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Guest Editorial/Editorial

Resistance to social housing transformation

1. Introduction

This special issue brings together seven empirical assessments of tenant resistance to social housing redevelopment across the world. Three of the cases deal with U.S. cities — Memphis and Nashville in Tennessee, and Richmond, Virginia. The rest of the cases are from various English-speaking parts of the world, Toronto, Sydney, Dublin, and London. These articles present analyses of how lower-income residents of social housing perceive the threats to their communities represented by redevelopment, and the strategies they employ as they try to engage housing officials and the larger polity in efforts to preserve their housing or in some cases merely to influence the redevelopment process. The movement to transform social housing and the scholarly attention given to it over the past two decades have been dominated by elite narratives of concentrated poverty, neighborhood effects, and paternalistic references to the benefits of relocation and dispersal, whether forced or otherwise (Goetz, 2013b). By surfacing and examining resident resistance to redevelopment, this special issue attempts to refocus the conversation around social housing transformation on the self-perceived interests of residents and the challenges they face in attempting to express those interests in ways that might influence outcomes.

2. Social housing transformation and the end of an era

The transformation of social housing in advanced industrialized countries has been proceeding now for more than 25 years. Since the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of units of social housing have been demolished in the U.S. In Canada, while fewer units have come down, the government is also pursuing redevelopment of large social housing estates. The strategies are the same in Europe, with France, the U.K., Belgium, the Netherlands, and other nations tearing down large estates and replacing them with newer communities. Australia and New Zealand have followed suit as well. In all of these places, the state has determined that older forms of social housing are now obsolete, that they unduly concentrate lower-income households, and that they suffer from architectural and urban design flaws that undermine the proper functioning of community. In each of these places, social housing estates are being replaced by new developments that incorporate income- or social-mixing and new urbanist design in order to avoid, according to advocates, the mistakes of the past.

Though initially rationalized as a response to the failures of the "worst" social housing estates, the strategy has taken on a life of its own. In the U.S., for example, demolition has spread far beyond the initial target of the most "severely distressed" public housing, and now occurs even in the absence of any redevelopment plans (Goetz, 2013a). In the U.K. ambitious plans were announced in January 2016 to accelerate the rate of demolition (Davies, 2016). In Australia, the sale and/or redevelopment of public housing both reflects and results from its extreme marginality (Morris, 2013).

This policy shift, so similar across so many different settings, is significant for a number of reasons. It constitutes a dramatic change and roll-back in social welfare approaches to housing assistance in many settings. The abandonment of government-first approaches to housing provision and their substitution with privatized, market based approaches signals a sea-change in the operation of the welfare state. In addition to privatizing the delivery of social housing, these redevelopments have been in most settings part of a larger trend of revalorization of urban land, both facilitating and accelerating processes of gentrification, and shifting significant portions of urban landscapes that had been devoted to social welfare objectives into the service of investment and profit maximization, and capitalization.[1] These policy changes, furthermore, have been accompanied by more aggressively paternalistic and disciplinary techniques whose objectives aim at behavioral manipulation, social control, and reduction in state responsibilities (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011).

As such, social housing transformation is part of a neoliberalizing of the city, reflecting a governance regime that emerged dominant in the last two decades of the 20th century and replacing welfare state approaches characteristic of mid-century. Social housing demolition and redevelopment is a particularly graphic and physical manifestation of this policy turn. As Hall and Rowlands (2005) argue, the welfare state model represented by large social housing estates was the product of a post-war political economy that no longer exists. The transformation of social housing, according to some, thus reflects much larger transformations in theories of governance as well as global economic changes triggered by the end of a sustained period of post-war expansion.

The current era of social housing transformation is also significant for the large scale displacement and relocation of lower-income households it has induced, as the residents of these estates are moved out to allow the demolition and redevelopment to occur. In the U.S. especially, where replacement housing is not always provided on-site, social housing transformation has produced significant population shifts within urban areas. While the entire enterprise is justified with reference to

[1] It should be noted that the degree to which social housing redevelopment serves as state-led gentrification and represents a retreat from welfare state provision of housing varies significantly from one setting to the next. France and the U.S. stand as contrasting cases in this respect. French commitments to social housing have not diminished during this period of social housing transformation as units are replaced on a one-for-one basis and the redevelopment typically occurs in suburban locations not frequently subject to intensifying market interest. (Though French redevelopment is significantly driven by other objectives related to social control and regime stability, and responses to on-going and repeated civil unrest in *banlieues* dominated by large social housing estates.) In the U.S. many public housing developments, located in or near the urban core, have intense latent market value and redevelopment is part of larger processes of reinvestment, gentrification, and repurposing.

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the good of the original residents, often displacement is the *only* way in which this process touches their lives (Buron, 2004). Relatively few return to the redeveloped site, for many reasons.

Finally, social housing transformation is significant because it invokes more fundamental debates about poverty and what can/should be done about it. The defenders of social housing redevelopment advocate theories of poverty that stress near-environmental effects, patterns of social capital development, and various hypotheses related to social interaction patterns, role modeling, and socialization (see, Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber, 2007). Social housing transformation, to the extent that it forces the poor into new environments with greater social or income mix, is a test of these hypotheses.

3. Research on social housing transformation

Thus, the transformation of social housing has attracted much attention from scholars and researchers interested in charting its impacts. For the most part interest has been on identifying the impacts of these changes either on the low-income residents themselves or on the neighborhoods and communities of social housing that have been transformed. One focus of research has been on where people go, how they experience the relocation process, how their lives change as a result of relocation/displacement. This research approach has been most notable in the U.S. (Oakley & Burchfield, 2009; Clampet-Lundquist, 2007; Manzo, Kleit, & Couch, 2008; Goetz, 2010) but has occurred in other settings as well (e.g., Lelévrier, 2010, 2013; Stubbs, Foreman, Goodwin, Storer, & Smith, 2005; and Bolt & van Kempen, 2010). The major intent of this research has been to test program hypotheses that residents will benefit from forced relocation; that their access to jobs and better education, and their reduced exposure to crime and economic marginalization will produce a range of material, physical, and psychic benefits.

The second research thread has focused on place. Here the objective has been to identify and document the changes wrought by redevelopment on the communities in which it takes place (see, e.g., Castells, 2010; Turner, 2010, Chap. 10; and Zielenbach, 2003 for the U.S., and Van Kempen, Dekker, Hall, & Tosics, 2005; Epstein, 2013; MacLaran, Kelly, & Brudell, 2013 for European examples). The research questions here focus on investigating changes in crime levels or property values or investment patterns (public and private) in order to assess the ways in which redevelopment has leveraged additional changes at the community level and documenting the wider changes wrought by regeneration.

A hybrid of these two research questions has been investigations that focus on social mix (see Beckhoven & van Kempen, 2003; Chaskin & Joseph, 2015; Arthurson, 2010; August, 2008; Bridge, Butler, & Lees, 2012). This research has focused on what life is like for lower-income households in the new communities produced by social housing transformation. Here the emphasis is typically a mixture of people and place-based inquiry. How do these communities operate as communities? What is the level of social interaction across class and ethnic lines, how are these communities experienced by both low-income families and their new, more affluent neighbors?

4. Previous research on resistance to social housing transformation

In contrast to the voluminous research generated on the foregoing questions, the issue of tenant and community resistance to social housing transformation has been relatively neglected. Despite the intrusive nature of state-led, forced displacement of low-income households, research on any number of questions such as the form of resident response, the extent of resistance, the conditions under which such resistance occurs, state strategies to minimize or deal with resident activism, and the success (or lack thereof) of resident efforts is unfortunately underdeveloped.

This relative lack of attention is surprising for at least two reasons. First, tenant resistance itself is not that rare, as Hackworth (2009, Chap. 10) pointed out in 2009, and is becoming more common. Residents have organized themselves to resist demolition and displacement in Porto, London, San Juan, Chicago, Seattle, Atlanta, and San Francisco to name only a few (see, e.g., Fée, 2015, Chap. 9; Queirós, 2015; Fernández, 2010; Hackworth, 2009; Goetz, 2013a). There are enough cases to support comparative and case study analyses that could reveal much about the political dynamics surrounding social housing transformation.

Second, post-recession issues of rapidly escalating housing prices, patterns of gentrification, increasing levels of displacement, and the emergence of 'housing wars,' typify a number of globalizing cities across the world (see Glynn, 2009; Tracy, 2014). This has triggered debate on the 'right to the city' that highlights the contentious and politically fragile claim that lower-income groups have on urban land that is increasingly in demand from economic elites and speculator/investors (Harvey, 2012). Social housing transformation is a central dynamic in these processes and the political contestation surrounding it is critical to fully understanding the larger housing market dynamics of the early 21st Century.

Third, the lack of attention to social housing activism is surprising in view of the closer attention scholars have given to resistance to neoliberalism generally (e.g. Cox & Nilsen, 2007; Sparke, 2008; Ashman, 2004; Wainwright & Kim, 2008) and in a very wide range of policy arenas, including but not limited to labor and union policy (e.g, Bieler, 2007, 2011), education (e.g., Hill, 2009; Oliveira, 2009, Chap. 10), and agrarian land policy (e.g., Adnan, 2007). Given that cities, as Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009: 49) argue, are important sites of "resistance to neoliberal programs of urban restructuring" (see also Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007; and, Long, 2013) one would expect to see a larger literature on the question of resistance to social housing transformation.

There has been some work on the topic. Three book-length treatments of social housing resident opposition to displacement exist for cases in New Orleans (Arena, 2012), Dublin (Bissett, 2008), and San Francisco (Howard, 2014). Shorter treatments of resident action also exist. Works by Darcy and Rogers (2014) explore tenant resistance in Australia and Wright (2006a, Chap. 5, 2006b, Chap. 6) describes resident opposition in Chicago. In these works the authors examine the constraints and obstacles faced by social housing residents in defying the plans of their state landlords. Residents are forced to act within parameters defined by their own lack of political resources on the one hand, and the multiple ways in which state actors (and their allies) can exercise their considerable power on the other. Many of these themes, more fully described below, are taken up by the authors in this special issue.

5. Analyzing resistance to displacement

By some accounts, resident resistance to public housing transformation has been less than might be expected (Clark & Johnson, 2009). Although tenant/community response has been notable in some places it has not materialized in other cities where it might have. By other accounts, the opposition of residents to their forced displacement and to the dissolution of their communities is common enough, what has been lacking is effective political organization of that opposition and media coverage of the same (Goetz, 2013b).

In either case, there are several dynamics at play in the redevelopment of public housing that make opposition itself, or the effective expression of opposition by residents, difficult. For example, many demolition and redevelopment initiatives begin after a prolonged period of disinvestment and de facto demolition in which projects are emptied of residents and the material conditions of the housing have been allowed to deteriorate. Thus, when redevelopment announcements are made there are few residents to constitute an opposition, and the neglected state of the property leads to a greater acceptance