

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MARILYN M. THOMAS-HOUSTON and MARK SCHULLER (Eds.)
Homing Devices: The Poor as Targets of Public Housing Policy and Practice. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006, xiv + 200 p. + bibliography + index.

I lived, during adolescence, in a seaside town in southern England. On the outskirts of the town were a series of so-called “housing estates” consisting of rows of drab, uniform “council houses”: that is, public housing units whose residents consisted mainly of low-income families. This was during the early 1950’s when the country faced a severe housing shortage and such subsidized housing was clearly essential. Even so, the whispered remark “she lives in a council house, you know” soon became a shadow of stigmatization – a shorthand substitute for being on the social margin and potentially disreputable – both locally and throughout the land.

The contents of *Homing Devices* suggest that this stigma against the poor generally, and public housing residents specifically, has remarkable longevity and travels far. Based on the contributions by anthropologists and social activists to sessions organized at two conferences, editors thomas-houston (sic.) and Schuller describe their book as being “...about housing policy in First-World peripheral contexts” (8). Following a brief historical and thematic introduction, the authors of this book’s nine chapters (including one by each editor) focus on the impact of housing policies on, and reactions by, affected groups of people on the periphery who generally lack the loud voices of political influence.

The greater part of *Homing Devices* – six chapters – is devoted to American studies, two chapters cover Canadian case studies, and one moves across the globe to Hong Kong. The focus of *Homing Devices* is, therefore, overwhelmingly North American, and in its content devoted to the United States, concentrates on the impact of the federal housing initiative known as HOPE VI (an optimistic acronym for Homeownership Opportunities for People Everywhere). The editors, however, indirectly counter this narrow focus by describing the anthology as “a collection of policy ethnographies, with long-term ethnographic case material from eleven cities in highly stratified Northern societies” (8) and stress the global context of the broader trends of privatization and globalization embedded in the “development discourse” of much urban housing policy. Not surprisingly, in view of the origins of this book and its ethnographic focus, nine of the contributors are anthropologists who committed themselves to at least two years study of their community research

environments. Their resulting sense of closeness to people affected by housing policies is evident in the strong activist perspective of much of the book. Again, in the editors' words, "we feel a special responsibility to share the stories of the marginalized, homeless youth, squatters, poor homeowners in a toxic waste site, and displaced tenants so that the public can hear their often-silenced voices" (8).

This list of peripheral groups just about covers the anthropological sites of the authors, although the editors divide the chapters (with very loose boundaries) between four conceptual themes: human rights and housing; governance and the bureaucratic business of public housing policy; the state's power to define reality in public housing initiatives; and, finally, examples of where marginalized people have been able to exert some impact on policy decisions. I will focus on the HOPE VI program, and evaluate what the book tells us about its purposes and outcomes. As Diane Levy of the Urban Institute notes, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development initiated the program in 1993 "to replace the nation's worst public housing projects with lower density developments of quality housing in safer environments, and to offer an array of services to meet a host of needs" (22). The worst areas were defined as those in deep distress, with physically deteriorating buildings, high crime rates, and attracting only the very poorest people. It was estimated in 1996 that 86,000 units of U.S. public housing, 6 percent of a total of 1.4 million units, fit this category. The financial provisions of the program have been the mainstay of support for public housing by the U.S. federal government, though with a gradual move towards privatization insofar as tenants displaced by lower density developments have increasingly been provided with vouchers which would, in principle, allow them to find public and private housing in safer, better serviced and less isolated neighbourhoods. Overall, HOPE VI is a classic piece of social engineering, devised with the best of intentions, but – so this book suggests – without enough attention to the social dynamics of the distressed areas or the prejudices of surrounding neighbourhoods.

Public housing areas deteriorate because of official neglect, inadequate funding and inappropriate policies. In both the United States and Canada, the neglect is easier to rationalize when the neglected are seen as, in large part, responsible for their own fates and in need of coercive control. Not surprisingly, when the most depressed areas in U.S. public housing are heavily populated by very poor Afro-American tenants and, within this group, by young, single, female heads of households, the stereotyping of tenants as shiftless, incompetent and potentially disruptive, comes easily. One of the most disturbing chapters in the book, by Cheryl Rodriguez, focuses primarily on the impact of the punitive federal "One Strike and You're Out" policy on poor Black women in a Florida public housing estate. The rule, which is linked to the almost manic "War on Drugs" in the United States, can lead to the eviction of tenants upon accusation and before any conviction for a crime. Indeed, a purported drug offence can take place 3000 miles from the tenant's residence, and still be considered relevant to eviction. Clearly, as Rodriguez notes, the policy perpetuates the notion of the poor as a criminal menace, and creates a sense of community

powerlessness. Yet, it is only an extreme example of the type of regulations commonly applied against those who take public largesse.

One of the two Canadian chapters – a study by Elizabeth Beaton of the reactions of elected officials and householders to the discovery that a small area of Sydney, Nova Scotia, was sitting on land contaminated by lead and arsenic – is not only significant for the tardy and bumbling official responses, but also for the fact that the area, the so-called “Coke Ovens,” was considered to be a “Black community,” something which Beaton shows to be an overgeneralization. In fact, most Coke Oven householders were not relocated from the toxic site. Their land was subjected to “remediation,” which is removal and replacement of the contaminated soil. In Beaton’s opinion, these desperately worried people received precious little information about the efficacy of this procedure, and limited consultation opportunities. She does not doubt that “environmental racism” was at work, as it was in the notorious bulldozing of Africville in Halifax during the 1970’s.

What we can learn from the anthropological analysis of attempts to institute HOPE VI and related programs is that the extent of their effectiveness has been closely linked to such stereotypes of public housing tenants and their estates. Thus in one of the more valuable chapters in this book, Edward Goetz examines the challenges faced by public officials in Minneapolis-St. Paul in trying to build new public housing units for up to 700 households being displaced in an attempt to decrease the areas of concentrated poverty in the city. Goetz notes that similar programs in Dallas and Pittsburgh did not succeed because they proved impossible, presumably as a result of political and NIMBY-style opposition (acronym for Not in My Back Yard) to locating replacement units in suburban areas. Fortunately, the advent of a very tight housing market in Minneapolis-St. Paul took the heat off the dispersal program at a crucial moment by highlighting the general issue of affordable housing. This, combined with good regional cooperation, made it possible to move a large minority of the households of the distressed areas into better housing in mixed-income areas with the advantage of advisory services (although one official described their treatment there by neighbours as “terrible”).

Again, as Sherri Clark found in a study of housing policies on the periphery of Washington D.C., the tendency to stereotype extended even within the public housing areas where “respectable” tenants used terms like “so ghetto” to refer to people they considered “unacceptable.” Such a stereotype also influenced the officials in charge of the Washington HOPE VI program who distinguished between the *crème de la crème* of the poor, as one official described them, and these “unacceptable” ones. The *crème* were accepted for movement to “privately-managed, mixed-income integrated sites where poor residents lived as part of the new paradigm in the deregulation of public services” (78). The latter, presumably the same group which Goetz describes as being sent to distant “outlands” in Minneapolis which lacked even bus service, were dispersed throughout the Washington urban area, often without much government assistance. Clark

notes that they were “in effect becoming erased from the socio-political landscape” (78). It is no wonder then that so many of the poor surveyed in these HOPE VI studies were unwilling to leave their run-down communities. Better the devil you know...!

Both Clark and Goetz try to balance the failings and benefits of these federal programs, as does Diane Levy who states that one of the sociological premises of HOPE VI – living in mixed-income communities will assist the poor with better employment prospects and upward mobility – is largely unproven. Yet, many residents moved from “distressed housing” do benefit from safer environments, better health facilities and improved educational prospects for their children. Contrast this with the comments of thomas-houston in her chapter on the official rhetoric of the public housing movement in South Carolina. She claims that the dispersal of poor people into mixed-income neighbourhoods de-politicizes them and makes them invisible. In her words, “now is the time for a more vigorously engaged anthropology. In view of the fact that the majority of the poor – whose right has historically and systematically been silenced by the power of the state and capital – also stand (more often than not) silently on the sidelines waiting; now is the time for that tiny voice of truth to ring out from among the crowd shouting, “the Emperor has no clothes” (134-135). Levy has much truth on her side: the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans obviously came too late for the editors to feature it other than in their introduction, but the fate of the dispersed inhabitants of Ward 9 is a classic example of official housing policy bending to the interests of capital. However, thomas-houston’s own rhetoric gives one little hope that the editors’ goal – *Housing Devices* will act as “an inspiration and a tool” for struggling communities – will be realized. The poor are not moved by Habermasian social science, just as the direct, harsh criticism of named public officials is a dubious route to meaningful reforms.

The above comments are less a criticism of this book than recognition of the limitations of social activism by the indignant intelligentsia. Because *Homing Devices* relies on the papers delivered at a couple of conference sessions, it does suffer from two weaknesses which are inherent in the editors’ apparent commitment to publish all or most of the accepted papers (though one assumes that they could have sought high-quality papers elsewhere). One weakness lies in the awkward inclusion of a final chapter that focuses on squatter resettlement in Hong Kong. The sheer complexities of the housing administration there, combined with a dramatically different social attitude towards public housing – authors Alan Smart and Ernest Chui note that half of Hong Kong’s population of seven million live in public housing without facing high levels of social stigma or pathological conditions – undermine the value of this particular jurisdiction for international comparison with North America. The other weakness is the fact that not all conference papers are worthy of publication. Most notably, the chapter by Rae Bridgman consists mainly of a day-by-day account of the brainstorming and initial planning of a housing project for homeless youth in the Peel region of Toronto. It is a preliminary report of work in progress, of some interest to Canadians certainly, but not yet a fully formed journal article. From my perspective, much would have been

gained overall if *Homing Devices* had increased its Canadian content, improved the quality of some papers, and offered comparisons of public housing policies on both sides of the border. Toronto is on the verge of revitalizing its poorest public housing district, Regent Park. The city could benefit from the advice (rather than just the criticism) that activist anthropologists, like those represented in this volume, are able to offer.

Robert M. Pike, *Queen's University*

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