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Florida International University
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Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Abstract

Prefabricated Promise: Operation Breakthrough and the Reconfiguration of U.S. Federal Housing Policy,
1968-1974

by

Bobbie J. Walker

Operation Breakthrough kicked off weeks before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, stalled out in the shadow of the Watergate scandal, and in between sponsored the development and construction of nearly 3,000 houses designed by, among others, fruit-jar companies and aluminum producers. The program was the brainchild of HUD Secretary George Romney who promised homes rolling off assembly lines like automobiles. Existing work on Operation Breakthrough analyzes Romney's promise, the design quality of the homes, or one slice of the political economy of housing in the 1970s. Building on this prior work, *Prefabricated Promise* examines Breakthrough from announcement to demise, zooming in on a single city to advance three claims. First, Breakthrough's supposed novelty masked continuity with prior federal housing interventions. Second, opposition from Indianapolis residents, fueled by local newspapers and city-county elected officials, stymied federal and corporate largesse for so long that HUD abandoned Breakthrough Indianapolis, choosing instead to sell the entire community to a private company. My third claim is that one city's experience with a relatively obscure federal housing program had lasting national implications. The program's most durable effect on housing developed from what I call the "administrative middle." David Meeker, a deputy mayor from Indiana, took lessons he learned about balancing federal and local actors to HUD. There he shaped the rules of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 and subsequently steered a forty-year expansion of local control and simultaneous retreat of federal oversight over public investment.

Date: November 5, 2026

Time: 1:00 pm

Place: SIPA II, 301

Zoom: <https://fiu.zoom.us/j/7628155322>

Department: History

Major Professor: Dr. Jessica Adler