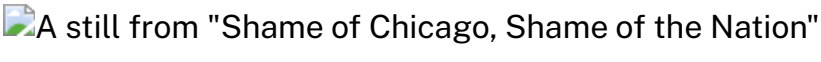
Residential Real Estate

Filmmakers document Chicago as historic epicenter of racist housing practices

By Dennis Rodkin



Credit: "Shame of Chicago, Shame of the Nation"

A still from "Shame of Chicago, Shame of the Nation" showing authorities lined up to serve eviction notices to tenants who refused to pay unjust rent payments.

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In the 20th century, Chicago was an epicenter of the nation's racist housing practices, a dark chapter with devastating modern-day ramifications, all of which a new documentary series lays out in painstaking detail.

In the four-part "Shame of Chicago, Shame of the Nation," filmmakers Bruce Orenstein and Chris L. Jenkins trace a direct line from white Chicagoans using everything from bombs to legal documents to prevent African-Americans from living in their neighborhoods, through entrenched segregation and into the modern day's wide chasm between Black and white household wealth.

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Group brings details of Chicago's racist housing history to light

In Washington Park, 100,000 red tulips mark sites of redlining

“It gives people a chance to see how what’s happening in Chicago today comes from what was happening then,” said Orenstein, an Albany Park native and lecturer at Duke University on the art of the moving image.

In the series, which premieres April 18 on WTTW-Channel 11, the filmmakers also detail how Chicago exported its race-based practices to cities around the country.

“It’s all coordinated and coming from Chicago,” Jenkins said. Race-based covenants that prohibited selling a property to Black people and often to Jewish and Asian people, appraisal standards that downgraded property values in areas where Black households were present, redlining that prevented mortgage lending in Black neighborhoods — all had their origin all or in part here.

The earliest evidence of enforced segregation in Chicago that the filmmakers document is from 1908, when white property owners in Hyde Park launched a campaign to push out any Black residents and businesses. “We don’t know if this is the first in the country,” Orenstein said, “but it’s one of the first.”

Wealthy homeowners in Hyde Park “really laid down the gauntlet,” Orenstein said, “and the real estate industry responded with this attitude that you should not introduce ‘inharmonious’ elements into a neighborhood.” The tools of enforcement included kicking out of the real estate board any white real estate professionals who knowingly were involved in transactions where Black people bought in white neighborhoods.

These incidents were not contained within the city limits. Orenstein says Wilmette property owners “saw what Hyde Park did and copied it.” The documentary also covers the bombing of Black chemist Percy Julian’s new home in Oak Park in 1951. The same year, when a Black couple moved from Woodlawn to an apartment in all-white Cicero, the National Guard had to be called in after a crowd gathered to throw rocks and flaming debris onto the roof of the 20-unit building.

Social Darwinism, a belief system that gave the so-called Negro race an inferior rank on a hierarchy of races, informed the work of the Chicagoans who devised the system of appraising real estate, the “protective associations” that lobbied their neighbors to place racially exclusive covenants over whole neighborhoods and other tools of segregation, Jenkins said.

“One thing that is eye-opening is the deliberate coordination of these policies, in Chicago and across the country,” Jenkins said. After a 1917 U.S. Supreme Court decision struck down apartheid-like laws in Baltimore, St. Louis and other cities that had attempted to create Black-only and white-only zones, “those cities looked to Chicago to see how it was getting this done,” Jenkins said.

Fill-in-the-blank documents creating racial covenants and other Chicago-born tools of segregation "were sent out to the real estate boards and (other) groups all over the country" by an early precursor of the Chicago-based National Association of Realtors, Jenkins said.

In 2020, the National Association of Realtors issued an apology for "being on the wrong side of history." In and near Chicago, there have been many other efforts to make amends for the error of racist housing practices, including a volunteer group that is scouring county land records to find every property that had racial covenants before the Supreme Court ruled them illegal in 1948, passage of a state law in 2021 that gives counties authority to black out any covenants that remain on property documents, even though they're unenforceable, and markers placed in front of individual homes where Black residents were denied homeownership through the deceitful practice of contract buying.

There's even an artist's planting of thousands of red tulips in the footprints of buildings that fell into decay because of redlining and were demolished.

Nevertheless, the most ghastly scar that remains from the era is the enormous difference in home values and neighborhood conditions between places where Black people were "permitted" to live then and places where they were excluded.

"The first step toward healing and repair," Orenstein said, "is facing up to and confronting the truth. We open that door."

By **Dennis Rodkin**

Dennis Rodkin is a senior reporter covering residential real estate for Crain's Chicago Business. He joined Crain's in 2014 and has been covering real estate in Chicago since 1991.

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