Revitalizing and Marketing Social Housing Estates

Kathy Arthurson

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A Case of "It puts your value down, I think if you've got them all around?"

Kathy Arthurson, Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

Abstract: Increasingly in Australia social housing estate regeneration programs involve partnerships between the public sector and private property developers. Using "The Parks Regeneration Project" as a case study, this paper explores questions about the way the new 'community' is being created through changing housing amenity and restructuring the social mix of the area. Social mix refers to the mix of housing tenures and socioeconomic variance of residents. While policy makers and private developers consider these aspects as crucial components of regeneration, the findings of the study suggest that changes to these characteristics will not automatically benefit disadvantaged social housing tenants. There strategies are more concerned with constructing place for those they want to consume it, new incoming more affluent middle-income homebuyers, rather than benefiting the most disadvantaged residents. Questions are raised about the commodification of what was previously public space and reductions to the stock of social housing and what the overall consequences and policy implications of these actions are likely to be. It is argued that the entry of private capital and the buying and selling of place through regeneration, to attract more affluent residents to the estates is likely to add to, rather than ameliorate the inequality of social housing residents in these areas.

Keywords: Social Mix, Estate Regeneration, "Social Housing, Tenure Mix"

Introduction

The title of this paper comprises a comment made by one home owner about the public housing tenure in the local neighbourhood. Similar viewpoints were expressed by other interviewees participating in a research project conducted on Australian social housing estates that have undergone regeneration. This paper draws on some of the findings of the project. In order to fully comprehend these sorts of comments it is necessary to briefly consider how the Australian social housing system has changed over the past 20 years.

Compared to many European countries, Australia has only a small government owned and administered social rental housing sector of 4.5 per cent of housing nationally. Levels of home ownership are high at 66.2 per cent reflecting the preference of the electorate for home ownership and greater support by governments for this tenure. The private rental sector houses 21.8 per cent of the population and community housing 0.4 per cent (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 2006: 16.4).

Despite long periods of strong economic growth and increased prosperity overall within Australian society, contemporary social housing has increasingly become housing for the most disadvantaged and complex, high need tenants. The processes of global economic restructuring coupled with changes in family structures and progressively tighter restrictions governing access to social housing has resulted in the sector moving from its original aim of providing housing for low income working families, to housing more complex, high need tenants. Contemporary tenants often experience mental health illnesses, substance abuse problems, unemployment and other compounding issues. Like many other industrialised countries, Australian social housing estates were built mainly, but not exclusively, in the period of strong economic growth following the end of the Second World War, to meet the demand for low cost and good quality housing, as at that time demand outstripped supply. Often the estates were built on the fringe areas of cities where the housing authorities bought up large tracts of low-cost land.

Today, common characteristics of the social housing estates include residents experiencing higher than average levels of unemployment, low-income and reliance on welfare benefits, poor educational outcomes, mental and physical health issues and problems of crime and anti-social behaviour (Arthurson & Jacobs 2006).

Simultaneously, as the complexity of managing the social housing tenure is increasing, housing authorities are faced with ageing stock, reductions in funding, and the withdrawal of support for government provision of social housing under neo-liberal government regimes and policy directions. Government assistance for social housing provided under
the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA), the major mechanism for funding social housing in Australia, has declined in real terms by almost 39 per cent between 1995-96 and 2004-2005 (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 2006: 16.7). Other challenges over the past decade have included the introduction of commercial principles into the delivery of social housing such as market rents, changes to security of tenure, tighter targeting of social housing and involving the private sector in the delivery of housing (Orchard & Arthurson 2005).

It is within this context, especially of limited funding for new social housing and commercialisation of the tenure, that partnerships between private property developers and housing authorities are increasingly being pursued as a panacea to regenerate social housing estates (Arthurson 2003). In posing the question of whether this model of regeneration benefits disadvantaged social housing tenants two key interrelated aspects are considered. First, the linking of housing amenity to the development and commodification of the idea of community, to be bought and sold on the private market. Second, the pursuit of social mix policies as a tool to regenerate disadvantaged estates.

The paper commences with a discussion of the way that the concept of ‘community’ has become commodified and marketed in relation to housing development. This is followed by examining the idea of social mix and how it is used in estate regeneration. Then the paper explores these two concepts in relation to ‘The Parks Urban Regeneration Project’ in South Australia.

Neighbourhood Regeneration, Housing and the Marketing of Community

Numerous commentators have highlighted that consumption has become a driving force in shaping the form of our contemporary cities and neighbourhoods. Neo-liberal government agendas have assisted these processes of consumption through promoting the viewpoint that everything has a value, which can ultimately be expressed in monetary terms. Harvey (1996: 296-298) argues that an increasing number of aspects of society are being turned into saleable items in order to create new niches for consumption activities that can be marketed and sold. He highlights how the movement of unrestricted market capital causes material inequalities in the urban landscape, producing “winners and losers” in terms of the impacts on particular localities. This perspective is pertinent to the formation of the concentrations of disadvantage on the Australian social housing estates, which in part relate to the impacts of unemployment, caused by industry restructuring and economic globalisation.

Harvey (1996) also argues that a large proportion of surplus capital has found its way into speculative place construction. The specific agenda is to return quick profits to real estate development. In the current context of inter-place competition successfully selling place requires attracting affluent residents. Hence, image making and advertising have become crucial strategies in regenerating particular areas of cities. The overall result is less leeway for place regeneration projects that do not fit mainstream standards and yield generous profits.

Zukin’s (1997) work augments Harvey’s analyses through delineating some of the ways in which various industries, such as property development, and the symbols of these industries, including housing, incorporate culture as ‘a way of life’ into their products. This approach is used as a marketing tool to attract consumption activities. From Zukin’s perspective, housing is a ‘cultural product’ that can be reproduced and sold drawing upon particular images and symbols to enhance the appeal to potential purchasers. According to Zukin, the way cultural products succeed is through framing and imposing a coherent vision or image on communities within urban space. A new landscape is created, both symbolically and materially, through forging alliances over culture.

The use of ‘New Urbanism’ design in developing contemporary neighbourhoods brings to mind one example of how these cultural products work in practice. New urbanism design originates from American urban planning practices and, as Talen (1999) argues, its appeal is in the linking of neighbourhood design to the promise of a particular ideal of community, with shared values and social homogeneity. The design features of new urbanism are drawn from early 20th century values in housing and community design and are used to convey traditional communities of the past. Common features include side-walks, front porches, picket fences and a town square designed to be like a traditional, pedestrian friendly, small country town. The underlying premise is that if you reinvent the traditional village, a sense of community will prevail. Hence, new urbanism design exemplifies how the idea of community is commodified and marketed in practice by the property development industry. The popularity of new urbanism design is that it appeals to people’s desires to reconnect to community in an increasingly alienated and individualistic world (Ehrenhalt 1998: 5).

While these processes of consumption connecting housing design to the promise of a particular type of community appear benign, some commentators argue that they have material impacts that can produce or lessen inequalities within regions and cities. For instance, Warde (2002) argues that ‘communities’ built on these processes embrace particular practices
which permit people to mark attachment to social groups, accumulate resources and differentiate other groups. Likewise, Bauman's (1998) work highlights that a lack of power to consume particular cultural products, such as housing, contributes to distinctions and status between social groups. A clear divide develops between those who can provide for their own consumption needs via the market place and other groups, such as social housing tenants, that are dependent on state provision of housing.

As government housing agencies in Australia increasingly turn to partnerships with private property developers to regenerate ageing social housing estates many of these issues have resonance. The regeneration of social housing estates often involves promoting new meanings for disadvantaged neighbourhoods and selling housing to middle income home owners through marketing and packaging of place. One of the tools drawn on in this reimagining of the neighbourhood is the idea of a 'balanced social mix'.

Housing Estate Regeneration and Social Mix

A common aim of many Australian housing authorities' regeneration projects is to diversify housing tenure on existing social housing estates in order to decrease the concentration of social housing and increase the level of owner-occupied housing; thereby achieving a 'more balanced social mix' (Arthurson 2002). In other words, creating communities with a blend of residents with a range of income levels from across different housing tenures types, including social housing, private rental and owner-occupied housing. This is generally achieved through upgrade, demolition, and replacement of obsolete social housing with housing for private purchase. The goal is to attract higher income homeowners/purchasers into the area to gain a more diverse social mix. In some Australian States, estate regeneration also involves permanent relocation of social housing tenants to other neighbourhoods.

The rationale underlying support for social mix policies is an expectation that these policies will assist in creating more stable and vigorous communities than when disadvantaged residents are concentrated together in one place (Arthurson 2002). Housing and planning policy makers who are proponents of social mix claim numerous benefits for disadvantaged residents of living amongst home owners and working residents. At the present time, the range of benefits referred to include: improved access to social networks that link disadvantaged residents to job opportunities; the provision of middle-class role models to integrate problematic residents into 'acceptable' social behaviours; increased education retention rates; and better access to a range of health and social services. Some academic commentators are more sceptical of the likely benefits, especially when social mix is imposed on existing communities. Social mix policies are also driven by commercial objectives of realigning stock, making the housing perform better economically, expanding home ownership and the related goal of marketing the neighbourhoods to outsiders. To date this imperative for the use of social mix as a strategy for re-imaging areas in order to attract new home owners into neighbourhoods that were previously characterised by concentrations of social housing has received little attention in the literature (See Arthurson 2002).

Taken together, the two key aspects of the newly emerging models of Australian regeneration projects, the emphasis on social mix policies along with the increasing involvement of private capital and marketing of place, evoke some major questions about the material effects on existing disadvantaged social housing residents. With these issues in mind the following sections explores the Parks Urban Regeneration Project.

Background - The Parks Urban Regeneration Project

The Parks social housing estate is located 7 kilometres north-west of the Adelaide CBD in South Australia. The estate was constructed in the post Second World War period, between 1945 and 1964, to meet a shortage of low cost and good quality housing. Typical of the approach taken by the South Australian Government at that time, the estate was constructed to attract and service the growth in manufacturing industry in the metropolitan regions. Some of the newly established industries included Tubemills, General Motors Holden and Phillips (Marsden 1986:175). In recent years the decline of manufacturing industry has negatively impacted on residents of The Parks as they relied on this industry for employment.

The main aim of The Parks Urban Regeneration Project is to address the concentrated problems in the area and "upgrade and replace the ageing social housing" (Government of South Australia, 2000). The project is currently the largest urban regeneration project in Australia, encompassing the five suburbs of Woodville Gardens, Mansfield Park, Ferryden Park, Athol Park and Angle Park, in total covering an area of five square kilometres. The project is a joint venture between the local government of Port Adelaide/Ellendale, the South Australian Housing Trust, and a private property developer, Urban Pacific Limited. The project formally commenced in 1999 and due to its large size is being managed in five separate stages, which will take between 12-15 years to complete. The major components of the project involve: demolishing nearly 2,000 ageing social housing dwellings; constructing around 2,400
new dwellings, of which 500 will be retained for social housing; refurbishing of approximately 500 existing social housing dwellings, retaining half for social housing and selling half on the private market; and reducing the concentration of social housing in the area from 60 per cent before regeneration commenced to around 25 per cent at its completion (Government of South Australia, 2000).

The Parks project is unique in the Australian context in the extent of the housing authority and private sector partnership, where the latter has responsibility for managing the project. The housing authority acknowledged that this arrangement presented new challenges from the start of the project. Specifically, attracting private sector interest in the project required developing an all encompassing vision for the neighbourhood, before the project actually commenced (Jackson 1999). A major marketing challenge was identified as the degree to which the uniformly negative image of the area from the viewpoint of outsiders could be reversed. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that residents might not identify with this negative perception of The Parks (South Australian Housing Trust & Pioneer Projects Australia 1996).

The data for the research project was collected through a variety of methods: a survey questionnaire self administered to housing authority staff involved in the project; semi-structured interviews and meetings held during visits to the project; interviews with residents and analysis of relevant policy documents and reports. This paper draws largely on the document analysis component of the research.

Re-Imagining the Parks
Consistent with the vision for regeneration, which involves attracting home buyers into the neighbourhood, The Parks is undergoing a transformation. A new image for the neighbourhood is being created through demolition, physical reconstruction, and a marketing strategy that includes development of an entry symbol and a new name for the project. The Parks was renamed as Westwood, to disassociate it from its past history of social housing. Figure 1, displays the entry symbol for the project with the “Westwood” insignia.

Figure 1: The Westwood Entry Symbol, Source: K Arthurson (2000)

The new image for The Parks conceives of an increased level of private home ownership to 64 per cent, compared to the original 60 per cent social housing ownership. In planning for the project it was acknowledged that the success of home sales would relate to the scale of physical renewal undertaken (South Australian Housing Trust & Pioneer Projects Australia 1996: 15, 25). In stage one of the project, for instance, 94 out of 105 of the existing social housing stock were demolished to make way for a broad range of new houses for sale on the private market. The remaining 11 homes were set aside for renovation (Urban Pacific 1999). Figure 2, displays some original double unit social housing at The Parks, which was awaiting demolition. Double unit housing is characterised by two duplexes joined by a common wall in the middle. This was the dominant type of social housing in the area prior to the commencement of the regeneration project.
Part of the revitalised image for The Parks includes building housing drawing on new urbanism design features. The housing, as shown in Figure 3, consists of a mix of “traditional family living, courtyard and villa homes, and cottage and terrace housing” (Urban Pacific 1999:1). The use of this design evokes a particular image of Westwood as a viable and upmarket community. As Harvey (1997) argues most of the suburbs where elements of new urbanism design are implemented are expensive and class based. At Westwood major aspects of new urbanism design are being adapted across neighbourhoods that in the past housed socioeconomically disadvantaged residents. This situation poses the question of whether the revitalised image and enhanced housing is for the benefit of the new or existing community. At The Parks, new urbanism design features are being adopted to market the image of the area to attract middle income home-purchasers to form a new community, rather than being for the original social housing residents. To market the new middle income image of the area requires a noticeable change in the social mix of the area through a drop in the concentration of social housing, from 60 per cent (2,690 houses) before regeneration to 25 per cent (765 houses) post-regeneration (South Australian Housing Trust & Pioneer Projects, 1996: 24-25).

The creation of the new image also imposes a sense of homogeneity, in terms of requiring the housing design to have market appeal to middle income home-buyers that are the targeted demographic for the project. The design is used to promote the idea that others moving into the neighbourhood have similar values and beliefs. Thus in-adopting this model of regeneration, it is unclear whether the
condition and inherent value of maintaining individual social housing stock is subordinated in the pursuit of developing a more pleasurable overall physical image of the area to market and sell the area to potential home purchasers from outside the area. Clearly, from the start of the project, the aim was to develop a comprehensive physical image for the whole area rather than addressing it on a street-by-street basis (Jackson 1999). The social housing at The Parks was characterised by double unit housing, often in poor condition, which arguably made wholesale demolition and revitalisation more compelling than in other projects. However, demolition is not always a fait accompli as shown in Figure 4, where this type of housing was successfully upgraded.

Figure 4: Renovation of an Existing Public Rental Dwelling at the Parks (before top picture, after, bottom), Source: Urban Pacific Limited 2000

Indeed, other Australian regeneration projects with problematic housing have pursued alternative approaches to The Parks. For instance, at Waterloo in New South Wales high-rise housing has been retained through undertaking less comprehensive and lower costly upgrades in the residents’ images. Seemingly, this would not be possible in a property development driven Westwood type approach that relies on attracting middle income home-buyers to purchase in the regeneration area. At The Parks the idea is that if the area can be marketed to appeal to people’s desire, then investment will be drawn to it. Financial viability was given a higher rating than other elements within the project and it was recognised that it "may over ride other factors" (South Australian Housing Trust & Pioneer Projects Australia, 1996: 13). Clearly, changing the image of the area is fundamental at The Parks because it affects market success of the project and the ability to attract potential, private, home purchasers. In this sense the design and marketing of the community has the potential to be exclusionary in its effects as it contributes to distinctions between groups such as home owners and social housing tenants that rely on government provision of housing. The remark that forms the title of this paper “it puts your value down, I think if you’ve got them all around” exemplifies this point. In this type of depiction, as Bauman (1998), argues the poor are viewed as ‘flawed consumers’ so that it is no longer poverty that is portrayed as the prob-
lem but the poor themselves. The newly emerging regeneration approach as represented by The Parks begs the question, of whether the project is servicing the needs of private capital, rather than tenants. With this in mind, the following section turns to an analysis of some of the material effects of the commodification and marketing of The Parks.

Regeneration, Commodification and Material Effects

**Social Housing Sales, Stock Reductions and Costs of Replacement Housing**

At The Parks unimproved social housing and land is sold to home building and property development companies for demolition, upgrading, or refurbishment and sale of the housing on the private market. The end result will be 1,735 fewer houses available for public rental than when the project commenced, whilst the remaining 765 high quality, new and refurbished social housing dwellings will be available for tenants who can access them. The housing authority argues that although these reductions in stock numbers will occur, this will be offset by better amenity of stock in The Parks area (South Australian Housing Trust & Pioneer Projects Australia, 1996: 159). This is a harsh reality for disadvantaged people on the social housing waiting lists or in the private rental market who are paying greater than 30 per cent of their income on rental costs. Whilst, some of the social housing lost through the project may be replaced by means of the housing authority purchasing stock in other areas it is questionable whether this will compensate for the overall reduction of stock numbers. This model of regeneration raises issues about the purchase costs to replace the social housing sold. In South Australian projects every 3.5 sales of social housing only results in enough funding to purchase one new replacement social housing dwelling (Spiller Gibbons Swan 1999: 20).

This suggests that one effect of the marketing of place in estate regeneration projects, such as The Parks, will be to further decrease social housing stock numbers. The current public policy focus on funding cuts and achieving commercial objectives in social housing places additional pressure on states such as South Australia to reduce total stock numbers. South Australia historically has always had a higher percentage of social housing compared to the national average. Hence, the imperative in regeneration projects is to sell off stock to fund improvements, which create a lesser number of higher performing commercial stock, and thereby meet the national criteria. In effect, the housing authority is penalised for past innovation in using social housing as a way to attract industry and employment to South Australia. This approach does not take account of local factors such as the non-existence of a secure low cost private rental market to supplement for the social housing lost.

**Benefiting the Old Community or New Community**

The Parks Regeneration Project involves the relocation of 1,730 tenants (Baker 2002) and the lowering of the concentration of social housing means that not all tenants can apply for new or refurbished housing in the area. This means that large numbers of existing tenants are displaced, through permanent relocation to other areas. In turn, relocation reduces the housing authority’s capacity to house applicants from the waiting lists, as around 10 per cent of the housing allocations are required for relocated tenants (Department of Housing and Urban Development 1996).

Previous studies of the The Parks have identified that a strong sense of community existed prior to regeneration commencing and that a significant proportion of elderly residents relied on the cooperative social support networks that existed in the local neighbourhood (Spiller Gibbons Swan 1999). Tensions emerge between meeting housing authorities’ social mix objectives that dismantle existing communities and other regeneration goals to improve community integration and self-reliance. In circumstances where positive and cohesive community networks already exist, there are convincing arguments for retaining communities rather than undertaking large-scale changes to social mix. These collective support structures need to be taken into account, rather than being undermined, as the latter is often the case in regeneration policy (Arthurson 2002).

**Privatisation of Social Housing**

The Parks Regeneration Project also involves privatisation of the social housing estate and transfer of the government’s role in urban regeneration to the private property development market. In the past, the housing authority had a successful record of intervening in the market to place social housing in desirable private developments, for instance in the development of Golden Grove in South Australia. In these circumstances, the private housing and its image of community was contested and forced to become more inclusive because if it were left to the market social housing would not exist in these types of developments. The housing authority is attempting a similar exercise in market intervention in The Parks project through bringing private funding into regeneration of a social housing estate. However, in this instance the former model of intervention has become inverted through private sector management of a social housing project. The privatisation of both
governments' role in urban regeneration and provision of social housing are at stake. Large numbers of social housing are being converted to private consumer goods. This is verified by the finding that Money Magazine (2006) recently identified The Parks as one of the 'hot spots' in South Australia for investors to purchase property. The urban regeneration approach at The Parks raises questions about what happens to the equity principles that are the responsibility of government, to provide affordable, social rental housing to low-income people.

Conclusion
The newly emerging approach to social housing estate regeneration in Australia, as exemplified by The Parks Urban Regeneration Project, comprises the entry of private capital, through home building and property development companies gaining control over management of regeneration. With the increased government emphasis in Australia on privatization, cost cutting and developing efficient well performing social housing we are likely to see more of these types of approaches to estate regeneration. The Parks project illustrates how private sector management of estate regeneration commonly services the needs of private capital rather than disadvantaged residents. Within this model, economic imperatives to market the neighbourhood and attract and sell place to more affluent incoming residents becomes the priority rather than retaining the supply of social housing. This approach contributes to outcomes, which help to maintain or even increase existing inequalities for disadvantaged members of society.

First, one of the most worrying aspects of this model of estate regeneration is the material impacts of the new urbanism design and social mix policies on low income individuals. Current policies involve large-scale reductions in the numbers of social housing, at a time when demand is increasing and housing affordability for low-income people is decreasing. These policy directions challenge current and future tenants' fundamental rights to access social housing. A key objection is surely that it is more equitable to undertake lower cost, moderate upgrades with less demolition and wholesale re-imaging that retain social housing for a greater number of tenants than to produce premium quality housing to benefit only a few.

Second, as signified by the findings of the research to date, another potential consequence of this model of regeneration is that social housing tenants who cannot afford to purchase housing on the private market risk being excluded within the revitalised neighbourhood.

Third, questions remain about which community benefits from regeneration. Is it the original community made up of low income tenants or the new community comprised of more prosperous incoming residents? While the new community at The Parks consists of some social housing tenants, uncertainty remains about the outcomes for relocated tenants who have not moved back into the regenerated area. There is a deficit of research in Australia that investigates whether they equally benefit from the rehousing processes of regeneration and are successfully integrated into their new communities or have found their social networks and supports disrupted.

Overall it appears somewhat ironic that the social housing estates, which are places that were in part marginalised by the processes of globalization, are now being reshaped by private capital in new but just as problematic ways.

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References
KATHY ARTHURSON


About the Author

Dr Kathy Arthurson

Dr Kathy Arthurson is a senior research fellow in the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology. She is currently working on an ARC funded postdoctoral research project on Social Mix and Social Exclusion. Her pre-academic career was largely in public policy, as a manager and policy analyst in a range of positions that included housing and urban policy, health, community services, ageing and disability. Dr Arthurson’s past experiences are reflected in the nature of her research on housing and urban issues, which is applied research that focuses on the policy implications of topics spanning social housing, neighbourhood regeneration and building sustainable communities.
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