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Connecticut's Liberal Image Hides a History of Systematic Housing Inequality, It's Time For A Change

A couple of weeks after moving to New York City, I was on assignment at a small bar in Astoria. There I hit it off with a fellow writer. We talked about the stress of a deadline and constantly feeling inadequate in our work, a painfully common feeling among writers, when the conversation turned to a weekend getaway she had recently taken to Connecticut, my home state. Hoping to reminisce about someplace I had scarcely been since I was a kid, I asked her where she had gone.

She replied Bridgeport.

Bridgeport?

I was puzzled.

She had chosen to spend her precious free time in Bridgeport?

What was she going to look at I thought? Burned out buildings? Was she taking a tour of abandoned factories or engorging herself on the delicacies of Captain's Pizza or Thomson Hotdogs? Did she take a safari through poverty?

It seemed bizarre to me that anyone would vacation in the Bridgeport that my family knew. But she gushed over hip new restaurants and a splendid waterfront. She described it as a beckoning Brooklyn.

It wasn't the place I remembered.

I remember the old abandoned GE factory, that was once the Remington Arms Factory and even made an appearance on the Travel Channel show, Ghost Adventures. I remember the Hi-Ho towers and burned-out homes on Boston Avenue. I remember all the stories my mother told me about growing up in one of the most notorious housing projects in the city, Father Panik Village. Her whole family grew up there and it was a constant source of stories—now, told with smirks instead of tears.

Sure, some new housing developments had started to pop up in Bridgeport, but they looked like strange roadside attractions, awkwardly placed among a cul de sac of abandoned factories.

The truth is, when I think about Bridgeport, I mostly think about Father Panik and how at first, it had been a dream project. It was a refuge for low-income families who had before, toiled in decaying slums. But through the decades, it fell apart and became a nightmare for families who could afford to go nowhere else.

When I think about Father Panik, I think about how little has changed in Connecticut when it comes to affordable housing. Father Panik and other housing projects may have been demolished, but what replaced them has done little to solve the problems facing the working poor in the state. Connecticut continues to struggle with finding a place for its poorer residents that doesn't corral them into concentrated "zones" of poverty, looking out on the wealth of the towns that surround them.

Father Panik Village opened in 1940 as [Yellow Mills Village](#). It featured a sprawling 778 units spread across 47 buildings. Apartments had their own bathroom, hot and cold water, and gas stoves, and the grounds had a park and community center where residents could coalesce. The housing projects attracted factory workers and laborers. For them, Yellow Mills Village was an oasis away from the slums they had escaped.

By the time my mother moved in with her family in 1978, however, it had been renamed Father Panik Village, and building conditions had fallen into disrepair. What was once seen as a way out of poverty had turned into a slum itself.

Housing inequality wasn't a new trend in Connecticut. In *Free The Beaches: The Story of Ned Coll and the Battle for America's Most Exclusive Beaches* by Andrew W. Kahrl, AN associate professor of history and African-American studies at the University of Virginia, Kahrl found that predatory zoning law has existed in Connecticut since the 1880s when residents and developers would petition the state legislature for charters which enabled them to levy their own taxes and set zoning restrictions. Early on, this led to exclusionary practices that effectively banned low-income and families of color from attractive areas on the coast. Today zoning laws from city to city in Connecticut differ but and have continued to be a way for upper-class communities to keep low-income families out.

In a series of [articles](#) by Jacqueline Rabe Thomas for ProPublica and The Connecticut Mirror written between 2019 and 2020, Thomas found that zoning regulations continue to haunt low-income Connecticutans. In Westport, where the median income of residents is almost [\\$163,000](#), only 65 affordable housing units have been built over the last 30 years. In total, the town only has 229 units of affordable housing and of the 10,400 homes in the city, only 58 accept rental assistance, like Section 8 vouchers. On average, these vouchers will cover just \$1,100 of the average \$1,800 monthly rent cost for a one-bedroom apartment in Westport. In all 0.4% of housing is considered affordable in Westport, which means the annual rent does not exceed 30% of the renter's income.

The economic divide comes into focus when you look at where an abundance of affordable housing is built in the state. Three-quarters of low-income housing is constructed in the ten poorest municipalities in Connecticut. Compare that to the mere 5% of affordable units built in the ten wealthiest towns, and you can see the problem.

Like in the 1880s, zoning is the main culprit.

Thirty years ago the Connecticut Supreme Court tried to outlaw predatory zoning [by making it illegal]. Legislators then passed law 8-30g— which outlines a way for developers to bypass local zoning laws, if 30% of the units they build are set aside for poor families. But city officials have found ways around it.

And in 2017, state legislators weakened 8-30g, by allowing cities to gain exemptions from it, making it easier for cities to keep poor families out by restricting their housing options.

Today, Only 19 cities and towns in Connecticut allow three or more unit developments without a special permit— which narrows housing options by keeping homes, predominantly, single family and property values high. Twenty-five prohibit the construction of multi-family homes, and 123 require special permits.

In Avon, which has a median income of almost \$124,000, 15 acres are required to build a two-unit home and only 1/3 acres for a single-family. Bolton, which has a median income of \$97,000, hasn't approved more than one duplex in over 30 years. And in Monroe, 70 acres are needed to build a multifamily development and each unit can have no more than two bedrooms. Single-family homes, on the other hand, need only one acre. The median income there is over \$110,000. By making it more difficult to build multi-family developments, places like Avon and Monroe keep low-income families out, creating an economic bubble around their community.

Monroe is flooded with opulent Tudor homes that sit on large pristine lots that could easily fit another home while maintaining plenty of space for children to play and family barbecues. When you look around, all you see is space, so much space it seems almost impossible, coming from the congestion of Bridgeport, for a place to be so vast. It's green and open. It's hard to believe anyone struggles there. My grandmother still lives in a four-family home in Bridgeport, where the adjacent upstairs apartment sits empty and the windows are blown out, on a plot so tiny a barbecue is but a distant dream. There is no green space within walking distance. It's crowded and claustrophobic.

Connecticut appears to have a transparent hostility toward creating mixed-income towns and cities and seems hell-bent on continuing to enforce concentrated pockets of wealth and poverty throughout the state. Even when incentives are created, towns manufacture obstacles designed to discourage the building of affordable housing, continuing a tradition of stealthy segregation.

Percentage of Affordable Housing vs. Median Income in Connecticut

https://www.datawrapper.de/_/To8Nl/

And reactions from residents haven't been any better than the practices. In an interview with the Connecticut Mirror in 2019, Greenwich resident Gayle DePoli said, "It's not about not in my neighborhood. It's: enough in my area. It's overbuilt with condos. Your hearts got to bleed a little bit for people that need low-income housing, and then you are going to put them in the middle of something they can't afford. They can afford the rent, but what else? They aren't going to the restaurants down there. Everything they can afford [is a car or bus ride] away. It's pretty sad."

If not Mr. DePoli's neighborhood, then where? Should Connecticut start converting the abandoned factories on St. George Street in Bridgeport into luxury apartments? Maybe gentrification will engulf the city with high end shops and cafes that charge \$15 a latte. Surely that would improve the lives of low-income families without burdening the residents of Greenwich or Monroe.

Presumably, the government of Connecticut didn't think toward the future when IT brought in low-income workers to take labor and service jobs in the early 1900s. IT never stopped to wonder what would happen if the factories shuttered and people began arguing for their fair share, instead of settling for scraps in the form of inadequate housing options.

In the early 1900s, the state of Connecticut heavily recruited workers from the south, and by the 1930s, 80 percent of people living in the North End of Bridgeport were Black. Once in Connecticut, up to half of their weekly income was spent on lodging. To meet the demand, slum

lords turned bedrooms into tiny apartments. Tenants were forced to share bathrooms with multiple families, and complaints and needed maintenance were ignored.

My grandparents arrived in Connecticut in the 1950s, along with a slew of other Puerto Ricans that were recruited by the city of Hartford for cheap labor in factories and tobacco fields. After arriving, they found themselves constantly on the move, going from one rundown public housing complex to the next.

By the 1980s, when they found themselves at Father Panik Village, it seemed not much had changed from the slums of the 1930s. Public housing had simply taken its place.

At Father Panik Village, lights in the halls and stairwell were constantly going out, a constant issue. No matter how many times my mother would go down to the building manager's office to air her family's complaints, nothing was done. At Father Panik, it was wise to return home before dark. If you didn't, you would be left wandering the halls in near pitch black, squinting in the faint light that came from the streetlights below. My mother feared the low chattering of voices in the stairwell, and she would call up to my grandmother hoping she'd hear her voice call back.

Making it to the door always felt like a triumph.

Like most cities in the U.S., Connecticut was affected by redlining. In 1937, the Federal Housing Administration labeled the North End as a "slum area," making it ineligible for FHA mortgages and precluded the area from enjoying the same growth as Hartford's suburbs did.

Kahrl writes that moves like this and categorizing overcrowding, high rates of illness, and slum living conditions, as racial traits were a further condemnation that kept people in slums and helped validate white homeowners' prejudice. All of this served to encourage these homeowners to resist integration and created lasting vestiges of intolerance for low-income families.

In 1941, slums were marked for closure, and the Hartford Housing Authority began building public housing to fulfill the need for homes. The Hartford Housing Authority was rife with policies of segregation, however, giving white families priority for newly built housing. White applicants got their pick of units, and apartments were set aside and left empty for them, even as demand was higher among for people of color. As Black residents moved into public housing, white residents secured FHA-insured loans and moved out. Around the same time as this migration, budgets were slashed by the FHA, and local housing authorities began halting new constructions and repairs to existing structures.

By 1986, with housing projects attracting crime and verging on unlivable, Connecticut began the process of demolishing projects. By the time my mother left Father Panik at the end of that year, only 15 buildings were still standing. By 1994 they would all be gone.

While new mixed-income housing was being built, Connecticut gave former project residents Section 8 vouchers to find new accommodations. The goal was to give struggling families a chance to live in safer neighborhoods. But roadblocks remained in the form of zoning and hostilities hostility toward families leaving housing projects.

It seems that people in affluent neighborhoods don't want to rent to people on vouchers. The very system that created the image of rundown housing and crime had made anyone using

section 8 vouchers seem like they would bring those issues with them. In high-income resident's minds, poverty brought trouble.

In Thomas's third [entry](#) on Connecticut's housing inequality, she found that 55% of the state's nearly 35,000 voucher holders live in areas of concentrated poverty.

After razing housing projects throughout the state, Connecticut replaced one broken system with another. The issue with these Section 8 vouchers is that zoning laws make it virtually impossible for residents who use them to break into high-income neighborhoods. Even when a person finds an apartment that meets their needs, and their voucher can cover the cost, they are denied the second they tell the landlord they'll be paying with vouchers.

It is illegal in the state of Connecticut to deny a prospective tenant because they plan on using Section 8 vouchers to pay rent. But in 2018, there were only 75 complaints of housing discrimination because SPELLING of Section 8 vouchers. With only 10 investigators in the state, those wronged have a difficult time feeling that filing a complaint will do much in time to help them, so they forgo complaining altogether.

Thomas spoke with Crystal Carter, a mother of four who struggled to find housing outside of Bridgeport. Every time she found something suitable, that her vouchers would cover, she was turned away by landlords and homeowners. Carter found, that the second she mentions using vouchers, [that] apartments she had toured would suddenly already be taken, only to reappear available for rent again weeks later. In Winchester, where residents call wealthy celebrities like Meryl Streep neighbor, Carter found that special preference was given to current residents for already scarce affordable housing. She was locked out.

How could she or anyone leave the cycle of poverty if neighborhoods outside of their economic bubble refused to let them in?

My grandparents met a similar fate. They were able to find an apartment in a two-family home, but it kept them in Bridgeport. It still had rats, but now they had a dog that caught and left them around the home to be discovered later.

Public housing didn't work in Connecticut, and Section 8 vouchers have left low-income families struggling to reach for opportunities outside of places like Bridgeport. What Connecticut needs are people like activist Ned Coll. Unsatisfied with the living conditions of Black and Latino residents, in 1964 he quit his job as an accountant and withdrew his life savings. He ran classified ads in two daily newspapers in Connecticut soliciting volunteers for the Revitalization Corps, a program he described as a "local style peace corps." Coll's goal was to bridge the divide between the middle class and the poor. He went into upper-class neighborhoods, country clubs, and suburban churches and asked residents what they could do, living in one of the wealthiest states in America, for those in their home states who had so little. By the end of the first year, Coll was able to gather 500 volunteers.

But Coll didn't just solicit the help of the upper class. He went into neighborhoods most affected. He went into the North End of Bridgeport, spoke to people, and built trust. The Revitalization Corps started a leadership program for children and took them on field trips to major employers throughout Hartford. They hosted career days and jobs training and provided aid to laid-off workers.

Coll believed in action on the ground to make a difference. In 1971, he [would] set his sights on Connecticut's beaches, 95% of which were private. Children growing up in public housing in

Bridgeport had no access to a clean water source for physical activity. Coll saw this as another sign of the clear class divide within the state. With residents, he staged protests, busing in children and families to private beaches. He put pressure on people to look at the faces they were denying entry to their palatial beaches. Over a period of time lawsuits and new legislation made beaches more publicly accessible, and in 2001 the Connecticut Supreme Court unanimously concluded that all Connecticut residents should have access to town parks and beaches.

In an August 27th, 1965 letter to the Hartford Courant, Coll said, “The suburbanite father who only shops or works in Hartford must realize that he has a social responsibility to our core city.” He later goes on to say, “What will you say when your child someday asks you, “Dad, where were you when Negroes and Puerto Ricans needed help?” Coll believed that all people in Connecticut had a responsibility to support the whole state and all of its people, not just their wealthy neighbors. If you live in a five-bedroom home in Fairfield with a pristine main street covered in high-end shops and restaurants, you should care that a family of five is struggling to find a home there, because no one will accept their vouchers. People should care when their fellow Connecticutan is forced to take a rat-infested apartment, in a neighborhood where children have nowhere to play.

Connecticut should also look to places where innovative approaches to zoning have helped mix-income neighborhoods thrive.

Connecticut Residential Zoning by City

https://www.datawrapper.de/_/YUc7J/

Connecticut should look to places like Japan, where zoning policies are built around mixed-use cities. Plans like this break down income barriers and allow all people the opportunity to live in desirable areas, instead of concentrating wealth and poverty.

In Japan, instead of individual municipalities and cities, the national government controls land use. The City Planning Act of 1968 lays out rules for cities to follow in development projects. There are two classifications for city development: “Urbanization Promotion Areas” and “Urbanization Control Areas.” Urbanization promotion areas are designated for extensive development and planning. Urbanization control areas have restrictive planning and are mainly for agriculture and open spaces. The act also created 12 city planning zones to help guide development in cities. If the qualifications under one of the city planning areas are met, developers don't require further discretionary action. With the exception of exclusively industrial zones and low-density residential zones, zones are mixed-use and can combine. This leads to greater diversity in housing throughout the city.

With a system like the [City Planning Act](#) in place, building multi-family homes in places like Westport would be much smoother than the year's long wait many developers go through seeking approval from community boards and city officials. In turn, this would also make it easier for cities to build mixed-use and mixed-income areas and make affluent cities like Fairfield more affordable and diverse. Low-income people on Section 8 vouchers would finally be able to seek opportunities in other towns throughout Connecticut, and Bridgeport could be reimagined in a way that brings businesses and mix-income housing to the area.

Connecticut can become the model of what is possible if you break down barriers and welcome mixed-income people into all neighborhoods, destroying stereotypes that insist low-income

families bring crime and lower property values. It's time for Connecticut to live its liberal identity instead of wearing it like a mask that hides its true intentions beneath. It's a pretty façade, but it is hollow. Connecticut can do more. It's long been time for action that tears down the old ways and paves a new one for all Connecticutans.

Ultimately, my mother was able to leave Father Panik Village and Bridgeport behind. Her cousin had a two-family home in the neighboring city of Stratford. It was on a nice quiet street and just a few blocks from the local elementary school. By now, it was 1990, and she had two children of her own. The last thing she wanted was to raise her children in the kind of place she grew up. When she looks back at her time in Father Panik Village, she describes it as mayhem. She feels lucky that she was able to get out. But more than that she hopes others who grew up there were as fortunate as her.

I grew up with a big backyard, with an above ground pool and a tire swing. I never saw a person dealing drugs or had a friend shot in the middle of the night. My mother didn't keep me indoors summer after summer. I got to run and play and be free. Everyone in Connecticut is not so lucky. But if we listen to the past, Connecticut can pave the way for a future that sees all its citizens as equal and deserving.

Here is my mother, Elsie Rodriguez, speaking more about her experience living in Father Panik Village.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m5xPh_RZq3kLFUS37ip4Yk3uwkIUtia7/view?usp=sharing