

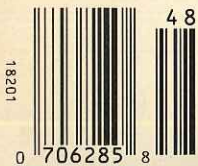
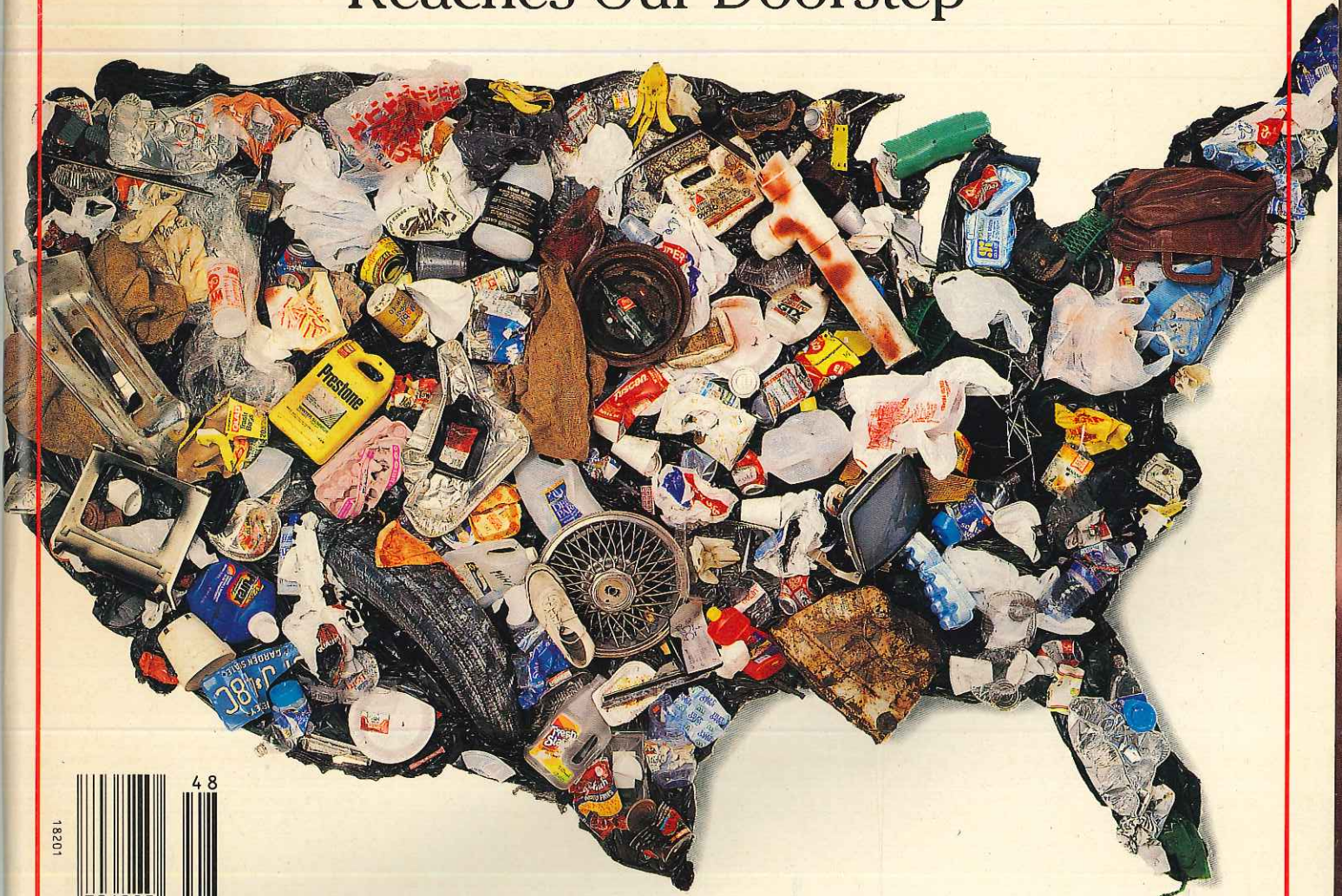
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# Newsweek

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18201



# When Tenants Take Charge

Kemp's housing plan works—but only up to a point



RICK FRIEDMAN—BLACK STAR

**Tearing down walls:** At the Bromley-Heath public-housing development in Boston

As a contender for the Republican presidential nomination last year, Jack Kemp preached Reaganism with a heart. With low taxes and other policies to stimulate private enterprise, he argued, conservatives could achieve portions of the liberal social agenda. As George Bush's secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Kemp now has a chance to see if his caring conservatism will work. His first major initiative, unveiled by Bush earlier this month, is a \$4.2 billion package of housing programs held together by an unusual—and some experts say dubious—linchpin: tenant management and eventual ownership of public and low-income housing. Instituted by the Thatcher government in Britain, the ideas have been put into practice here only in isolated cases. But the results suggest that tenant managers can help improve housing projects that officials have written off.

The longest-running success story is in Boston. Bromley-Heath was all but forgotten by the Boston Housing Authority in the late 1960s. Its 37 low-rise buildings, sprawled across the city's crime- and drug-ridden Jamaica Plain section, had 4,000 broken windows, two broken boilers and leaky roofs everywhere. Mildred Hailey, who has lived in the development for 35 years, says organizing a tenant manage-

ment council wasn't an option, it was an imperative. "Our becoming involved was for survival," says Hailey. It took her three years to convince other residents that they could do a better job running Bromley-Heath than the housing authority. By 1973 they had assumed all operations at the project except the selection of tenants. Today Bromley-Heath still has problems with crime and drug use. But there is also a day-care center, job training, a private security force and free medical care donated by local hospitals.

Other successes follow the Bromley-Heath model: small groups with a will to change both the system and the attitude of their neighbors. In 1983 Irene Johnson and a tenant group at the LeClaire Courts project in southwest Chicago began winning private grants to enroll in management-training classes. Last spring the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) gave Johnson's group full responsibility for LeClaire's \$1.5 million annual budget. But winning over the CHA was only part of the struggle. Most of the 3,500 tenants in LeClaire's dismal brick-and-wood low-rises were cynical about the changeover. "When we told them we were going to get them a new Laundromat, they looked at me and said, 'Get out of my face,'" Johnson says. But soon the tenant group had a private funding for a new

coin-op laundry and a young tenant trained to repair breakdowns. Johnson's group is also developing a project to send tenants out to the burgeoning suburban job market. "Now instead of 'Get out of my face,' I'm seeing a change in people's faces," Johnson says.

Critics say such accounts are inspiring but misleading. While no one objects to the empowerment of public-housing dwellers, they say tenant management and home ownership are no answers to the severe shortage of low-income housing. Reagan-era cuts, gentrification and soaring demand (an estimated 900,000 families on waiting lists for the 1.4 million occupied units of public housing) have pushed the situation to a crisis. Some housing advocates say Kemp's plan smacks of abandonment. "What it really represents is us throwing up our hands nihilistically and saying to poor people, 'Here, this is unmanageable. You take it over,'" says Jim Fuerst, professor of social-welfare policy at Loyola University and a former CHA administrator.

**Physical decay:** Some pockets of success, like the much-touted Kenilworth-Parkside development in Washington, D.C., have benefited from personal attention of officials like Kemp and may be difficult to duplicate on a mass scale. Many public housing projects are simply too far gone—awash in drugs, gangs and physical decay—for tenant managers to do much good. Despite Bromley-Heath's 16-year success, no other Boston housing projects have been converted to resident control (although officials are currently attempting to organize a second development). While Kemp views tenant management as a precursor to private ownership, some say that is an even more distant prospect for a population barely subsisting in tenancy. "This romantic notion of homeownership is a cruel hoax on the poor," says Bob McKay, executive director of the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities. Mildred Hailey says the tenant council at Bromley-Heath hasn't even considered the possibility, nor does she even regard it as a legitimate goal. Her priority: "To get every unit rehabilitated and occupied."

Despite the widespread misgivings, Kemp is pushing ahead. As many as 60 tenant management groups are in training across the country. An ambitious politician who covets a shot at the White House in 1996, Kemp is staking a good chunk of his political future on the concept's success. "It will tear down the walls that come between people and their self-respect," he told reporters. But Kemp may find those walls a little higher and more impenetrable than he once thought.

BILL TURQUE with TIM PADGETT in Chicago,  
TODD BARRETT in Boston and  
CLARA BINGHAM in Washington