

Social Mix In the Making: Implications to Social Housing Redevelopment

Executive Summary

Described as a policy tool used to decrease social exclusion and spatial segregation, the aim of social mix is to create a diversified blend of residents by income, employment status, age, ethnicity, immigrant status and/or religious affiliation. Although frequently questioned and debated in academic and policy circles, social mix has recently re-emerged as part of a new conventional wisdom in planning thought and practice in North America. Since the 1990s, the trend of social mix in Canada has been towards the redevelopment of what were previously non-mixed, low-income social housing communities into a mix of market-rate and non market-rate units.

While social mix is emerging as a significant goal of housing policies in Canada, the complexities around implementation remain to be unraveled. This report seeks to gain a better understanding of the nature and implications of social mix as a housing policy instrument. *The research objective is to examine the implementation of social mix in social housing redevelopment and the implications for the planning practice and policy development.* In a broader sense, it is the intention of this report to offer useful documentation for future discourse that will further stimulate debate and encourage the establishment of best practices in social mix planning policies.

The research was conducted using the Little Mountain Housing Project (LMHP) as a case study. Built in 1954, the LMHP was the first public housing project in Vancouver, British Columbia, that was approved for subsidized rental housing for low-income individuals and families. As it existed, the LMHP provided 224 units of social housing to approximately 700 residents. In 2008, slated for redevelopment, the property was sold to a private developer, Holborn Properties. The controversy

that resulted from the privatization of public land to private ownership continues to the present day. Community based housing activists argued that the vision for the socially mixed, high-density project lacked transparency, resulting in the demolition of stable homes and the destruction of a community, along with the destabilization and displacement of long-term Little Mountain residents.

The practice of social mix remains a complex issue for social policy development and urban planning initiatives. As a vehicle to explore the implications of social mix amidst one slice of the Canadian social housing fabric, the case study in this research is useful in that it provides an illustrative example of the transformation of low-income housing into socially mixed housing, it holds contemporary relevance and it is characteristic of a Canadian example of social mix in the making.

Through a literature review, and examination of the LMHP, this report provides a framework for introducing social mix in social housing redevelopment. There are four major conclusions. First, from the literature, it becomes apparent that while assumptions exist around the means by which social mix can foster social harmony and equality, the achievement of inclusionary social mix strategies presents enormous challenges. Second, when driven by social justice values, social mix has the power to create and sustain social inclusion. When driven by market mechanisms and the private sector, social mix has the power to create and sustain a system of social exclusion. Third, consideration must be given towards the social and economic costs of displacing original tenants to avoid undue conflict between proponents and residents. Fourth, the social mix in social housing redevelopment is a substantial and elaborate process, which calls for a transparent and regulatory framework. In conclusion, several recommendations are provided to assist planners, housing authorities, developers and other stakeholders involved in the implementation of social mix in social housing redevelopment.