Behind the struggle for affordable housing in New York City

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One of the social issues that is closely bound up with the rapid growth of inequality in the United States is the housing crisis and the need for affordable housing.

A report recently issued by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development tallied about 565,000 homeless across the country as of January 2015. New York City is the sharpest expression of the homeless crisis, with more than 75,000 reported in this category, nearly 60,000 of them in the city's inadequate and often dangerous shelter system.

The administration of Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio took office nearly two years ago with ambitious promises to deal with this crisis, but the number in the city's shelters has continued the steep upward climb that began with the financial crash in 2008. According to statistics from the Coalition for the Homeless, the census in the shelter system was 53,615 in January 2014. By September of this year it had risen to 59,305.

This is the context of the current exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, entitled, "Affordable New York: A Housing Legacy" (through February 16, 2016). There is some useful information in this exhibit, but there is even more that is left unsaid or distorted.

According to its opening panel, the exhibition "explores the history of how New Yorkers have sought to make the city a place where all can find decent homes they can afford." It goes on to acknowledge, "Today, New York City has some of the most expensive housing in the nation, and decent, affordable homes are beyond the reach of many residents." This, however, is immediately followed by touting the promise made by the city's current mayor, Bill de Blasio, to "build or preserve nearly 200,000 affordable units" over the next ten years. Of this total, only 40 percent will consist of new construction.

The Museum, as part of the city's Cultural Institutions Group, is part of a partnership with and receives much of its funding from the city. Perhaps it is not too surprising that it looks at de Blasio's policies through rose-colored glasses.

Research has shown that the proposed total of 200,000 units is less than half of what is needed to meet the current need, let alone to address future demand. Yet de Blasio's grossly inadequate goal is presented in this exhibit as the latest in a series of courageous efforts by the city's mayors, beginning in the 1980s with right-wing Democrat Ed Koch. These have all been based on "incentivizing private-sector involvement in an era when large-scale public housing is no longer being built."

There is no explanation anywhere in this substantial exhibit as to why "large-scale public housing is no longer being built." It is simply taken as a given, a social and political fact of life, rather than a choice made by successive administrations, in Washington and New York City.

The exhibit includes descriptions, photos, and dioramas of the period from the 1930s through the 1960s, when major public housing construction was undertaken, principally under the auspices of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), but later including projects sponsored by quasi-public entities and labor unions, such as the massive Co-op City in the Bronx, Penn South in Manhattan and Rochdale Village in Queens.

It is necessary to go back and place the origin of NYCHA in its historical framework. Public housing did not emerge in a political vacuum or out of the kindness of Franklin D. Roosevelt's heart. The bankruptcy of capitalism had been exposed in the Depression, and the same year of 1934 in which NYCHA was founded, as the first major public housing agency in the US, saw a number of general strikes—in Minneapolis, Toledo and San Francisco—that were led by socialists. New York was a massive center of immigrant and working class radicalism, going back many decades. During the Depression, Communist Party members organized direct action to stop evictions. The Russian Revolution, which had taken place less than two decades earlier, struck fear into the ruling class, despite its accelerating degeneration and the crimes carried out by the Soviet bureaucracy.

In a statement that stands in stark contrast to today's policies, the New York State Constitution was amended during this period to state that, "The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by … its subdivisions."

NYCHA was modeled after similar projects already undertaken in Europe, often by social-democratic governments. Supported by funds made available under the Roosevelt administration's New Deal, the construction of public housing also provided thousands of jobs. The first project, appropriately named First Houses, was located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a heavily immigrant and working class district. It was completed in 1935, and by 1940 there were eight developments, with a total of 10,000 apartments.

Despite its provision of affordable housing, the NYCHA effort was far from fully meeting the needs of the city's working class. Admission to an apartment was limited by a strict screening system, which excluded the poor and racial minorities. As an exhibit panel states, "Between 1934 and 1939, 174,000 New Yorkers applied for NYCHA apartments, but only around 14,000 qualified."

These policies only began to be relaxed in the 1960s, following protests against discrimination in NYCHA and other large housing developments, such as Stuyvesant Town in lower Manhattan, which had been built by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and explicitly excluded African-Americans. A brief mention of the protests is as close as this exhibit gets to any reference to political

struggle.

In 1965, at the end of the NYCHA building boom, the system included 135,000 housing units, but 100,000 people were still on the waiting list. Today, the situation is even worse. While there are about 400,000 people living in NYCHA housing, 270,000 more are on the waiting list, with expected wait times of up to eight years.

The exhibit's description of public housing efforts is followed by an account of the relatively meager policies of recent decades. Today, in a pattern that harkens back to the ineffective efforts prior to the Depression, programs to augment the available stock of affordable housing are based on "incentivizing" private developers via programs such as 421-a, which provide lucrative tax breaks and zoning variances, boosting the profits of private developers while making barely a dent in the outstanding need.

Funding for various forms of public housing and for low-income rent subsidies has been cut drastically. The NYCHA system, for example, which includes over 180,000 units, was once the most successful public housing program in the country. It has now been allowed to deteriorate, with huge backlogs in necessary repairs, delayed for months and even years, leaving tenants to endure unhealthy and unsafe conditions for extended periods. This is in addition to an estimated budget deficit of approximately of $98 million, and a whopping $17 billion needed to meet projected capital costs.

Mayor de Blasio's proposed solution to NYCHA's budgetary shortfall is to lease open space within the housing complexes to private developers so they can construct market-rate apartments, depriving existing residents of areas for recreation and relaxation, which were part of the original design, and opening the way to the eventual privatization of the system as a whole. Residents have expressed strenuous objections. None of these issues are discussed in the exhibit.

Instead of repairing and expanding public housing programs, an important component of future affordable housing efforts in the city, according to the exhibit, will be de Blasio's "Inclusionary Zoning" program. It will employ a variety of inducements, including zoning changes and investments in infrastructure upgrades paid for by the city, to lure private developers into impoverished neighborhoods in order to upgrade conditions there, while providing a modest percentage of supposedly affordable housing.

The city judges affordability based on the "Area Median Income" or AMI. Reflecting the extreme income inequality in New York, this is calculated as $86,300 for a family of four. Since nearly half of the city's population lives in or near poverty, with incomes well below the AMI, the supposed affordability of many "affordable" apartments is illusory (see: Minimum-wage workers cannot afford apartments in New York City).

The inclusionary zoning program has been widely criticized as nothing more than city-sponsored gentrification, a process that has pushed less well-off residents into increasingly marginal areas in recent decades.

The unstated premise of current policies is that there is no fundamental right to decent, affordable housing for all. Only housing that is profitable to developers and landlords will be made available. If that is not adequate, public funds will have to be employed as "incentives" in an effort, inadequate at best, to induce more construction. And, if that doesn't meet the need, then there is nothing more to be done. Workers will simply have to do the best they can.

This idea that only those with money are entitled to live comfortably is of a piece with the whole social counter-revolution in America, beginning with the collapse of the postwar boom in the early 1970s, and accelerating since the 2008 financial crash. The ruling class views as impermissible all social programs and anything else that impairs its "right" to maximize profits. It is a throwback to conditions that prevailed during the later 19th and early 20th centuries, when large numbers of the city's working class, including a substantial proportion of immigrants, were housed in horrific slum conditions.

In this regard, it is appropriate that, coinciding with the affordable housing exhibition, the museum has also mounted a show about Jacob Riis ("Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half"; through March 20, 2016). Riis, a Danish-born journalist, is best known for his book of photographs, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890), which revealed to a wider public the conditions under which the city's working class families were forced to exist. Certain improvements were made in the wake of the exposures, by Riis and others, during the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, although major advances did not come about until the advent of major public programs such as NYCHA.

Perhaps these two exhibits are juxtaposed in an effort to show "how far we've come." If that was the aim, it does not succeed. It is hard not to be struck by the growing similarities rather than the differences between these two periods.

Despite the attempt of the Affordable Housing exhibit to communicate an optimistic message, the reality of housing for the working class in New York City is dire. The numbers speak for themselves—a shortfall in affordable housing of 550,000 for people who can't afford to pay more than $1,050 per month in rent (by the city's own estimate), 270,000 on the waiting list for public housing, more than 75,000 homeless, including nearly 25,000 children, and the continuing withdrawal of tens of thousands of apartments from rent stabilization every year. Compare that to the mayor's proposal to build or "preserve" a mere 200,000 affordable housing units *over the next ten years* and the scale of the problem becomes clear.

The Affordable Housing exhibit highlights the role of New York City mayors over the last 150 years. One after another, going back to the 19th century and including even right-wing law and order advocate Rudolph Giuliani and billionaire Michael Bloomberg, these political representatives of Wall Street are depicted as "housing advocates"! There may be a grain of truth applying this label to such figures as Fiorello LaGuardia during the 1930s Depression era, but it certainly does not apply to the mayors of the past 50 years.

Mass struggles and militancy were able to win limited housing reforms in the past. Today, in the face of capitalist decay, a political strategy is urgently needed. The basic social right to decent living conditions can only be successfully fought for as part of a socialist program.