



The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America

By Richard Rothstein

Review by Shireen Miles

Intrigued by an interview with the author on NPR, I ordered two copies of this book, one for myself, and one as a gift for Mayor Steinberg, because I know that economic justice and housing policy are among his highest priorities.

If you're willing to confront the history of how municipalities throughout the US, along with government entities such as the federal Housing and Urban Development agency, the Public Works Administration, lending institutions, law enforcement and the courts (and all the rest of us, who allowed this to happen) deliberately created and maintained segregated housing, this book is an important read and I recommend it.

I knew about 'red-lining,' the practice of coding neighborhoods by their racial composition for the purpose of determining value and 'risk' to lenders, but Rothstein's book took it to another level. As a local activist addressing homelessness and housing policy, and as someone who considers herself relatively well-versed in the dynamics of race and poverty, this book answered questions that from my privileged vantage point, it had never occurred to me to ask. The powerful human stories make the book very readable. In the examples he shares, many of which were from California, including the San Francisco Bay Area, the author forced me to divest myself of the assumption that the worst examples of housing discrimination exist in major urban areas or in the South.

While the government did its best to accommodate the sudden influx of white workers in the shipyards of Richmond, California, most of their African-Americans co-workers were forced to live in poorly-constructed temporary housing in North Richmond, in cardboard shacks, tents, barns or to live far from the shipyards. Did you know, for example, that the housing boom, constructing homes for veterans post-World War II was white-only? African-American veterans were precluded from buying the homes. Neither did they qualify for the subsidies and low-interest housing loans associated with those developments, forcing them to pay for substandard housing in already-depressed areas at exorbitant prices. This ban even extended to the African-American owners of the construction firms which built the housing.

Examples are given of early church activism to confront these segregationist policies, but most of these efforts were inadequate in the face of the powerful institutional forces which benefited from housing segregation.

The last chapter presents some cautiously hopeful remedies for our current situation, which gives us ample evidence that discriminatory policies leave a long-lasting legacy benefitting no one.