

Section 8.2 Housing?

BY TIM ROWLAND

IN ANSWER TO A “FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION” on its Web site, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development helpfully starts out: “If a family lives in a public housing unit that is scheduled to be demolished . . .” Bummer. If there’s anything worse than an eviction notice, it’s an explosion notice. “Sorry ma’am, but your digs are so contemptible that dynamite is the only answer.”

Public housing may be the only government construction project that draws greater cheers when it comes down than when it goes up. And for good reason. Through the middle part of the century, public housing basically replaced inner city slums with nicer slums, or at least slums with more amenities, like non-working toilets.

Curiously, it didn’t work out. Imagine that—gather up a bunch of destitute, unemployed, ill, and addicted people and put them all together in a big, multi-story box, and somehow it didn’t succeed.

With the government’s typical lightning speed (in this case, about four decades) the problem was recognized and new solutions to the old solution were proposed. Enter Section 8, a voucher program that allows the poor to go house hunting, just like any other happy, all-American family in their wood-paneled station wagon on a Sunday afternoon.

The poor would put 30 percent of their income toward the rent. (For the unemployed, that would be 30 percent of zero, which is, umm—where’s my calculator?) The government would pick up the rest of the tab.

The thinking was this. Since crowding the destitute into one big crib didn’t work, the obvious answer was to scatter them to the four winds, allowing them to integrate into “legitimate” neighborhoods where, through osmosis or something, they would eventually succumb to creeping middle classism, start shopping at J.C. Penney, and coach their kids’ soccer team.

Perhaps the seed for mixed communities was planted in the 1950s when Ricky Ricardo wound up living next door to Fred Mertz. Did you notice the way the relationship improved Fred and Ethel? It’s the same idea.

Section 8 was—and still is—praised specifically for what it is not: government-managed, high-rise housing. Still, the clever neighbor is not fooled. Section 8 has become a pejorative. Out

walking their dogs, parents will point to a house and whisper to their kids, “That’s a Section 8 family.”

A good landlord might object, but then good landlords are increasingly opting out of Section 8. That leaves the program to landlords who deeply, deeply care about . . . getting their rent check, which the government virtually guarantees. Any other improvement or attention paid to the property is purely coincidental. A cynic might even say that Section 8 is more about welfare for landlords than about helping the poor. (Of course, no such cynics read this magazine.)

More than a few cities are also struggling against something the program was supposed to prevent. Instead of distributing the disadvantaged evenly throughout a broad mix of neighborhoods, Section 8 properties tend to coagulate in the decaying, inner city core where landlords can’t find other tenants. This “high-rise without the high-rise” environment revisits the original problems of public housing, with the added disadvantage that you generally can’t implode a whole downtown, much as you might like to. Cities that wish to attract wage-earning (and spending) homebuyers to their cores through incentives, beautification projects, and events are often thwarted because the kudzu of Section 8 housing chokes out any new growth.

Housing officials are quick to point out that the majority of people on public assistance are truly in need of help. In many cases, Section 8 is that help. But the program, which dates to the Nixon administration, is showing its age. Local housing authorities, beaten down by HUD guidelines that make the *Bhagavad-Gita* read like a children’s book, have lost energy. Landlords have learned how to slip through the legal cracks. Tenants, instead of being encouraged by more upscale surroundings, look at their neighbors and see more of the same.

This year’s federal budget provides little optimism that change is in the offing. It adds to traditional Section 8, while subtracting from innovative programs like HOPE VI, which replaces public housing projects with mixed-income communities that are partly capitalized with private money. Programs like HOPE VI have shown considerable promise, in part because they realize that community fabric is as important as brick walls.

There’s enough good in Section 8 to recommend its continuance in some form or another. But society is moving on, and we should be learning what works and what doesn’t. After 30 years it’s time to expect a new version—call it Section 8.2. **R**



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