Cities 57 (2016) 40–46

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities

Privatizing public housing redevelopment: Grassroots resistance, co-operation and devastation in three Dublin neighbourhoods

Michelle Norris [a,*], Rory Hearne [b]

[a] School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington Building, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
[b] Department of Geography, Rhetoric House, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 December 2014
Received in revised form 11 December 2015
Accepted 23 December 2015
Available online 9 January 2016

Keywords:
Public housing
Redevelopment
Privatization
Gentrification
Resistance
Neighbourhood
Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article examines variations in residents' responses to proposals to redevelop three public housing neighbourhoods in Dublin using Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) and the outcomes their resistance achieved. It investigates the important role that structures of participation and representation and local social cohesion play in developing effective resident resistance to displacement and gentrification through regeneration. In two of these neighbourhoods community representative structures were strong and although one community co-operated with the PPP plans and the other opposed them, both were broadly successful in achieving their campaign objectives. Community structures in the third neighbourhood were weak however and the imposition of PPP redevelopment devastated this community which is now almost entirely vacant. This article provides some important insights for the literature on grassroots resistance to urban redevelopment, welfare state restructuring and public housing redevelopment. It reveals that, despite their lack of power, residents' resistance can significantly influence public housing redevelopment strategies particularly where community representative structures are strong. However for vulnerable communities, where representative structures are weak, the over emphasis on poverty de-concentration and refurbishing the built environment in public housing redevelopment policy can have devastating consequences. Thus, it concludes that the rationale for grass roots resistance to redevelopment is centred upon a strong place attachment, but also opposition to the privatization of public housing and the desire for poverty to be addressed in an holistic manner.

1. Introduction

This article examines residents' responses to plans to redevelop three run-down public housing neighbourhoods in Dublin, Ireland in conjunction with private developers which were initiated and partially implemented during the unprecedented economic boom Ireland experienced between the late 1990s and early 2000s (popularly known as the 'Celtic tiger boom) but collapsed at the end of the 2000s when this country experienced one of the most severe busts of the global financial crisis (Norris & Coates, 2014). The three neighbourhoods — Fatima Mansions, Dolphin House and O'Devaney Gardens, share much in common. They are all public rented housing developments, owned by municipal government (Dublin City Council) and are located in the Dublin's inner city, within 30 min walk of the main downtown shopping and business districts. They also share a common socio-economic profile (very disadvantaged like most public housing in Ireland) and design (low rise apartment blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s) and were earmarked for similar redevelopment strategies in the mid-2000s (demolition/rebuilding and poverty deconcentration funded by Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) between Dublin City Council and private property developers). However the three neighbourhoods differ significantly in terms of the strength of community structures and lobbying capacity, residents' views on the PPP redevelopment plans, the campaign strategies they adopted in response as did the outcomes experienced. The key concern of this article is to unravel the relationship between these factors and thereby identify role which social cohesion and structures of participation and representation played in enabling or undermining effective resident resistance to public housing redevelopment.

Fatima Mansions is a very strong, cohesive community and its residents proved to be very skilled advocates on their own behalf during the redevelopment planning and implementation period. They decided to co-operate with and try to shape the PPP redevelopment project to reflect their own objectives and they were largely successful in achieving this. Residents of the Dolphin House complex adopted a different approach, they campaigned successfully to oppose the PPP redevelopment planned for their neighbourhood and then to have central government cover the costs of an alternative redevelopment programme which had just commenced at the time of writing. Community structures in this neighbourhood were also strong but this was not the case in the third neighbourhood under examination here — O'Devaney Gardens. In this

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: michelle.norris@ucd.ie (M. Norris), rory.hearne@nuim.ie (R. Hearne).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.12.006
0264-2751/

case residents' representatives failed to influence the City Council's plans for redevelopment of their neighbourhood and when the PPP scheme proposed for this purpose collapsed following the Irish housing market and economic crash in 2007–08 this community was literally devastated. The majority of residents moved out and the neighbourhood was almost entirely vacant in 2015.

The analysis of these issues presented here is organised into six further sections. The first and second of these summarise the relevant themes in the literature, the key features of the case-study neighbourhoods and the research methods employed to examine them. The next three examine: the process of devising and implementing redevelopment plans for the three neighbourhoods and residents' responses and outcomes achieved. The conclusions set out the findings of the case-study research and reflect on their implications for the literature on residents' resistance to public housing redevelopment and for neighbourhood regeneration policy in Ireland.

2. Grassroots resistance, privatization and poverty deconcentration

The issues examined here are relevant to some of oldest themes in the urban studies literature and some of the newest. In the latter category is the large literature on grassroots resistance to urban redevelopment emerged during the 1970s and 1980s among which Castells (1983) landmark study *The City and the Grassroots* remains the most influential. He emphasized the agency and impact of these movements, while also acknowledging their limits. Although unable to transform social structures, he argued they held the potential to transform 'urban meanings', by undermining the social hierarchies which structure urban life and working to create cities organised on the basis of autonomous local cultures and decentralized participatory democracy.

Later research in this genre concentrated more on the limits of these movements, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. For instance, lack of skills and money, narrow social networks and alienation from the political system are all cited as factors which inhibit effective grassroots action from emerging in poor neighbourhoods (Gans, 1962; Rich, 1980; Gittell, 1980). While other authors have argued that the local focus of the organisations prevents them from challenging the wider social structures which shape their problems and highlight the potential for their co-option by state and other powerful interests (e.g. Mollenkopf, 1983; Kramer, 1981).

However more recent research has adopted a more optimistic view regarding the power of grassroots urban movements, or at least argued that the influence is more complex, varied and contingent matter than some authors have implied (Graham & Hogan, 1990). For instance, Hackworth (2006) and Feldman and Stall (2004) draw on the research on social capital to emphasize the importance of shared community history, networks, and bonds between residents in enabling resistance to public housing redevelopment. Place attachment is also commonly cited as an important motivator for collective action, sometimes as exclusionary action for instance as a driver of middle class 'NIMBYist' (not in my back yard) exclusionary campaigns, but in low-income communities' loyalty to place can also motivate positive campaigns for improvement of local facilities (see: Devine-Wright, 2009; Fullilove, 2013; Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Place attachment is linked to length of residence (e.g. by Taylor, 1996) and also to the sense of 'bondedness' and 'rootedness' in a shared community (Riger & Lavarkas, 1981).

Also of relevance to neighbourhoods examined here is the fashion among governments in many developed countries for 'deconcentrating' poor households by subsidising low-income residents to move to wealthier neighbourhoods or demolishing existing public housing and replacing it with mixed tenure housing. Research on the impact of these policies has focused on their success in delivering neighbourhood sustainability. What is lost in terms of public housing units and communities has received less attention (Popkin, 2006 is an exception). The US research on the politics of neighbourhood deconcentration has concentrated on opposition from middle class communities to disadvantaged incomers while resistance from already resident poor households is neglected in the literature (Santiago, Galster, & Pettit, 2003; Lens, 2014). However recently, mainly British, research on 'state-led' urban gentrification has adopted a more critical perspective which harks back to the Castells (1983) arguments (Hackwood & Smith, 2001). In this vein, Lees (2014) highlights the success of residents of neighbourhoods earmarked for poverty deconcentration programmes in maintaining resistance despite efforts to control the choices available to them by government. Furthermore, Watt (2009) stresses that the role of public housing plays as a buffer against the displacement of working class communities from the cities and how poverty deconcentration focused redevelopment can undermine this.

3. Context, cases and methods

As mentioned above and detailed in Table 1 the three neighbourhoods examined in this article were selected because they share much in common in terms of location, socio-economic characteristics, size, housing tenure, design and history. Furthermore they were among the eight public housing complexes in Dublin which were earmarked for regeneration using public private partnerships in the early 2000s. Among this group of neighbourhoods the three examined here include: the only PPP development which attracted the co-operation of residents (Fatima Mansions); the only one successfully opposed by residents (Dolphin House) and one of several schemes which was unsuccessfully opposed by residents (O'Devaney Gardens).

All three case-study neighbourhoods were built between 1969 and 1956 and are all low-rise apartment complexes (called flats in Ireland) and are owned and managed directly by the Dublin City Council. Each neighbourhood is small (originally between 278 and 436 dwellings), highly disadvantaged and largely mono-ethnic (white, Irish) but the districts surrounding them contain a mix of housing tenures, commercial and residential development and (particularly in recent years) income and ethnic groups (Norris, 2013a; Hearne, 2011). During the decades following their construction the case-study neighbourhoods enjoyed a period of stability. This ended in the 1970s when deindustrialisation and economic stagnation precipitated a dramatic increase in unemployment, particularly in inner-cities. These neighbourhoods were further destabilised by heroin use and associated drug markets which emerged in Dublin in the early 1980s, and poor-quality housing management and maintenance by the Dublin City Council (Punch, 2005).

In response to the problems of these and other disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, from the early 1980s the Irish government initiated a series of spatially-targeted measures to promote the socio-economic regeneration and promoting community development. These were paralleled by a separate programmes to fund the redevelopment of the run-down public housing complexes, which began with the 'Remedial Works Scheme' which was established in 1985 and funded entirely by central government grant, but in later years these policies expanded to include tax expenditures to subsidise the construction/refurbishment of private sector dwellings which were initially applied to mixed tenure inner-city neighbourhoods but subsequently extended to public housing (Norris, 2013b). The socio-economic regeneration programmes had a positive impact on Fatima Mansions and Dolphin House in particular (see: Punch, 2009) but have been criticized as 'less them the sum of their parts' because the use of so many separate funding disbursement streams makes it difficult to raise money for multi-faceted redevelopment schemes which address the socio-economic as well as the built environment related causes of neighbourhood decline. This is a particular problem for public housing landlords who are generally only eligible for funding for physical redevelopment of neighbourhoods (Norris, 2013a). Research conducted by the authors in 1997–98 found that the Remedial Works Scheme funded redevelopment of Fatima Mansions in the late 1980s was not successful because it failed to address socio-economic problems and as a result: 'Within a few years of the