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Mixed-Income Housing Developments:
Separating Myth from Reality

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Abstract

Mixed-income housing has long been promoted as a panacea to the largely-failed social housing experiments of the mid-twentieth century. However, more often than not, the social mix philosophy leads to more problems than it solves. It amounts to a spatial solution to what are complex social and spatial problems. Moreover, the support for this approach calls into question its true motives: is it intended to truly benefit low-income populations or is it merely a form of stealth gentrification? A better solution would be to identify assets within existing low-income housing developments and increase investments in a targeted fashion, rather than expecting benefits to trickle down.

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Introduction

A recent *Globe & Mail* article[1] described a proposal for (as well as the backlash against) a residential development in Vancouver, which, if built, would force social housing and market-value tenants to use separate entrances. While many observers have expressed concern over this kind of segregation in a mixed income development, these so-called 'poor doors' point to a more fundamental problem with the concept of mixed-income housing. Social mix theory (on which mixed-income housing is based) has long been promoted as a panacea to the failed social housing experiments of the mid-twentieth century. However, the lofty goals of social mix philosophy have proven difficult to reconcile with social realities.

Faced with the intractable societal crises of affordable housing shortages and lack of access to economic opportunities, civic boosters and social mix advocates across North America are proposing redevelopment of existing social housing into mixed-income projects. However, while this approach purports to kill several birds with one stone, in reality it forces a simplistic spatial solution onto an array of complex social problems. Moreover, the support for this approach calls into question its true motives: is it intended to truly benefit low-income populations or is it merely a form of 'gentrification by stealth'[2]? Looking at evidence provided by a case study suggests the latter is the case. A more effective solution would be to identify assets within existing low-income housing developments and increase investments in a targeted approach, rather than expecting benefits to trickle down.

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1 Woo, "Vancouver Developer Accused of Using 'Poor Door' for Low-Income Residents."
2 Bridge, Butler, and Lees, Mixed Communities: Gentrification by Stealth?

Background

Early social mix theories

Social mix as a planning principle can be traced back to Britain during the Industrial Revolution. Benevolent factory owners, such as John Cadbury, sought to "raise the workers' standards of health and morality" by constructing utopian communities in which class boundaries were less visible, if not completely broken down [3]. Towards the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the idea of social mix was incorporated into the Garden City movement. However some early planners of the movement, such as Ebenezer Howard, argued that social mix should take place in the city as a whole, and not at the neighbourhood or block level, which ought still to be segregated by income [4].

Post-WWII

The resurgence of social mix as an urban planning principle occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By then, the effects of two decades of modernist urban planning—separated land uses, expressways, slum clearance, and 'urban renewal' strategies—had become apparent. The work of William Julius Wilson [5] popularized the idea of a geographically-concentrated kind of poverty, characterized by concentrated crime, drug use, and welfare dependency. The failure of this social housing model prompted governments to take action, notably the HOPE VI program launched in the U.S. in 1992. This was a $5 billion program designed to rehabilitate poor quality public housing. While this action sometimes consisted of renovating extant social housing, more often than not funds were used for the demolition of public housing and the construction of mixed-income developments.

Theoretical foundation of modern social mix theory

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[3] August, "Social Mix and Canadian Public Housing Redevelopment: Experiences in Toronto," 84–85.
[4] August, "Social Mix and Canadian Public Housing Redevelopment: Experiences in Toronto."
[5] *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy.*

A useful framework for conceptualizing social mix theory has been developed by Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber[6]. In their model, the authors identify four main hypotheses made by social mix theorists, relating to the following concepts: social networks, social control, behaviour modification, and political economy of place.

Social networks

The main idea here is that by living in close proximity, residents coming from different socioeconomic classes will have no choice but to come into contact with one another. In doing so, they will gradually become familiar with and begin to trust one another. A key assumption of this hypothesis is that more affluent residents will aid lower-income residents by passing on job search information, which will lead to higher employment rates and less welfare dependency [7]. Essentially, residents are building social capital—"mutually supportive institutions within a neighbourhood that residents can turn to 'when the going gets rough'". [8]

Social control

Having established a base level of trust and accountability to one another, it is thought that delinquency will be reduced as a result. The increased possibility of being recognized for committing crimes means that fewer people will enter the criminal justice system, keeping individuals within the community and improving quality of life for the community at large.

Behaviour modification

With increased social encounters between people of different incomes comes the adoption of positive behaviours. This entails the replacement of a "culture of poverty" with a "culture of work and responsibility" as affluent residents model middle-class values for lower-income residents. This

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[6] "The Theoretical Basis for Addressing Poverty through Mixed-Income Development," 376–377.
[7] Ibid., 377–378.
[8] Temkin and Rohe, "Social Capital and Neighborhood Stability: An Empirical Investigation," 63.

aids in strengthening the previous two components, by lowering crime and creating a similar neighbourhood culture.

Political economy of place

Once local social networks are in place, the community can now use its collective power to lobby for improvements to services and infrastructure, which benefits all residents.

Criticism of social mix theory

A number of scholars have taken issue with the way in which social mix theory has been formulated, and call into question some of its key underlying assumptions.

Oversimplifying a complex problem

By representing "concentrated poverty" as the problem, it is implied that lower-income individuals possess serious character flaws that reach a kind of critical mass, causing numerous negative spin-off effects when clustered together. In advocating for the deconcentration of poverty, one is in effect proposing "simplistic spatial solutions to what are complex social and spatial problems" [9].

A 'Trojan horse' for gentrification

Another strain of criticism of social mix theory is based in the political economy tradition. From this viewpoint, promoting mixed income redevelopments of public housing is simply a cover for advancing development consonant with the interests of the neoliberal state[10]. In light of the accelerating spatial segregation of incomes in cities such as Toronto[11], some of the few remaining developable parcels of land within higher income areas are the sites of public housing. In this way,

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[9] Crump, "Deconcentration by Demolition: Public Housing, Poverty, and Urban Policy," 582.
[10] Walks, "The Urban in Fragile, Uncertain, Neoliberal Times: Towards New Geographies of Social Justice?"
[11] Hulchanski, "The Three Cities within Toronto: Income Polarization among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005."

the introduction of mixed (read: higher) income households into these neighbourhoods effectively constitutes municipally-sponsored gentrification[12].

Loss of public housing units

While the precise definition of gentrification is open to debate, there can be little doubt that redeveloping public housing by replacing some or all units with market rate dwellings often results in a net loss of subsidized units to the social housing system[13]. However, even in cases where the total number of subsidized or rent-geared-to-income units remains the same, the decision to build market rate units instead of more affordable housing when there is a severe shortage of the latter is bound to be called into question [14].

Social mix in Canada: success or failure?

In Canada, social mix policies have been promoted on the grounds that "[...] a mix of assisted tenants with tenants paying market rents would contribute to the financial viability of the projects [and] social problems associated with projects which contained high concentrations of low- income households would be reduced" [15]. Since the early 2000s, a number of these redevelopments of public housing have been undertaken, many in the Greater Toronto Area.

In a way, these new developments represent another form of public-private-partnership (market-rate tenants making up the private component) which Canadian cities increasingly have no choice but to pursue given the historic dearth of financial resources accorded to them by provincial and federal governments and lack of novel revenue-generating mechanisms.

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[12] August, "Negotiating Social Mix in Toronto's First Public Housing Redevelopment: Power, Space and Social Control in Don Mount Court."
[13] Arthurson, *Social Mix and the City: Challenging the Mixed Communities Consensus in Housing and Urban Planning Processes*.
[14] Silver, *Good Places to Live: Poverty and Public Housing in Canada.*
[15] Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, "Section 56.1 Non-Profit and Cooperative Housing Program Evaluation," 162.

In order to assess how well the social mix model corresponds to reality, it is useful to look at a case study. This approach reveals the disparities between touted benefits and real outcomes.

A Toronto case study

The Don Mount Court housing redevelopment in Toronto has been the subject of research for a number of years[16] [17]. Constructed in 1969 under the federal Urban Renewal Program (before it was cancelled), this development comprised 232 units arranged in a row house configuration. Thirty years later, when inspections revealed severe deterioration of the structures, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) decided to renovate it. However, instead of simply replacing the units with new public housing, TCHC decided to redevelop it according to contemporary, mixed-income, New Urbanist planning principles. In the end, all 232 units of public housing were replaced, and 187 market-rate condominium townhouses were added to the site[18].

Power struggles in a socially-mixed development

When tenants returned home following the redevelopment and new market-rate residents moved in, a new power dynamic quickly set in. A community development worker was incorporated into project plans from the beginning, but acted mainly as a liaison between tenants, market residents, and owners of adjacent homes. The residents formed various committees with purviews ranging from seniors' issues, youth, training, the environment, and crime[19].

Following the social mix model outlined above[20], one would expect interactions between tenants and market residents to be of an equal and reciprocal character. However, what played out in reality was that the more affluent market residents quickly asserted their power over proceedings.

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[16] August, "Social Mix and Canadian Public Housing Redevelopment: Experiences in Toronto."
[17] August, "Negotiating Social Mix in Toronto's First Public Housing Redevelopment: Power, Space and Social Control in Don Mount Court."
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Joseph, Chaskin, and Webber, "The Theoretical Basis for Addressing Poverty through Mixed-Income Development."

Sometimes, they acted in accordance with the wishes of tenants, but only in cases where there was mutual interest. In areas of disagreement, market residents exercised power through dominating meetings and shutting out tenants' voices by procedural means[21] [22]. Rather than modeling good behaviour for low-income tenants, market residents sought to curb delinquency (often just the appearance of it) by zealously contacting law enforcement whenever they witnessed "inappropriate use" of space[23]. Such behaviour could consist of anything from area youth loitering outdoors to tenants using the back lane for a barbecue. Tenants were quick to point out the racially-charged character of these encounters, given that a large percentage of the low-income tenants were black. As one teenager put it, "People call the police every time they see black people outside"[24].

Envisioning alternatives to mixed-income redevelopments

While the situation for public housing in some of Canada's larger centres seems bleak, it is possible to envision solutions by looking at slow-growth cities such as Winnipeg. Smaller cities are not subject to the same powerful forces of gentrification and neighbourhood change that are present in rapidly growing cities like Toronto, and as such offer opportunities for more subtle interventions.

The case of Lord Selkirk Park, Winnipeg

The revitalization of Lord Selkirk Park, in Winnipeg's North End, has been identified as an example of a successful public housing redevelopment[25]. Instead of immediately looking to introduce higher-income individuals into the neighbourhood as a means of improving it, the neighbourhood's *Rebuilding from Within* strategy takes a community development approach. Launched in 2005, this strategy identified the assets already present in the inner-city public housing project rather than

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[21] August, "Social Mix and Canadian Public Housing Redevelopment: Experiences in Toronto."
[22] August, "Negotiating Social Mix in Toronto's First Public Housing Redevelopment: Power, Space and Social Control in Don Mount Court."
[23] Ibid., 1170–1171.
[24] Ibid., 1171.
[25] Silver, *Good Places to Live: Poverty and Public Housing in Canada.*

focusing on what it did not have. Tailoring opportunities and supports to the community, using a holistic approach, building capacity, and hiring from within the community were important components of this strategy[26].

Grassroots redevelopment

While it is important to note that this project has not solved all of the community's problems, it has made gains in terms of increasing residents' engagement and building a sense of hope. Although this program has suffered from underfunding, it demonstrates that given a small amount of help at the start, a community can begin to build social capital from within, rather than have it imposed from the top-down.

Conclusion

Social mix theory asserts that low-income individuals will naturally adopt behaviours and benefit from the social capital of their more affluent neighbours through living in close proximity. To many observers, this appears to be 'common sense' and it has proven very attractive from a policymaking standpoint. However, available evidence suggests that many of the purported benefits of social mix policies never actually materialize, and advancing a social mix agenda tends to accrue benefits and privilege to those already in possession of it.

To present public housing policy as a choice between continued decay or redevelopment into mixed-income communities is to present a false choice. Given the right tools and funding, public housing can be renewed from the inside out. If more governments were to use this approach, it would go a long way toward addressing the root causes of poverty, instead of reproducing geographies of social isolation and displacement.

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[26] Ibid., 125–128.

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