

Once Upon a Time on the Hill

What Self-Management Meant to One Housing Project

by Peter Byrne

illustrations by Rina Ayurang

SUNDAY, Feb. 11, 2004—In the pre-dawn hours, Deandre Dow, 21, is gunned down inside the Hunter's View housing project in southeastern San Francisco. A few hours later, Mayor Gavin Newsom and his bodyguards drive by the bloody scene. Days later, the freshly inaugurated mayor tours the project with reporters in tow. Saddled by the public's perception that he is a heartless rich man, Newsom struts his benignity. He instructs staff to replace bullet-ridden basketball backboards. He orders the head of the housing authority to remove a burned-out dumpster. He makes it clear that he cares.

Newsom is not the first politician to parachute into Hunter's View. In May 1992, Mayor Frank Jordan escorted Dan Quayle, then vice president of the United States, on a tour of Hunter's View—WWII military housing scattered on top of a hill with a million-dollar view of the Bay and a smoking power plant. The project had been scoured of graffiti, junked cars and burned-out dumpsters hours before the luminaries arrived.

Protected by Secret Service snipers and a SWAT team, Quayle and Jordan sat down to tea with a pair of grandmothers, Vera Kennedy and Jewel Green. Quayle bounced Green's grandchildren on his knee. He expressed curiosity about the West Mob (young men who sold narcotics in the project, and had suddenly made themselves scarce). According to a report in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the vice president asked the matriarchs, "Where are the men? Where are the role models for the children?"

In a speech that evening at the Commonwealth Club, Quayle attributed the "moral weakness" of America to the phenomenon of single motherhood, exemplified at its most degenerate by television-sitcom character Murphy Brown. The vice president plugged "resident management," a government program that trained tenants to take over the management and ownership of their housing developments.

A Community Transformed

Vera Kennedy and Jewel Green were so impressed with Quayle's vision that they formed a resident management corporation. They received help organizing the tenants from a local right-wing think tank and a group of socialist artists who were teaching art to children in the project. The off-beat hook-up of canny grandmothers, capitalist ideologues and community-based Marxists produced some remarkable results.



HUNTER'S POINT HILL

Within two years, the 267 families of Hunter's View had elected a resident management council (RMC), employed a professional accountant and, as required by federal law, hired a Department of Housing and Urban Development-certified business consultant. A dozen salaried tenants managed the RMC's several business projects, which included a \$700,000-contract with the housing authority to landscape the 20-acre hill.

By mid-1995, the RMC had transformed a syringe-strewn moonscape into a verdant community. Young men who made modest livings selling crack to ghetto-cruising white suburbanites abandoned that dangerous trade to become landscapers—at \$14 an hour, plus benefits. Working under the leadership of a local landscaper, co-ed teams of gardeners learned how to operate machinery, how to install copper



irrigation pipe, how to weed, seed, water and prune.

The RMC held other housing authority contracts worth about \$300,000. Tenants ran a family drug rehabilitation program, a child-care center, a food assistance program, and a laundromat. Negotiations with the housing authority were proceeding for a \$1 million contract to remove tons of lead paint and to repaint all of the buildings. Invigorated by self-reliance and success, the RMC became a national model for dozens of newly-minted resident councils.

As hundreds of fruit trees, bougainvillea



bushes and wildflowers took bloom among the new lawns of Hunter's View, many of the ex-drug dealers found outside employment using the RMC's warehouse full of gardening equipment. People started shooting hoops instead of bullets on the basketball court. No one torched the dumpsters anymore. Emerging into sunlight, children played hide-and-seek and ran screaming in silly circles, as children are supposed to do.

Huge feasts were had, replete with suckling pig, beef and pork ribs, pots of greens and mussels, Samoan delicacies, sweet potato pie, vats of gumbo a la Louisiana bayou. Live rap and gospel concerts filled the air with music on the weekends. Violent crime nearly ceased, as the workers gained something to lose. After the RMC set up its own security patrol, white male crack heads from Marin and Milpitas learned to avoid the hill.

As an experiment in participatory democracy, the life of the RMC wasn't all bread and roses. There was internecine warfare as family and religious groups competed for jobs. There was a racial-economic discord between members of the African-American majority and the Samoan minority. There was theft, even a bit of embezzlement. Resident council meetings were loud, emotionally charged and seemingly chaotic affairs. But, over time, the council generally made rational decisions about the best way to spend its million dollars.

Taking the local and federal governments at their word about their commitments to resident management, the council planned to take ownership of Hunter's View away from the housing authority within a year or two. The tenants would then become shareholders in a cooperative housing development.

But by January 1996, the RMC was dead.

Victim of Politics

It turns out that Dan Quayle's version of poor people power was never intended to succeed. In dozens of cities across America,



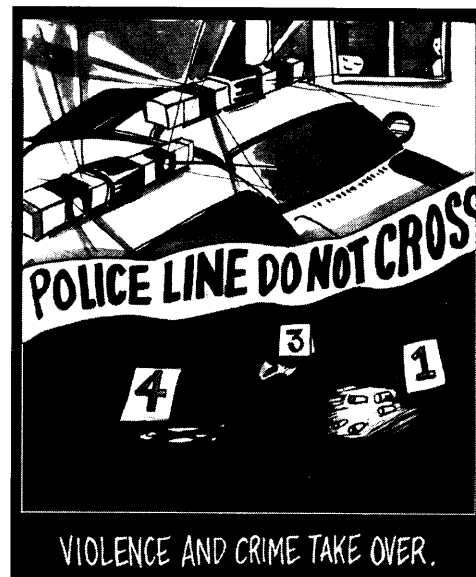
the Department of Housing and Urban Development program has torn down public housing and replaced it with "mixed-income" housing owned by private investors who benefit from tax breaks and grants of public money. The resident management program has been junked.

The key to understanding why America's public housing is such a mess is simple. The worse shape a housing project is in, the more money the feds spend to "repair" or "replace" it. The very last thing that housing authority bureaucrats and the contractors and unions that work with them want to see is a group of eager, self-motivated tenants taking control of billions of dollars.

In San Francisco, for instance, the trade unions for plumbers, painters and carpenters have benefited for generations from exclusive contracts with the housing authority. These contracts have remained in place as various projects—such as Hayes Valley, Plaza East, and North Beach—have been torn down and rebuilt with the federal and local governments assuming all of the financial risk and private parties receiving all of the profits.

When Willie Brown won the mayoralty from Frank Jordan in late 1995, he had large political debts to pay off to the real estate interests and the labor unions that had supported him with money and votes for his entire career. Suddenly, the housing authority stopped negotiating with the RMC. Resident management was not an option under the Brown administration, even as it initiated a multi-billion-dollar public contracting program—the most massive spending spree in the history of the city.

Hunter's View quickly reverted. The grass died. The fruit trees turned black. The demoralized leaders shut their doors. The young men started dealing crack cocaine again. The white addicts returned. And years later, Deandre Dow, who was barely an adolescent when the RMC dissolved, was shot dead by



his neighbors as they plied the only trade they knew.

New Hope or Business as Usual?

Miraculously, though, the spirit of the RMC lives. A daughter of Hunter's View, Bianca Henry, remembers how nice the project looked when she was paid to garden it so many years ago. Henry does not advise praying for manna from City Hall. "Newsom has fixed a few potholes, that's all," she says. She favors direct action, such as breaking the locks off of vacant units and moving into them. As a paid organizer with the Coalition on Homelessness, Henry did exactly that last Thanksgiving. But the only way to end the violence is to create jobs for the jobless, she says.

The Newsom deputy in charge of changing Hunter's View, Alex Turk, says he has not heard of the defunct RMC. "We are using basketball as a hook to get people involved," he says. "We'll have city workers and cops up there for a tournament soon. And we are working with some local companies on summer job training. And we'll get the unions involved."

Meanwhile, housing authority spokesperson Mike Roetzger says that the burned-out dumpster identified by Newsom has been removed. Some graffiti has been painted out. Some new lighting has been installed. A handful of plants have been plopped in place by city workers—not by tenants. That's about it, except for the new speed bumps.

"You should drive by there," he says, with gusto. "You wouldn't recognize it." ★★★

From 1993 to 1995, investigative reporter Peter Byrne was the HUD-certified business consultant at the Hunter's View RMC.

