



## Requiem for a Civic Monument

Chicago's demolished public housing projects are 'mythic spaces' that continue to shape the city, says Ben Austen '93, in a new book.

Interview by Maya Dukmasova '12

Chicago public housing and its troubles have been a journalistic focal point for decades, generating a slew of news coverage, books, and magazine articles about all that's wrong with "the projects." In 2000, then Chicago Mayor Richard Daley launched a \$1.6 billion project to rehabilitate or redevelop 25,000 units of public housing. Nearly two decades later, despite some rebuilding, there's been a vast reduction of permanently affordable rental homes, and an increase in vouchers that subsidize rent in the private housing market. The changes, moreover, have largely reinforced racial and economic segregation rather than paving the way for greater housing opportunities in well-to-do neighborhoods in the city and its suburbs.

In February, writer and Chicago native **Ben Austen '93**

**SHAPING CHICAGO:** Austen, a Windy City native and a former editor at *Harper's*, argues that the city's infamous housing projects continue to shape the environment, even after their demise.

published *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing* (HarperCollins), the first general-audience book about the history and residents of Cabrini-Green. Told through the eyes of four long-time residents who called the development home, it's a requiem to a civic monument that may be erased from the city's skyline, but has continued to shape Chicago nonetheless.

"I think my book chronicles our thinking about the inner city, and our always uneasy relationship to poverty and race," says Austen. "Cabrini-Green is not a place just to be razed and forgotten, like we've done with this thing. We're not. We're literally not done with it."

**You're a Chicago native—a "South Sider"—but, growing up in the South Shore and Hyde Park neighborhoods, lived a life quite distant from those of the people you write about. How does that affect your view of Cabrini-Green, and public housing in general?**

In 2010, when the last tower was coming down, for someone who grew up here, it was like: what does that mean? Not just 23 towers





in Cabrini-Green, but across the entire city. Because they loomed so large in the public imagination, these mythic spaces. They're as much a part of the city as the lake, Michael Jordan, Oprah. Being a South Sider even increased the mythic aspect of Cabrini-Green. People on the South Side, white and black, talked about Cabrini-Green [on the near North Side] as way worse and more nightmarish than the Robert Taylor Homes, which were on the South Side, because that made the Taylor homes more familiar.


#### How did you settle on the four people who became the main characters in this story?

When we think of this development of 20,000 people, we mostly think of the crime and drug use that came to define it, but the range of experiences that went on there—it was an entire town on 70 acres of land. The people I write about are ordinary people, but also extraordinary in their perseverance and their willingness to take action. These are the people who gave me their time, but their stories drew me to them. They were engaged in a kind of fight, not only to stay in public housing but to make life better there. None of those lives are free of the ill effects of public housing but they're full of taking action and attempts to define their own lives despite it all. That's powerful.

I don't think the people whose lives get told in this book are representative, that they embody every life, but they do have a fullness of experience and have a lot of agency, and I think in a

novelistic way they come to life in a way that defies a lot of simplistic notions of public housing, of poverty, of inner-city Chicago.

**Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here*, the last mass-market book about Chicago public housing by a journalist, was cited extensively in the 1990s as an example of why public housing should be done away with. Have you thought about the possible reverberations *High-Risers* could have in policy and politics?**

Empathy and less irrational fear lead to better policies. But a dramatic telling of someone's life doesn't necessarily offer an easy prescription for those solutions. Alex's book reminds me of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*: it was a revelation to readers that this is going on in our country. His book is very much an *I Accuse...*, a "Can you believe this?" He's embedded with an individual family as things are happening. But the towers were torn down and the concentrated poverty and isolation of public housing didn't go away—they were moved elsewhere. In my book, I'm both wrestling with those changes and interviewing people about the past events of their lives. Cabrini-Green becomes the magnet for all the fears our society has about the inner city. I'm writing in that context. If we start thinking about how unfair and unearned most of those fears are, then hopefully we can make better policy. 

*Dukmasova writes about housing and criminal justice for the Reader, Chicago's alternative weekly.*