

## Commentary

*These comments relate to the articles in this Cityscape symposium by Levy, McDade, and Bertumen, by Keller et al., and by Kearns et al.*

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# On Spatial Solutions to Social Problems

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One of the persistent themes in the history of housing policy in the United States is that we almost never *do* housing policy for its own sake; that is, to provide or ensure the provision of “a decent home and suitable living environment” (to borrow the famous language from the 1949 Housing Act<sup>1</sup>) for all people. Instead, housing policy has long been about using housing for other purposes, such as limiting the potential for political unrest in the tenements during the Progressive Era’s reforms or absorbing surplus labor in the Great Depression with the initiation of federal public housing in 1937. In this way, the current emphasis on mixed-income housing fits into a long and not particularly glorious history. Mixed-income housing also fits into another, and comparably inglorious, history: that of trying to solve social problems by way of spatial solutions. In this brief commentary, I will discuss the goals of poverty alleviation and socioeconomic interaction and the failures of mixed-income housing policy to achieve its nominal goals.

## Poverty Alleviation

A central theme in, and justification for, mixed-income housing has always been its potential role in poverty alleviation. I am thus heartened by the recognition from Diane K. Levy, Zach McDade, and Kassie Bertumen that, after their exhaustive review of the evidence thus far, mixed-income housing does not reduce poverty. Furthermore, the useful (for reducing poverty and increasing incomes) things within mixed-income housing developments are services and interventions that could be implemented regardless of mixed-income housing. As Levy, McDade, and Bertumen put it, “If poverty alleviation is the primary goal, however, the path to it does not appear to require mixed-income living.” In this, the authors echo Joseph and his colleagues’ conclusions of several years ago from their meta-analysis of the evidence (see Joseph, 2006; Joseph, Chaskin, and Webber, 2007). Simply, very little evidence indicates that living in mixed-income housing increases the earnings or wealth of poor people. This recognition does appear to be the emerging consensus, and I am

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<sup>1</sup> *The Housing Act of 1949*. Public Law 81-71.

glad to see the change in perception. To be clear, I am not glad to see that poor people living in mixed-income developments have failed to realize improvements in their incomes or wealth. I am, however, glad that this view is being acknowledged as the consensus, because it means that perhaps we can finally stop talking about mixed-income housing as a solution to poverty. Because doing so is fundamentally a distraction from addressing the real ways in which poverty reduction happens.

Poverty is not a function of the spatial configuration of poverty. The concentration of poor people in geographic space may well make the experience of poverty worse for some, and it certainly seems to lead to unjust outcomes such as poor quality services, schools, and amenities. But the root causes of poverty within capitalism are the organization of labor markets (and the structure and character of the demand for labor in those markets) and the centrality of wage labor to household income and wealth. Efforts to deal with poverty must, on some level, deal with this reality. At the risk of being overly reductionist, we can thus reduce poverty in one of two primary ways: (1) by transforming the operation of labor markets such that being employed in waged labor means not being poor, or (2) by providing income support to those not in waged labor such that not being employed does not mean being poor.

Theoretically, mixed-income housing does intervene in the operation of labor markets, in two different ways: (1) it potentially increases the social capital of poor people, and (2) it improves the soft skills that employers always say they want from their employees via middle-class role models (of course, employers often say that to mask their discriminatory hiring practices; see Moss and Tilly, 2003). These interventions are modest in the operations of labor markets, however—focusing solely on fairly limited supply-side components of labor markets<sup>2</sup>—and their effects are more apparent than real.

## **Spatial Fixes for Sociopolitical Economic Problems**

Besides trying to deal with poverty in a roundabout and theoretically and empirically dubious way, space as the solution is a problem. And just as mixed-income housing policy is repeating the story (doing housing policy for reasons other than housing), so too is it mimicking the history of urban planning; a history that is littered with efforts to solve social problems by using a rearranged spatial form. Spatial determinism has been nearly endemic in planning. Ebenezer Howard, one of the definitive figures in the history of urban planning (whose influence is acknowledged by Jim Fraser, Deirdre Oakley, and Diane K. Levy in the introduction to this *Cityscape* symposium) began this process. His anarchist-inspired, revolutionary book *To-Morrow: The Peaceful Path to Real Reform* was about how to fundamentally transform the brutal living conditions for working-class people in late-19th-century England without violent revolution (Howard, 1898). It was rebranded a few years after its initial publication into *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, and instead of real social reform,

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<sup>2</sup> Theoretically, mixed-income developments may lead to significant increases in economic activity (primarily retail) in those neighborhoods. For this increase to yield significant growth in demand for labor, however, it would need to be in places with very little previous economic activity; changing from cheaper retail to wealthier retail does not lead to changes in aggregate demand for labor in a place, and it may not even much alter the mix or quality of the jobs for the workers. I am not sure much evidence suggests that such an increase in economic activity has occurred in too many mixed-income sites.

we got spatial changes and, ultimately, garden suburbs for rich people. This spatial determinism continued with the *Le Corbusier* modernist work that inspired so much of postwar public housing construction; thus the machine for living became the towers in parks and all that. Finally, the current moment has given us the new urbanist designs that will purportedly solve so many ecological, political, and social problems (and have been so central to so much of the HOPE VI—or Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere—housing that has been constructed).

We have seen this movie before; several times. We know how it ends. Spoiler alert: it ends with people a few decades from now deciding on a different spatial solution. They will then ridicule the old solutions, because all good Utopian thinking requires a rejection of what came before. Then they will not actually deal with the social problems. I am being glib here, but the idea that the way to deal with poverty or race or class relations is through a different demographic map and different design is one that really is remarkably similar to so many solutions in the past—solutions that have simply failed to achieve their stated goals.

The spatial component of mixed-income housing is intended to have clear implications for the relations between groups. That is, the proximity is intended to lead to interactions and observations that help poor people; that is, improve and increase the social capital of poor people. It is unclear whether this increase ever happens—and the evidence from the articles by Levy, McDade, and Bertumen, by JoDee Keller, Janice Laakso, Christine Stevens, and Cathy Tashiro, and by Ade Kearns, Martin McKee, Elena Sautkina, George Weeks, and Lyndal Bond further suggests that it does not. When thinking about why it does not happen, I have often been reminded of intergroup contact theory. Allport (1954) had a set of criteria for when contact between groups could reduce prejudice and produce meaningful intergroup interactions. The first criterion he had was that the groups have equal status. I have also been reminded of the tradition of community studies from the 1950s to the early 1970s within sociology. Writing at the tail end of that period and surveying what research had been done and what had been learned from it, Tilly (1973) famously asked, “Do Communities Act?” He also had three main criteria for when people in communities were likely to come together and act. His first criterion was “when communities are homogenous with respect to the main divisions of power at the regional or national level” (Tilly, 1973: 213).<sup>3</sup>

I mention these research traditions because we have allowed a very ahistorical and ageographic understanding of space and its role in social cleavages to take hold. We have viewed poverty reduction through the lens of the postwar city-versus-suburb divide (and the poor-versus-rich and Black-versus-White dichotomies that are so often piled onto city versus suburb in American social science). This has led us to simply overstate the significance of space in the production of social relations, processes, and divisions. Space may divide groups, but little reason exists, either theoretically or empirically, to believe that geographic proximity leads to greater equity, understanding, or even interaction between groups in society. Southern U.S. cities, after all, have long had lower

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<sup>3</sup> I recognize that intergroup contact theory is about reducing prejudice and increasing social understanding, and Tilly was primarily focusing on collective action within communities as places. Thus, neither one is a direct match with mixed-income housing. Both, however, contribute to the larger understanding of dynamics between social groups and in urban space. Both also remind us that we should not expect much when both tenure and class are different between market-rate renters or owners and affordable-housing renters or owners.

rates of racial segregation than Northern U.S. cities (see Denton, 2006), but this has hardly suggested the absence of racism or White privilege in Southern U.S. cities. And Manhattan Island has far less geographic distance between rich and poor than most American metropolises (if for no other reason than its compact size), and yet it has income inequality worse than any other city in the country; inequality that rivals that in Namibia or Sierra Leone (Roberts, 2012). In both of these cases, the relative absence of spatial separation has been a function of the strength and durability of the social divisions in question. And in both cases, nothing about proximity bridges those divides or enables those on the losing end to gain anything.

We need different maps; more precisely, we need our maps to convey different realities. One of the principal components of racial and economic justice is a very different set of spatial processes and spatial outcomes in our cities, and these efforts must include race- and class-integrated neighborhoods. But that new cartography must be created as part of the social processes of struggling for racial and economic justice. We cannot create a new cartography and then expect the social outcomes to simply emerge from the new spatial form. The gaps between groups are simply too great to be bridged by a new geography alone. Even if we seem as yet unable to break the mixed-income orthodoxy, I am glad to see that we are finally recognizing this.

## Author

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