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Social Mix as a Goal of Housing Policy: Lessons for Planners

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A widely acknowledged benefit of urban life is the opportunity to interact with people who have a different background than one's own. When communities are perceived to deviate from this normative model, such as in the supposedly bland middle-class post-war suburbs or with the concentration of disadvantaged people in inner-city public housing, decision makers tend to promote social mix policies as an antidote to the ills resulting from homogenous neighbourhoods (Sarkissian, 1976, 240). The apparent consensus that diversity is a good thing begins to erode when the discussion turns to specific measures that attempt to modify the social mix in a particular area or neighbourhood. Vancouver has had recent examples where social mix plans have been criticized: in the case of the Olympic Village for threatening the viability of market-level condominiums in the same project (Geller 2010), and in the Downtown Eastside for paving the way for the gentrification of the neighbourhood (Wyly, Ley & Blomley 2011). These cases illustrate the complexity of social mix policy, and show the need for a careful understanding of the topic by planners. This essay will attempt to develop that nuanced position by reviewing the history of social mix initiatives and the policy rationale behind them, discussing the criticisms that have been leveled against social mix policy, suggesting contextual factors that planners should consider while developing plans for social mix, and highlighting documented strategies to promote positive social interaction between neighbours of different backgrounds.

The idea that living in socially mixed neighbourhoods will bring benefits to the wealthy and disadvantaged alike has a long pedigree. Its 19th century origins have been ably traced by Sarkissian (1976), who notes that the first proposals for socially mixed communities arose out of concern in industrializing England that growing divisions

between workers and the wealthy were causing “class antagonisms” (234). Proponents of new mixed villages typically sought refuge from the “degradation” and intensity of industrial cities and attempted to create communities with “neighbourly values and easy social communications which were the crowning virtues of the small town” (234). Arthurson (2008) notes that a primary motive for mixing different classes together at this time was to dilute “the concentrations of the working classes, rupturing their social solidarity and deflecting their perceived, potentially threatening behaviors” either by having them live near the middle-class or through “volunteer visitors” who would act as “middle-class role models to educate the working classes and expose them to more appropriate models of behavior” (490). At the same time, many planners and proto-planners advocated for mixed communities because of their view that society as a whole requires forms of dissonance for psychological growth and innovation (Sarkissian, 238) and the belief that “the mixed community is an educational two-way street” benefitting the middle-class as much as the disadvantaged (Sarkissian, 243).

Arthurson and Sarkissian both point to the post-World War II period as the next era of major significance in social mix policy. Returning soldiers boosted demand for homes and governments scrambled to provide adequate housing, resulting in extensive suburban expansion as well as inner city redevelopment. Sarkissian notes that in central cities “services had deteriorated, housing standards had fallen, crime was rife, and many areas were officially pronounced ‘slums’ by urban renewal authorities” (241). Urban renewal programs in America promoted social mix as a way to “stem the movement of upper classes to the suburbs” and help stabilize poor communities that could not otherwise support quality public services (241). Ultimately, the post-war housing renewal

version of social mix was found to be problematic; on the one hand, the “mix of housing in redeveloped neighbourhoods distinctly favoured the middle class” (Sarkissian, 241), and on the other, many postwar housing projects are now seen to be homogenous clusters of poverty, crime and other social ills (Musterd & Andersson, 762). In the United States, these concentrations of poverty have historically had a racialized dimension, with segregation by ethnicity accompanying segregation by class. As many of these social housing projects have fallen into disrepair and are due for redevelopment, the American government has attempted to convert the neighbourhoods into mixed-income communities through grant programs such as HOPE VI (Musterd & Andersson, 766).

The Canadian encounter with social mix policy, according to Harris (1993), also began with a post-war public housing program. Planners encountered stiff opposition to low-income housing proposals in existing neighbourhoods, and started to recognize the “geographical segregation” and “social isolation” that resulted when low-income projects were actually built (Harris, 308). Harris suggests that social mix projects in Canada were designed “to make subsidized housing more acceptable to recipient neighbourhoods” and “generate internal subsidies that would keep down project (and program) costs” (308). The tools used to accomplish social mix at the federal level were “programs for cooperative and non-profit housing” (308) which began in the late 1970s, and major projects that were initiated at this time included the St. Lawrence neighbourhood in Toronto and False Creek in Vancouver. Unlike the United States, Canada’s experience with social mix policy has been primarily based on socio-economic mix rather than ethnic mix, though Harris notes there are “important local exceptions” in major cities such as Toronto and Vancouver (309). Social mix policies and goals remain popular in

inner-city redevelopment project, as can be seen in plans for the Regent Park redevelopment in Toronto, and Southeast False Creek and the Woodward Building in Vancouver (Eberle, Serge & Losier, 14).

Given the enduring popularity of social mix policy in Canada and elsewhere, a closer examination of the rationale behind it is warranted. A review of social mix literature reveals that there are three main categories of justification for mixed-income developments, though individual programs may emphasize some of the rationales while ignoring or avoiding the others.

First, social mix policies are seen as part of a broader economic development strategy for cities that is both “economically lucrative and politically viable” (Joseph & Chaskin, 370). With the departure of wealthy residents to the suburbs and an ensuing decline in property values, inner-city municipalities are faced with a reduction in their tax base and ability to provide services to their citizens. By reintroducing the middle class back to the inner city, this trend is reversed or at least slowed, and economic stability can be maintained. Under this same category, mixed-income projects can be seen as a lucrative opportunity for developers who want to cash in on the new middle-class interest in downtown living, and utilize social mix in response to local opposition to redevelopment as a “strategy that can unite otherwise divided political constituencies and generate the financing necessary to secure and redevelop prime inner-city land” (Joseph & Chaskin, 370). This category of policy rationale is the least cited as a reason for promoting social mix, and most arguments focus on the remaining two “neighbourhood effect” rationales that impact spatial concentrations of disadvantaged people.

Secondly, social mix policies are justified as a way to alleviate the physical or spatial conditions that keep people trapped in poverty. William Julius Wilson's 1987 book on inner-city African American poverty, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, spawned a host of follow-up studies on the conditions of inner-city social housing projects and led to greater awareness of how where people lived affected their socio-economic outcomes. Some of the physical attributes of poor neighbourhoods said to reproduce poverty include spatial mismatch between jobs and housing (Galster, 23) and "underinvestment in infrastructure, goods, and services in predominantly minority communities" (Joseph & Chaskin, 374). Under this rationale, the increases in tax base and political influence from middle-class in-migration are a means to improve the physical conditions that lead to poverty. Alternately, social housing could be provided in existing middle class neighbourhoods to achieve the same balance; an Australian evaluation of such policies noted that the "social mix of an area provided a basis for allocating services at an average level and was about equitable distribution of public funds across different neighborhoods" (Arthurson, 494).

The third and final category of policy rationale is another form of neighbourhood effect, but instead of emphasizing the physical or spatial attributes of communities, its focus is on the social relationships that influence people's behaviours and thus their socio-economic outcomes. The underlying premise is largely the same paternalistic view held by the mid-19th century social mix proponents, namely that mixing social classes will "raise the standards of the lower classes' by nurturing a 'spirit of emulation'" (Sarkissian, 231). However, this rationale has gained sophistication and there are a variety of mechanisms by which this neighbourhood effect is said to operate.

Galster (2007) provides a summary of the different ways in which social interaction between neighbours can have an effect on behaviour or socio-economic outcomes. Residents may mimic the positive or negative behavior of their neighbours, a process referred to as “socialization” (Galster, 21). Some socialization effects are only evident when a particular threshold of group concentration is reached, where that group’s beliefs or norms then become dominant or influence the other residents in a neighbourhood; this effect is labeled the “epidemic” effect (22). Other socialization effects only impact some residents in a neighbourhood, a process called “selective socialization”, such as the case where “secondary school dropouts may discourage only their same-age peers from attending school” (22). People can also be affected by their residential environment by the “social network” they have available to support them through challenges; this can occur when people with similar backgrounds have a shared affinity, or when people with different backgrounds are able to support each other despite their differences, creating social cohesion (Galster, 22). Bolt et al. (2010) refer to this cohesive effect as “the ‘glue’ holding society together” (131), potentially defusing conflict through greater contact and mutual understanding between groups. If there are two or more strongly defined groups in the same neighbourhood, this may lead to a situation where they are in competition with each other over scarce resources, resulting in conflict and negative experiences. If one group is perceived to be better-off than the other, this can result in feelings of “relative deprivation” (22), causing jealousy and lowering the self-esteem of the disadvantaged group. Finally, Galster mentions that an area can experience “stigmatization” when a large proportion of its residents are

disadvantaged, resulting in negative stereotyping by governmental and market actors, and reductions in “the flows of resources” (22).

By adjusting the composition of people in a given area from homogenous to relative heterogeneity, policymakers believe they can activate the varying mechanisms of neighbourhood effect described above to alleviate poverty and improve the lot of the disadvantaged. In practice and theory, this belief has been subject to considerable criticism. Galster suggests that depending on the desired mechanism of neighbourhood effect, it may be preferred to have disadvantaged groups either clustered together, widely dispersed, or mixed evenly with advantaged groups; that is, there are “radically different conclusions regarding desired neighbourhood household mix” depending on what mechanism you are trying to activate, a quandary that has not been adequately addressed in existing social mix programs (35).

When social mix programs are successful in attracting the middle class back to the inner city, many scholars point out that the long run outcome of this process is gentrification of the neighbourhood and the subsequent displacement of the very disadvantaged households that the social mix program was intending to help. Blomley (2004) suggests that this result may even be what was originally desired, with social mix policy framed as “a conscious instrument of residential purification, designed to exclude ‘anti-social’ elements” (99). Unlike all the supposed benefits for the disadvantaged that are supposed to flow from social mix policies, Lees (2008) observes that in an actual project in Toronto “the fall-out was homeowner NIMBYism, significant rent increases and tenant displacement” (2457). Similarly, Smith (2003) notes the unintended consequences of social mix policies in Vancouver: “by increasing the number of market

units in the area and encouraging the settlement of affluent households, pressures of upgrading in the Downtown Eastside were intensified” (504).

Authors have also questioned whether the neighbourhood effects sought by policymakers will even take place if residential mix is achieved, given that frequent social interaction between people of very different backgrounds is a prerequisite for most of the social mechanisms to operate. Examining the social relationships between renters and owners in a neighbourhood, Kleinhans (2004) concludes “owners have largely different social worlds compared to social renters, spending more time away from the estate and using local facilities far less than renters” (377). This social distance may even be intensified in the case of gentrifying neighbourhoods: Rose (2004) describes the multi-stage nature of gentrification, with early gentrifiers being more likely to mix with the original disadvantaged inhabitants of a neighbourhood, and later stage gentrifiers being more individualistic and unlikely to interact with neighbours of a different background than their own. Walks and Maaranen (2008) have identified gentrification, often seen as an agent “positive public policy tool” for increased social mix, as instead a driver of increased polarization and reduced social mix (293).

Further critiques of social mix policies have pointed to the diminishment, or lack of improvement in social well-being that result from such policies: Baum et al. (2010) observe that residents of socially mixed projects exhibit lower levels of neighbourhood satisfaction than those in relatively homogenous neighbourhoods, and Graham et al. (2009) conclude from a nation-wide study of Great Britain that the mix of tenure in a given area does have a great impact on indicators of social well-being. These results suggest that planners and policymakers should be wary of heralding social mix policies

as a panacea for social ills, and that claims made about the efficacy of social mix should be modest.

The abovementioned critiques, beyond drawing attention to the shortcomings of social mix policy, have also yielded insights that have the potential for improving social mix projects. If there is political will and determination to pursue social mix policies, planners would do well to include the following considerations as part of their program design.

First, when discussing or proposing social mix policies, a key issue is the scale of mix. Sarkissian laments in 1976 that “throughout decades of discussion on social mix, remarkably little attention has been paid to the vital question of scale” (243), with historic examples of proposed spatial scales running from entire colonies in New Zealand to Clarence Perry’s influential “neighbourhood units”. The challenge of scale is to define the proper size of area, whether it is a block, neighbourhood, city or region within which a mix of people is to be encouraged. Harris (1993) suggests that social mix policies should be pursued in social housing projects because “mixed projects are superior to segregated low-income housing” (317). However, according to Harris the mix should not be too fine-grained: “the most effective mixed projects are likely to be large, allowing mix at the neighbourhood scale to be achieved without forcing people to live next to people who are different from themselves” (317). His tentative guidelines are that the maximum size of a social housing project should be “about twenty units” (317). Eberle et al. (2007) found that in discussion with a panel of Canadian planners, most respondents believed that “at a small scale, homogenous neighbourhoods are preferable and social inclusion is not necessarily a valid goal [because] many studies have shown that

relationships are better in relatively homogenous neighbourhoods, particularly if they are not forced” (22). Many of the planners interviewed by Eberle et al. preferred to think of social heterogeneity as a “city and metropolitan scale” issue (22), and when looking at the neighbourhood or block level, they suggested that a more adequate measure of social inclusion would be the “porosity” of the area (i.e. the extent to which an area is accessible and open to all). In this view, a social housing project such as Toronto’s original Regent Park would be seen as problematic because the lack of through-roads generates a feeling that the project is detached from the city. Planners working to implement social mix policies should be cognizant of the spatial scale which they are targeting and the reasons why that scale was chosen, and they should be attuned to other measures and strategies for improving social inclusion, such as “porosity”.

The other key consideration for designing social mix projects is that most of the benefits arising out of social mix neighbourhood effects are premised on increased interaction between advantaged residents and the less well-off, and this relationship should not be taken for granted. The desired interaction may not actually happen; Lees (2008) suggests after reviewing the literature on social interaction in mixed communities that “it is not realistic to assume that people from different social class backgrounds or income bands living cheek-by-jowl will actually mix, let alone integrate”, and that “socially mixed communities are just as likely to engender social conflict as social harmony, due to the clash of different cultures, classes and socioeconomic groups “ (2460). Due to the increasing prominence of mobile communications technology, even neighbours with similar backgrounds may be unlikely to interact with each other, instead opting for more intense and increase contact with a more geographically dispersed social

network (SURP 874 class discussion; March 31, 2011). Planners implementing social mix policies need to view their projects holistically and include design elements and program strategies that will help to foster social interaction between residents of different backgrounds if they are to attain any of the benefits social mix policy is intended to provide.

Several researchers have suggested strategies for promoting social interaction among residents with mixed socio-economic backgrounds. Casey et al. (2007) evaluate a series of case study neighbourhoods and acknowledge that although both owners and renters in mixed tenure communities tend to have 'mobile lifestyles' which entail social contacts outside of their home neighbourhood, there were important features in their neighbourhoods that did allow for greater interaction. The most important of these features was the availability of high-quality local services, such as schools, libraries and shopping, within easy walking distance of homes (331). Casey et al. postulate that these shared services facilitate interaction by mingling people both at the local facility itself as well as encouraging informal contact between people on shared walkways on their way to and from the facilities. Casey et al. also suggest that in order to overcome stigma for low-income renters in mixed developments, the design of the buildings should be deliberately made so that "the distinction between private and rented housing is blurred" (332).

Chaskin and Joseph (2010) offer several strategies for promoting community cohesion in socially mixed communities. They suggest the use of participatory mechanisms, such as public meetings or community associations where all residents can be involved and have their voices heard. Chaskin and Joseph warn that these collective forums do have the potential to entrench differences between sub-groups or lead to

“social compartmentalization”, so it is important to emphasize issues that are of common interest to all residents, such as safety and social activities. Another way to enable interaction is through social activities “such as block parties, neighborhood festivals, barbeques, bingo nights, skating parties, performances, [and] field trips” that are “geared toward as broad a cross-section of residents as possible” (314). These social activities can particularly be a way for children in mixed housing projects to interact and start friendships, which in turn can lead to greater interaction between their parents. Chaskin and Joseph also suggest that community-focused projects can be a means to enhancing neighbourhood solidarity, although in the three case studies they explored there was little example of this actually occurring.

Talen (2006) focuses on the design strategies planners can use to enable and sustain stable and diverse communities. Like Casey et al., Talen argues that “equipping a neighbourhood with nonresidential uses—services, facilities, amenities, and the whole range of public and quasi-public resources” can be a way to promote interaction, and that institutions such as churches are particularly useful enhancing “cross-status ties” when low-income residents are relocated into a new neighbourhood (243). Together with the facilities themselves, Talen notes “the public realm, in the form of parks, plazas, streets, and other elements, may act in particular as both mitigator and generator of diversity”, and provide “shared space as opposed to places of privatized residential space, therefore providing a better chance for informal, collective control as well as a sense of shared responsibility” (243). In addition to the need for shared spaces, Talen suggests that successful diverse communities require a wide variety of housing types to enable households to “improve their standing ‘in place’” (244), a point echoed in Kleinmans

(2004, 372). By allowing for a range of housing choices within a community, more successful families will have an opportunity to have their housing career remain in the same neighbourhood. The longer a family is able to stay in a neighbourhood, the more likely they are to have built ties and social networks with other residents, thus increasing the potential for social interaction in mixed communities. Talen provides some examples of how diverse housing types can be added to single-family neighbourhoods that currently lack such diversity: planners could start by “allowing corner duplexes, walk-up apartments on side streets, duplexes that look like single-family homes, and accessory units over garages,” and relax exclusionary regulations by “allowing multi-family units where they have been excluded, and eliminating minimum lot size, maximum density, minimum setbacks, and other rules that work to prevent housing unit diversity” (244).

Like any other public policy, social mix programs have the potential to generate unintended consequences, such as gentrification, or they may be ineffectual because they are promoted at the wrong scale or the social distance between residents limits positive neighbourhood effects. These potential drawbacks do not mean that social mix policy is always an inappropriate course of action, and depending on the context there may valid reasons to use government regulations or incentives to encourage greater residential mix between people with disparate backgrounds. Planners ought to be aware of the long history of the social mix concept, the cogent criticisms that have been made against specific programs, and the techniques and strategies that can be employed to improve social mix projects, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

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