urban renewal. While not invisible in years past, this list is much more accessible today because it has been digitized and is available online. Chapter 1 introduces the scope of the data that is now widely available, as well as the capabilities of the map itself, while also examining the long-lasting fiscal consequences of urban renewal, which has traditionally been framed as requiring only a minor local investment. To further this analysis, this chapter draws attention to the experiences of cities in several southeastern states that made use of urban renewal funds.

While the increasing digital availability of relevant data is one of the most exciting aspects of current urban renewal research, new sources of data must first be found before that information can be put online. Much of it can only be encountered by doing the yeoman’s work of visiting state and municipal archives or opening forgotten file cabinets in local planning offices. In his chapter, David Hochfelder provides guidance for conducting research at the state and local scale in the state of New York. Reaching far beyond the well-documented projects in New York City, Hochfelder uses local and state archival resources to bring to light the experiences of Elmira, Jamestown, and Painted Post, among other upstate communities.

The next section of the book emphasizes not the process of recovering data but the stories of the varied and diverse geographies to have used urban renewal funds. In Chapter 3, Benjamin D. Lisle introduces readers to the struggling mill town of Waterville, Maine, which had a population of 18,695 in 1960. Waterville undertook two urban renewal projects. In the face of hard times for the city’s paper mills, Waterville first sought to essentially turn its downtown into a shopping mall to appeal to tourists. Its second project cleared a working-class neighborhood composed of Lebanese and French Canadian mill workers. This experience in some ways mirrored the power dynamic more often seen in larger cities, with the burden of urban renewal falling most heavily on minority and immigrant populations, but with ethnic geographies that were shaped by rural New England’s industrial past.
Douglas R. Appler

Moving away from central Maine and into the Sun Belt, Robert B. Fairbanks’s chapter highlights the experiences of the Texas cities of Grand Prairie and Lubbock. The postwar growth experienced by these two cities challenges the traditional urban renewal narrative of aging Rust Belt cities seeking to lure residents back from the suburbs. Grand Prairie, in particular, stands in contrast with that narrative in a number of ways. Its Dalworth project rehabilitated an African American neighborhood instead of clearing it. Most of the previous residents retained ownership and remained in the neighborhood after renewal, and the rehabilitation loans that supported this transition were insured by the FHA. While there was significant relocation of residents, and the project reinforced a segregated residential pattern, it was successful in ways that many better-known projects were not.

Chapter 5 introduces another geography that is rarely encountered in studies of urban renewal. Like the Sun Belt and central Maine, U.S. territories do not fit the typical view of the program as addressing the needs of major legacy cities. This is unfortunate for many reasons, not the least of which is that Puerto Rico made heavier use of urban renewal than did thirty-four states. After briefly introducing the experiences of other territories, the author offers a Commonwealth-wide view of urban renewal as used in Puerto Rico, emphasizing the progressive populism that defined much of the urban renewal era (in contrast to the conservative politics in the continental United States) and the consequences of urban renewal for the built environment. The chapter suggests three possible areas of future study, including the relationship between urban renewal and the vernacular architectural form known as the casita, the decision by Puerto Rican officials not to use urban renewal to engage with the buildings surrounding central plazas, and the connection between urban renewal and the development of the architectural style known as tropical modernism.

In Chapter 6, Stacy Kinlock Sewell approaches urban renewal from the state perspective, examining the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC). The story of the UDC draws attention to the failure of many local officials to effectively complete the projects they started. In the small cities and towns of upstate New York, as in many other locations, slum clearance might be framed as the “easy part,” while redevelopment for many proved to be a much more difficult challenge. Sewell discusses the work of the UDC and its experience being the “developer of last resort.”

The book’s next chapter examines the experience of Elmwood Park in St. Louis County, Missouri. One of the primary themes of Colin Gordon’s discussion is the centrality of the concept of “relocation” and the degree to which it was mismanaged in the case of this small, predominantly African American St. Louis suburb. Providing a fine-grained examination of the pro-
cess by which the community was dismantled, Gordon calls out the county officials’ incompetence and willful avoidance of their responsibilities to address the relocation needs of the affected residents.

While some cities almost seemed to prioritize disrupting the lives of their poorest citizens, others initiated their renewal efforts using both a public health and a rehabilitation perspective. In his chapter, Leif Fredrickson uses the experience of Baltimore, often seen as an urban renewal pioneer, to examine how urban renewal related to other existing city improvement efforts, most specifically its public health initiatives that predated the Housing Act of 1949. In the mid- to late 1940s, Baltimore was well known for its health code-based “Baltimore Plan,” which prioritized strict code enforcement as a way to improve health outcomes in former slum neighborhoods. But while it attracted significant attention nationally, it was a very slow process, and its positive results were also often short lived. Following the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, the city gained new tools to use, and so began an uneasy working relationship between the city’s Public Health Department and its developers. Fredrickson charts the city’s path from a public health–based rehabilitation effort to one that ultimately had the counterproductive consequence of pushing additional low-income households into already overcrowded neighborhoods, worsening public health outcomes.

The final chapter in this book examines one of the most significant shifts in the program: its expansion to include rehabilitation as an option for neighborhood renewal in addition to clearance. Because it provided a less expensive, and possibly less traumatizing, option for addressing the physical liabilities of a “blighted” neighborhood, rehabilitation was a popular option for many cities once it became available. Francesca Russello Ammon’s chapter considers the various consequences of this approach to urban renewal practice, with a particular focus on how it began to incorporate not just rehabilitation but historic preservation as well.

Conclusions and Future Directions for Research

These chapters draw attention to the benefit of looking outside familiar locations to paint a more complete picture of a federal program whose effects were felt across the country. Taken as a whole, they showcase the diversity, perhaps unexpected, of how different communities experienced the federal urban renewal program. Urban renewal was used to respond to both industrial decline and industrial growth. It was encouraged by both progressive populists and local chambers of commerce in wildly different political and cultural contexts. It was used in both the smallest and largest cities. It was responsible for both clearance and the rehabilitation of existing buildings.
Beyond just saying that “urban renewal happened here too,” these chapters point to real differences, many of which challenge long-held assumptions about the program and its consequences.

These chapters also help draw attention to several areas that hold promise for future research, particularly those that are made possible by the greater accessibility of data that make plain the breadth and scope of the program. Probably the most significant shift in the near future, along with an expansion of the number of small and medium-sized cities being studied, will be the addition of a greater number of comparative studies that incorporate multiple sites within the same research project. Stand-alone, intensive case studies are always going to be a valued part of urban renewal scholarship for the detail and depth they provide, but the ability to quickly identify projects that share geographical, political, chronological, or social characteristics has opened new doors for future research. A regional approach, for example, would be useful not only for the Southwest, where Fairbanks has pioneered research at that scale, but also for the Midwest, the Southeast, and other geographies. One could imagine a study of urban renewal projects along any, or all, of the Great Lakes, for example, or along the Ohio River or the Merrimack River. In each of these cases, projects thus identified can be used as the entry point for understanding broader questions about the region, its economic history, its culture, and in many ways its modern prospects for success.

Continuing the idea of assembling a group of case studies based on a unifying characteristic, a project examining how urban renewal affected immigrant and ethnic neighborhoods in a variety of cities—large and small, and from all corners of the country—would be tremendously useful. Lisle’s chapter, and other current work, hints at the need for this topic, but it deserves greater attention. Another badly needed volume would explicitly connect post–Civil War African American communities with the urban renewal projects that cleared or threatened them. This would help raise the profile of these communities as valued and historic American settlements and would also make plain their continued targeting by various levels of public policy.

Leaning on the 1974 Urban Renewal Directory, studies that seek to address all projects within one city are also a logical next step, drawing attention to the ways local expectations for the program changed over time as neighborhood leaders became more effective organizers and as program administrators became more receptive to other forms of “renewal.” Taking a cue from Fredrickson’s chapter, this approach may make it easier to understand the local policy frameworks that supported urban renewal and the diversity of challenges that local policy makers and community leaders sought to address over the life of the program. Single-city studies also present an opportunity to emphasize architectural traditions lost and gained. For better or worse, many urban renewal projects pushed out traditional building types and replaced...
them with something entirely different. Questions about the value of both to modern community members remain worth asking.

If nothing else, the chapters assembled in this volume make clear that we do not know urban renewal as well as we think we do. We have a better understanding of its reach than did earlier scholars, but we have only just begun to raise the questions required by that shift in perspective. From a researcher’s point of view, however, recognizing that our understanding of a topic is deficient is a good thing because that means there is so much more for us to learn. Hopefully the work presented here will help move our collective questioning forward.

NOTES

2. U.S. Senate Committee on Banking and Currency.
7. See also Fairbanks, this volume.

10. Though Herbert Hoover should be given credit for the Home Loan Bank Act of 1932.


29. U.S. Senate Committee on Banking and Currency.


34. Teaford, “Urban Renewal and Its Aftermath.”


46. Orlebeke and Weicher, “How CDBG Came to Pass,” 34.


50. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 152.


