

Elizabeth Virrick and the “Concrete Monsters”: Housing Reform in Postwar Miami

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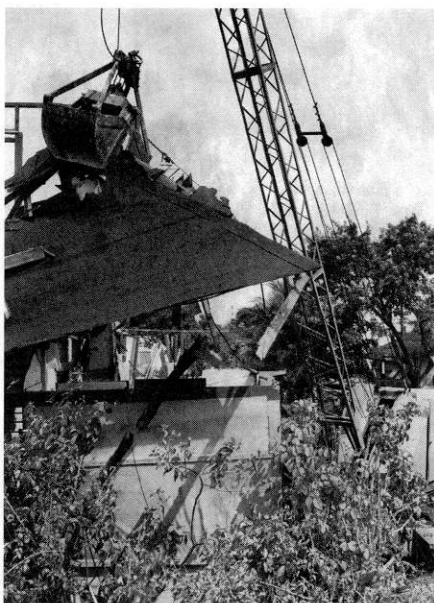
To the casual visitor, postwar Miami had all the appearances of a dreamlike tropical paradise. This glitzy resort capital of the nation seemed perpetually bathed in warm sunshine and gentle ocean breezes, an urban landscape buried in lush foliage, blooming hibiscus, and bougainvillea, and tall, stately palms. Its beautiful beaches, fishing grounds, golf courses, country clubs, racetracks, and illegal gambling casinos attracted the rich and famous each winter season. Endless promotional extravaganzas, intense national media attention, and the Miami-based popular television shows of Arthur Godfrey and Jackie Gleason all kept the public spotlight focused on the tropical resort image of this emerging Sunbelt city well into the 1950s and after.

But there was trouble in this winter paradise, trouble stemming from Miami's “Deep South” racial divide. From Miami's origins in the 1890s,



Elizabeth Virrick in an undated photograph.
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the city's African American population had been subjected to second-class citizenship, denied equal educational and job opportunities, and confined residentially to a few segregated areas of mostly run-down rental housing controlled by politically powerful slumlords. As Miami Mayor Perrine Palmer put in a 1947 speech on Miami's low-cost housing needs, "Even though Miami is the youngest of the metropolitan cities, it is already rotting at the core, like the older ones."¹ It was a shocking admission, coming from the leading public official of America's number one tourist and recreational playground. At the time, Mayor Palmer was pushing for Congressional passage of the hotly debated Taft-Ellender-Wagner bill, which provided federal funds for slum clearance, public housing, and urban redevelopment. Congress eventually approved the legislation, known as the federal Housing Act



In the early 1950s, the City of Miami began razing substandard dwellings, such as this one, in its black neighborhoods.

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of 1949, but its full implementation remained problematic, especially in southern cities such as Miami.

In the late 1940s, Mayor Palmer and other Miami advocates of public housing and urban redevelopment found an unlikely ally in a citizen's movement for housing reform led by a diminutive, middle-class, middle-aged white woman named Elizabeth Virrick. By the early 1950s, when she had become Miami's "number one slum fighter," community organizer, and housing advocate, Virrick was a force to be reckoned with in the city's highly contested political landscape. Throughout the postwar era, she fought the slumlords

and the speculative builders who were squeezing tremendous profits from what Virrick called the "concrete monsters"—the newly built two- and three-story apartments that densely covered Miami's inner-city

Black ghetto. She challenged the implementation of urban renewal programs that benefited landowners and developers but ignored low-income housing needs. In the late 1950s and 1960s, when inner-city expressways threatened to decimate Miami's Black neighborhoods, Virrick launched a virtual one-woman anti-freeway movement. By the 1960s, Virrick was deeply involved in "Great Society" fair housing, job opportunity, and social service programs. Most Miamians generally agreed that for their city, Virrick "fired the first shots in the war on poverty."² Urban change is generally a slow and tedious process, but through her relentless social activism over four decades, Virrick demonstrated that human agency could make a difference in urban policy, municipal politics, and community life.

A native of Winchester, Kentucky, and the daughter of an attorney, Elizabeth Landsberg was born in 1897. She attended the University of Wisconsin and then Columbia University in New York City, where she studied architecture but never graduated. At Columbia she met Vladimir E. Virrick, a young architect from Russia who had been serving in the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C. when the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917. He never returned to his native country and soon went on to the Columbia University School of Architecture. The Virricks married in 1925 and traveled to Miami on their honeymoon. At the time, Miami and Miami Beach were in the midst of the astonishing but short-lived South Florida real estate and housing boom. It must have seemed a promising time and place for a young architect to begin building a professional career, and the Virricks never left South Florida. Vladimir established an architectural practice in Miami, while Elizabeth kept house, raised a daughter, and for several years ran a stenography business in Miami Beach. The family lived in Haiti for a time in the early 1940s, when Vladimir worked as the chief architect for the Societe Haitienne Americaine de Development Agricole, but otherwise their life in Miami remained uneventful until Elizabeth's conversion to housing reform and political activism in 1948.

Elizabeth Virrick's emergence as a housing reformer coincided with dramatic changes in American cities. Indeed, as World War II came to an end in 1945, urban America stood at the brink of unprecedented change. Over five million rural dwellers had migrated to the cities for wartime factory jobs. Many cities experienced severe housing shortages, intense social service demands, and some nasty episodes of racial conflict.

Perhaps most significantly, many American city dwellers came to share the view that the postwar era would be a time for a massive “reconstruction” of the American city—a view promoted by big-city mayors, urban planners, downtown civic leaders, and urban real estate interests.

Ambitious plans for urban reconstruction surged to the surface in postwar America. The urban housing stock often dated to the industrial era of the late nineteenth century, slums needed to be cleared, and new housing built. The coming of the automobile posed still another kind of challenge, since urban street systems built for pedestrians, horses, and electric streetcars were now outdated; cities needed to rebuild their transportation systems to accommodate the automobile. At the same time, several demographic and economic transformations were underway. The Black migration from the rural South to the industrial centers of the North, Midwest, and West Coast had already begun to swell the central cities. Simultaneously, postwar urban America was on the verge of spilling out its white population into burgeoning postwar suburbs. The beginnings of “de-industrialization”—the abandonment of the urban core by American industry—also could be found by around 1950. These powerful transformations quickened the pace of urban change after 1945.

Throughout this era of growth and change in American cities, political leaders, business interests, and citizens groups fought to achieve alternative visions of the urban future. Elizabeth Virrick’s reform activities in Miami are best understood in the context of these battles over the direction of national urban policy. The national Housing Act of 1949 represented the first major effort by the federal government to address the needs of cities in the postwar period. After a protracted debate that began in the early 1940s, a compromise housing measure eventually garnered sufficient votes for Congressional passage. The new legislation sought to satisfy interest groups with deeply contradictory aims. In the first place, appeasing the liberal housing lobby, the 1949 housing law stated as its goal the realization of “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.” To reach that admirable goal, Congress authorized 810,000 units of public housing over the next six years, primarily funded by the federal government. It also provided for a program of slum clearance and urban redevelopment. Using the power of eminent domain and with two-thirds of the funding coming from Washington, city redevelopment agencies could

purchase slum properties and then resell the assembled land parcels to private developers at a lower price. One key requirement held that the land acquired in this way had to be "predominantly residential," either before or after redevelopment. This permissive loophole made it possible for private developers to condemn low-income housing areas and redevelop the land for other, more lucrative purposes—shopping centers, business buildings, expensive apartment houses, and the like.³

The real estate and building lobby found much to its liking in the slum clearance and redevelopment provisions of the Housing Act of 1949. It promised a profitable subsidy to the real estate developers. By contrast, public housing advocates initially viewed the slum clearance section of the law as a necessary compromise that would speed Congressional approval of the housing provisions. "Public housers," as the reformers were called, took seriously the stated legislative commitment to provide decent housing to all. They expected that cleared and redeveloped land, or some of it anyway, would be allocated for new low-income housing projects. But in actual practice, that rarely happened. According to one study, of the initial fifty-four urban redevelopment projects in the early 1950s, only three included any public housing. Considerably more low-income housing was demolished under the redevelopment provisions of the law than was built under the public housing provisions. By 1954, fewer than 200,000 of the promised 810,000 units of public housing had been built. Also, the real estate interests conducted a bitter campaign to undermine local implementation of the public housing provisions of the Housing Act of 1949, causing more frustration to the housing reformers.

Congressional legislation a few years later further shifted national urban policy away from public housing. The Housing Act of 1954 sought to speed up redevelopment activity, now renamed "urban renewal." It also added provisions encouraging rehabilitation of existing properties, requiring relocation of displaced families, mandating citizen participation, and insisting that redevelopment projects fit into city-wide zoning and land-use plans. However, practically speaking, the legislation once again favored developers over public housing advocates. Indeed, special exemptions freed builders from even the permissive "residential" provisions of the 1949 law. Consequently, urban renewal soon came to be labeled "Negro removal," as low-income Black communities were cleared for inner-city redevelopment projects that



Elizabeth Virrick is seen here clutching a trophy awarded her as Dade County's Outstanding Citizen for the year 1948. HASE, Miami News Collection 1989-011-23560.

included little replacement housing. Moreover, in the implementation stage, agencies such as the Federal Housing Administration failed to enforce the law, and local housing and urban renewal agencies often ignored provisions for rehabilitation, relocation, and public housing. Finally, throughout the 1950s, a conservative-dominated Congress cut back on annual appropriations for public housing. In short, postwar federal housing legislation seemingly promised much, but left a legacy of failure. In the process, cities across the nation became battlegrounds between real estate developers and housing advocates.⁴

As varied plans for postwar urban redevelopment unfolded, urban places and spaces became contested arenas. In the South, where hostility to federal activism and intervention persisted unchecked into the 1950s and 1960s, urban reform that depended on federal largesse or that challenged entrenched racial segregation remained problematic. The real estate industry—especially private builders and slumlords—fought bitterly against any form of public or subsidized housing that threatened their profits. Moreover, the anti-Communist fervor unleashed in the late 1940s by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his ilk confused the national debate on urban issues. In Florida and in the South, McCarthyism had the unfortunate consequence of linking housing reformers and civil rights activists with socialism, communism, and un-American activities.

The national and regional battles over public housing and urban renewal were replayed in Miami in the late 1940s and 1950s. Southern attitudes still endured in postwar Miami, and the anti-Communist crusade resonated widely in this South Florida tourist spa. Thus, urban

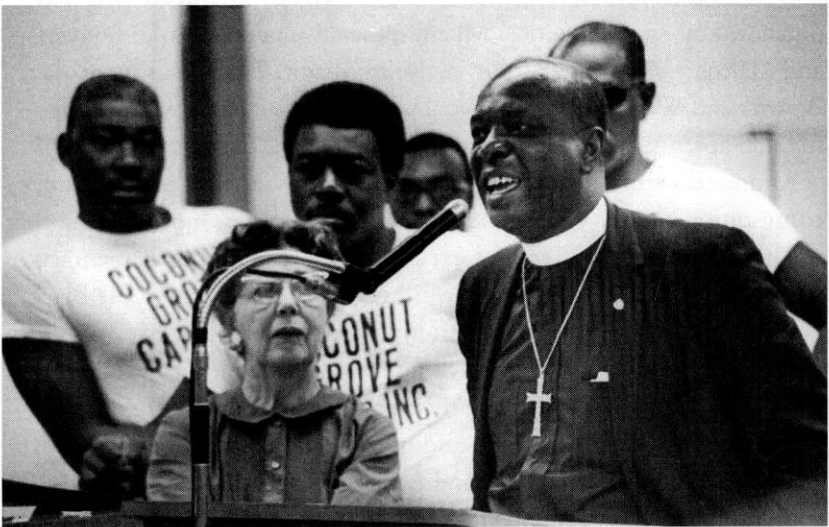
reform that focused on public housing, federal programs, and a fair deal for African Americans faced an uphill battle. Convergent ideologies in business and politics—anti-communism, pro-segregationism, and hostility to federal social programs—dominated Miami's political landscape throughout the period. Under such circumstances, grass-roots social and housing reformers such as Elizabeth Virrick faced formidable challenges.

Elizabeth Virrick's political awakening took place in 1948. The instigating issue did not seem especially momentous at the time. The place was Coconut Grove, one of the oldest communities in Miami. A self-contained village within the city, Coconut Grove had expensive waterfront villas, neat blocks of middle-class white homes, and a sizable Black community. Black immigrants from the Bahamas and their descendants made up most of the residents of Black Coconut Grove. White landlords owned a large portion of the Black Grove's tiny wood-frame homes and small apartment buildings. A compact and badly overcrowded area of about forty blocks, heavily planted with gardens and fruit trees, Black Coconut Grove suffered from inadequate municipal services such as water supply, police protection, and garbage collection; few houses had both running water and indoor toilets. The one large tract of empty land that still remained in the Black Grove—the so-called St. Albans tract of about seventeen acres—had recently been purchased by two well-known Miami speculative builders, John Bouvier and Malcolm Wiseheart. Already active in Miami's Black housing market, Bouvier and Wiseheart saw potential profit in Coconut Grove and planned to build apartments and duplexes on the St. Albans tract.

Announcement of these plans stirred passions in the Coconut Grove community. Nearby white residents had mixed views, most arguing that the land should be reserved for expansion of an adjoining elementary school or for white housing, a few others accepting the need for Black housing but not in the form of multiple units. Some Black spokesmen made the case for additional Black housing, although not necessarily large-scale apartment units. For their part, Bouvier and Wiseheart noted that the St. Albans tract, and indeed all of Black Coconut Grove, was zoned for commercial and industrial uses and that legally they could do what they wanted with the land.

Enter Elizabeth Virrick. She and her husband had just invested in a small, newly constructed apartment building in a white section of Coconut Grove. When the lily-white Coconut Grove Civic Club held a public meeting in August 1948 to protest the Bouvier-Wiseheart

plan to put multiple units of Black housing on the St. Albans tract, Virrick attended to see what all the commotion was about. Also invited to attend was the Reverend Theodore Gibson, a Black Episcopal priest from the Grove, who gave an electrifying speech about the desperate living conditions in the Black community. A deep-voiced and stirring orator with roots in the Bahamas, Gibson proclaimed that “My people are living seven deep.” He demanded that the white community take some responsibility for lack of enforcement of municipal sanitation ordinances and for the uncontrolled activities of the white slumlords. It was a transforming event for Virrick, who felt at the time that Gibson was speaking directly to her. As she later remembered in a set of autobiographical notes, Virrick went to see Gibson at his church the next day, asking what could be done. Consequently, they organized a second meeting, this one focused on conditions in Black Coconut Grove and attended by over two hundred people, both Blacks and Whites, which in itself was a remarkable event in deeply segregated Miami. Converted by now to grass-roots activism, Virrick came to the meeting with a reform agenda and a plan of action. One observer reported what happened: “Father Gibson spoke.



Elizabeth Virrick with Reverend Theodore Gibson, 1969. Father Gibson was Dade County's foremost Civil Rights leader and an outspoken critic of the city of Miami's failure at code enforcement, and the uncontrolled activities of white slumlords.

Mrs. Virrick spoke. Some people spoke who seemed aroused only by a fear of Negro encroachment. But there were many others who were shocked into action for improvement." This memorable mass meeting ended with the formation of the Coconut Grove Citizens Committee for Slum Clearance, with Elizabeth Virrick as chairman.⁵

With her newly formed institutional base, Virrick became a human dynamo devoting her energies toward social reform and social action. She had already begun exploring Black Coconut Grove, discovering living conditions and social problems for herself. Her friend Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a well-known writer and Florida environmentalist, described Virrick's voyage of discovery in an unpublished essay from 1953, "Slum Clearance, Community Style":

She took her first walk in Coconut Grove colored town, up one narrow, littered, crowded street and down another...She saw that whole families were packed into single rooms of broken-down old houses, into boarded up porches, shacks like lean-tos and in a few flimsy, over-crowded, too expensive apartment houses...She grew to know intimately every untidy backyard, heaped with refuse and uncollected garbage, on which rats fed...She knew exactly where more and more bars were being built and were running wide open on all the street corners. Garbage was irregularly picked up or not at all. Flies were everywhere. Children played in the streets without sidewalks. There were no parks, almost no street lighting...Nobody seemed to pay any attention to city ordinances against overcrowding, to buildings badly built, to uncollected filth. There was little or no police protection here where no police would bother to enforce what seemed like unenforceable laws.⁶

Virrick's forays into the Black Grove provided her with insight and information, which she quickly transformed into a program of action for the Coconut Grove Citizens Committee.

With Virrick at the helm, the Citizens Committee wasted little time in getting down to the work of neighborhood improvement. She appointed subcommittees on sanitation, rezoning, and exorbitant rents. She convinced the Miami city commission to conduct a survey of sanitation and public health in Coconut Grove. She persuaded the city to

collect garbage regularly and prompted the local water company to extend water mains to every street in the Black Grove. Virrick successfully used her contacts in the press and local radio to publicly pressure Grove landlords to reduce rents to the same level paid by white families for comparable housing. Powerful opposition to sanitation and rent reform came from Miami slumlords, mostly represented by Luther L. Brooks, who managed a large rent collection agency for apartment owners. Nevertheless, the Citizens Committee prevailed upon the Miami city commission to enact several ordinances in October 1948 requiring every Coconut Grove residence to have running water, flush toilets, and septic tanks, replacing the outdoor wells and privies that were commonplace throughout the area. When Citizens Committee members showed up en masse at the city commission debate on the new ordinances, the crafty Virrick reportedly said: "We have not come to insult your intelligence by pleading with you to sign these [ordinances]. We are merely here to give ourselves the pleasure of witnessing your unanimous affirmative vote."⁷ When some landlords refused to comply with the new rules, the Citizens Committee got the city health department to initiate legal action. To assist Black homeowners, a low-interest loan fund was created to facilitate compliance with the new ordinance. Successful passage of the city sanitation ordinances seemingly empowered Virrick and her reform colleagues.

The Citizens Committee soon initiated a variety of other programs and reforms. A new system of block clubs mobilized the Grove's Black residents in behalf of community betterment. As a result, a massive clean-up campaign was initiated, complete with parades, bands, speeches, and prizes for the best lot improvements. Neighbors banded together to clean up and transform empty spaces into small parks and playgrounds. Plans for a community center, a health clinic, adult education programs, and a day nursery were implemented. The health department began a campaign of rat, fly, and mosquito extermination. For the first time, the city hired Black policemen to patrol the Grove area. Within a year, through persistent local action, Virrick's Citizens Committee had sparked a remarkable transformation of Black Coconut Grove.

These early achievements of the Coconut Grove Citizens Committee represented a modest beginning. Coconut Grove, after all, was a small neighborhood. The slumlords still owned most of the rental housing. Little had been accomplished on the issue of rezoning Coconut Grove

from commercial and industrial to single-family residential. The speculative builders had already begun putting up some new apartment blocks in the Black Grove. The slumlords represented by Brooks and apartment builders such as Bouvier and Wiseheart had much to lose and were more intransigent on the zoning issue, and they used their collective influence to stave off city commission action. The rezoning issue became Elizabeth Virrick's next big battle for urban reform.

The rezoning campaign pitted the increasingly relentless Virrick and the Citizens Committee against the locally powerful real estate lobby and their political allies. Several prominent architects worked with an interracial subcommittee of the Citizens Committee to develop a new zoning plan for Black Coconut Grove that would prevent the further construction of multiple housing units. They sought to retain the primarily small home, single-family character of the neighborhood. Residential densities in the area surpassed forty-two persons per acre; more multiples would intensify the overcrowding that had already created severe social problems. Moreover, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) routinely rejected mortgage insurance for single-family homes in areas zoned for other purposes. Virrick anticipated, perhaps unrealistically given official federal government support for racially segregated housing, that FHA mortgage insurance approvals would follow a rezoning of the Black Grove. Time constraints also motivated the zoning reformers, since construction had already begun on several new apartment projects. In addition, Bouvier and Wiseheart were seeking approval of their extensive building plans for the St. Albans tract.

In January 1949, after numerous hearings and much-heated debate, both the Miami planning board and the five-member Miami city commission voted down the Citizens Committee rezoning plan for Coconut Grove. Further debate a month later on compromise proposals providing a mix of single-family and duplex units also met defeat, despite the large crowds of rezoning supporters who jammed into city commission hearings. Only two of the five commissioners, Mayor Palmer and H. Leslie Quigg, had consistently supported housing and zoning reform. Virrick had lobbied vigorously for the rezoning plan, working the phones, chairing meetings, talking to people in the streets, getting people out for commission hearings, using her new-found political clout, pushing for favorable editorials in the local press, even

threatening to campaign for a seat on the city commission—but ultimately to no avail. After the vote against the new zoning plan, Virrick publicly blasted the offending commissioners: “You have dedicated yourselves to those who exploit the Negro,” she declared. Coconut Grove, Black and White, seemed united in support of the plan. In numerous editorials, the *Miami Daily News* lashed out at recalcitrant public officials as “willing tools” of the land speculators and ghetto builders. But, the builders and landlords came away from the political debate over zoning with a free hand to put up their “concrete monsters,” as Virrick began calling the planned multiple apartment units.⁸

The Coconut Grove reformers did not give up. Defeated by the builders, the slumlords, and the city commissioners, the Citizens Committee decided to use an initiative petition to force approval of the rezoning ordinance. Under Florida law, petition signatures of at least 10 percent of the city’s registered voters would compel the city commission to approve the ordinance or submit it to a referendum in the next general election. As Virrick noted at the time, “The issue is whether a civic group, backed by almost all the citizens of an area, is to have a voice in deciding an issue they feel is vital to the welfare of the community.”⁹ Between February and June 1949, Citizens Committee activists canvassed Miami neighborhoods and set up tables outside stores, banks, and movie theaters, collecting over eleven thousand signatures, considerably more than the required 10 percent. Two local newspapers, the *Miami Daily News* and the Black community’s *Miami Times*, endorsed the Citizens Committee rezoning petition. The reformers seemed encouraged by the progress of the petition drive.

The speculative builders fought back in a variety of ways, however. They were able to get a favorable editorial in the *Miami Herald*, supporting their multiple apartment project on the St. Albans tract. At several points during the petition campaign, Bouvier and Wiseheart sought a compromise with the Citizens Committee permitting fewer multiple apartments. The reformers refused, holding out for the best zoning plan. Later, unidentified burglars broke into the committee’s office, rifling through desks and file cabinets, apparently seeking to thwart the petition drive. The burglars overlooked the accumulated petitions stored in a small cabinet obscured by other paperwork. A few days later, the *Miami Herald* ran a photograph of Elizabeth Virrick handing over a two-foot stack of petitions to the Miami city clerk. The petition drive

was successful, but on a split vote in July 1949 the Miami city commission refused to endorse the Coconut Grove rezoning measure, sending it instead to a referendum vote in the November election.

The rezoning referendum campaign heated up in the fall, replaying the earlier petition drive. Once again, the debate pitted the Citizens Committee against the speculative builders and slum landlords. Once again, the real estate interests worked actively against the rezoning proposal. Bouvier and Wiseheart, for instance, spent heavily on full-page newspaper ads, some of which "attempted to mislead the public into thinking that Mrs. Virrick...was endorsing their plan."¹⁰ The Citizens Committee countered that claim in a last-minute newspaper ad of its own. On election day, apparently swayed by Virrick's reformist vision of better housing for all, Miami voters approved the rezoning plan by a large majority. It was the first time in Florida history that the initiative and referendum method had been implemented successfully. In the aftermath of the two-year Coconut Grove struggle, Virrick received local and national recognition for her community work, including the Dade County "Woman of the Year" award.

For Elizabeth Virrick, the Coconut Grove zoning battle of the late 1940s turned out to be a mere beginning. In the months and years that followed, the Citizens Committee carefully monitored activities of the city planning board, which had the authority to approve zoning variances. Miami planning officials and city commissioners, not to mention the builders and slumlords, remained hostile to housing reform, even after passage of the national Housing Act of 1949, which promised federal assistance to cities for slum clearance and public housing. Many southern cities and states rejected federal assistance of any kind because of a narrowly held conception of states' rights. Such views were still powerful in Miami in the 1950s, when federal support for public housing seemed to many an opening wedge to take control of local programs. Moreover, the real estate lobby, nationally and in south Florida, portrayed public housing as dangerously un-American and socialistic. At the same time, they soon recognized the huge profit potential in slum clearance and urban redevelopment activity. Virrick's next big battle sought to secure, against powerful opposition, local implementation of the public housing provisions of Housing Act of 1949. She also began shifting her focus from the small and compact neighborhood of Coconut Grove to the larger and more complex arena of metropolitan Miami.

The reformers sparked a protracted struggle in early 1950, a struggle that lasted more than a decade, when the Miami city commission rejected federal funding for slum clearance and public housing. As noted earlier, the Housing Act of 1949 had authorized 810,000 units of public housing and provided the mechanism for a widespread program of slum clearance and urban redevelopment. The trouble, as might be expected, lay in local implementation of the new legislation. Poorly constructed “shotgun shacks” and more recently built multiple apartments—Virrick’s overcrowded concrete monsters—covered Miami’s largest inner-city Black neighborhood, then called the “Central Negro District” and later known as Overtown. Located just northwest of the city’s relatively small central business district, the area had been targeted for destruction by Miami’s civic elite since the 1930s. Many downtown business and political leaders sought to eliminate Overtown and move all the Blacks outside the city limits, thus paving the way for expansion of Miami’s business center. An early housing project, Liberty Square, completed in 1937 about five miles from downtown Miami, was conceived locally as the nucleus of a new Black community that ultimately would siphon off Overtown’s population. Some white civic leaders believed that more public housing for Blacks, if located in unincorporated Dade County, would speed the process of Black dispersal from the center city. However, slumlords and builders involved in Overtown felt threatened by any federal programs that might diminish their profits and their control of inner-city Black housing.¹¹

The issue came to a head after Congressional passage of the Housing Act of 1949, signed by President Truman on July 15. Subsequently, the Miami city commission (ironically, the same commission that had opposed the Coconut Grove rezoning) authorized the Miami Housing Authority to apply for federal slum clearance and public housing funds under the new law. However, a snag in completing the appropriate paperwork delayed submission of the federal housing application until after the November 1949 city commission elections. The outcome of the voting altered the political landscape, as two newly elected commissioners, along with one holdover commissioner, stood firmly opposed to public housing. Obviously, differing positions on public housing reflected a deep split within Miami’s civic leadership, with some adamantly opposed to any federal funding and others willing to use federal funds to achieve long-term goals of racial separation. In any

case, Miami city commission meetings once again became a battleground between housing reformers and the real estate owners and their attorneys, as well as among the commissioners themselves. In March 1950, after hours of heated oratory and by a three to two vote, the new Miami city commission formally voted to reject federally assisted slum clearance and public housing.

Politically charged conceptions of free enterprise lay at the heart of the Miami housing debate. In April 1950, under Mayor Wolfarth's prodding, the city commission enacted a slum clearance ordinance of its own, one that did not rely on federal funding. The new ordinance required more rigorous

self-enforcement of sanitation and building codes by the slum landlords themselves. Parrying the public housers, Wolfarth also contended that the local private housing industry could build all the low-income housing that was needed, which is what the builders themselves maintained. The new mayor claimed to be interested in slum clearance and better housing, but he argued that the private real estate industry was best positioned to achieve these goals.

Virrick publicly scoffed at these claims. The mayor's housing plan, she wrote, was "merely a patchwork job of slum perpetuation." The new Miami slum clearance ordinance "had no more chance of accomplishing this end than a jack rabbit." She also linked Wolfarth and the local real estate interests: "This ordinance was dreamed up by the opponents of public housing as a panacea," and then put into place by the politicians. The *Miami Herald* agreed with Virrick this time, editorializing in March 1950 that, "Free enterprise has nothing to do with the issue. Yet it has been the slogan which has been used as the sandbag to beat to its knees every slum clearance proposal which has dared to show its head to the public in the last twenty years." The landlords and builders waved the flag of Americanism and free enterprise to advance their financial



William M. Wolfarth and Perrine Palmer, Jr., pictured here in 1953, were two Miami mayors who spoke to Miami's low-cost housing needs. HASE, Miami News Collection 1989-011-22793.

interests, and the politicians went along. It was a carefully calculated strategy in 1950, in the midst of the anti-Communist crusade we have come to know as McCarthyism.¹²

The feisty Virrick ominously noted that “the storm clouds [are] now gathering,” but she did not shy away from another fight.¹³ There was immediate talk of a recall campaign directed against the anti-housing commissioners. Virrick wrote to a Congressional committee investigating the housing lobby, inviting a probe of the Miami situation. Virrick also pressed Mayor Wolfarth, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to freeze building permits in Overtown, pending a proper zoning plan for the area—a move to stave off the landlords and builders who had begun replacing shotgun houses with concrete monsters.

However, these approaches soon gave way to another strategy. Emboldened by their earlier success, the housing reformers resurrected the initiative and referendum petition process that had worked so well in Coconut Grove, hoping in this way to implement a city ordinance on slum clearance and public housing. Reformers established an ad hoc Miami Citizens Housing Improvement Committee, with Virrick and Abe Aronovitz, a local attorney, playing major roles to challenge the Miami



Bill Baggs, a crusading *Miami News* editor, and a strong supporter of Elizabeth Virrick's movement for better housing for Miamians. HASE, Miami News Collection 1989-011-19270.

commission's rejection of federally financed public housing. The new housing reform committee launched the petition campaign in early April at a mass public rally at Miami's downtown Bayfront Park that drew over two thousand people, although not all of them were housing supporters. Aronovitz made an impassioned pro-housing speech, sarcastically attacking the “big-bellied builders.”¹⁴ Over the next two months, Virrick, Aronovitz, and other housing advocates spoke at innumerable gatherings, including at least one meeting of unfriendly real estate brokers and builders. Debates were held at local club and association meetings, as well as on

Miami radio and television shows. Bus tours of Miami's inner city areas were conducted for leaders of the city's many civic and religious organizations. As with the earlier Coconut Grove campaign, the reformers sought to engage the public on housing issues.

The builders and landlords, with profits at stake, defended their position aggressively. They formed a Committee Against Socialized Housing, with the appropriate acronym of CASH, to parry Miami's public housers. The group had the backing of the Miami Board of Realtors, several leading bankers, and top politicians, including the new mayor, William Wolfarth. CASH distributed printed leaflets, brochures, pamphlets, and cartoons against public housing. These materials had been sent to Miami by the national real estate lobby, composed of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, the Mortgage Bankers Association, the National Association of Home Builders, and the U.S. Savings and Loan League. Newspaper ads, some the expensive full-page variety, trumpeted the builder and landlord position. Public housing, CASH contended, represented the first "step toward the socialistic state."¹⁵ One CASH newspaper ad suggested that the reformers' expressions of concern about "poor slum dwellers [was] a mere sentimental smoke screen to close the eyes of the sympathetic American people, while socialism takes over this country."¹⁶ Similar battles against public housing were underway in other cities, using, as Virrick noted, "the same slogans, the same billboards, the same distorted and untruthful arguments."¹⁷

Thanks to Virrick's earlier work in Coconut Grove, public consciousness on housing issues had been raised substantially in Miami by 1950. Consequently, opponents of housing reform often found themselves on the defensive. Newspaper columnists attacked the builders and landlords as heartless, selfish, and greedy, seeking only to maximize profits from building and renting in the slums. *Miami News* columnist Bill Baggs, a big supporter of Virrick's movement (he fondly called Virrick "my ol' Kentucky babe"), labeled CASH as "an outrageously stupid and dangerous group."¹⁸ In several columns, he suggested collusion and pay-offs between the real estate people and some city commissioners. Columnist Jack Bell of the *Miami Herald* considered as laughable the builders' claim that they would supply all the needed low-income housing and accept lower profits. "Altruism isn't exactly running rampant among that group," Bell wrote in a column dripping with sarcasm.¹⁹

Investigative reporter Luther Voltz of the *Herald* demonstrated that the builders' private redevelopment plan was simply "rebuilding" new slums, replacing older shotgun shacks with multiple-unit concrete apartment houses that quickly became overcrowded, but that also produced greater income.²⁰ Leaders from the Black community similarly condemned CASH's motives. Typically, the Reverend Edward Graham, Miami's leading Black Baptist minister, attacked opponents of public housing as "persons seeking to profit from their own rental units at the expense of human misery."²¹ Harry Simonhoff, editor of the *Jewish Floridian*, strongly endorsed public housing, but blasted Miami's white establishment: "The treatment accorded to Negroes in metropolitan Miami is a blot upon American civilization."²²

And so it went through forty-six days of the petition campaign in the spring of 1950. By early June, over thirty-two thousand Miami voters had signed the initiative petition, forcing the city commissioners to either accept the slum clearance and public housing ordinance or call a special election. The commissioners chose the latter path, scheduling the election for later that same month. Meanwhile, attorneys for the builders and landlords went to court seeking an injunction to halt the election, but their suit was dismissed. A few days later, the housing reformers won a sizable vote of confidence, as the referendum endorsed federal slum clearance and public housing in Miami by a vote of some fourteen thousand to ten thousand. But the victory was short lived. Housing opponents went to court again seeking to declare the referendum vote illegal, and this time they were successful. The Florida Supreme Court voided the referendum election on the grounds that the ballot did not contain the full text of the reformers' housing ordinance and that, therefore, the voters were insufficiently informed of the issues. Virrick was incredulous, later writing that "in truth and in fact no matter that had ever been before the people of Miami up to this time had ever received as much attention in the press, on the air and been discussed as widely and as thoroughly."²³ But the Court had spoken. It was another victory for the landlords and ghetto builders.

Bowed but unbroken, the housing reformers pressed for another election with a more explanatory ballot. In early 1951, Miami's city attorney ruled that the 1950 petitions remained valid, and eventually the public housing ordinance was placed on the ballot for the November 1951 city

elections. The housing issue simmered through most of the year, but by the beginning of November, things heated up once again, with a new ad hoc committee, the Miami Citizens Committee for Slum Clearance, orchestrating the publicity campaign. Virrick wrote a series of pro-housing articles for the *Miami Daily News*, focusing on "The Slum Disgrace."²⁴ The columnists cranked back into action, while numerous public meetings aired the issue. The new reform committee publicly vetted candidates for the city commission on their stance on public housing, refusing to accept evasive answers.

The opposition remained active, as well. Just a few days before the election, Mayor Wolfarth used his appointment authority to pack the Miami Housing Authority with anti-public housing members. At the same time, the landlords were still trying to keep the housing question off the ballot. They went back to the Florida Supreme Court, this time claiming that the ballot question was too long and too time consuming. However, a few days before the election, the Supreme Court ruled that the referendum could take place. The election on November 20, 1951 represented another major victory for Miami's housing reformers, as voters supported the slum clearance and public housing ordinance by a convincing two to one margin—20,563 for and 10,461 against. A run-off election the following week put a pro-housing majority on the city commission, as well. Three years of housing activism had put Elizabeth Virrick at the center of urban reform in Miami.

Virrick's initiative and referendum victories between 1949 and 1951 demonstrated that Miami's voters were ready for housing reform. Unexpectedly, more legal entanglements soon prevented any immediate public action on urban redevelopment. In August 1952, Miami's housing and redevelopment plans were thrown into disarray by a Florida Supreme Court decision in the case of *Adams v. Housing Authority of the City of Daytona Beach, Florida*. The ruling declared that using the eminent domain process for federally funded redevelopment was unconstitutional in Florida. This legal decision delayed public redevelopment and urban renewal programs in Miami by more than a decade.

Virrick spent a good part of the 1950s trying to get an amendment to the Florida constitution through the legislature that would authorize urban renewal. Failing that, she actively promoted four separate efforts to put urban renewal enabling legislation on the Florida statute books. She sponsored public forums to educate the public, but also denounced

the Florida legislature at every opportunity. As Virrick told a Miami reporter: “We have officials who are supposed to be leaders, but who don’t have any common sense. They talk about sin and motherhood, but everything they utter shows they don’t know anything about urban renewal.”²⁵ Not until 1959, when the state supreme court upheld a Tampa redevelopment law, did Florida join other states in accepting urban renewal funds from the federal government. Political and jurisdictional disputes in the early 1960s between the city of Miami and the newly established Dade County metropolitan government, now known as Metro, delayed implementation of urban renewal still further.

There were other battles in the years and decades to come. Throughout the 1950s, Virrick hammered away on the issues of slum clearance, public housing, and building and zoning controls in Miami’s expanding Black neighborhoods. However, none of these housing reforms did anything to diminish racial segregation in Miami neighborhoods or public housing projects. Dating back to the early twentieth century, official housing policies in Miami and Dade County established and preserved residential segregation. In particular, racial zoning was used to maintain physical distance between Blacks and Whites, even though that practice had been outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Buchanan v. Warley* in 1917. Miami’s housing reformers accepted residential segregation as a given in the 1950s, but sought better housing for Blacks and expansion areas for new Black housing developments. Miami’s Black civil rights leaders at the time, notably preachers Theodore Gibson and Edward Graham, also worked for housing reform within the context of a racially segregated society. Elizabeth Virrick was not a civil rights activist, but instead sought to expand housing availability through public housing and urban renewal. Later, by 1960, perhaps influenced by the emerging Black freedom struggle, Virrick came to recognize that ending slums depended on ending racial segregation: “It is a plain hard fact,” she contended in 1960, “that we will never get rid of slums if we have segregation, and vice versa, if we did not have segregation, we could get rid of slums.”²⁶

Maintaining the status quo seemed to be the official watchword throughout the 1950s. Federal redevelopment funding was banned at the time, but city and county officials did little to develop alternative slum clearance plans. Miami established a Department of Slum Clearance and Rehabilitation in 1952 after Virrick packed city commission meetings

with hundreds of supporters, but eventually the new department came to be headed by an ally of the slumlords. Building codes went unenforced for years; repair notices and condemnations were ignored by landlords. The Miami Housing Authority, controlled for a time by anti-housing appointees, made little progress on new public housing until the mid-1950s, when a single new project was completed. Minimal as this effort was, given the city's need for low-cost housing, the Miami Board of Realtors went to court to halt construction. In the late 1950s, Miami city commissioners were still undermining the efforts of the Miami Housing Authority to build new public housing. As Virrick put it in 1958, "The opposition to any change in the status quo here is unbelievable and is carried on by the very influential and wealthy so-called respectable people who own the extensive and profitable Negro slums." Not only did the slumlords have friends in government, but as Virrick bitterly suggested, "Almost none of our officials [seems] to be interested in anything from which they cannot profit."²⁷

During the 1950s and 1960s, Virrick engaged in a long running battle with Miami builders, realtors, and slumlords. Most of Miami's housing problems, Virrick sarcastically noted in 1958, could be attributed to "the number of real estate people to the square inch."²⁸ These were the people who were reshaping Miami's residential landscape in a major way in the 1950s. By the time Virrick's petition drives were taking place, residential transitions were already underway, as white neighborhoods gave way to African Americans seeking better housing. Segments of the local real estate industry facilitated the process of neighborhood turnover. For instance, builders Bouvier and Wiseheart moved Black families into Knight Manor, a white apartment complex they owned on Miami's north side, changing the name of the complex to Carver Village. Nearby White residents protested, demonstrated, and demanded that city officials protect White neighborhoods from "Negro encroachment." Punctuating these demands, on three occasions in late 1951 dynamite bombs blew up several empty apartments in the complex—bombs almost certainly planted by local Ku Klux Klansmen. The bombings brought national media attention to Miami's housing problems, with critical articles blaring such sensational titles as "Miami: Anteroom to Fascism" and "Dynamite Law Replaces Lynch Law."²⁹

City and county officials sought to contain the racial fallout from the bombings. Hoping to prevent black migration to an established white

neighborhood, the Miami city commission asserted its intention to buy Knight Manor and turn it into a public housing project for Whites only. Around the same time, the Dade County commission set up a "Negro housing committee" to seek out undeveloped properties in distant fringe areas where the private sector could build new Black housing. The idea of maintaining residential segregation remained a powerful imperative in Miami, and the corollary idea of moving all the Blacks beyond the city limits had not died out either. In Miami's Overtown, slumlords were moving quickly to replace thousands of small, wooden houses with the much larger and ultimately more lucrative concrete monsters.

Despite Virrick's persistent warnings about the spread of slum conditions to new areas, things seemed to get worse in the 1960s. In August 1965, the *Miami Herald* reported on a wave of new apartment house construction all over metropolitan Miami, a trend fostered by inadequate zoning laws and the weakness of planning controls. "Big blockbusters wedged on tiny plots of ground and surrounded by asphalt are cropping out all over," reporter Juanita Greene noted. Greene traced this construction pattern back to the mid-1950s, when the city of Miami began granting more building permits for apartments than for single-family houses or duplexes. By 1963, the movement had "engulfed" all of Dade County. Up to that point, the concrete monsters had been mostly confined to the inner-city Black community of Overtown. But, Greene went on, "in the past three years the monster has migrated from his original habitat."³⁰ Virrick had been throwing out caution signs about the multiple-unit apartments since the late 1940s, but the ghetto builders had continued and mostly prevailed.

Luther Brooks, owner of the Bonded Collection Agency and Miami's chief slumlord, emerged as the special target of Virrick's scorn during these years. By the late 1950s, Brooks's company collected rents from over ten thousand rental units in Miami, making it one of the largest rental firms in the country. Brooks was politically connected, and said to be "chummy" with four of the five Miami city commissioners. Press reports in 1958 and a subsequent grand jury investigation linked Brooks to city officials charged with enforcing building and sanitation codes. Records on over five hundred already condemned Brooks properties were somehow "lost" by Frank A. Kelly, Brooks's friend and head of Miami's Department of Slum Clearance and Rehabilitation.³¹ Reported violations in hundreds of other Brooks properties were never followed up.

An outspoken opponent of public housing, Brooks cleverly used the furor over slum clearance to benefit the slumlords, and his own company as well. Using the slogan of "free enterprise," Brooks took the lead in encouraging property owners to replace aging wooden slum houses with new concrete monsters. In doing so, he argued that the private real estate sector was able to provide for the housing needs of low-income families. Later, when urban renewal and expressway building destroyed thousands of Overtown rental units, Brooks essentially managed the process of "block-busting" by which displaced Blacks moved into transitional White neighborhoods. Trading barbs at city commission meetings, in the newspapers, and in radio debates, Virrick and Brooks engaged in a bitter sparring match that lasted more than two decades.

Although a consistent advocate of public housing, Virrick eventually became a hard-edged critic of urban renewal in the 1960s. The Housing Act of 1954, by using eminent domain to assemble land parcels for private developers, had become nothing but a massive "real estate promotion." The program, she said, was "rigged in favor of the slum owners," who profited from government purchase of their rental properties. The builders and developers "eat a rich meal and we grab the check and pay it," she wrote with her typical flair for the dramatic phrase. Unless revisions were made to urban renewal enabling legislation in Florida, the program would simply create more permanent slums. Virrick was vehement: "Why should there be a profit for anybody in clearing slums? Why should a sugar tit be given to the slum owners or the real estate and home builder people to pacify them so they will permit us to clear our slums?"³² She wanted safeguards built into Miami's urban renewal plan that would provide decent, low-income housing and that would guarantee appropriate relocation provisions for those dislocated by redevelopment. Equally important, she promoted the idea that all urban renewal housing should be built by philanthropic or non-profit organizations—a means of insulating urban renewal from the real estate speculators and slumlords.

Virrick enjoyed word games and had a habit of writing clever, doggerel verse, which she often recited at meetings. One such piece, titled simply "Housing," skewered urban renewal:

Said Congressman Botch to Congressman Bungle
Let's give a thought to the darn slum jungle;

Previous bills gained their authors fame
 And there are votes galore to be had from same.

So off with their notebooks went Bungle and Botch
 To speech-make and hand-shake, to pry and to watch.
 Their erudite study of five days or so
 Conclusively proved that slums had to go.

The Congressmen thrilled to the challenge before them;
 The bills and amendments would surely restore them
 To office again when their terms had expired.
 With campaign hopes high, they worked and perspired.

Bill number X was proposed forthwith
 To care for poor people and all their kith.
 Filibustering went from morn till night
 And they finally agreed that right was right.

Just as success seemed forthcoming at last,
 From the town's leading hostess, they felt a cold blast.
 To her gala occasions they weren't asked to come.
 The reason uncovered was: she owned a slum.

The real estate lobby howled with rage
 And the bill went into the amendment stage.
 "All right," said Bungle, so gay and witty,
 "We'll let them have their hands in the kitty."

We'll buy up the slums with taxpayers' dough
 And sell it for less than it costs us, you know.
 Then enterprise private will grab at the deal
 Because it has a big business appeal.

So they wrote and rewrote until finally they had
 A masterful bill that made nobody mad.
 After all this ado, is it naughty to wonder
 If the whole blessed thing has been one great, big blunder?

Cause people who need housing are left in the lurch,
Going hither and yon in search of a perch.
They haven't the money to pay the high cost
So the cause of the people seems dismally lost.

Is it possible, really, in this day and age
That we haven't the people sufficiently sage
To solve this slum problem that gnaws at our core
And spreads in our vitals, a cancerous sore?

It takes courage and vision and thinking it through
And not caring a whit what the lobbyists do.
No, Botch, no, Bungle, you have not succeeded
In giving the people the housing that's needed.³³

By the mid-to late 1950s, expansive plans for interstate highway construction in downtown Miami complicated Virrick's campaign for housing reform. Interstate planning called for an expressway that traversed the heart of Overtown. A contemplated downtown interchange would eventually level twenty square blocks, including densely populated Black housing and the entire Black business district in Overtown. As these expressway plans became public in 1956 and 1957, Virrick immediately recognized the devastating consequences for Black Miami. As she wrote to Wilbur Jones, director of the Florida State Road Department, "the pathway of the new expressway will cause great hardship to the Negroes in the Central Negro area, both home owners and tenants, who will be displaced."



Dade County's vast expressway system ripped out the heart of historic Overtown and parts of other nearby communities. HASF, Miami News Collection 1989-011-5416.

She urged the creation of a relocation agency that would survey available housing in Miami and provide assistance to those displaced by expressway construction. Without such relocation assistance, Virrick argued, population densities in the Overtown area would rise rapidly, “aggravating the miserable slum conditions that already exist.”³⁴

Virrick did not get very far with the state road department, because the business of that agency was highway building, not relocation housing. In fact, the Florida road department provided only a thirty-day eviction notice to those in the path of the Miami expressway. This policy conformed to federal Bureau of Public Roads guidelines on housing relocation. Federal policy required relocation assistance for those displaced by urban renewal activities but not by interstate highway construction.

Construction of the south leg of the Miami expressway through Overtown and into the central business district began in 1964. Influenced by the writings of urban critic Jane Jacobs, Virrick intensified her attack on the highway builders. As Virrick framed the issue, “the helter-skelter spewing out of expressways without proper forethought and planning” would destroy the urban fabric. In a series of hard-hitting articles in her monthly newsletter, *Ink: The Journal of Civic Affairs*, she mounted an assault on a new type of monster—the inner-city expressways (she called them “great Frankensteinian monsters”) that destroyed neighborhoods and parks, disfigured the city, and created new slums. Virrick painted a harsh picture of the consequences of expressway building in Miami:

With shocking ruthlessness, the expressways slash through our city without regard to the grim results...building an impenetrable wall that will cut the city in half, separate many stores from the people who deal there, [and] uglify pleasant areas and make bad areas worse. We are told to take it or leave it. In our over-anxiety to move automobiles faster, we bow our heads to this dictatorship and take it...Hasn't anyone heard of San Francisco where the road program was stopped and replanned because an alert citizenry demanded it?

Miami was suffering badly from “bulldozitis followed rapidly by asphaltitis.” As Virrick phrased it with typical sarcasm, “The theme appears to be: never mind about anything, but Woodman, spare those

twelve lanes for the automobile!" Echoing the national outcry against urban expressways that had emerged by the early 1960s, Virrick pleaded often for "a fresh evaluation of the entire expressway system."³⁵

Throughout the expressway-building era, Elizabeth Virrick was a lonely but publicly respected voice speaking out on the necessity of linking highway construction with public housing and relocation programs. But it was not to be. Virrick was the closest thing Miami had to an anti-expressway movement, but a one-woman crusade was not enough. The Miami expressway system was completed by the late 1960s, but at the cost of uprooting most of Miami's inner-city Black community. A formerly vibrant community despite its poor housing conditions, Overtown soon became a rubble-strewn urban wasteland left in the shadows of an elevated expressway.

By the end of the 1950s, Elizabeth Virrick had become highly expert on housing issues. She kept up with housing issues in cities around the country and developed a large correspondence with the nationwide community of housing officials and reformers. She attended meetings of the National Housing Conference and the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, published articles in the public housers' *Journal of Housing*, contributed chapters to scholarly books on housing, and toured European cities with others investigating alternative models of housing reform.³⁶ With her friend Marjory Stoneman Douglas, she began researching and writing a book on slums and housing in American cities—a project left unfinished. In the mid-1950s, she began publishing her own Miami housing and slum clearance newsletter, *Ink: The Journal of Civil Affairs*, which became an influential vehicle for her monthly critique of city officials, housing bureaucrats, slumlords, and the local real estate industry. In the mid-1960s, the Coconut Grove Citizens Committee became the Dade County Conference on Civic Affairs, reflecting Virrick's wider urban interests and involvements. She became something of an institution in Miami, and she seemed to be everywhere, serving on over a dozen advisory boards and committees from the 1950s through the 1970s. Serving on the Dade County Community Relations Board in the 1960s, for instance, put Virrick at the center of emerging conflict between Miami's African Americans and the growing community of Cuban exiles.

Virrick demonstrated her political savvy in three successful initiative and referendum campaigns. Her appeals to blacks and whites and across

social and economic boundaries reflected extremely effective interpersonal and organizational skills. She quickly developed persuasive powers as an articulate and impassioned speaker, soft-spoken but confident and powerful nevertheless. Her writings for local newspapers and later for her own newsletter were hard-hitting, known for impatient criticism and biting sarcasm, but also for sensible analysis and carefully crafted policy



A busy Elizabeth Virrick at her desk, 1977.
HASF, Miami News Collection 1989-011-23537.

prescriptions. Her ability to connect with powerful voices in the media, especially local newspaper columnists and radio and TV newsmen, cemented her position as Miami's trusted voice on housing matters.

Virrick was the gadfly, the crusader, the militant watchdog, operating outside the official power structure, badgering city commissioners and planning and housing officials into action. Politicians learned that to cross swords with Virrick might shorten their careers in office. Slumlords, builders, and attorneys for the local real estate lobby hated to see her show up at hearings and meetings. She often made public

officials squirm at those open forums, as she demanded full public accountability. As one observer put it, "No one could storm into city commission meetings and lay 'em low so effectively with invective."³⁷ Her opponents called her a communist for advocating public housing, but Virrick easily turned that argument around, often making the case that "slums are the most fertile soil for the seed of communism."³⁸ She was knowledgeable, unintimidated, impatient, tenacious, witty, and sarcastic—and she made good press copy. "She mostly battles in the open," one scribe reported, "but if the need arises, she doesn't hesitate to play a cloak and dagger role."³⁹ Perhaps most of all, Virrick's role was one of educating the public about urban renewal and housing issues.

On these matters, Virrick wrote, "Miamians need educating, and I am the teacher."⁴⁰

By the late 1960s, twenty years of community organizing and reform militancy had taken its toll. Now in her seventies, Virrick cut back on her activism, retreating to the arena she knew best—Coconut Grove. Reflecting this shift in priorities, by 1970 the Dade County Conference on Civic Affairs took on the new name of Coconut Grove Cares. The new organization engaged in various social service functions in the Black Grove, but Virrick was most proud of the Elizabeth Virrick Boxing Gym, a former Coast Guard seaplane hangar transformed into an athletic facility for Miami teenage boys aspiring to Golden Gloves fame. In the late 1980s, Virrick still came to work everyday, sitting at her desk and keeping an eye on things at Coconut Grove Cares. When she died in 1990 at the age of ninety-three, Virrick left a lasting legacy of urban commitment and accomplishment. Given the social and cultural constraints imposed on southern women in the 1940s and 1950s, Virrick established a remarkable public career. For the Miami metropolitan area and its citizens, Virrick and her reform activism made a difference at a time of dramatic urban change.

Postwar urban policy on many issues emanated from Washington D.C., but implementation took place at the local level under the direction of mayors, city councils, city and county commissioners, and local agency bureaucrats. Consequently, a full understanding of late twentieth-century urban history and urban change requires an examination of the decision-makers and opinion-shapers in cities across the nation—the activists and gadflies as well as the mayors and public officials. In Miami, Elizabeth Virrick confronted local power, appealed to a larger public, and often forced the resolution of conflict on housing and urban reform issues. Every city had such individuals, women and men who made a difference. Virrick's public career puts a human face on American urban history, demonstrating the ways in which individual action mediated, moderated, and shaped the larger patterns of postwar urban change.

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