

New Orleans unveils fresh model for housing the poor

By [Rick Jervis](#), USA TODAY 8/4/2011

NEW ORLEANS - The decaying brick buildings of what was known as the Magnolia Projects are now rows of freshly painted town homes with ornate balconies and manicured lawns. Stoops where dealers once sold dope and shot at rivals have been replaced by a clubhouse featuring a flat-screen TV and a pool where neighborhood kids splash.



By Jonathan E. Bachman, for USA TODAY

Jamie Jones and Missa Smith, right, supervise Ashley Coleman as she explores a newly built playground at Harmony Oaks Apartments, standing on what was a notoriously risky housing project.

The Magnolia Projects, once one of the city's most notorious public housing complexes, today is Harmony Oaks Apartments, a 460-unit mix of government-subsidized and market-priced apartments. It replaces one of six public housing projects across the city recently razed to make room for new apartments and a fresh approach to housing the city's poor.

"I never thought I'd be able to live like this," says Harmony Oaks resident Larry Berzat, 60, who grew up in the former Magnolia Projects. "It's a whole lot safer. And a whole lot better."

Following a national trend, [New Orleans'](#) traditional model of corralling all subsidized housing into one location is being replaced by newer developments that mix subsidized and market-priced homes. More than 900 such units have opened in New Orleans already; another 3,100 are on the way.

Public housing projects in Chicago, Atlanta, [Salt Lake City](#) and other cities have followed a similar trend, says Linda Couch of the Washington-based National Low-Income Housing Coalition. What makes New Orleans unusual is how the city toppled all of its major public housing projects at once, choosing a swift overhaul to its public housing over a phased redevelopment, Couch says. "People will be watching New Orleans closely," she says.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-08-03-New-Orleans-public-housing-rebuild-experiment_n.htm



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Larry Berzat scoots up a custom ramp to his "whole lot better" apartment.

Residents and city leaders agree that the new developments are far more livable and draw less crime than the previous structures, some of which were more than 8 decades old. But housing advocates warn that the new plans will steeply drop the number of available public housing units, leaving thousands of low-income families without affordable places to live.

Across the city, about 3,500 fewer units will be available, says [James Perry](#), head of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center.

"You're going to have a large number of people without housing," Perry says.

Most of New Orleans' public housing complexes were built after the [Great Depression](#) as a way to create jobs, and the structures deteriorated over the decades, according to the [Housing Authority of New Orleans](#). Neglect and the unsafe environs steadily drove residents away. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 further scattered residents.

After the storm, only 5,000 families lived within the city's 12,000 public housing units, according to housing authority statistics. City leaders decided to knock them down and partner with private developers to rebuild.

Tammy Cowart, 49, lived in one of the old complexes, the St. Bernard Housing Development. Drug dealers prowled the property and shootings were rampant, she says.

Today, Cowart lives in a roomy one-bedroom apartment on the same land, redeveloped and renamed Columbia Parc at the Bayou District. Crime has all but vanished and some of her neighbors are even New Orleans police officers, she says. There's bingo night at the clubhouse, movie showings and a van that pulls into the complex every other week carrying job listings.

"It's a whole new world," says Cowart, who pays \$72 a month for her apartment. "It's much better living" — but better only for those who get in.

Public housing units account for about one-third of the new developments, and many families who once lived in the projects will be left out, housing officials say. At 460-unit Harmony Oaks, for example, there's a 4,000-person waiting list.

Families who don't get into the complexes can apply for a federal voucher and live in market-priced apartments that accept them, says [David Gilmore](#), a private contractor hired by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to oversee the New Orleans Housing Authority. But there's also a waiting list for those: about 22,000 families.

Shrinking budgets and lack of federal support have led local housing authorities across the USA to partner with private developers and build mixed-income projects that are better for the community but lower the overall number of subsidized units, he says.

"You have a choice," Gilmore says. "Do you serve 800 families in deplorable conditions or 300 in much better conditions? I know what choice I would make."

Harmony Oaks once was the site of the C.J. Peete public housing complex, where crime rates routinely exceeded the city's.

Rapper Juvenile, who grew up in the projects, memorialized the complex's drug-and-violence culture in best-selling songs.

Today, the new complex not only houses hundreds of low-income families in much better surroundings but also has spawned new businesses nearby, creating jobs and improving the neighborhood, says Lauren Anderson, who runs Neighborhood Housing Services, a local non-profit housing agency.

But something needs to be done for all those who don't get in, she says.

"You have to look at how else you're going to meet the need," Anderson says, "because the need is not going away."