BOOK REVIEW: Not in my Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City

Contributed by:
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By Antero Pietila (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee 2010)

The history of any town or city is multi-faceted. Economics, sociology, geography and culture all play their part in forming the places where people live. In “Not in my Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City,” former Sun reporter and editor Antero Pietila focuses in on one facet of Baltimore’s history: namely, how housing patterns have evolved in Baltimore City along racial and religious lines over the last hundred years.
Today, Baltimore’s population is majority Black, with a few pockets of Whites and other ethnicities, and a small number of mixed neighborhoods. One hundred years ago, the situation was reversed, with Whites forming the large majority of the city’s residents. Within the White population, Jews and Gentiles, and separate groupings within, tended to congregate in certain neighborhoods, which have shifted over time.

In tracing these changes, Pietila focuses on how the housing market has been shaped and distorted by various factors. From the point of view of Blacks, at the beginning of the 20th century it was virtually impossible to buy housing outside of narrow areas of Baltimore city. The purchase by a Black attorney of a building at 1834 McCulloh Street in 1910 caused an uproar, with legislation passed by the City Council forbidding the purchase by Blacks of properties in White areas. Restrictive covenants in deeds to property further barred the way for even wealthy Blacks to purchase a house in much of the city.

In the 1940s, as the Black population increased, and Whites began moving to the suburbs in greater numbers, the pace of racial change in neighborhoods started to quicken. This process was aided by the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1948 decision in the case of Shelley v. Kraemer, which found that racially restrictive covenants on properties were unenforceable.

The process by which Blacks moved into formerly white neighborhoods followed an overall pattern. A pioneering Black family would typically enter into a contract with a “middle man” to rent or purchase a home on a white block. The terms of these contracts were unfavorable, as it was impossible for most Blacks to obtain loans from banks. In fact, the federal government’s official policies from the 1930s through the late 1960s actively discouraged the provision of loans to Blacks, echoing eugenicist theories that Blacks were an inferior race.

Whites living on a block with a Black family would begin to sell their houses, actively encouraged by “blockbusters” looking to purchase houses for cheap prices from Whites and sell them for high prices to Blacks. Blockbusters profited both off of the bigotry of Whites, whose fear led them to sell at panic level prices, and off of the lack of financial alternatives for Blacks, which caused them to pay onerous amounts for their housing.

With a journalist’s eye for detail, Pietila describes many colorful characters involved in the real estate scene, including politicians, civic leaders, bureaucrats, homeowners, developers and agents. For local activists, the book provides food for thought about an issue that strikes close to home, if you will forgive the pun. Housing is a topic that is recognized as very important, with great disparities among classes and along racial and ethnic lines. Yet the history behind our present housing situation in Baltimore is not widely known among younger generations.

At the same time, Pietila’s book does not consider alternatives to housing markets and standard government housing programs, which is a limitation. For example, community land trusts are one practical approach to provide affordable, stable housing, which is being applied in Northwest Baltimore. In a larger framework, housing should be approached not as a commodity, but as a human right, in the context of broader political, cultural, environmental, and economic “rights to the city.”

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