of the fifty-three high-rise public housing buildings that once marked a gray and red slash across Chicago’s inner-city skyline, only sixteen remain standing. Motivated by the racial and socioeconomic inequities that have alienated the predominantly African American population from their neighbors since the 1970s, the Chicago Housing Authority is razing its projects and replacing them with mixed-income accommodations. The $1.6 billion urban renewal initiative, titled Plan for Transformation, aims to integrate public housing residents into the same neighborhoods as doctors, teachers, and others gainfully employed in the hope that diversity will help counteract the projects’ association with concentrated poverty, organized crime, and welfare dependency. While various academics, politicians, and journalists have chronicled these problems over the years, there is no greater critic of Chicago’s public housing than late twentieth-century popular culture.

From the wailing police sirens in the television show *Cops* to the gun-toting bad boys in MTV hip-hop videos of the early 1990s, urban public housing has been a stage on which to enact terrifying anxieties about the inner city, forever cementing an out-of-control vision in the collective American mind. Mediated through these dramatized channels, the public’s understanding of Chicago’s projects has been reduced to an ideological terrain of stereotypes, exaggerations, and moral panics. Narratives from this period not only construct public housing as a landscape of hopelessness in the American visual imagination, but have also had the effect of validating the “death” of the projects in such initiatives as the Plan for Transformation. This effect is articulated in a report from a mixed-income property developer who stated: “Seen from forty floors up in a luxury tower across town, Cabrini-Green’s apartment slabs brood like tombstones on quarantined turf.” Specifically, the visual death knell of public housing allegorized the conservative myth-making strategies and ideologically over-determined images so central to the late twentieth-century discourse on the “urban crisis.” Blaming the urban minority poor for the poverty and social isolation they faced and exaggerating the threat they posed to the rest of society, television shows like *Cops* helped to establish crime as one of the nation’s most significant problems. A 1993 article from the Chicago-based newspaper the *Times Mirror* located the source of this panic by asking the public where they obtained their information about crime. Sixty-five percent responded that they learned about it via the news media. Such fears helped to justify social policies such as the 1994 Violent Crime Control Law Enforcement Act, which subjected public housing communities to increased policing as well as cuts in income support and social
services. Yet the terror of the inner city was greatly exaggerated, as the national rate of violent inner-city crime actually declined slightly between 1973 and 1994. In other words, the danger posed by the urban “underclass” was disproportional to the toxic discourse that surrounded it. The mainstream news media were not alone in their inflation of the menace of the inner city. Rather, the real ideological damage was committed on the big screen with the swath of violent “ghetto-based” dramas that emerged in the early 1990s.

In representing urban public housing as a divided space—zoned according to incidents of alcoholism, street crime, and drug addiction—Menace II Society (1993), directed by Albert and Allen Hughes, set in the Jordan Downs housing projects in Los Angeles; and Clockers (1995), directed by Spike Lee, situated in Brooklyn’s Gowanus projects, were joined by the less critically successful drama Judgment Night (1993), directed by Stephen Hopkins, set in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes. Hopkins’s film differs from its contemporaries in its harshly drawn distinction between the utopian suburban homes of the middle-class central characters and the nightmarish inner city into which they unwillingly venture en route to a boxing match. The film’s strict binary opposition invokes and justifies the late twentieth-century moral panic over the inner city, helping to seal the fate of public housing in the American visual imagination.

This social polarization is established in the film’s first few minutes when we find our suburban heroes—Frank, John, Ray, and Mike—in an idyllic autumnal landscape of middle-class familiarity. Scenes of kids riding bicycles and a man with a briefcase returning home from work are accompanied by a symbolic hip-hop soundtrack that pulses in the background like a mounting heartbeat, hinting at the urban fate that awaits them. After hugging his wife on the stoop of their home, Frank and his friends take to the road in a luxurious RV that Ray has secured on loan for the night. The calm before the storm is swiftly cut short, however, when a traffic jam forces the group to make a detour into an area made recognizable by the concrete towers of the Robert Taylor Homes.

As the RV exits the expressway into a dimly lit tunnel, the camera cuts to a high-angle crane shot that highlights the dystopian gravity of this spatial decision. In stark topographical contrast to the raised street and fluorescent lights of the freeway, the dark and decayed tunnel leaves the viewer in no doubt that the suburbanites have made a wrong turn. Finding themselves on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks, the group enters a terrifying urban landscape of litter-filled vacant lots and omnipresent graffiti. Against a cacophony of complaints, Ray brings the RV to a grinding halt in front of a group of homeless men loitering around a burning oil barrel in the middle of the street. Seizing a chance to humiliate the men from the raised safety zone of the RV, Mike beckons them over to ask for directions: “We’re the welcome wagon—can you come here for a minute, please?” Under the beam of the headlights, a homeless man stumbles into the frame mumbling the partly discernable line, “Let them have it, Earl.” Cue dramatic music as Earl reaches into his pocket, rummaging for the ultimate come back to Mike’s provocation: a gun. As the horrified friends dive to the floor of the RV and Ray attempts to retrieve his gun from the glove compartment, the camera reveals that the “weapon” is just a harmless bottle of booze. With his pride thoroughly dented, Ray steps on the gas, ordering his friends to lock the doors and reassuring them that if anything like this happens again, “We’ll just blow them away.”

Judgment Night’s representation of urban existence satisfies the image of “underclass” life postulated by American sociologist William Julius Wilson. Wilson contends that although the lack of jobs and poverty is the ultimate cause behind inner-city destitution, behavioral deficiencies among predominantly black communities create a “tangle of pathology”—a term borrowed from former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan to describe the social traits that perpetuate the conditions of the poor. Wilson argues that since the 1970s, structural changes in the economy—such as the shift from manufacturing to service industries and
the departure of low skilled jobs from urban centers—rendered the remaining unemployed inner-city families socially isolated from role models and job networks, and mired in concentrated poverty, crime, single motherhood, and welfare dependency. With this social transformation of the ghetto, "joblessness as a way of life takes on a different social meaning ... a vicious cycle is perpetuated."

Hopkins's camera articulates Wilson's critical stance by framing the Robert Taylor Homes as the social equivalent of a black hole. Through textual references to its cartography, the film constructs public housing as a site of repression and social isolation. "One Way," "Do Not Enter," and red "Stop" signs appear throughout the film, signifying the various pathologies that Wilson argues separate housing project residents from the wider metropolitan matrix. Within this filmic road to perdition, residents are helplessly trapped in a vicious cycle that offers them one choice: murder or be murdered. Frank, John, Ray, and Mike's repeated cries of "We have never been here," "I don't see a sign or anything here," and "Where the hell are we?!" add weight to the sense that public housing is a socio-spatial dead end. Ensuring that citizenship exists solely within the mobile territory of the RV, the mini suburbia-on-wheels comes to symbolize the United States' investment in individualist home ownership as a marker of national belonging. The film's stark comparison between the "respectability, diligence, and moral superiority of (white) homeowners" and the "disreputableness, slothfulness, and property endangering" black project tenants renders citizenship an ideological construction and a form of control.  

As Seyla Benhabib writes in The Rights of Others, "Citizenship and practices of political membership are the rituals through which the nation is reproduced spatially. The control of territorial boundaries ... seeks to ensure the purity of the nation in time through the policing of its contacts and its interactions in space. . . . Every nation has its others, within and without." In this sense, the vehicle's windshield becomes a literal and metaphorical frontier demarcating those inside the modern spaces of order (those "within") and those outside (those "without"). Rendering the underclass "socially isolated" from the safe, comfortable lifestyle coded within the interior of the RV, the planar frame of the windshield confines modernity, power, and luxury within the closed limits of middle-class white suburbia. This representation of the underclass as a separate group reinforces the discourses of urban decline widespread in U.S. culture during the late twentieth century.

In addition to Wilson's critique, during the 1980s and 1990s, numerous cultural commentators traced the troubles within U.S. cities to the growth of an alien and dysfunctional inner city. A Time magazine story from 1977 stated: "Behind [the ghetto's] crumbling walls lives a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachables: the American underclass." This statement isolates the "underclass" as a disconnected group implicitly responsible for its members' immiseration and "unreachability." As Steve Macek notes in his book Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right, and the Moral Panic Over The City (2006), "With such an 'Other,' no commonality, no communication, no shared experience is desirable or even possible; the only possible relation decent (white, suburban) people can have to such Others is to exclude, control, and confine them." Reared on this isolationist ideology, when the suburbanites look down at the projects' residents through the picture frame of the windshield, they are certain that mockery and objectification is all the poor deserve. Thus, when the RV pulls away from the homeless men and Ray reassures his friends, "Look, don't worry, when the guys built the expressway they did it logically. When we hit the next intersection, we'll cut over," he is convinced that "the guys" (Chicago Aldermen Richard Daley and John J. Dufy) had it right: logic will prevail and the paranoid political establishment that constructed the expressway barrier will protect him and his friends from the illogical urban "other." Ray underlines this sense of intractable difference between himself and the urban dweller when he expects the homeless man to be armed. To Ray, because of where he is, the man must be a criminal, a social and
spatial pariah who exists outside of, or in the case of the screen metaphor, the other side of the public sphere. Through this representation of spatial duality—of inside and outside, of self and "other"—the film portrays social barriers, or in the words of social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, "invisible walls" that "confine those who have no power, and [serve] to perpetuate their powerlessness." However, after becoming involuntary witnesses to a drug hit, the group is forced to breach Clark's "invisible wall," leaving the safe confines of the mobile home behind in order to run for their lives.

As gunshots ring out in their wake, Ray cries "Where's the cops, man?" to which Mike responds, "We could dynamite the whole city block and no one would come!" "That's criminal," decides John. In the next moment, John stumbles across a vandalized payphone. In the few seconds between John uttering "That's criminal" and picking up the abused phone—a democratic feature of American urban civilization—the film spatially designates public housing as a "criminogenic" environment. John's critique refers not only to police negligence but also, through the scene's spatio-temporal association, links project residents with the decrepitude of their living environment. This scene provides a "spatial fix" for "generalized insecurities and anxieties" about U.S. society, conveniently blaming local residents for the despicable conditions they are forced to endure on a daily basis. The sense that life in public housing is a self-made misery extends to the film's close attention to the bounded iconography of its architecture.

Lured by the deceptively welcoming sight of twinkling Christmas lights in a window, the suburbanites finally arrive at the front door of the foreboding Robert Taylor Homes. Shot from a low angle and illuminated by sultry lighting, the red brick buildings rise up like a volcano ready to erupt. Iron security fences throw jagged slices of shadow against its side, entombing the high-rise in claw-like silhouettes that look eerily similar to the dark bars of a prison cell. This abstract geometry magnifies the image of criminality, localizing transgressions within the space, while simultaneously hinting at the perceived destiny of many of its young inhabitants. An exchange between Frank and Ray articulates this sense of social separation:

Frank: We've got to make one of these people let us use their phone.
Ray: Do you really think one of these freaks is going to let us use their phone?!
Frank: These freaks are our neighbors, Ray!
Ray: They're not my neighbors.
Frank: I bet we haven't been further than ten miles from your front door this whole night.

Ray's disavowal of his "neighbors" draws attention to how social differences are all the more obvious when they exist in close proximity to one another. Today, as the Plan for Transformation calls for half-million-dollar condominiums to be constructed adjacent to yet-to-be-demolished public housing high-rises, observers are asking "how the twain will meet." Doug Van Dyke, a white homeowner in a new mixed-income development, admits, "People on both sides have looked at each other with more than a little suspicion." Ray's dismissal of public housing, then, parallels Van Dyke's thinly veiled anxiety about living next door to ex-project residents. This film's theme of spatial dread continues unabated when the pursuing felons force Frank, John, Ray, and Mike to negotiate a rickety ladder that connects two tenement rooftops.

Shot from above, the next sequence frames Robert Taylor Homes as a predatory Venus Flytrap threatening to engulf the suburbanites at every turn. Other elements of the mise-en-scene, such as ominous silhouettes and shadows, reinforce the overriding impression that subsidized housing is a hazardous place to visit or, worse still, to live. This disconcerting topography reflects aspects of Ray's troubled subjectivity. Thus, when the suburbanite declares, "Nothing about tonight makes much sense," he is at once disconnected in the space of public-housing yet comfortable in his own understanding of it—"They're not my neighbors, man." For Ray, the projects will always be viewed through a social barrier, whether it is a windshield or the green veil of the overused hundred dollar bills with which he unsuccessfully tries to buy his life. His viewpoint is geographically and culturally unyielding. A gang leader punishes Ray for his views by tossing him off the roof and into the misty orange netherworld below, dismissing his offer of money with the line: "You think you can buy me off? Ten thousand dollars might buy you out of North Shore. Here, that means shit. This is my fucking world."

The film's climactic final scene takes place in a South Side grocery store where Hopkins leaves the family man Frank to fight it out with the gang leader alone. After the criminal threatens to hurt the suburbanite's wife and child, a fistfight ensues and "normal" middle-class Frank heroically outwits the deviant public housing resident. As a squad car and ambulance arrive and the final credits roll against an absurdly peppy soundtrack, the final verdict is in. By framing the projects as a deviant, wild urban core populated by a hopelessly pathological "other"—the moral inverse of the noble, victorious suburbs—public housing is sentenced to death in the viewer's imagination. If we are not already convinced that public housing is, in Ray's words, "hell," then the visual and sonic ferocity of the film's final minutes leaves us in no doubt. Hurricane-force winds whip through the air, slamming the building's exterior and choking the air with trash—giving visual form to the notion that public housing is a lost cause. The portrayal of public housing as a descending spiral of physical disintegration and mental immiseration, from which there is absolutely no hope of recovery, reflects the hegemonic mythology surrounding the implementation of the Plan for Transformation.

A 1995 report from mixed-income property developers the North Town Community Partnership, which uses metaphors of disease and decay to characterize public housing as "warehouses of terminal poverty, crime plagued, prowled by dope gangs," effectively articulates the Plan for Transformation's myth-making tactics. Yet this report, like the visual propaganda in
Judgment Night, conveniently ignores historical fact. By failing to articulate the government’s culpability in the establishment of urban problems—the denial of social services, persistent unemployment, the failing public school system, and sweeping disinvestment—the ninety-minute cultural narrative distorts the meaning of Chicago’s inner city and narrows the complexity of project life. Instead, subsidized housing exists as a problem in itself, and a burden to the world. By presenting inner-city Chicago as a degenerate space rife with poverty, lack of policing, dead ends, and cultural aliens, Judgment Night supports the government’s implosion of public housing and conveniently ignores the generations of law-abiding residents who, against all odds, made this place their home.

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Watching Dad

A fruit knife and your father, coughed
Into retirement, saunter through the garden.
His lines of halved wine barrels offer up
Their bell peppers, their tomatoes,
Their crookneck squash. He deposits them
Into the lumped bowl of his shirt stretched
Before him. When you watch your father sweat,
You die a little—

The skin on his head thins,
The eyeglasses live on his face for longer

Portions of the day—and you brace for a fall
Among the artichokes. You do what you can.

Ephraim Scott Sommers

Untitled

Patrick Lydon

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