



THAT
SHIT'S
RACIST

volume 2 | issue 0

housing
discrim
ination

“We inherit our ample patrimony with all its incumbrances; and are bound to pay the debts of our ancestors. This debt [of slavery], particularly, we are bound to discharge; and, when the righteous Judge of the Universe comes to reckon with his servants, he will rigidly exact the payment at our hands. To give them liberty, and stop here, is to entail upon them a curse.”

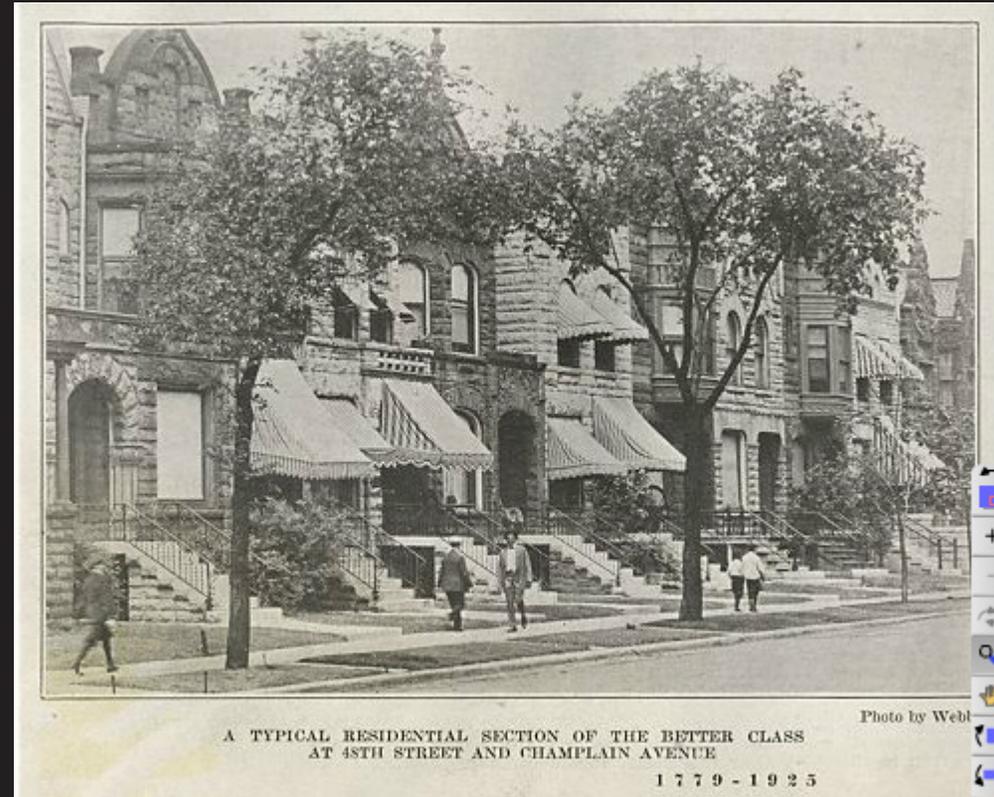
— *President of Yale University Timothy Dwight, 1810*

“I for one believe that if you give people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and the basic causes that produce it, they’ll create their own program, and when the people create a program, you get action.”

— *Malcolm X, 1964*

“When people talk about time, ... I can’t help but be absolutely not only impatient but bewildered. Why should I wait any longer? In any case, even if I were willing to—which I am not—how?”

— *James Baldwin, 1961*



Cover image: photograph of an African-American residential neighborhood (49th Street and Champlain in Chicago, circa 1925).
Source: Chicago Historical Society,

WHY HOUSING? A letter to the reader

Sometimes it seems the easiest way to start talking about any subject is by situating oneself in the arena. I'm in my twenties and already in my brief adult life I've experienced a decent variety of housing conditions: I've slept on couches in other people's spare rooms and basements; lived in a roadside motel and a residential hotel; occupied bedrooms that were actually closets; left three apartments due to bedbug infestations; shared houses (and a single bathroom) with ten other adults; inhabited unheated cabins in the woods; and spent months traveling around without my name on a lease or any other formal place to call home.

Throughout all of these various adventures, however, I have never truly been homeless, and even at my most housing-insecure I have still had the good fortune of knowing at least a few people who would open up their own spaces to me in times of crisis. This should not be a privilege or a blessing but it is both.

Housing is central to so many other aspects of making it work as a person: without a place to live it can be hard to get a job, raise a family, attend school, and stay healthy. Additionally, in a capitalist society, owning one's own home is often construed as the post-war capitalist success marker and crown jewel of the American Dream. In a country that was founded in part on the guarantee for all its citizens of "life, liberty, and property," denying people the opportunity to own their own home is especially pernicious.

At one point in American history, in fact, the contemporary equivalent to owning a home was owning slaves. "Like homeownership today," writes Ta-Nehisi Coates, "slave ownership was aspirational" (*The Case for Reparations* 64), further linking property with liberty. Coupled with the legacy of slavery, wherein black and brown bodies were assets in themselves, owned and traded by whites, housing discrimination has wrought seemingly irrevocable devastation

on black families and communities throughout the country. The tactics of housing discrimination were just new ways to keep the same bodies subjugated despite legislative and constitutional prohibitions against slavery. In short, housing rights are human rights.

All that being said, to declare access to safe and secure housing a human right is a disappointingly empty gesture. Yes, everyone should enjoy basic shelter that allows privacy and dignity and a decent quality of life. But people are denied this right in every city in the world. Why is this? How have cities tried to house their poorest and most vulnerable citizens? What have the many failures and modest successes taught us about effective ways of addressing housing problems?

In trying to find answers to these questions, I've read lots of books and talked to several very smart people and visited museums and taken myself on tours around Chicago (my current home city and the site of LOTS of housing history)--and while this hasn't exactly yielded definitive solutions, it has led to new questions and interesting ideas.

This is a serial zine, released in concise (fingers crossed) installment, and it's the result of the rather daunting exploration bundled under the aegis of "a brief history of housing discrimination in the modern United States." I hope you're ready for a long ride!

This will become overwhelmingly clear, I'm sure, but I am not an expert of anything, let alone the politics or history of housing policy and activism in the United States. I still have so much to learn and so many questions to ask and books to read and places to go--but that will never not be true, so what you have is a work in progress that I wanted to get out into the world before I become too overwhelmed to "finish" it at all.

best,
amber



Left: *Many Mansions*, Kerry James Marshall, 1994
acrylic on paper mounted on canvas
Art Institute of Chicago

INTRODUCTION

Housing in the United States is, like many things, a racial issue. But before we can more fully explore how and why that is the case, let's talk about what specifically I mean when I say "housing." This zine is going to spend a lot of time looking at public housing projects, but I'm also interested in the private housing market, homelessness, patterns of gentrification and ghettoization as guided by federal and local policy—broadly, anything that has shaped who can live where, under what conditions, and for what price.

The way I see it, the people of the United States (we citizens/residents as well as the folks we elect to make our laws and policies) are not only responsible for creating just housing conditions for us all, but we are morally and ethically obligated to do so.

Around the time that slavery was formally abolished in the United States, a huge number of people were newly granted (nominal) recognition as people rather than property. Subsequent decades of racist policies and practices (of legal, illegal, and extralegal varieties) established a significant economic underclass that needed housing. Since then, the US has sort of tried and mostly failed to figure out how to house its growing citizenry.

This is not only frustrating, but unacceptable. The United States economy has always depended on a large and consistently un(der)paid labor force. Poverty is not an unfortunate and unforeseen side effect of the American marketplace—it is a necessary condition for it.

However, poverty need not be the overwhelmingly disproportionate burden of black and brown people, and economic precarity need not create such rampant housing insecurity.

Why, then, have so many people in this country been so consistently without a safe place to live? Because federal agencies and cultural attitudes have been employed to limit or deny any kind of housing assistance to people who most need it! It is not an accident that more often than not those people are black and brown and/or women with children. It is the result of more than 150 years of unjust government policies, discriminatory business practices, and prejudicial attitudes and behaviors exhibited by large groups of fellow citizens.

In short, poverty and homelessness are social ills that have been manufactured and maintained by all of us living in this country.

I'm going to repeat that one last time just because it defies the narrative that has circulated about the black and poor and/or homeless since before this land was even a formally-recognized country:

most people who are black and poor or homeless have been systematically made so by outside forces.

AND YET! In the face of this undeniable complicity, neither the public nor the private sphere has been willing or able to provide affordable and adequate solutions to this ongoing housing crisis.

Various strategies—among them public housing, subsidized rent and rent vouchers, and mixed-income communities—have been attempted to provide housing solutions, but they have only ever fallen vastly short of the goal of adequately sheltering even most of those in need.

Furthermore, when tasked with creating affordable and/or public housing solutions for those in need, several programs and agencies have ghettoized and further disenfranchised those same populations, often deliberately so.

In the next installment, we'll be looking at some of the backbone policies of housing discrimination:

**restrictive covenants,
redlining practices,
& housing contracts.**

