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## MHN Interview: NYU's Furman Center's Surprising Data on Subsidized Housing

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*By Jessica Fiur, News Editor*

New York—New York University's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy was recently awarded the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. This award, which came with a \$1 million grant for the research center, recognizes the Furman Center's achievement in providing objective, policy-related research to address the challenges facing neighborhoods in New York City and in the United States.

*MHN* interviewed Furman Center co-director Ingrid Gould Ellen on the Furman Center and what surprising data their research revealed about subsidized housing.

**MHN:** Describe the Furman Center's mission.

**Gould Ellen:** We are based in a university, so we are an academic research center, but we are dedicated to studying public policy issues—especially urban policy. We have four areas of particular research interest. One is in subsidized housing, another is in land-use regulations, a third is in housing finance and another is neighborhood change. The key is that we really are interested in doing research that makes both an academic contribution but also speaks to policy.

**MHN: Congratulations on your recent MacArthur Award win. What do you think led to this award?**

**Gould Ellen:** Thank you! I think we won the award for being able to walk this line between producing high-quality social research, but also engaging in real-world policy dialogue. We do a lot of work—in addition to our research, we’re also committed to translating our research when translation is necessary, writing policy briefs that can be accessible to a broader audience, and we have events in which we invite leading practitioners and policy makers in current issues on policy. We are non-partisan. We’re not an advocacy group, and so I think that’s an unusual space. Obviously we’re also very committed to students. We like to think that while we’re doing all of this, we’re also helping to train the next generation of leaders in affordable housing.

**MHN: What are some of the biggest issues right now in terms of multifamily?**

**Gould Ellen:** We’ve done a lot of work studying the neighborhood impacts of subsidized housing, so obviously there’s a lot of concern that community residents have about affordable housing being built in their communities, but there really isn’t much empirical work showing what happens—a lot of that is just based on fears and worries about what’s going to happen—that property values are going to fall, that crime is going to increase—so we did a series of studies and vigorously tested what happens to communities when subsidized housing is built. We found that contrary to expectations, subsidized housing, at least in New York City, could help to revitalize communities.

**MHN: How does subsidized housing revitalize a community?**

**Gould Ellen:** Well, you’re bringing in nice, new housing, and often it’s replacing blighted buildings and vacant lots, and you’re building neighborhoods and bringing in stable tenants. We found that it was very good for a community. Subsidized housing, when done well, isn’t going to undermine communities, and it has the potential to be a source of improvement. Our image of subsidized housing—and what we fear—is that it’s going to come in and destroy neighborhoods, and that’s not what we have found. A lot of the housing that we’re looking at is often low income housing tax credit development, which is smaller scale than the traditional large-scale public housing developments, so that’s the other piece. There’s some level of income mixing in these developments, and I think all that helps to make these apartments naturally woven in to the community. And I think

the architecture is at scale with the rest of the community. When you can get those things right, it's not going to undermine communities, and it may well, in some circumstances, improve them.

#### **MHN: What are some of the other projects you've been working on?**

**Gould Ellen:** We have a large project called the Subsidized Housing Information Project. We've basically created a database of all the privately owned, but subsidized, housing units in New York City. There was no single source of information for all these developments, so we created this database that we hope will be a tool for policy makers that are interested in preserving this resource for New Yorkers. It will allow people to target their preservation resources for the developments most at risk.

We're also starting some work on how landlords make decisions about investing in maintenance and financing those investments. We have a lot of indicators that track the quality of buildings in neighborhoods in New York City. One of the things we hope to do—and MacArthur gave us this grant to help us expand our national work and help us do more to speak to national issues—is provide forums for national policy makers to debate issues rather than just city policy makers.

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