



## ***Just city: Growing up on the Upper West side when housing was a human right*, by Jennifer Baum**

*New York, NY, Empire State Editions, Fordham University Press, 2024*

**Julia Chaitin**

To cite this article: Julia Chaitin (04 Sep 2024): *Just city: Growing up on the Upper West side when housing was a human right*, by Jennifer Baum, Journal of Urban Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/07352166.2024.2393967](https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2393967)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2393967>



Published online: 04 Sep 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 20



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

***Just city: Growing up on the Upper West side when housing was a human right***, by Jennifer Baum, New York, NY, Empire State Editions, Fordham University Press, 2024

*Just City*, by the filmmaker turned writer, Jennifer Baum, is a highly interesting combination of a sociological analysis of the rise and fall of subsidized housing policy in New York during the 20th century, where decent housing was a civil right for *all* citizens, and not solely as a privilege for the rich, and her memoir of growing up in such housing, during the peak of the progressive housing movement. The book describes many of Baum's childhood and adolescent experiences—in the building, in the local schools and in the diverse and complex neighborhood—and the ways in which these encounters shaped her life and social-political ideology and understandings. Through her combined use of personal memories with historical documentation of the movement, interviews with people who grew up in subsidized housing and posts on social media, Baum presents an autoethnography (even though she does not use this term to describe her work) that highlights how the personal and the social-cultural-political interconnect. She interweaves documentation of the movement, the eventual privatization/gentrification of Manhattan's Upper West Side that brought this era to an end, with the multi-level and multi-generational impact that this movement had on the city, in general, and New Yorkers, specifically, who lived in these buildings.

*Just City* provides insights into the realm of American governmental housing policy, that has mainly extended privileges to the wealthy and systematically disregarded and oppressed people from the lower class and minority groups. She shows how a housing policy that favors the rich and harms the less-than-wealthy and poor, moreover, has a far-reaching, negative influence on additional aspects of urban life: it harms good inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations and class relations, it harms accessibility to good, public education, it narrows the development and sustainability of diverse cultural life, and it injures and destroys local businesses that are replaced by national chains.

By drawing on her childhood memories at the RNA house—one of the buildings in the Mitchell-Lama Housing Program (1955) whose “mission was to provide affordable rentals and cooperative apartments for thousands of middle-income New Yorkers” (p. 3)—Baum provides an insider's view into how this massive housing strategy (the program built 138,000 apartments) affected the residents that lived there. This program, created to prevent middle-income families from fleeing the city to the suburbs, and sensitively implemented as part of the West Side Urban Renewal Area, created a deep feeling of community and belonging among the residents. She takes us deep into her—and into her friends'—buildings: we learn about the setup of their apartments, the buildings' common spaces—the lobbies, the elevators, the concrete playgrounds and even the laundry room—which were the setting for meaningful life experiences. Moreover, since rent and costs were based on income, the residents of the buildings were diverse: there were Whites and Blacks, and people from different ethnicities and religions, which translated into multi-cultural and multi-racial encounters on a daily basis. As Baum notes, since segregation was deeply entrenched in New York, as it was throughout the rest of the U.S., the subsidized rentals and cooperatives provided people with experiences of diversity and community, which she views as crucial for the creation of a city/state/country that embraces and advances equality and human dignity.

I was drawn in from the first few pages: Baum writes in a straight-forward manner that invited me to continue reading, in order to learn “what happened” to her after her father's sudden death, her relations with her mother and sister, with childhood friends, and her own personal and professional development. On the whole, Baum succeeds in bringing together the documentation and research results with her personal experiences that present and discuss housing policy and law in an extremely reader-friendly fashion—not an easy task to accomplish.

There were two main places where I felt that the book could be improved. The first one is the photographs: while Baum provides here, too, a mixture of housing photographs and plans with photos from her childhood, I found most of them to be too small to carefully inspect. Moreover, not being a native New Yorker (I was born in Queens but moved to Detroit at the age of 2), I am not familiar enough with the city (though I, too, love it) to understand where the buildings are/were located that were the context of Baum's life. Therefore, I suggest eliminating some of the photos, enlarging all of them, and adding a map of Manhattan, in general, and the area of the Upper West Side, in particular. Secondly, at times, I got lost in all of the city, state and federal housing programs: there were many acronyms and titles and descriptions that remain (for me) somewhat entangled and unclear regarding who was (and is) in charge of what. Therefore, I suggest adding a glossary to help the reader locate and understand these entities and perhaps provide a visual overview of the different agencies and entities.

I see *Just City* as containing a wealth of information and new insights into the meaning of life for people who grew up in subsidized housing. As such, I believe that students, scholars and practitioners/professionals from the fields of anthropology, architecture, human geography, qualitative research, sociology, urban planning and urban studies, would benefit from reading the book. Moreover, given the writing style, I am certain that this book will also appeal to people, who in general, are interested in learning about life in Manhattan. Concerning its potential for impacting housing policy, I believe that decision-makers, from all levels of the U.S. (but not only) government, would benefit from reading this book. Moreover, they would benefit from meeting Baum, as well as others who grew up in subsidized and cooperative housing, to learn more about the deep necessity to provide the civil right of good housing for all—regardless of socioeconomic class, religious/ethnic background, physical and psychological health, family status, etc., etc.

Julia Chaitin  
*Sapir College (Emerita)*  
 [Jchaitin563@gmail.com](mailto:Jchaitin563@gmail.com)

© 2024 Urban Affairs Association  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2024.2393967>

