

Martin Luther King Plaza

# Public housing towers: 'Ghettos of poverty'

thick metal mesh to keep children and objects from falling out.

King's 942 residents face more than just poor living conditions. Many sense a stigma attached to living at King Plaza — it identifies them as being among the poorest of the poor. Some have been known to give a different address when applying for a job. King Plaza has had an impact on the surrounding areas as well.

Although much of Hawthorne is impoverished, there are also many working-class families there. And some Hawthorne residents say King Plaza is responsible for many of the neighborhood's problems.

King Plaza is also widely blamed for the run-down area on Broad Street, a half block away, and for stifling development on South Street and in the Center City neighborhood to the north.

"I think it has had a major negative impact," says City Councilman Frank De Cicco, whose district includes Hawthorne and King. "It's so identifiable as a project — who would want to develop around there?"

"It's a clear visual symbol," says Ted Agoos, partner in an architectural firm that moved to Broad and Filrwater seven years ago, opening up shop almost next door to King Plaza. "There are very few people who are going to put a major investment near there."

Both DiCicco and Agoos believe that simply taking down the towers — and removing that symbol — will go a long way toward helping the area. And they support PHA's plan to replace the towers with less-dense housing.

So does Beverly Rosa, owner of Tara Real Estate, who says, "It's impossible to sell houses where those buildings loom. People tell others coming into the area, 'Don't live near the project.'"

They agree — as do many others — that for the Avenue of the Arts to flourish, the towers must come down. "I think there's a general uneasiness about poverty abutting an area that you want to be pedestrian-friendly," said Rylanda Wilson, PHA's senior planner. "If people want to park two blocks into the neighborhood and walk to Broad Street, there should be pedestrian-friendly ways to do that. When it gets dark and you're on the avenue, you're not going to feel comfortable."

There were 95 reported crimes at King Plaza last year, including 12 robberies, 3 rapes and 28 aggravated assaults, according to the PHA Police. That gave King — which ranks 9th in population — the highest crime rate of any PHA development in the city.

It's difficult to gauge King's impact on crime in the surrounding neighborhoods — police statistics do not reveal that kind of information.

Thirteenth Street above South is plagued by crime, and some area residents believe King is largely responsible. The street also runs through the middle of King Plaza, and is perceived as a north-south corridor for residents traveling to and from the Center City shopping district.

But police are not sure exactly how much crime is actually being caused by



**Children play outside the community center at King Plaza. The city envisions replacing high-rise towers with low-rise housing.**

King residents. Although it's not uncommon for suspects being chased by police to run into the project, they may not live there.

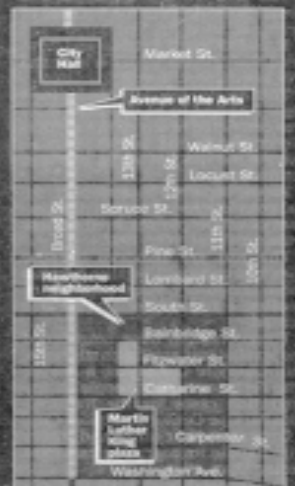
Bill Yancy, a Temple University sociology professor, says it's difficult to find evidence that public housing developments are responsible for a larger share of crime than their surrounding neighborhoods.

"People make the assumption that if there's a project there's going to be more crime," Yancy says.

PHA acknowledges that some crime does come from King, and the problem can be greatly reduced by building the kind of housing that gives people a sense of community.

"When people begin to look out for one another, they keep themselves from being victims," said Acting PHA Police Chief Dexter Green.

PHA wants the federal government to pay about half the \$56 million cost through a program that would provide residents with job training and other services. If PHA gets the money, the first two towers could come down next year.



houses on the site of the towers, along with a 38-unit mid-rise building.

Throughout the Hawthorne neighborhood, another 117 houses would be built or rehabilitated. Sixty of those would be sold at market value to whoever wanted to buy, Wilson said, as part of PHA's goal to improve the overall neighborhood.

"The whole idea," she said, "is to make the public housing unit indistinguishable from any other unit."

PHA's plan is also to give residents a chance to buy their houses.

"If I'm going to buy my property, I'm not going to tear it up and I'm not going to let you tear it up," says Cobbe, who has lived at King Plaza for nearly 20 years. "It would give people a sense of pride and responsibility."

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Rendell said he believes that what benefits King Plaza and Hawthorne will benefit the Avenue of the Arts and other prospective development.

And that prospect is the reason PHA's proposal has strong support among many in the surrounding neighborhoods.

"As real estate investment, no doubt, we'd be better off if they were moved out, and the area was gentrified," Agoos says. "But in the long run, it's a reminder that we have to provide opportunities for the least fortunate of our society. You just can't cut them off and throw them off in another part of the city."

But the support is not unanimous. Community activist Dan McGowan of Bella Vista Neighbors — in the neighborhood just east of Hawthorne — agrees the towers at King should come down, but believes that only a limited amount of public housing should go in their place.

"I personally believe they should scatter people all over the city," says McGowan. "People who are poor should have the opportunity to be in other kinds of neighborhoods. I think it would be better for people in public housing, and better for the surrounding neighborhoods."

Said McGowan: "The high-rises are definitely no good, but to build house after house after house doesn't solve anything. You've still got a very strong concentration of poor people, and I believe that's going to stifle development."

McGowan says he's surprised there hasn't been any public discussion of PHA's plan other than meetings with residents of King Plaza and Hawthorne.

"They have not really reached out to other areas and the city in general to talk about it," he said. "Why aren't we having public hearings at City Hall? It's not just the neighborhoods — this affects the whole city."

PHA Director John White said that since the people most affected are residents of King and Hawthorne, "I'm not sure of the value of having a citywide discussion of what happens at Martin Luther King Plaza."

PHA has no intention of eliminating public housing from the area, White said.

"That would be unconscionable in today's environment," he said, "and it would not be something that I would be even remotely considering."

But many people in King and Hawthorne believe the government wants poor people out of the neighborhood.

"There's a lot of fear that these homes are being built for someone else," said the Rev. John Cooper, pastor of the New Hope Temple on 12th Street near Bainbridge. "There's a real concern that this is a ploy the government is using under the cloak of wanting to improve things."

Elijah Anderson, a University of Pennsylvania sociology professor who has served as a consultant on the King Plaza plan, says that mistrust is deeper than people might think.

Many have a fear, he says, that "there's a plan by the government to undermine the black community, and taking our housing is part of that plan."

Anderson is a strong supporter of the PHA plan, though he acknowledges no one really knows how well it will work.

He notes that while job training may be a good idea, it will not count for much if job simply are not available. "It's a daunting task to get people from a situation of dependency to independence," he says. "I'm not saying it's going to be wonderful and work perfectly. It's not going to happen overnight."

PHA PLANS call for 125 new duplex towns.

Our world continues to undergo significant and extraordinary changes. Technology is firmly becoming embedded into society, population is steadily increasing, and a greater awareness of our fragile environment is emerging. Cities are responding.

There is a reclaiming of the American downtown. Suburban USA still sprawls at alarming rates, but cities are beginning to shed their image of havens for crime and the homeless.

A more acute investigation at the neighborhood scale reveals situations more reluctant to adapt. Pieces of the urban fabric over time have been torn from their whole. Some, the result of neglect, while others are the victims of sweeping Modernist ideas that never came to fruition, leaving racial, social and economic barriers that halt the momentum of change. This thesis project, Philadelphia Public Housing: Reknitting the Urban Fabric, addresses these issues by forming a bridge between a place, with its inherent urban language and the people who inhabit that place.