

Spatial Deconcentration in D.C.

We begin with a murder--that of Yulanda Ward in Washington, D.C. at 2 A.M., November 2, 1980. She was shot to death in what now appears as an assassination disguised as a street robbery. She was not robbed but her head was pushed over the edge of a car and shot; her three companions were robbed but not otherwise harmed. The weapon of murder appears to have been a .357 Magnum, not exactly a street-crime weapon. According to the Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund and other groups, her murder has been followed by either thorough police incompetence or a systematic cover-up and non-investigation. Moreover, the police have attempted to stop the independent investigation of her murder, even though "grapevine" inquiries report that she was murdered by "out of town" hired killers.

Why be concerned with this one murder? Who was Yulanda Ward? She was a 22 year old black community activist involved with the Washington, D.C. Rape Crisis Center, the Black United Front and other community groups, most notably the Citywide Housing Coalition. It is this last activity that could have led to her death, for she was a key activist in uncovering a U.S. government plan labelled "spatial deconcentration."

We reprint the following article on spatial deconcentration for two reasons. First, its information is valuable while its analysis begins to uncover many important political points about the organization of space under capitalism. Second, *if* Yulanda Ward was assassinated, we wish to alert others about it and urge them to assist the Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund in investigating the reasons for and perpetrators of the murder. In this way we hope that our increased vigilance will help stop any violent state repression of the type suspected in this case.

This article focusses on Washington, D.C. but the spatial deconcentration program is nationwide. The precise patterns and plans may vary from place to place, the essential operation is constant: to remove the treat posed to concentrated capital by concentrated masses of urban poor.

Yulanda Ward was murdered in D.C. In other cities local organizers for the Grassroots Unity Conference, of which Yulanda was a member and which has been combatting spatial deconcentration, have been attacked physically and verbally--burglaries, false arrests, threatening phone calls, verbal attacks by government officials. Nonetheless, and necessarily, the struggle continues.

SPATIAL DECONCENTRATION

by

The Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund

Housing activists in Washington have long battled with indifferent city officials, individual and organized, and the Metropolitan Washington Board of Trade as we sought to halt the displacement of masses of Blacks and other poor or working class minorities from the inner cities to the suburbs. Since 1972 campaigns have centered around rent control, condominium and hotel conversions, land speculators, and government bureaucracy. We clearly understood the process of gentrification (replacing poor inner city residents with middle and upper class "gentry"), and perceived the underlying economic basis on which the process rested with land speculators vigorous-

ly exploiting inner city neighborhoods. The displacement of Blacks and other minorities from the inner city was thought to be a product of the capitalist housing market, which provides housing only for those who can afford it. It was not until 1979 that we discovered and began to research a Federal government program called "spatial deconcentration", the hidden agenda behind the phenomenon of displacement. We discovered that displacement had an economic base to be sure, but more importantly, it was a means of social control--a means to break up large concentrations of Blacks and other inner city minorities from their communities. We have witnessed the forced evacuation of more than 50,000 poor inner city residents from the city each year and their subsequent replacement by an affluent class. We understood the role of the

government and its officials as it aided this process by creating laws that benefitted landlords and speculators while impoverishing tenants, but it wasn't until Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) documents began to surface using the words "housing mobility" and "fair housing" that we began to understand the magnitude of the masterplan to rid the city of its inner city poor and working classes. To fully understand this program we had to examine its history, the atmosphere out of which it developed, and its objectives. After this, we had concrete answers for why 50,000 poor people a year are being driven into Prince Georges, Montgomery, Prince William, and other suburban jurisdictions increasingly further away from the inner city, while central city neighborhoods are allowed to decay until speculators and middle class whites move in to take them over.

The riots that rocked American cities in the 1960's provoked lengthy governmental studies to investigate the riots and to make recommendations on what could be done to prevent civil disturbances by oppressed minorities. President Lyndon Johnson appointed a special commission, the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission) in 1968, composed of police and army specialists, FBI and CIA agents, and civilian consultants who worked at "thinktank" institutions like the Brookings Institute, the Rand Corporation, and the Urban Institute. The commissions, clearly connected with the Pentagon, the State Department, the CIA and the FBI, felt that large concentrations of Blacks in the inner cities represented a threat to the security of the United States and had to be removed from the cities immediately. Thus, the Kerner Commission's recommendation was that low income housing projects and the Blacks that lived in them, should be relocated from inner city neighborhoods to sites outside the central city. This would break up the concentrations of Blacks within the central city and thus disrupt their potential to erupt into violence in response to their economic conditions. The commission recommended that Blacks be systematically placed in outlying suburban counties and dispersed, so that the counties themselves remained white dominated, but the Blacks would be isolated and broken up, neutralizing their violent potential. The death this same year of Martin Luther King and the subsequent riots hastened the government's determination to control Black people in the inner city. The Federal government acted on the Commission's recommendations and

began, in 1969, a program called "spatial deconcentration" which to date, has received a Federal investment of over 5 billion dollars.

The enactment of the program required the coordination and cooperation of many government officials and capitalists, and due to the large sums of money being offered by the government, received widespread development and support. Metropolitan areas in America have witnessed how banks and insurance companies have red-lined central city neighborhoods while real estate speculators have milked what profits they could from these communities, further hastening the deterioration as thousands of housing units were demolished, abandoned, or taken off the market for any number of reasons. As the artificially created energy crisis worsened, the inner city became an attractive option to the middle class that fled to the suburbs in the 50's and 60's. Redevelopers and banks began redevelopment or "urban renewal" projects which have caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of inner city residents of Washington and other urban cities over the past ten years. Due to a housing shortage as artificially created as the energy crisis, the victims of urban renewal are forced to relocate in the suburbs, thereby eliminating their political presence within the central city.

The workings of the spatial deconcentration program are simple. First, the Blacks have to be driven out of a neighborhood and placed in suburban jurisdictions that are forced to take them, or co-opted with bribes of large Federal grants. In Washington D.C., in order to drive people out of a particular inner city neighborhood, the Federal government, along with the D.C. City Council and the Mayor, eliminated the housing in neighborhoods by giving landlords incentives to abandon their buildings, or remove rental units from the market by specially designed rent control and conversion laws. We witness this practice in action by the continuous loopholes found in all of our rent control legislation that allow landlords to abandon their buildings, convert them to condominiums, or generally remove them from the market. Second, the government closes down all of the public housing it has sponsored since the 1930's, thus forcing the displacement of the poor people living in them. For low or fixed income homeowners in the community, property taxes are escalated and housing services are decreased, thus also impoverishing this group of people. Once the housing is eliminated, then other services that support the community are cut back--the public transporta-

tion is rerouted or a subway is built that totally bypasses the community. Available schools for the children are closed down in the name of budget cuts; hospitals are relocated to 'improve health delivery systems'; jobs are taken away as businesses are offered inducements to relocate in other areas. The entire community is destabilized to force the people of that community to want to move as their lifestyle deteriorates. Yet, poor people can't just pick up and move just because a neighborhood has gone down. Moving takes money, and this is where the government plays its most visible role.

In 1974 Congress enacted the Housing and Community Development Act, which revamped the Revenue Sharing and Urban Renewal programs. One section of the Act specifies that one of its main purposes is "spatial deconcentration" of impacted neighborhoods in the inner cities. The next year, the Federal subsidy program, Section 8, was enacted by Congress. The creator of the Section 8 program was a civilian member of the Kerner Commission called Anthony Downs who also developed the entire theory of spatial deconcentration for social control in his 1973 book entitled *Opening Up the Suburbs*, Section 8 was specifically aimed at the poorest of the poor and was a rent subsidy program that allows tenants to pay a maximum of 25% of their monthly income for rent with the government picking up the tab for the rest. Of course, like most subsidies, the real estate interests are guaranteed profits while the tenants have to wait on long waiting lists to register for the privilege of guaranteeing these profits for landlords.

So when poor people are forced into a position of having to move, they are granted Section 8 certificates which appear to ease the burden of not having a place to stay. However, the catch to the Section 8 program is that by using it, you no longer have a choice in where you can live. The new "housing mobility" created through Federal subsidies actually eliminated freedom of housing choice because at the same time HUD is giving Section 8 certificates to the suburbs, they claim there is not enough money available to keep people in D.C. They will give Section 8 certificates to families in D.C. but allow them to use them only in specifically selected suburban counties, not allowing the people to stay in D.C. to be close to the jobs, the Metro, the culture or the human services. This forces them out to the suburbs where there is no way to join together to struggle. Of course, the people become even more impoverished as

welfare assistance programs, like AFDC, provide even less income than allotted in D.C. This entire process paves the way for the upper classes to replace poor people in inner city communities, under the guise of increasing the tax base of the city to provide more services to the poor residents of the city. The whole program of physically moving the poor and working class population out of D.C. which is actually spatial deconcentration is disguised as a "Fair Housing Program" called Areawide Housing Opportunities Program (AHOP). Simply put, you disperse the concentrations of Black and poor people in D.C. where they could erupt into a dangerous force to challenge the ruling class of the city and form a political base to threaten indifferent and sold-out officials. The program creates small pockets of poor people, isolated in the suburbs, available to work when the economy needs them, but separated and alienated, like the South African Blacks who are forced to live in *Bantustans* that surround rich white settler cities.

The spatial deconcentration program has played a major role in the transformation of Washington, D.C. from a riot-torn, abandoned inner city to a fast growing executives' paradise. Since Washington's primary industry has always been the Federal government, now more so than ever, a large executive class is being drawn into Washington by attractive real estate, the energy crisis, and the cooperation of Federal and city officials. Meanwhile, unemployment for the poor and working class escalates; the few of them who receive training and jobs are limited to clerical or blue collar jobs with little or no upward mobility. Fewer and fewer jobs are available to the poor in the inner city, and to counter the effects of the program, the city government must create job programs (designed to fail) in order to pacify the remaining population. In addition, we have a city which is experiencing record-breaking commercial construction (office buildings, the Civic Center, etc.) yet has a critical shortage in that basic human necessity, shelter. This condition was created by the fact that Washington was one of the original cities targeted for implementing the spatial deconcentration program in 1969. The program has been operating here for eleven years and is the concrete basis for the advanced stage of displacement we are experiencing.

The implementation of the spatial deconcentration program for the Washington area (AHOP) required the authority and financing of the Federal government, the

participation of private industry, and the cooperation of local governing bodies. The application of the program to Washington was undertaken by the Washington Council of Governments (WashCog) which is the inter-jurisdictional body for the metropolitan area, composed of elected officials from Washington, Virginia and Maryland and, again, consultants from thinktanks like the Brookings Institute and the Urban Institute. WashCOG began administration of the program by enlisting the support of the District officials to create the inner city conditions that would force people to move. These officials ensured that neighborhoods that were already devastated by the riots were left to decay and support services were cut. Next, WashCOG had to persuade suburban officials to accept the flow of Blacks who would be forced into their communities. Most of the persuasion was accomplished through Federal bribes in the form of Community Development monies. The impetus for the persuasion come with the Fair Housing Laws passed by Congress. They ensured that under the mask of "integration" white suburban neighborhoods would have to accept poor Blacks from the inner city. Suburban communities were also granted other bonuses as they received more public transportation (the Metro), increased social services (from the Federal payments) and were assured that there would always be white dominance in the suburbs since the Blacks would be dispersed over large areas. Prince Georges' county was the first area country to buy into the program. We now see the county government moving to halt the flood of Blacks into the county, fearing Black dominance.

The next phase of the program requires the persuading of the poor people in the inner city that life is better in the suburbs. The Section 8 certificates now come into play, as housing counselors, usually springing from government-sponsored community groups, urge people to relocate wherever their Section 8 certificate placed them, which is always in the suburbs. Apparent community groups, like Metropolitan Washington Planning and Housing Association, support the objectives of the program by assisting tenants in obtaining Section 8 certificates, and omitting to warn them of their loss of housing choice. In fact, MWPHA sponsored a HUD workshop entitled "Increasing Housing Opportunities in the Suburbs" in May 1980. The hidden punch line to the workshop was that to increase housing opportunities in the suburbs, you must first decrease them in the

city, which is the essence of spatial deconcentration. The government has made increasingly larger grants available to train community housing organizers, so that they may learn to properly administer Section 8 programs. Many of the grassroots housing groups in Washington are dependent on Section 8 contracts for their survival, and will refuse to recognize and discontinue the role they play in the program.

The monetary benefactors of the spatial deconcentration program are the real estate interests. Land values in the inner city skyrocketed, while suburban developers made tremendous profits from developing the communities which will house the Blacks being driven out. Owners of buildings who have Section 8 tenants are guaranteed profits that will be paid by the Federal government, and usually can obtain loans for renovation from the government at interest rates 5-8% lower than the regular market. For example, a large, sprawling apartment complex in Silver Spring, Montgomery County, Maryland recently accepted a large number of Section 8 tenants from Washington D.C. In return, the owners of the property were granted large loans to renovate the property. The owners only have to allow Section 8 tenants to stay in the building for five years. After that, they can convert to condominium, luxury apartments, or whatever they want, because they've tripled the value of the property with the renovations paid for by the government. However, after the five years are up, the poor tenants who moved into the building will have to move again. They will not ultimately benefit from the renovations, and furthermore, will be forced even further away from the inner city.

An investigation is proceeding into Yulanda Ward's death. Assistance, inquiries and contributions to the investigation should be addressed to:

*The Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund
P.O. Box 21005
Washington, D.C. 20009*

