ABSTRACT

For many historians, the Housing Act of 1954 seems to mark a shift from a focus on the slum and its inhabitants to a new emphasis on saving the downtown and allowing the city to better compete with suburbs. Such a view suggests a shift from the social emphasis of slum clearance to the economic emphasis of making the city more attractive. But a closer look at the legislation suggests that in many ways it is the culmination of various efforts in the war against the slum. Neither the Housing Act of 1937 nor the Housing Act of 1949 created such a comprehensive program to eliminate the slum menace in American cities. Indeed, the report that most shaped the Housing Act of 1954, authored by the President’s Advisory Committee on Government Housing Policies and Programs, emphasized such a theme when it observed “the necessity for lifting our sights from piecemeal thrusts . . . to a broadside integrated campaign that stretches across the whole spread of urban blight from the earliest symptoms to the last stage of urban decay.”

This study first explores the comprehensive nature of the Housing Act of 1954, which introduced Urban Renewal and in some ways reunited “housers” and planners to a common purpose. Then it explains why the program had such little impact on the war against slums in select Southwestern cities such as Dallas, and Phoenix. Although traditional knowledge emphasizes the strong support urban renewal had from civic leaders and the business community, key components of the urban renewal program were never carried out in these Southwestern cities. The paper provides new insight on why this happened and argues that Cold War paranoia along with a citizen’s revolt against centralized decisions making and over reliance on experts were issues that thwarted urban renewal. And such issues reflected a changing public discourse that now viewed urban renewal as a threat to personal liberties rather than a remedy to the problems presented by the city’s slums. The rights of citizens now took precedence over the needs of the larger city. By exploring the fate of urban renewal in selected Southwestern cities, this study provides an additional chapter on the history of urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s by focusing an understudied region in the United States. Unlike many eastern and midwestern cities, Dallas and Phoenix experienced tremendous growth at this time and had a decidedly pro-growth local government, a more manageable size, and fewer actors than the Midwest or Eastern cities, thus allowing a closer examination of the urban renewal efforts. Finally, the paper’s emphasis on the changing discourse about the city, the slum, and urban renewal during the 1950s provides new insight to why the urban renewal program fell out of favor so quickly, not only in the Southwest but elsewhere in the nation.
The Housing Act of 1954, a Comprehensive Document

For many historians, the Housing Act of 1954 seems to mark a shift from a focus on the slum and its inhabitants to a new emphasis on saving the downtown and allowing the city to better compete with suburbs. Such a view suggests a shift from the social emphasis of slum clearance to the economic emphasis of making the city more attractive. But a closer look at the legislation suggests that it can also be seen as the culmination of various efforts in the war against the slum. Neither the Housing Act of 1937 nor the Housing Act of 1949 offered such a comprehensive program to eliminate the slum menace in American cities. Indeed, the report that most shaped the Housing Act of 1954, authored by the Presidents Advisory Committee on Government Housing Policies and Programs, emphasized “the necessity for lifting our sights from piecemeal thrusts . . . to a broadside integrated campaign that stretches across the whole spread of urban blight from the earliest symptoms to the last stage of urban decay.”

Although President Eisenhower had appointed many business leaders to the committee that shaped the bill, he also included housing reformer Ernest J. Bohn as well as James Rouse, former member of Baltimore’s Citizens Planning and Housing Association. Rouse had been one of the architects of the Baltimore Plan that emphasized rehabilitation as a tool in the war against slums. He chaired the Subcommittee on Urban Redevelopment, Rehabilitation, and Conversation while Bohn headed the Subcommittee on Housing for

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2 Recommendations on Government Housing Policies and Programs: A Report of the President’s Advisory Committee on Government Housing Policies and Programs (Washington: GP0, 1953).
Low-Income Families. Despite housing reformer fears that the final report might call for the elimination of public housing due to the leadership Albert M Cole, the Chair of Committee, it did not.¹

Instead the Committee created and Congress passed what one historian has called “an astonishingly bold document.”⁴ The Committee called for a “closely integrated, comprehensive” undertaking. “Programs for slum prevention, for rehabilitation of existing houses and neighborhoods, and for the demolition of worn out structures and areas” it continued “must advance along a broad unified front to accomplish the renewal of towns and cities.”⁵ It also warned that surrounding suburbs are often “poorly laid out, constructed, and serviced, and eventually show the symptoms of blight found in older cities, except for density of development.” Such urban decay and “disorganization of metropolitan regions” invited “national disaster” and warranted intervention with an emphasis on metropolitan integration and ordered development.⁶ This underscored an organic view of metropolitan areas that had been expressed by planners and others since the 1920s. Indeed, the Housing Act of 1954 accentuated the growing influence of planners in the housing debate. Indeed, the Housing Act of 1954 birthed the 701 Program that provided financial support for metropolitan planning agencies as well as for cities with a population of less than 25,000.⁷ Not only did the report call for metropolitan integration and ordered development, but it mandated sound plans for the cleared areas covering

² Mel Scott, American City Planning Since 1890 (Berkeley: University of California Press), 500.
⁴ Miles L. Colean, whose book Renewing Our Cities clearly influenced the committee, emphasized that the “urban renewal problem [was] primarily one of how to construct, maintain and rebuild the various parts of the urban structure so that the city as a whole remains at all times in a sound economic condition…” This emphasis on a more comprehensive strategy appeared to be an essential part of urban renewal. Miles L. Colean, Renewing Our Cities (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), 40.
⁵ Ibid., 131.
⁶ Scott, American City Planning, 502.
“land uses, density, and other factors contributing to good neighborhoods,” requiring they be “properly related to the growth and development of the city as a whole.”\textsuperscript{8} Urban rehabilitation was also about more than fixing up dwellings, according to the report, since it too should encourage “a standard of decency and order which will support the self-respect of people, adequately serve family life, and prevent physical surroundings which are unsafe or unhealthful or destroy community and citizen morale.”\textsuperscript{9} Indeed, James Rouse, a major influence in the final version of the Housing Act of 1954, thought the legislation was about

"making the city into a community of healthy neighborhoods where people want to live and raise families. . . . Urban renewal in order to be effective must go deep enough to reach the attitudes of the people, and to rehabilitate those attitudes along with the dwellings in which they live.” \textsuperscript{10}

The comprehensive nature of the Housing Act of 1954, which introduced Urban Renewal and in some ways reunited “housers” and planners to a common purpose, never achieved the goals outlined by the Committee on Government Housing Policies and Programs report.\textsuperscript{11} Nor was it that unique since master plans prepared for Southwestern cities like Dallas and San Antonio in the 1940s and early 1950s paid attention to the housing problem and called for the same strategies that Rouse had. Indeed, these plans not only recommended slum clearance and redevelopment but urged cities to embrace

\textsuperscript{8} Recommendations on Government Housing Policies and Programs, 203.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{10} Quoted in Howard Gillette, Jr., \textit{Civitas by Design: Building Better Communities, from the Garden City to the New Urbanis}, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 104.
rehabilitation and conservation to prevent the current housing stock from deteriorating to slum conditions. 12

Historians emphasize the failure of Urban Renewal to address the city’s social issues, an outcome of a program that was eventually hijacked by the business community and used for their own agenda. But the actual outcome differed from the broader vision of the Housing Act of 1954 and reflects a comprehensive approach that moved from slum clearance to a wide-ranging strategy that included rehabilitation and conservation too. The failure to implement the larger vision reminds us of a consistent problem concerning plans—securing their execution. Much attention in the literature has been given to the role of downtown interests in subverting the more comprehensive strategies of urban renewal, but in the Southwest another group played an equally important role in subverting the comprehensive intent of the Housing Act of 1954. Property owners and political conservatives not only rebelled against slum clearance but against housing code enforcement and other rehabilitation strategies. Indeed, a growing concern about governments’ (both federal and local) apparent disregard of citizen rights undermined the comprehensive nature of urban renewal and resulted in a very different outcome in Dallas and Phoenix than the Committee on Government Housing Policies and Program had advocated. Growing fears about public housing and the liberal use of eminent domain had a particular chilling affect on the reception of urban renewal programs in the Southwest.

The initial promises of urban renewal to eliminate slums and stop blight, problems that even booming Southwestern cities experienced, proved largely illusionary. Neither Dallas

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nor Phoenix, two of the most explosive Southwestern cities after World War II, fully participated in the government’s urban renewal program despite the fact that a substantial portion of the business community, along with housing reformers and planners, supported the programs. Both cities received planning grants but neither ever was allowed to carry their programs out. In part, their effort to undertake comprehensive urban renewal programs and public housing was thwarted by challenges from a shrill minority that questioned the power of government to dictate policies that threatened property ownership.

The Dallas Experience

Dallas civic leaders and housing advocates who had endorsed slum clearance and redevelopment in 1949 showed their willingness to participate in urban renewal even before Texas passed the necessary enabling legislation for that federal program. The urban renewal program required that each participant city develop a Workable Program that showed a readiness to prevent future slums. It required comprehensive plans, neighborhood analysis, adequate housing and building codes, proper administrative organization, local provisions for financial aid, adequate replacement housing, and provisions for community participation.13 Federal officials approved the city’s Workable Program on March 6, 1956.14 About the same time Phoenix also complied with the Workable Program mandates by passing its first ever housing code on July 3, 1956. Both cities seemed posed to begin federally sponsored urban renewal.

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Although Dallas had initiated rehabilitation for an area called Little Mexico just north of downtown and became the first city to qualify for Section 220 rehabilitation loans,\(^{15}\) it soon turned its sights on slum clearance after the state finally passed the necessary enabling legislation letting the city use eminent domain to clear and redevelop areas. Since 1944, when planner Harland Bartholomew had completed his report on the city’s housing problem for the Master Plan, civic leaders had targeted West Dallas as a top priority for slum clearance and urban redevelopment. Located across the Trinity River in a 9-mile unincorporated area, West Dallas’ population had quadrupled between 1940 and 1948 as it provided housing for over 25,000 whites, blacks and Mexican Americans. Only ten percent of West Dallas dwellings contained indoor plumbing. Tenants used outhouses and drank from shallow wells. Problems with inadequate water and sewage help explain the area’s disproportionately high number of typhoid, tuberculosis, and polio cases.\(^{16}\)

Ten days after the state finally passed the necessary enabling legislation on May 29, 1957, the, Dallas Citizens Council, the city’s most important civic organization, urged the city to undertake slum clearance and redevelopment of West Dallas as soon as possible. The city’s housing authority had already completed a 3,500 public housing unit project there by 1954 and shortly afterward city officials initiated rehabilitation measures. But they oconcluded that additional slum clearance seemed necessary to clear out housing too far gone for rehabilitation. Some of that land located closer to the river appeared more appropriate for industrial development.\(^ {17}\)

\(^{15}\) *Journal of Housing*, January 1957, p. 19.
\(^{17}\) *Dallas Morning News*, April 18, 1954 and January 9, 1958.
Meanwhile, the Central Business District Association pushed for the redevelopment and beautification of a four-block area near the city’s Memorial Auditorium bordering the south side of the Central Business District. The plan combined slum clearance, preservation and rehabilitation. The cleared area would be sold for the development of apartments. Such an area would not only make the setting around the auditorium more attractive but would stimulate the “upgrading of large sections of South Dallas that have been a thorn in our side almost equal to West Dallas for many years.”

The urban renewal and redevelopment plans for West Dallas were never realized, however. Led by the city’s charismatic and vocal Republican Congressman, Bruce Alger, the public uproar against the slum clearance and redevelopment plans of the urban renewal program was so intense it persuaded Mayor Robert L. Thornton to abandon federally financed slum clearance since it threatened to divide the city. Alger emphasized the unfairness of eminent domain that allowed the government to take land from one owner and turn it over to another for redevelopment. He also warned such programs contributed to higher taxes and an expanded government which meant a loss of local and personal freedom. Some characterized it as a rich man’s opportunity while others called it socialistic. One opponent contended the federal program would result it “forms, endless consultations and bureaucratic determination.” Realtor Lyn E. Davis argued that urban redevelopment projects not only drained the taxpayers but also warned that the relocation of slum dwellers would necessitate additional public housing, a program that had become increasingly controversial in Dallas. At a public hearing, the Dallas Morning News observed that the 150 attending were evenly divided but the opponents “whipped up more applause by invoking such slogans as ‘free enterprise’ and “God bless Dallas, God bless

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18 Ibid., March 16, 1958.
20 Ibid., January 9, 1959.
the South.” Maybe more telling, the paper noted that most persons advocating urban renewal at the hearing were mainly businessmen and lawyers while opponents came from a variety of classes.21

In the end, it was this citizen revolt against the urban redevelopment aspect of urban renewal that most shaped the program in Dallas. Mayor R. L. Thornton, fearful of the backlash against the liberal use of eminent domain, announced his own program, the West Dallas Revitalization Project that focused on rehabilitation and conversation strategies. But members of a Build America Better Committee visiting Dallas several years after the mayor’s plan was in place, concluded that the city’s slum rehabilitation program was “too slow in pace; to limited in extent; too light in impact.”22

The Phoenix Experience

As early as 1944, thanks to the efforts of the Phoenix Housing Authority, a bill had been introduced to the state legislature for enabling legislation that would allow the city to clear slums for use other than for public housing.23 Although that effort failed, later after Congress passed the Housing Act of 1949, PHA commissioner John F. Sullivan contacted Washington to secure model legislation for the necessary state enabling law that would allow urban redevelopment.24 Even before the state had approved such legislation several years later, the city’s Health Department surveyed a 163 block area southeast of downtown as a potential site for clearance and redevelopment.25 The state legislators’ delay in passing state enabling legislation to allow cities to participate in federally sponsored urban redevelopment until 1954 meant Phoenix officials had additional hoops

21 Ibid., June 24, 1958.
22 Ibid., January 24, 1962.
to jump through. As we have seen, Congress passed the Housing Act of 1954 that required a Workable Program for Community Improvement to promote a more comprehensive approach to the housing program and Phoenix readily complied.

By 1959, the city’s urban renewal department had submitted two applications for urban renewal money. The first request was to redevelop a 54-acre site southeast of the Central Business District called the East Jefferson Street Project. The area, initially zoned for light industry and commercial use, housed nearly 900 residents, including many Mexican Americans. Most of the dwelling units were labeled substandard and the mix of residential, industrial and commercial uses convinced planners that the area needed redevelopment. According to the Urban Renewal Commission, the area’s “extreme dilapidation and deterioration . . . as well as the crowded and unsanitary living conditions that existed there “ along with the “incompatible land uses” made it a slum. Plans called for clearance of the area, ”presently a social and economic liability,” and its redevelopment for commercial and industrial use because of its proximity to railroad tracks and a major thoroughfare. Such a redevelopment strategy made sense, according to planners, because the mixed land use provided a setting not conducive to good housing.26

The second proposed redevelopment project, submitted shortly after the first one, proved even more ambitious. The boundaries of the Southwest Project, as it was called because of its location from the downtown area, ran from 7th Avenue to the west side of 15th Avenue and from Harrison to Durango. It covered about 320 acres and although predominantly residential it also included a variety of non-residential uses. Except for the Mathew Henson public housing project, many of the dwellings had privies and were

without sewer connections. The proposal called for the relocation of more than 5,000 people, including many African Americans. Planners designated part of the site for commercial and industrial development use but recommended other parts of the site for residential use—from high density to single-family homes. The plan also proposed tourist facilities and a series of small parks for the residential areas. According to its authors, a heavily planted buffer strip would “be placed along the north side of Mohave Street to separate residential and industrial uses.” 

Before the city could proceed with its urban renewal program, it had to modify its housing code so that the Housing and Home Finance Agency would recertify its Workable Program. City council did that in April 7, 1959 and also authorized the city manager to hire four housing inspectors. Once that was done the federal government approved the city’s application for the two projects and gave it until December to accept the money and proceed.

Initially there appeared little visible opposition to the idea of urban redevelopment. Even the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, which opposed additional public housing at this time, suggested the city use Title 1 to clear its slums. But such a consensus disappeared in the late 1950s. Changes in the political mood of Phoenix that decade, including the rise of Barry Goldwater in national politics gave the Republican Party new life in the desert city and created tensions in the Charter Government Committee (CGC), the city’s dominant political organization. Those tensions helped diffuse that city’s single-minded

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focus on promoting city growth and development. Goldwater’s emergence as a national figure stemmed from his attack on creeping socialism along with his criticism of big government and the loss of local autonomy.\textsuperscript{30} For some in Phoenix by the late 1950s, those issues, more than the city’s efficient growth and development, were most important. Others began to see federal policies as a potential inhibitor of continued growth in the Southwest equating the New Deal regulatory ethos, in the words of one historian, “with red tape, retarded development, and economic stagnation.”\textsuperscript{31} Finally, a new preoccupation with citizen rights crept into the local political discourse and in a short time all this altered the future of slum clearance in the desert city.

Throughout the 1950s, the CGC-dominated council had consistently voted to allow federally sponsored slum clearance and redevelopment and had not been swayed by protesters and criticism of the program. Even conservative mayor Sam Mardian had advocated federal assistance in this matter and as late as May 1960 had declared that “I am in favor of it. It’s a program that is needed.”\textsuperscript{32} But the growing uproar against federally assisted slum clearance, especially from the city’s two newspapers owned by Indianapolis journal mogul Gene Pulliam, a powerful supporter of the CGC, cooled that body’s support of urban redevelopment.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} As early as 1956, the \textit{Journal of Housing}, mouthpiece of the National Organization of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO), expressed grave concern about “the accelerating trend toward federal domination of local public housing and renewal programs” “Local Autonomy,” \textit{Journal of Housing}, January 1956, cover.


\textsuperscript{33} Pulliam had a reputation for using the paper to crush causes and opponents with whom he disagreed. Peter Wiley and Robert Gottlieb, \textit{Empires in the Sun: The Rise of the New American West} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982), 167.
Similar arguments were made against slum clearance in Phoenix as they had in Dallas. These included an effort to avoid red tape and delay, the threat of eminent domain to property rights, fear of federal intrusion into local affairs and concern that additional public housing would be needed to house the uprooted.

As a result of this anti-renewal blitz, council postponed a public hearing on the urban renewal projects and instead appointed a 16-member committee composed of bankers, housing developers, businessmen and an attorney to decide if the city should use federal money for the slum clearing urban renewal projects. The committee voted against accepting federal money in November of 1960 arguing that privately financed renewal was possible by using tax allocation bonds. Council agreed with the first part of the recommendation and declined to take federal money but it never issued the bonds effectively killing the urban renewal projects.

Protests from opponents of federally supported slum clearance not only convinced city leaders to revoke their support of urban renewal and disband the urban renewal department, but they also bullied the city into revoking its housing code. As we have seen, since 1959 the city had a revised housing code that made it eligible for federally allocated urban renewal funds. Starting in October of that year, the Urban Renewal Commission began enforcement of that code in neighborhoods that had requested help. But as the expansion of code enforcement moved into other neighborhoods, resistance increased.

34 Phoenix Gazette, June 8, 1960; Brosnahan, “How Phoenix Lost Its Housing Code,” p. 7;
36 Ibid.
The election of the liberal John F. Kennedy to the Presidency in November of 1960 seemed to have intensified fear over government meddling at all levels, and encouraged attacks on the housing code at this time. A letter to the editor on January 1, 1961 appearing in a Phoenix newspaper challenged the constitutionality of the code, especially the part allowing inspectors to enter houses. Soon others joined in with criticism including the Pulliam controlled newspapers.\textsuperscript{37} Rev. Aubrey L. Moore, a 36-year-old pastor of the West Van Buren Southern Baptist church, emerged as a major figure in the protest by questioning the constitutionality of the code and arguing that it violated property rights and individual liberty. He was not alone however. Opponents established a new organization to protest the housing code and called it the Citizens for the Preservation of Property Rights. It was practically a who’s who of the extreme right in Phoenix and beyond. Marlin T. Phelps, a former Arizona Supreme Court justice and member of the national directorate of the John Birch Society emerged as one of the organization’s most vocal members. Others included the Dean of Students at Arizona State University, Weldon P. Shofstall, as well as Marlin Smith, former “Americanism” chair for the Elks, and Jo Hindman, West Coast Editor of the \textit{American Mercury} who did not even live in Phoenix. This group eventually launched the “Stay American Committee” a political organization that ran a slate of candidates in the city election. Rev. Moore, one of that body’s council candidates, also headed that organization. Effectively using the media, including a sympathetic press, the opponents of the housing code launched an all out assault on it and called for council to amend the objectionable

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., 8.
inspection provision of the code. While city council debated on how to respond to this request, opponents collected 10,477 signatures on a petition calling for a referendum on the housing code. Council could avoid the special election by voiding the entire act. Despite Mayor Mardian’s earlier support for a city housing code, he agreed with council’s decision on February 28, 1961, to repeal it.

The controversy over the housing code did not end with the repeal. The following October, lawmakers appointed a Citizens Housing Code Committee to develop a new, less objectionable housing code. Phoenix businessman Frederick Navmetz headed the 32-member citizens committee that helped city council write the code during a 16-month study. City council proceeded to pass unanimously that code on February 5, 1963 and a variety of civic organizations lined up to support it, as did leading representatives from the Republican and Democratic parties. But their emphasis on the importance of the code for the public good generally did not convince large numbers of residents, who feared that the code threatened their own freedoms. Led by many of the same people who had opposed the earlier housing code, a host of citizens expressed their opposition to the revised code arguing that it still remained an invasion of privacy and an attack to property rights. After council approved the code, Rev. Moore promised he would continue his fight.

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38 Ibid., pp. 7-8; Arizona Republic, October 30, 1966.
39 Arizona Republic, March 1, 1961. Opposition to housing codes was not simply a Phoenix phenomenon. In Houston, efforts to enforce a newly passed code led to the murder of a health department inspector and the wounding of two others who had posted notices ordering a slum landlord’s apartments to be vacated. The killer boasted that he was glad he did it since “They were trying to rob me. I was right in protecting my property.” “Houston Slum Landlord Shoots Inspectors Placarding Houses,” Journal of Housing, May 1954, p.167.
and secure its repeal. He was true to his word. By March 21, he had collected 16,203 signatures forcing a referendum on the housing code. 41

Rev. Aubrey Moore continued to lead the assault against the housing code and reiterated how its enforcement threatened people’s privacy. In addition, he warned the Northeast Optimist club that certain secretive powers were trying to get a housing code passed to secure urban renewal funds from the federal government. Despite a more organized and systematic campaign in support of the code, voters on November 8, 1966 rejected it by a vote of 67,329 to 59,144. Thirty South Phoenix precincts, the area most affected by a housing code, voted against the proposal as did the so-called wealthier county-club districts, fearful that such action marked the beginning of a more intrusive government and the slippery slope toward socialism. Opposition in the low-income areas of Phoenix might have stemmed from false reports by opponents of the bill that homeowners might lose their homes if the new housing code passed. The Arizona Republic confirmed that many low-income homeowners feared that “code enforcement officials would force their way into homes” and “that urban developers would bulldoze whole neighborhoods.” 42

Conclusion

Although such actions by Phoenix voters could be dismissed as a momentary hysteria influenced by the Cold War, inflamed by the Pulliam papers, and demonstrating the growing power of the radical right, they also reflected a direct challenge to the

41 Arizona Republic, March 22, 1963
42 Arizona Republic, March 1, 1970; December 12, 1967. As a result of the defeated referendum, Phoenix remained the only large city in the United States as the 1970s started that did not have a housing code. As a result, the city received no federal slum clearance and urban renewal money and was ineligible for the Model Cities Program.
establishment and the idea that a small group of leaders could best know what was good for the city as a whole. In many ways, this mirrored similar action in Dallas and undercut the claims that officials and experts worked for the good of the city. Concerns about property rights, an intrusive government and a suspicion that planners did not necessarily know what was best for the city resulted in this backlash against urban renewal and planning in both Southwestern cities. A changing public discourse that now questioned officials’ ability to act for the public interest became increasingly visible by the late 1950s and reflected a growing fragmentation of the city with individual needs replacing the public interest as the subject of public discourse. The comprehensive urban renewal programs promoted by the Housing Act of 1954, then, failed to receive the kind of political backing that was necessary for successful implementation. As a result, suspicion of intruding government, threatened property rights, along with other concerns reflected in a new public discourse in Southwestern cities thwarted the comprehensive approach of urban renewal and stalled the war against slums in the Southwest. Citizen revolts against urban renewal throughout the United States at this time suggest this was not merely a regional phenomena; rather it reflected a changing public discourse throughout the nation.

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