Why do we want mixed-income housing and neighborhoods?

By James DeFilippis and Jim Fraser

"Please, would you tell me," said Alice, a little timidly, ... "why your cat grins like that?"

"It's a Cheshire cat," said the Duchess, "and that's why."

-Lewis Carroll

I. Introduction

Whenever there is widespread agreement or consensus that a certain policy, or set of related policies, should be pursued and enacted, it becomes necessary to step back and ask why? This is because once widespread agreement occurs, the theoretical premises that underlay the policies become lost – assumed away as the policies' goals become self-evidently "good." But the why questions do not cease to be important; they just become asked less frequently. Why, that is, should we pursue the policies in question? What understandings of the current state of affairs and the potential change to them (after the policies are implemented) are required for us to think we should enact the policies.

In the last 15 years there has emerged a consensus in the fields of urban studies and urban policy that mixed-income housing and neighborhoods (hereafter MI HN) are desirable. In this paper we discuss the recent sets of policies surrounding MI HN. We do not do so, however, with the goal of assessing particular policies or their implementation. Instead, we take a few steps back and we question the premises of these policies. We do so because we have consistently found ourselves attracted to the ideal, in theory, of MI HN but frustrated by its reality in practice. This contradiction could be handled in different ways. We could, for instance, stand beyond the veil of “imperfect practice,” as so many have done. Instead, however, we asked if maybe the recurring failure in practice was not simply a result of imperfect practice, but rather a result of flawed theoretical foundations. In short, we think that MI HN is being pursued for the wrong theoretical and normative reasons. And since they are being advocated for the wrong reasons, we should not be surprised when the policies fail to make our cities better places in which to live and work (which, it has to be said, is the measure by which all policies *should* be evaluated and discussed). As they currently exist, mixed-income housing policies are largely based on the (hegemonic) mantra that low-income people themselves are the problem, and that a benevolent gentry needs to colonize their home space in order to create the conditions necessary to help the poor ‘bootstrap’ themselves into a better socio-economic position.

The paper proceeds in several steps. It begins with a discussion of the growth of MI HN, and the causes of that growth and its popularity among mainstream policy analysts. It then discusses the policies that emerge from these reasons, and the problems associated with those policies – problems, that is, if the goal is something like social justice in our housing policies and in our neighborhoods. We argue that the problems that are evident in the policies are rooted in the theories behind them, and thus perfecting practice will still lead to unjust outcomes. From there, we explore alternative reasons for supporting MI HN – alternatives rooted in the history of urban social theory, and with explicit or implicit goals of making cities more just. We end with a preliminary discussion of what kinds of policies would follow from those theoretical starting points.

II. Why do policy makers like MI HN?

While the reasons for the promotion of MI HN vary slightly in their content, they inevitably come back to the issue of helping the poor by having them live in proximity to the rich (or at least middle class). Even the most thoughtful version of this, by Mark Joseph and his colleagues (Joseph, *et al*., 2007; Joseph, 2007) begin with this premise.[1] Joseph *et al*. identify four reasons why MI HN are being supported and promoted in public policy circles. The four reasons are:

1. the improved social networks/social capital of the poor people that live in MI HN
2. the increased social control and improved social organization the poor will have if living near middle and upper-class people
3. the importance of middle class and wealthy people on the behavior of the poor – in terms of presenting role models for the poor to aspire to be like
4. the improved services and goods available to the poor once upper income people live nearby (the *political economy of place*

The first of these four has its roots in Putnam's understanding of social capital. The thinking being that poor people lack social capital and placing them in proximity to the wealthy will increase the quality and quantity of their social networks, thereby enabling them to improve their incomes and quality of life. The second and third have their roots in Wilson's "underclass" perspective and Lewis' "culture of poverty" – the distinction between the two (Wilson and Lewis) being increasingly irrelevant from the point of view of policy. This is the idea that, as Brophy and Smith (1997, p. 6) bluntly put it, "physical concentration of poor households in

[1] In fairness to Joseph and his colleagues, they said their goal was to recount the stated reasons for the support for MI NH. They were not necessarily taking ownership of any of those reasons.

multifamily projects causes severe problems for the residents, including joblessness, drug abuse, and welfare dependency…a mixture of income levels will reduce the social pathology caused by concentration." Finally, the last reason, *the political economy of place* is rooted in the recognition that public services and the goods of collective consumption are better provided in middle class and wealthy neighborhoods than in poor ones.

Joseph, *et al.*, provide a thorough analysis of the empirical support – or lack thereof – for these four suppositions about MI HN, and thus we need not do that here. But there are a few things that need to said about them before we can proceed. First, there is actually little empirical evidence to support the first three, and only some to support the fourth. Thus the consensus, when pressed, seems to rely, as Schwartz and Tajbakhsh (1997, p. 81) put it, "largely on faith and on dissatisfaction with the previous thrust of low-income housing policy." Second, there is a fundamental confusion about space and society. The recognition that the spatial concentration of poverty may, in many cases, lead to a worsening set of experiences of poverty, is not at all the same thing as saying that spatial concentration causes poverty. But what has occurred is that MI HN, either through dispersal or redevelopment strategies, has used space to displace the issue of poverty (sometimes literally as well as figuratively).[2] Finally, and most important to us here, implicit in these understandings is the assumption – always unstated – that the middle class or wealthy people do not have anything to gain from the proximity of poor people (although probably unstated because it simply does not occur to people, rather than for political expediency). Poor people, in much of this language, come to be simply "a problem" that we need to spread out – and the language of "fair share" or "regional equity" that is often heard

[2] We are grateful to Elvin Wyly for making this point strongly on several occasions, and that has certainly shaped our thinking about this.

sounds remarkably similar to how people involved in environmental justice movements talk about things like waste transfer stations or incinerators.

Of course, there are other reasons why MI HN are being promoted, most often to revalorize disinvested neighborhoods. This usually comes with some displacement/dispersal of the poor – whether it is public sector lead, in the context of HOPE VI and Section 8 voucherization, or it is private sector-led gentrification – or both simultaneously; see Wyly and Hammel, 1999). That is, poor people in many cities are concentrated in places that, with capital reinvestment, can be gentrified and made middle or upper class. The striking thing about this perspective is that, like "the poor people benefit" perspectives, it is predicated on the assumption that poor people themselves bring nothing to the equation. The place that they happen to occupy may have become a potential focal point for the reproduction of capital. But the presence of poor people is largely beside the point. The place's revalorization has everything to do with the larger scale political economic forces of urbanization, and virtually nothing to do with the people who happen to reside there. It is striking that when places are poor and marginal to capital the causal reasons given for the poverty of those places center around the characteristics of the poor people who reside there; but when the places become destinations for reinvestment capital the (poor) people who already reside there play absolutely no part in that explanation.

Thus, we have a situation in which the dominant understanding of housing policy says and believes that poor people offer nothing to the rest of society. And if so, let us at least say that out loud that poor people are, in a literal sense, worthless.[3]

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[3] They can potentially serve as a reserve army of labor that mediate capital-labor relations for the benefit of keeping wages down. Extrapolating from this perspective, urban planning is used as a form of social control as many problems of contemporary society have been "consigned to the inner cities and [in the European context of social housing] peripheral estates (Cochrane, as cited in Bridge and Watson, 2003:534).

III. What are the policies that emerge from these understandings?

A variety of public policies have emerged from these understandings of the relationship between poor people and places being mapped and understood as poverty stricken. We highlight four here, two fairly large policies, a third that is a well-known but tiny pilot project, and a fourth that is not a policy per se, but rather a set of policies. These are: voucherization, HOPE VI, Moving To Opportunity (MTO), and the promotion of gentrification. All have been grafted onto an understanding of poverty that stresses the benefits poor people will experience if they are separated, dispersed, and assimilated into the mainstream of American existence (and perhaps, re-socialized). We briefly review these four policies that seek to send the poor into middle-income neighborhoods, and those that aim to move higher socioeconomic status households in impoverished neighborhoods/develops.

Since the early 1970s, and increasingly since the early 1990s, there has been a decided shift in the form that federally subsidized housing takes, and that shift has been away from the project-based subsidized stock and towards the voucherization of subsidized housing. While vouchers (formerly called Section 8 vouchers or certificates, now called Housing Choice Vouchers) were not originally meant to promote MI HN, they have become strongly associated with this goal, and therefore they have grown in support among mainstream housing policy analysts. As the project-based subsidized stock – the older Sections 221(d)3s or 236s, and the newer project-based Section 8s – opt out of the affordable housing programs and convert to market, the tenants within them receive vouchers that they can use *in situ* or can take with them wherever they decide to live. This slow drip of the conversion of housing from project-based to vouchers has not received the attention of the more dramatic demolitions associated with HOPE VI, but has impacted far more affordable housing units, as roughly a quarter of a million units have been lost, with most converting the tenants to vouchers (see DeFilippis and Wyly, 2008). This is seen by most policy makers and analysts as desirable since the project-based stock is fixed in place, and therefore concentrates poverty, while vouchers enable mobility, and thereby, theoretically at least, promote the mixing of incomes since low income people are assumed to want to flee their neighborhoods.

HOPE VI may be viewed as simultaneously a poverty dispersion program as well as a placed-based revitalization effort. The specific dimensions of HOPE VI have been outlined in numerous studies, but one of the central goals of this program is to create physical and social environmental conditions that will enable those defined as lower-income to pull themselves up from poverty into a higher socioeconomic status and experience an increased quality of life as it relates to the places they operate/live (see Joseph, 2007, for an excellent overview of HOPE VI stated underpinnings and goals). While many critics of HOPE VI show that the absolute numbers of subsidized housing units in these developments decrease in comparison to the pre-existing public housing development on which they were built, other studies demonstrated that MI NH has not produced the intended economic or quality of life goals even for those who have been able to relocate into the completed HOPE VI developments (Fraser and Kick 2007; Joseph 2007). Joseph (ibid.) suggests that there is a “need to lower expectations” for what HOPE VI might accomplish for lower-income populations because the conceptual underpinnings and routes by which low-income people might utilize to achieve their goals in the context of HOPE VI are either underspecified or not operating as conceived. We add that this current state of affairs may be due to an under-appreciation of the relationships between home, neighborhood and work. For example, while HOPE VI inspired improvements in housing stock, architectural design, and aesthetics is seemingly desirable, public housing authorities, social service providers, and even HOPE VI communities all operate in the context of social forces – such as the production of labor markets and public policy - which are beyond their immediate grasp of rearranging.

The Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program has generated significant attention among academics and policy-makers – attention far beyond what is suggested by the program's incredibly modest size of less than 5,000 people in an experiment in five cities. The program/experiment placed people in project-based subsidized properties into one of three groups: 1) a group that simply stayed where they were; 2) a group that received vouchers that could only be used in low poverty neighborhoods, and; 3) a group that received regular section 8 vouchers. The experiment produced ambiguous results (see Goering and Feins, 2003), with households that moved to low income neighborhoods feeling safer in their neighborhoods, and therefore somewhat happier about the neighborhoods, but otherwise not displaying much impact in the fields of health, mental health, employment, earnings, education, crime or most other issues.

Whether or not policymakers, public officials, or private sector supporters of mixed-income housing explicitly endorse gentrification as a potential outcome of mixed-income housing implementation, the reality is that the creation of desirable housing markets can have that effect. Goetz (2005), citing Bennett and Reed (1999) as an example, notes, "that private investors are now bidding up property values in the vicinity of public housing projects," (p70) as a way to accrue profit from speculative increases in land rent. Neil Smith (2002) notes that gentrification is a general strategy engaged by public and private sectors to revitalize their cities to be competitive places for other forms of economic invest. The confluence of housing policy and broader urban economic development strategies tends to promote place as an amenity for new economy workers (i.e., those with more disposable income). What is remarkable about this trend is not that developers have pushed for new markets o invest their capital, but rather that public policy, via academia (Florida 2005), has fostered this sense of creating a common good that, like the Reagan years, promises to trickle down to those in the most vulnerable position but rarely does. While some observers demonstrated that HOPE VI-styled mixed-income housing pushed people out of their home spaces for the more capitalized members of society, the parallel non-HOPE VI, public-private ventures to reclaim low-income neighborhoods for higher socioeconomic status populations simply devastate opportunities for those who are less privileged (Fraser and Kick 2007).

Taken together, all four public policies, or sets of policies, that promote mixed-income housing focus on a conception of poverty that chooses to focus on surface appearances that intuitively suggest "anything is better even for these poor people." While this may be based upon an implicit understanding of the harshness of living in hyper-segregated poverty, the conceptual premise that mixed-income housing and neighborhoods will operate to smooth inequities between raced, gendered, and classed populations is certainly "a grin without a cat." That is, there is a dissociation with pre-existing and unequal opportunity structures that operate in a society based upon *laissez-fare* capitalism.

IV. Problems with these policies

When examining the problems with these policies a central issue is that that these programs do not do produce their hypothesized results and there is little evidence that the expected benefits will be realized. Simply put, poor people do not seem to benefit much from MI HN. It should be noted that the one theorized benefit that actually appears to have some empirical basis is that of the “political economy of place” – but to look at this benefit and therefore argue that we *should* do MI HN, is a remarkable way of talking about what should be done. This perspective starts with the recognition of an unjust situation (that the quality and distribution of public goods and services is based on the class of the people receiving those services), and, instead of saying what we *should* do is rectify the injustice, it assumes the immutability of that injustice. It then suggests that moving people around urban areas and promoting mixes of income distributions is commensurate with opening up opportunity structures to people in poverty.

The failure of MI HN to improve life for poor people is not particularly difficult to understand. There are several reasons that seem clear to us. These policies – particularly those that promote mobility – often leave poor people in places without the social networks and informal social support of prior neighborhoods. Despite assumptions to the contrary, poor urban neighborhoods have dense networks of social support that have been created largely out of necessity because services that are commodities in wealthy neighborhoods (childcare, for instance) must be negotiated as non-commodified when the participants do not have money. Empirical studies have found that relocated public housing residents have a difficult time rebuilding social networks (Clampet-Lunquist, 2004), leading to higher degrees of social isolation for children as well as adults in many situations (Curley, 2005; Goetz, 2003; Gibson, 2007). Fraser and Kick (2007), in their study of a HOPE VI project in Durham, North Carolina, found that those residents relocated into other public housing developments not only faced the challenge of building social networks, but did so in the context of harsh environmental conditions as measured by a longitudinal, spatial cluster analysis of violent crime and Urban Institute survey data reporting decreased levels of safety by residents.

Similarly, such mobility-based policies often leave poor people without the institutional services and support of their prior neighborhoods, and puts them in new places which lack the institutional capacity to provide those services. The American political economy still provides some services for low income people in American metropolitan areas[4], and the not-for-profits that do much of the legwork of such service provision are geographically highly concentrated in the inner city neighborhoods from which they have emerged. Mixed-income policies have also failed to create social mixing, networks, and interaction – that is, social capital. This is because the MI HN leave the larger social cleavages unaltered. For example, HOPE VI developments – and the organizations that govern them - typically sort people based upon subsidized versus market rate status. Similarly, in non-HOPE VI mixed-income neighborhoods, the ability to achieve homeowner status articulates a resident as having automatic rights to the city – that is the right to participate in the creation of the rules of conduct and to enforce them – whereas renters rights have typically been marginalized. In both scenarios social sorting occurs based upon classed, and in many cases, raced and gendered identities. Finally, such policies are often self-defeating policies, since poor people (especially those with vouchers) often re-concentrate in new places. This is for two primary reasons. First, there is the willful behavior of people trying to re-create former communities and social ties in new physical spaces. And, second, even with vouchers up to 110% of Fair Market Rent, the market, as the allocator of housing, has tendencies towards segregating people along race and class lines.[5]

[4] We do recognize, of course, that many of these services have been cut dramatically in the last quarter century.

[5] These are all problems that come directly from the theoretical assumptions and understandings that inform the particular policies. These are not problems that emerge from "imperfect implementation" as many studies imply, for example, which conclude with such statements as, "Our data point out areas where performance improvements appear urgent and, in addition, there remain some important knowledge gaps that must be overcome before HOPE VI relocation practice can be fully assessed" (Kingsley, Johnson and Pettit, 2003), and, "While acknowledging the HOPE VI program's important successes, it is also necessary to recognize where the program needs to be improved" (Popkin, Katz, Cunningham, Brown, Gustafson and Turner, 2004).

VI. Why do we like MI HN?

While the reasons usually given in contemporary public policy circles for the promotion of MI HN are relatively new, the goal itself is not. People with dreams of better cities and towns (Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford); or people involved in efforts to improve the cities we have already (Jane Addams); or people celebrating, and protecting, some of the best of currently existing cities (Jane Jacobs) have long discussed the benefits of MI HN. Howard, Geddes, and Mumford embraced social integration as part of their broad and deep sympathies to the utopian anarchist tradition – a tradition that included the mixing of all classes and activities into cities and towns, with the land being worked and owned in common (see Hall, 2002). Addams followed a different line of reasoning, and argued that the social integration of people would lead to the upper classes learning about life by being exposed to the poor (Addams, 1910). Finally, Jane Jacobs rather famously embraced the integration of different peoples, activities, and uses of urban space. Our intellectual and political lineage, in our support for MI HN, is not with Oscar Lewis and William Julius Wilson, but with the anarchist utopian planners, the more critically minded of the settlement house movement leaders, and – a bit – with Jane Jacobs.

The problem, however, is that the reasons why MI HN is appealing to us are perhaps better expressed in the negative than in the positive. That is, it is easier for us to see what is wrong with class-based segregation than to convincingly affirm the transcendence of those problems through the processes of integration. But we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves. There are, we think, several reasons why class-based segregation is a barrier to realizing more just cities and processes of urbanization[6].

[6] we should acknowledge at the beginning of this discussion that Young, 2000, ch. 6 played an important role in our thinking through these issues

First, class segregated neighborhoods and towns leads to class segregated public spaces – the rich and poor, simply put, do not interact or even see each other in the public spaces where they gather. And while the specific relationships between public space, the public sphere and public policy remain issues for debate (see, for instance, Calhoun, 1992; Mitchell, 2003), it is certainly true that people at least partially come to understand who and what constitutes "the public" by who and what they encounter and interact with once they leave the realm of the private (that is, their homes and their cars). The second problem that stems from the first, and it is that without integrated public spaces the wealthy are enabled to continue to believe that they are "middle class," or, similarly, that the United States is a "class free" society. Lives lived in exclusionary isolation – especially those so often represented in the media as normal – become naturalized, and their particular qualities made invisible to those who live them. Third, the goods and processes of social reproduction, that is, schools, hospitals and other health care facilities, child care, etc. also become segregated when there is class based segregation. This undermines the political will and capacity to support funding for such efforts beyond the immediate realm of individual neighborhoods. This, in short, is one of the reasons why the political economy of place rationale for MI HN has some empirical support. Finally, class-based segregation is a fundamental barrier to urban democracy and social justice. This is simply because democracy (urban or otherwise) requires at least a tacit acceptance that there is a shared fate and future within society. We need not embrace Aristotelian republicanism (which we do not, by any means, do) to think that democracy requires a recognition of the existence of a mutually-shared society. Such understandings of a shared fate in society also benefits a great deal from unmediated interactions that are most likely to occur in shared spaces.

The problem with the above discussion, however, is that while segregation is a barrier to social justice, it does not necessarily follow that integration (by itself) is a solution. Space, it seems, can more easily be part of the problem than part of the solution. Being in close proximity need not engender interaction, and when it does, that interaction may mean conflict as much as anything else. It is, in short, unclear whether or not the physical proximity of the rich and poor will lead to the rich even acknowledging, let alone understanding or trying to understand, the poor. There is, what we call the "<u>The Agatha Christie problem.</u>" We call it that because there is a reason why the butler could always be the murderer in cozy British murder mysteries, and that is simply because the butler was always completely invisible to everybody else in the room with him. He shared the most intimate spaces with people, and yet was never seen by those people. Similarly, and not hypothetically, the re-emergence of large numbers of homeless people in the streets and parks of New York City led more to New Yorkers developing a capacity to see past homelessness than it did to interactions, dialogue, or understanding between the housed and unhoused in the city's streets. Proximity can also lead more to conflict than any other outcome. This was certainly the case in Paris in the 19^{th} century, which was marked by repeated uprisings by the urban poor and working class, and they fought with the bourgeoisie who lived nearby – or at least did so until Haussmann forcibly removed the poor and working class from the center of the city. In both outcomes – invisibility and conflict – proximity absent larger changes in the political economy is clearly woefully inadequate as a way to try to realize social justice (or even improve the condition of the poor).

Those who live in mixed-income environments do not escape the reality that "communities" are raced, classed and gendered. These identities have a long history of being made important in larger society and play out in the workings of mixed-income neighborhoods.

The criteria that are implemented on a daily basis to distinguish those who have legitimate claims to the "rights to the city" (to inhabit and create urban space) usually undercut subsidized renters in obvious ways (i.e., drug tests, mandatory house cleaning course, checks on employment status). How can we not expect those practices to bleed into the social relations between proximate residents and their unequal sense of the right to be in place? This is because the key issue remains the unequal power relations involved in people's access to the space – people's ability, in short, to claim a right to be in the place (or, more broadly, a right to the city). For mixing to have a role in making our cities more just the people being mixed need to be in proximity on their own terms and those terms need some level of equivalence or comparability. And this is simply not true for the policies that currently promote MI HN.

This last point leads directly to the problem of "community" in MI HN. And here we depart from most all critiques of mixed-income housing policy, because virtually none have taken into account the very notion of "community." While community is largely romanticized as a positive force that enables individuals and households to foster connections that serve to expand and deepen group- and individual-level opportunity structures, it is also a social force that its members experience differentially. Mixed-income housing developments/neighborhoods, by definition, are comprised of residents who have pre-existing and differential sets of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). If these qualities act as mediating structures that position people in their everyday experiences with their neighbors as well as public and private entities that insert themselves into neighborhood affairs, then very real power differentials will exist in mixed-income locales.

This is no different when we talk about building community in mixed-income environments because the ability to have one's needs and desires represented (politics of representation) in the creation of communal processes and social norms is inextricably tied to who has rights to space, what forms of surveillance and governance will be promoted and tolerated, and what resources will be made available to them. Moreover, when “community” and the guiding principles of place do not work for some residents, then the forms of capital listed above become extremely important. Consider that cultural capital - the stock of experiences, knowledge and networks of affiliation (Bourdieu, 1986) – provides some residents the ability to act swiftly and deftly when bringing extra-neighborhood resources to bear on neighborhood affairs. So, the question becomes how can forms of community – and associated processes – be created to smooth power differential between groups marked by income and wealth differentials?

The answers are elusively simple yet procedurally difficult. First, community and other processes of neighborhood governance must always exist in a state of *becoming*. Since community can only be understood in its articulation with other phenomena such as labor conditions, housing markets, educational opportunities, race, class, gender – and the list goes on ad infinitum – then community and its organizations/institutional manifestations must be constantly critiqued, contested, and re-negotiated if it is to respond effectively to the context within which it operates. Mitchell (2003) rightly contends that in order for democracy to flourish as well as the creation of a socially just society, public spaces are crucial sites within which the people may lay claim to a politics of representation. In mixed-income neighborhood settings this is a poignant call for all residents to be able to create the rules of conduct and to respond effectively to the fact that differently ‘incomed’ groups of residents are going to have overlapping desires but also distinct agendas that need to be addressed (see Massey, 2005, on “spatial co-presence”).

The second set of strategies to produce a vibrant and responsive mixed-income neighborhood revolve around smoothing inequities experienced by low-income residents through actual wealth accumulation policies. For example, in the wake of the mortgage and foreclosure crisis that has inordinately affected lower-income populations, some housing scholars are thinking about reviving social housing. In the context of mixed-income housing development, shared-equity housing strategies such as community land trusts, limited-equity co-ops and deed restricted housing could be employed to move people into low-risk, mixed-income housing (see Davis, 2006, for a thorough discussion of “shared equity homeownership”). This would additionally serve to mediate the pernicious marking of some residents as being marginal community members based upon, once again, that low-income people have less to offer than those who can make a larger economic investment in place. By engaging in strategies such as these we believe that new opportunities might be opened up where social mixing might produce some of the building blocks to create real opportunities for low-income residents to actually take part in <u>creating</u> their own opportunity structures rather than relying on the benevolence of more privileged neighbors.

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