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American Apartheid

"An apartheid threatens the United States," says Charles Abrams, one of this country's most respected housing experts.

Apartheid is a hard term. One thinks of Rhodesia and South Africa. It means total separation of races. Even in the southern United States, every small town has both black and white neighborhoods, sharing the same streets and countryside. And in our biggest cities, both races come under one municipal government and share the same school system, if not the same schools.

But Mr. Abrams isn't talking about Athens, Georgia, or South Chicago or Waterbury, Connecticut. He is talking about the ring of white suburbs that surrounds the nation's cities. He's talking about us, the educated, concerned suburbanites who have given sympathy and dollars to the civil rights movement from the first.

Many factors have contributed.

There is the property tax, which has discouraged private investment in low-cost housing and is in great need of revision. Another is the federal government, which 20 years ago was threatening to withdraw cheap mortgage assistance where it found people were not practicing exclusion.

Another is zoning. Town after town has decided that low-income housing will have to be someone else's responsibility. The result of this widespread refusal to accept responsibility has been the exclusion of low-income groups from town after town, confining them to reservations at the very center of affluence.

Only when suburbia recognizes that it is fostering apartheid will it recognize that it must also be the cure. The question is whether the other Americans will wait for us to hand them their share of America.

We doubt it, and we don't think they should.