God's waiting room: The rise and fall of South Beach as an unplanned retirement community, 1950–2000

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ABSTRACT

Between 1950 and 1980, South Beach, at the southern tip of Miami Beach, was transformed into an unplanned retirement community by the arrival of thousands of elderly, poor, mainly Jewish in-migrants. South Beach seniors had a profound impact on the local economy and became a dominant force in city politics, profoundly altering perceptions of what was formerly a tourist resort. After 1980, the elderly population of South Beach declined rapidly and effectively disappeared by the turn of the century. This essay traces the rise and fall of South Beach as a large-scale, informal, voluntary, urban retirement enclave to show how key features of the political economy of cities in the United States may frustrate the aspirations of environmental gerontology to enlist municipal governments in the effort to provide desirable options for aging-in-the-right-place to a broad socio-economic range of seniors.

Introduction

Although best known as a resort city, Miami Beach served as the site for one of the nation's largest unplanned retirement communities for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Between the end of World War II and the 1970s, South Beach (the southern part of Miami Beach) was inundated by elderly migrants – mainly Jewish, principally from the northeast, increasingly poor – who transformed the local economy, dominated municipal politics, and refashioned the use of space in what was formerly a ritzy tourist zone, thus changing the city's image from glamorous playground to ocean-side ghetto. Between 1980 and the end of the century, death, displacement, and redevelopment led

to an even more rapid decline of South Beach as a haven for seniors. Today, that influential retirement community has vanished, leaving almost no trace of the dramatic changes that so profoundly affected the area in the post-war era.

This article proceeds from the perspective that the large-scale, informal, urban retirement community created by South Beach seniors was not only a good place-to-age for them but also worthy of emulation by others, and that studying its rise and demise can assist gerontologists in their efforts to extend the benefits of voluntary self-segregation-by-age to a broad socio-economic range of retirees (Golant, 2015; Golant, 2008).[1] Almost without exception, the low-income, ethnic-minority seniors who chose South Beach as their preferred place to grow old did

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[1] In simplest terms, this article proceeds from the observation that the sort of large-scale, voluntary, informal, urban, age-segregated community embodied by South Beach was obviously appealing to thousands of seniors; that such a residential option should, therefore, be part of the spectrum of possibilities available to other seniors who might find it the right place to achieve residential normalcy; and that we can learn something about the possibilities and limits of making such an option available by delving into the past to understand what occurred to make, and then unmake, South Beach as a retirement haven. My point of reference for this perspective is Golant's extensive research on the subject of aging-in-place. Golant's sophisticated, comprehensive, humane, evidence-based approach suggests that achieving residential normalcy (a combination of mastery and comfort) requires recognition of the often-unappreciated diversity of preferences and needs of the elderly. Successful aging involves a broad range of factors that affect the living choices of seniors. Some prefer the now-standard model of active aging, trumpeted by the retirement industry, with its heavily marketed image of continued homeownership, abundant recreation, and festive sociability. Other seniors prefer to be more sedentary and withdrawn, embracing old age without attempting to sustain the illusion of eternal youth. Homeownership, though an appropriate option in some circumstances, is not always feasible even for long-time homeowners, and may not be possible for seniors who only have the means to rent. Close study of the preferences of a large sample of seniors reveals differences on dozens of issues that affect feelings of comfort and mastery: community involvement, physical ability, tolerance for diversity, political affiliation, proximity to family, desire for interaction with neighbors, desire for pets, tolerance for children, ethnic diversity, and the list goes on. These preferences can best be understood as being arrayed along multiple spectra; the choices of individual seniors are frequently independent of one another (for example, not all seniors who prefer homeownership also prefer age-segregation), undermining any notion that a one-size-fits-all solution is possible. The result is an approach to caring for the elderly that advocates the customization of living arrangements guided by the polestar of residential normalcy, thus necessitating an almost infinitely varied range of options that allows individual seniors to adapt to the inevitable, though often unpredictable, changes of life between the Third and Fourth Ages. It recognizes as well that the choices made by individual seniors will not remain the same over time, as mental and physical capacities change and as attitudes and preferences develop. Golant also recommends teaching coping skills so that the elderly who are not able to customize their residential choices can adapt to the inadequacies of those places that they are able to afford and manage. The goal of this article, therefore, is to learn from South Beach in the hopes that its history can tell us something useful about making large-scale, informal, urban, age-segregated communities an option for seniors who might wish to live in such circumstances.

so by migrating with the express purpose of living out their final years in a tropical paradise. This was not a case, in other words, of aging-in-place as a result of residential inertia, although many who came to South Beach as young-old retirees would subsequently spend decades there (in some cases, trapped by poverty and ill-health). The fact that so many seniors moved to South Beach by choice is the strongest indication that they thought of it as the right place-to-age, not as a dump where they were discarded by an inhumane, cold-hearted society that preferred not to take care of them – and their voices should be given substantial weight as we formulate contemporary approaches to successful aging. Therefore, although this article will recount the difficulties confronted by South Beach seniors, it strongly endorses the view expressed by Golant (1985:26) that "There is nothing intrinsically evil, malicious, or immoral about advocating that large numbers of older people live near each other." South Beach seniors created an insular community, to be sure, but one that was not "socially isolated from the rest of the world." Instead, South Beach illustrates many of the positive features of age-segregated housing that notably improved the quality of the retirement years of thousands of elderly South Beach residents: an empathetic, supportive subculture of like-minded individuals sharing a common history; environs that facilitated the creation of pleasurable, memorable experiences; political power flowing from demographic concentration; and a local economy devoted to their distinctive needs and preferences.

These benefits are often associated with planned, formal, age-segregated housing for higher-income seniors, "where land uses, population makeup, and activities are carefully controlled" (Golant, 1985:26)". In recent years, Sun City, Arizona, the nation's leading planned retirement community, has been the most celebrated example of this phenomenon, in spite of the fact that only a small percentage of seniors have the means to live in such places. Opened in 1960 by developer Del Webb, Sun City offered seniors an active lifestyle free from the obligations of work and family (with children excluded by deed covenants and zoning ordinances), thus sustaining the image of a seemingly "ageless self." Though originally intended for modest-income residents, Sun City has been redefined by the affluence of its predominantly Midwestern in-migrants who have successfully isolated themselves and their resources from the surrounding polity, especially in matters of school funding. Walled off from neighboring communities and inward-looking by design, Sun City is the architype of state-sanctioned, court-approved self-segregation by age and class, making it the subject of considerable criticism (Gober, 1985; Gober, 2003; Gober, 2006; Kastenbaum, 1993; Laws, 1995; Mchugh, 2000; Mchugh, Gober & Borough, 2002).

Currently, the age-friendly cities movement offers the best hope for extending the benefits of this sort of large-scale, voluntary age-segregation to a substantial group of less affluent seniors (World Health Organization, 2007a; World Health Organization, 2007b; Buffel, Phillipson, & Scharf, 2012; Scharlach & Lehning, 2013). The age-friendly cities movement goes beyond a recognition that place matters and that successful aging is not merely a matter of individual indicators (e.g., health and cognitive functioning). It also broadens the focus of environmental gerontology beyond the physical attributes of rooms, buildings, and their surroundings that make cities and neighborhoods more amenable to seniors. It emphasizes instead that "political jurisdictions, their administrators, their regulations, their intergovernmental cooperative relationships and their styles of governments also matter" (Golant, 2014:3). The result is an ambitious aggregation of innovative and coordinated policies and programs addressing housing, transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings, social and civic participation and inclusion, public information, and community health. Given its potential to transform the urban environment in broadly desirable ways, creating age-friendly cities thus has the "lofty" goal of not only addressing the needs of the growing population of elderly who wish to stay put as they age at a lower cost than in nursing homes, it also promises to "reinvent and rejuvenate the form and functioning of urban

settlements and create sustainable (or smart growth) communities that could accommodate the lifestyles and activities of populations irrespective of their age or disabilities" (Golant, 2014:5). Unfortunately, American urban areas have been laggard in their participation in the age-friendly cities movement, with no official commitment at any level of government and only spotty efforts by a handful of cities characterized either by motivated philanthropic organizations or strong, visionary leaders (Golant, 2014:11-12). In short, our conception of how cities might contribute to successful aging has outstripped the institutional capacity of our urban areas to implement our plans for them.

As part of the ongoing effort to make a multiplicity of options for successful aging available to the largest possible group of seniors, this article delves into the past to understand the difficulties created by the intersection of voluntary, informal age-segregation and the political economy of cities. It is not my goal to transport our current toolkit of policies, programs, and perspectives on aging into the past to speculate as to how the problems of yesteryear might have been solved with the solutions of today. Not only would that be an improper use of history, but it seriously underestimates the structural constraints on public policies associated with urban political economy in the United States. There is no doubt that seniors of the past would have benefited from solutions available in the present; the last half century has been full of advances in the understanding of aging and in the development of techniques for assisting seniors at every stage of retirement. However, it is now clear that some of the problems of the past are still with us, especially those associated with cities as centers of care for less affluent seniors. Demographic trends in the United States and around the globe have already transformed cities into the primary centers of population; increasing life expectancy means that those urban populations will continue to age; persistent inequality in the midst of spectacular economic growth suggests that economic distress is, as always, unlikely to disappear in retirement. There can be no denying, therefore, that cities will become the home for the vast majority of people on the planet, including those with few resources, and that those people will live longer: cities around the globe will become the retirement centers of the future, and few of them will look like Sun City.

This article uses the case of South Beach to highlight four aspects of urban political economy that will continue to be problematic as gerontologists elaborate their plans for making cities more age-friendly: the primacy of economic development for municipal public policy; the difficulties of local redistributive policies; the paramount importance of image/identity for local economic development; and the dangers of urban demographic instability. American cities confront several constraints – interjurisdictional competition, institutional dependence, and structural weakness, in particular – that limit their range of policy choices, especially the possibility of aiding needy residents (regardless of age) through redistributive social welfare policies, including those associated with the sweeping changes in the design and management of urban areas represented by efforts like the age-friendly cities movement.

First and foremost, cities are involved in interjurisdictional competition for mobile capital, firms, productive labor, and residents which compels them (1) to focus on developmental and allocative activities (economic growth and efficient provision of basic services) that enhance their ability to raise money and (2) to shy away from redistributive policies that might advance worthy social objectives (Peterson, 1981; Tiebout, 1956; Oates, 1972; Oates, 1999).[2] As Judd and Swanstrom (2008:303) observe, "Cities are constrained to emphasize economic development because of the place they occupy in the American intergovernmental system, which forces them to compete

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[2] Competition for mobile firms and residents is the central argument of fiscal federalism, an extraordinarily influential perspective on urban management over the last half century, which emphasizes that taxpayers "vote with their feet" by moving away from jurisdictions that do not offer their preferred packages of taxes and services.