

No heat. Leaking roofs. Mold and pests. Interminable waits for basic repairs.

Public housing in New York City has become synonymous with the dilapidated living conditions many of its more than 400,000 residents have endured in recent years.

But it wasn't always like this in the 325 housing projects owned and managed by the New York City Housing Authority, also known as Nycha. The country's largest public housing system was once a seemingly reliable option for the working poor. Nycha successfully endured some of New York City's most turbulent eras while other public housing buildings across the country came tumbling down.

Now, Nycha is at a crossroads. As part of a settlement in June in which Nycha admitted to covering up its actions and lying to the federal government, a court-appointed monitor will soon oversee the beleaguered agency as it tries to come up with billions of dollars to keep thousands of its aging buildings habitable for decades to come.

To understand how Nycha arrived at this point, we combed through our photo archives for forgotten images and spoke to longtime residents, former housing officials, historians and others about the housing authority's often overlooked and surprising eight-decade history. That story, in their words, is below.

**1934-1968**

## A Progressive Housing Solution to Fix New York City

Nycha was founded in 1934 as Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia's antidote to the shoddy tenements of New York City's housing crisis during the Great Depression. Public housing was trumpeted as the duty of progressive

government, and the swift construction of sprawling complexes became a slum-clearing machine that reshaped the city's urban landscape.

But Nycha developments were not poorhouses: Unlike other cities, New York effectively barred lower-income residents from public housing. From 1953 to 1968, it excluded most residents on welfare by screening applicants using a list of moral factors, including alcoholism, irregular work history, single motherhood and lack of furniture.

12 [Nycha] was a creation of liberal politics in New York. In the depth of the  
'A Depression there had to be jobs and housing that people could afford.

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,”  
m They were relatively low-rise walk-ups built to extraordinarily high-quality  
ic standards. Basically, as good or better as middle-class housing. They were  
1” built for a very carefully-selected tenancy, mostly working families that  
even during the Depression had no social service background or history.

'8 When my mother came, only white people lived here, until the 1950s.

3e  
m The problem of this housing, though, was that it was *too* good in many  
people's eyes. The response was projects like the Queensbridge Houses:  
much bigger projects, more repetitive design, units finished at a much  
more basic level, and a lot of economizing done.

10 In my day, the staff was the best. They had their job, they did their job, and  
3e they were qualified for their job. You'd call, and it would be fixed right  
18 away.

12 The amazing thing about New York is the scale of this.

m You have 69 projects with over 1,000 units by the 1960s. That's amazing,  
and these are enormous developments that are created. Maintaining such a  
big system was already a challenge, but by then it was too late. The genie  
had left the bottle.

**1969-1999**

# A Changing Mission, and New Problems

Nycha was housing about 500,000 New Yorkers by the sixties. Minority residents now outnumbered whites, but the percentage of tenants on welfare was just half the national average for public housing.

Nycha loosened its selectivity in 1968, under immense pressure from the federal government and social justice activists, and the percentage of residents on public assistance doubled by the early seventies. And by the eighties, many of New York City's troubles also plagued housing developments : crime, drugs, vandalism.

However, the authority's robust management capabilities, financial resources and tough policing kept it afloat while public housing in the rest of the nation spiraled into disrepair and demolition.

- m The number of social issues increased significantly. The challenge managerially went up. They had to replace an enormous number of windows, and elevator maintenance became much more difficult because of the vandalism. It was a break-and-repair kind of cycle.
- er There would be mailboxes bashed into and broken. Because back then, everyone was getting paper checks, for their jobs or welfare. So you could cash them in anywhere. It didn't matter who you were.
- er Obviously the authority had much more staff at that time. We had 17,000 employees, not including the 2,700 police officers. The authority at that time had its own police force. My impression in those days is that there was a lot of capacity. There wasn't unlimited money. We couldn't renovate every building out there, but if a problem came along there was enough money to address that particular problem.
- h As New York falls apart in the 1970s, in ways that have been largely forgotten, the housing authority's projects were anchors of stability and safety. They were places that you wanted to get into as the neighborhoods were deteriorating around you. All of this changes in the late 1980s. The 1980s is the first time when you're more at risk of criminal violence on Nycha property than you are in the surrounding neighborhood.

- 13 When the crack epidemic came, it took over. There were fights everyday,  
in shootouts everyday, people playing music outside of your building to get  
'5 someone out to fight.
- 14 It was a very small percentage of bad actors having a huge impact on the  
rk quality of life for hard-working people. We always felt like we were the  
er underdogs. We were doing the most difficult job in the city while at the  
ty same time being looked down upon as second-class for not being N.Y.P.D.  
nt
- '0 Every place you step, you would step on a crack bottle, back in the '80s, a  
in long time ago. In Grant, you would be afraid to walk down the steps  
'6 because they had a bunch of crack bottles and they get stuck in the groove  
of your shoe.
- er At that time, cameras were not prevalent to the extent that they are now.  
We also had a fairly active tenant patrol where residents would volunteer  
and sit in lobbies and check in people coming in and out.
- ry The first day on patrol in the Farragut Houses, I got hit with a padlock. It  
grazed my face. There were some people that did not want us there because  
we were interfering with their business. I saw objects as big as a living room  
couch thrown off the roof of a building onto a police car. Those were the  
bad old days. You don't hear those stories anymore.

**2000-2018**

## An Era of Defunding Begins

By the turn of the century, the idea of government as landlord went out of fashion. Suddenly, Nycha became a victim of disinvestment as all levels of government steered billions of dollars away from the agency.

The housing authority's operating deficits and mounting costs to maintain and renovate its aging 2,462 buildings quickly impacted living conditions.

Hurricane Sandy's wrath and last winter's frigid temperatures further exposed the buildings' vulnerabilities.

Mismanagement followed, and the authority admitted in June to lying, covering up missed lead inspections and deceiving federal inspectors. Now, Nycha is waiting on a federal monitor and the infusion of at least \$2 billion in city funds, although even that might be a drop in the bucket next to the system's estimated \$25 billion in unmet capital needs .

m Everything is getting old at once, because everything was kind of built at once. So it's like a 30-year window where almost all of public housing was built, and now we're in that 30-year window where it's going to be totally revamped or redeveloped. A lot of these buildings have had more than your normal wear and tear.

rd They stopped doing preventive maintenance, which led to a lot of boilers  
al not working. You have to service the boilers in the summer so they're ready  
10 for the winter, and that stopped being done because they didn't have the  
3S staff to do it.

er Now, it's different. It takes time, because there's a backlog. I called for a  
paint job in May and they're coming in August. It can take months for  
anything.

15 Recently, we didn't have hot water for three days. So you couldn't take a  
in bath or shower.  
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m It was built under a model where tenant incomes would increase, and thus  
rents would increase in proportion. But the thing in New York, as in other  
cities, is that the income of the residents in public housing, as opposed to  
the private market, have not kept pace with society or the cost of  
maintaining these buildings.

3Z I did some things that were kind of radical. I raised rents, but I did it in a  
to way that really took people's fixed incomes into consideration.  
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rd Sandy's effect on Nycha put the icing on the cake. Nycha was in decay  
already. Hurricane Sandy and the developments that it hit really devastated  
the properties, because the boilers and electricity were located in the  
basements. Sandy came in and really finished the job — in the Rockaways,  
in Coney Island, in the Lower East Side.

- er The authority doesn't have the reputation it had 30 years ago. It was considered the best large housing authority in the United States. People wanted to work for us. People wanted to live there. It was a better attitude all-around.
- '7 In the seventies it was great. They would fix up anything that you needed.  
as They used to have two people working in each building. We don't have that  
'5 anymore.
- 1z Still today, with all its problems, Nycha hasn't folded. Part of that is because of demand for housing in New York, of course. But it's amazing how they've been able to adapt to attrition. It remains a model of how to survive.
- az I'm heartbroken because this is an important resource for poor people in New York City.

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