

UC Berkeley

Breslauer Symposium

Title

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/45j8r2bc>

Author

Rongerude, Jane

Publication Date

2006-04-01

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

Jane Rongerude
Department of City and Regional Planning
University of California, Berkeley
April 1, 2006

Contemporary research on concentrated poverty assumes intractable ghettos and a dying urban core. In the meantime, welfare reform and gentrification have changed the framework for these debates, giving rise to new spatial arrangements within US metropolitan areas. The new sorting of poor people and poor places is flexible, dynamic, and context-specific. It includes physical changes in the urban form, new networks of institutional relationships, and a reconfiguration of social formations within poor communities. It constitutes a new geography of poverty and opportunity in America's urban areas.

Central to this new geography are spaces of poverty management I call regulated public environments. Wolch and DeVerteuil define poverty management as "organized responses by elites and/or the state, directed generally at maintaining the social order and more particularly at controlling poor people."¹ While one can identify numerous types of places where poverty flourishes or where a poor public needs assistance, regulated public environments receive their distinct characteristics through their relationship with the current system of poverty regulation where they are maintained through the apparatus of the state. They include the real life places where poverty is experienced and where poverty management is both practiced and contested. These spaces represent specific institutional forms, what Loic Wacquant describes as a "historically determinate, spatially-based concentration of mechanisms of *ethnoracial enclosure and control* (p.343);" They are shaped by the local context where, through the twin processes of public housing reform and gentrification, the dominant power relationships of the post-welfare state are reinforced and normalized through the reconstruction of urban space.

Using the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s HOPE VI program as a paradigmatic case study, this paper investigates how public housing projects, and in turn how poor people, are managed in the United States within the current historical moment of neo-liberalism, localism, and decentralization. This paper begins with an attempt to understand the logics and limits of HOPE VI as a post-welfare strategy for poverty management. Next it places the research in San Francisco and the efforts of the San Francisco Housing Authority and argues for the importance of studying these questions in a city with a booming housing market. Finally, it returns to the idea of the regulated public environment and considers how HOPE VI could contribute to a new geography of US urban poverty.

HOPE VI and the End of Public Housing as We Know It

In 1989, Congress established the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing and charged the Commission with proposing a National Action Plan to eradicate severely distressed public housing by the year 2000. Over an 18-month period, the Commission and its staff visited public housing developments in 25 cities, held public hearings, and talked with the people who were affected by conditions in the public housing developments—the

¹ Wolch, J. and G. DeVerteuil. "New Landscapes of Poverty Management," *Timespace: Geographies of Temporality*. Eds. Jon May and Nigel Thrift. London : Routledge, 2003. 149-168.

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

residents, boards, and staffs of public housing agencies, and industry leaders.² The Commission concluded that roughly 86,000 of the 1.3 million public housing units nationwide qualified as severely distressed and that a new and comprehensive approach would be required to address the range of problems existing at these developments.³ In their final report, the Commission recommended revitalization in three general areas: physical improvements, management improvements, and social and community services to address resident needs.

In response to the Commission's recommendations, Congress authorized HOPE VI on August 10, 1992. HUD describes HOPE VI as "the engine driving the revitalization of the Nation's most distressed public housing developments by providing grants and unprecedented flexibility to address the housing and social service needs of their residents (HUD website)." The four main elements of the program include:

- Changing the physical shape of public housing projects;
- Establishing positive incentives for resident self-sufficiency and comprehensive services that empower residents;
- Lessening concentrations of poverty by placing public housing in nonpoverty neighborhoods and promoting mixed-income communities; and
- Forging partnerships with other agencies, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses to leverage support and resources (HUD website).

Just as President Clinton pledged, with the passing of PWORA in 1996, to "end welfare as we know it," HOPE VI is an attempt to end public housing as we know it. The HOPE VI program is situated on what has been described as the leading edge of welfare reform and within a larger effort to reform public housing that took place in the 1990s.⁴ These changes include revamping the Section 8 voucher program, repealing the one-for-one replacement rule, an emphasis on promoting self-sufficiency and employment among public housing residents, greater flexibility for local housing authorities in setting criteria for resident selection, new opportunities for creative financing or redevelopment, and policy changes such as rent ceilings designed to attract and keep higher income residents. Collectively, these policies fundamentally change the national practice of public housing and the role of the public housing authority within the local urban context.

The HOPE VI Approach to Poverty Management

The HOPE VI program and its intended outcomes have generated a body of literature over the last decade. Most of the research on HOPE VI has been directed at program evaluations and new generations of HOPE VI policy.⁵ My research fills this gap by considering HOPE VI as a project of poverty management with specific tensions and dynamics that emerge from its unique institutional and spatial arrangements. Working from the existing HOPE VI literature as well as early research at the San Francisco Housing Authority, I find five features of HOPE VI that characterize the program's unique approach. They are the ways that HOPE VI redistributes

² An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI, Vol. 1 Cross Site Report

³ Popkin, Katz et al. A Decade of HOPE VI

⁴ Popkin et al, 2004.

⁵ CCC, 2003; NHLP, 2002; Popkin et al., 2004, kingsley...

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

poverty, targets new beneficiaries, promotes flexible regulatory regimes, changes local institutional landscapes, and reconfigures urban space. This framework provides a starting point for analyzing HOPE VI and the ways in which it affects the geography of poverty in US urban areas.

HOPE VI redistributes poverty

HOPE VI is based on the belief that many of the ills generally associated with public housing can be attributed to that affects of concentrated poverty. It seeks to rectify those problems by encouraging local housing authorities to replace existing distressed public housing projects with mixed income communities and to relocate residents into less poor and less racially segregated neighborhoods using housing choice vouchers.⁶ HOPE VI attempts to deconcentrate poverty by decreasing the density of housing projects, encouraging mixed-income developments, and redistributing many of the original residents through the use of housing choice vouchers.

The HOPE VI approach is rooted in physical space both through the redesign of public housing structures and the relocation of public housing residents. It intentionally seeks to redistribute poverty within a given urban area and to encourage a new type of public housing resident. Advocates of this policy claim it breaks open existing spaces of social control, exclusion, and regulation and replaces them with spaces that are more prosperous, integrated, and free. Critics claim that HOPE VI merely provides a more fine grained approach to sorting the deserving and the undeserving poor. Nationally, fewer than 50% of the original public housing residents return to the renovated HOPE VI projects.⁷ While little research is available that tracks residents over time, critics claim that many end up in other projects at least as bad as those they left.⁸ Other alternatives, such as housing vouchers, are inadequate to keep the poorest families from slipping into greater poverty and increased threats of homelessness.⁹

HOPE VI targets new beneficiaries

Beginning with the Commission's final report, severely distressed public housing, the original impetus for HOPE VI reforms, is consistently defined in terms of the condition of the physical structures as well as the characteristics of the residents. As codified in the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 (Section 513.d.2), severe distress:

1. Requires major redesign, reconstruction, redevelopment, or partial or total demolition...;
2. Is a significant contributing factor to the physical decline and disinvestment . . . in the surrounding neighborhood;
3. Is occupied predominantly by . . . families with children that are very low income, whose members are unemployed and dependent on various forms of public assistance, or has high rates of vandalism and criminal activity; and
4. Cannot be revitalized through assistance under other programs.

Under HOPE VI, local public housing authorities are no longer required to limit their services to the lowest-income members of their communities. Some projects are rebuilt with a mix of income and affordability requirements, at times limiting the deepest subsidies to as few as

⁶ The Section 8 program was renamed Housing Choice Vouchers in xxx.

⁷ Popkin et al, 2004.

⁸ CCC, HOPE Unseen

⁹ Popkin et al, 2004.

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

30% of the redeveloped units. Even when housing authorities choose to limit their services to public housing eligible people, as is the case in San Francisco, the new lease agreements associated with return to the renovated projects have enough requirements that many families choose to go elsewhere rather than risk an eventual eviction.¹⁰

HOPE VI promotes flexible regulatory regimes

As discussed earlier, HOPE VI fits within a larger context of public housing and welfare reform. As part of the devolution included in these changes, public housing authorities were released from a range of federal requirements such as who they served and options for financing redevelopment. HOPE VI combines the structure of a federal framework with the flexibility of a community based program implemented with local partners.

HOPE VI changes local institutional landscapes

As local housing authorities take on the task of redeveloping specific projects, they form new relationships with both public and private sector partners which include private sector developers, consultants, architects, social service providers, housing advocates, community-based organizations and agency staff people. HUD requires that local public housing agencies create committees that also include local agencies, participating organizations, and residents as vehicles for community feedback and oversight during the HOPE VI process.

HOPE VI reconfigures urban space

From its conception, HOPE VI has been concerned with the importance of design. Local housing authorities are encouraged to include defensible space and new urbanist design features in their plans.¹¹ Projects are re-knit into the urban fabric of the surrounding community, at times including community space or retail tenants as part of their design. Public housing projects are demolished and then rebuilt, with the possibility, as happens with the most highly praised projects, of becoming something entirely new to the community: isolated ghettos of social ills re-emerge as home ownership opportunities, workforce housing, and revitalized neighborhoods.

The experience in San Francisco illustrates that not all severely distressed public housing projects are eligible for HOPE VI selection. To be successful, a potential HOPE VI site has to be able to leverage additional funds. In order to include higher income options such as market rate housing or homeownership opportunities, there has to be market interest. HOPE VI, then, has the potential to work as an agent of gentrification. It also tests the limits of gentrification and the potential for neighborhood revitalization as smaller and smaller pockets of intensified poverty are left behind.

HOPE VI on the Ground: Following the San Francisco Housing Authority

The next stage of this research will use this framework to investigate the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA), a local public housing authority which is in the process of implementing its fifth HOPE VI project. The urban context for this project is critical, and I have chosen San Francisco because of its booming housing market and resilient economic growth. San Francisco is a city of assets: it is a highly desirable location, has one of the most highly educated

¹⁰ CCC, Hope Unseen

¹¹ Popkin et al, 2004; Peterson, 2005.

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

populations in the country, median annual incomes are above \$80 thousand, and median home prices are among the highest in the nation. According to data from the 2000 US census, only one census tract within the San Francisco city limits had a concentration of poverty above 40%, down from four in 1990. No one associates the city with concentrated poverty or dilapidated housing projects. Nonetheless, both exist in San Francisco, and SFHA must contend with a city where gentrification is putting enormous pressure on many of the remaining low-income areas.

As part of the research, I will ask what it means to revitalize public housing in one of the most expensive housing markets in the nation; I will consider the pressures and limitations of gentrification within this process; and I will connect the national project of post-welfare reform to the local institutions that are resorting the urban poor while reshaping and redefining urban space. Using a combination of observation or participant observation and in-depth interviews, I will follow the on-the-ground practices of SFHA, tracing the work of agency staff as they interact with local community organizations, HUD officials, and the housing residents themselves. My research will include building relationships with housing authority staff, attending meetings, and observing the daily operations of the agency to the largest extent possible. I will also conduct in-depth interviews with key staff people at the housing authority, regional HUD representatives and individuals from other organizations involved in the community oversight boards of SFHA HOPE VI projects.

The San Francisco Housing Authority

The SFHA is the oldest housing authority in California. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors established the agency in 1938; just one year after the United States Congress passed the United States Housing Act. Housing Authorities are unique entities established by a combination of federal, state and local actions. While the Mayor appoints the seven members of the SFHA's Board of Commissioners, the SFHA is an independent agency and a state chartered corporation. Two Commissioners are SFHA residents who represent the families, seniors, and disabled persons housed through SFHA. The Board of Commissioners appoints an Executive Director to lead the SFHA workforce of more than 400 employees. The total budget for the SFHA is over \$200 million.

In 1940, the SFHA opened Holly Courts, the City's first low-income housing development, for 118 families. This community was the first public housing development west of the Mississippi River. Potrero Terrace (469 units), Sunnysdale (767 units), Valencia Gardens (246 units) and Westside Courts (136 units) followed closely and were all completed by 1943. This building boom was part of the war effort to support the 35,000 service members, war workers, and their families who came to San Francisco to assist in ship building and other kinds of production for World War II. Many of SFHA's communities were built during the period of 1940 to 1970.

Much of the funding for SFHA programs is derived from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the rents paid by residents. Residents pay approximately 30% of their income for rent, although tenants with no income pay zero rent. For fiscal year 2002, the agency's budget was \$47 million for public housing operations, which must cover maintenance and management costs for all 6,575 housing units.

The SFHA considers itself highly successful in HUD's HOPE VI program. To date, the SFHA has collaborated with private developers and State and City agencies to complete HOPE VI revitalization at Hayes Valley, Bernal Dwellings and Plaza East. The North Beach development was demolished in July 2002 and reconstruction is nearly completed. Demolition of

Regulated Public Environments: The New Geography of US Urban Poverty

the Valencia Gardens development began in the fall of 2003 and construction began in 2004. By 2002, the SFHA had received a total of \$118.5 million in grant funding from HUD for the five HOPE VI sites. This grant money has been leveraged with an additional \$166.8 million in private funding.

Regulated Public Environments and the New Geography of US Urban Poverty

The US welfare state is in the midst of reorganization. Over the last decade, we have seen efforts to dismantle well-known social welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC); and since the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996), there has been little public or political support for programs that provide benefits to the poor as entitlements. Although federal programs remain an important source of support for many poor families, poverty management programs often require recipients to work for benefits. Much of the control over poverty management programs has devolved down to states and localities, and the institutional landscape has changed to include a wider array of both public providers and private subcontractors. While the state is less visibly present in these institutional arrangements, the new apparatus extends influence to a much finer scale.

This process of change extends beyond new institutional arrangements. It includes a new discourse of poverty management, new ways of diagnosing poverty, new systems for sorting the deserving from the undeserving poor, and new understandings of the appropriate public to be served. As a result, poverty programs in their final form serve a particular set of interests quite separate from the needs of the final recipients, and program goals and outcomes may appear contradictory on the surface.

As the previous spaces of social control associated with poverty management, such as public housing projects, are being broken apart and reconfigured, some are reconnected back to the larger urban fabric while others are left to become more intensely controlled and behaviorally focused, what I call regulated public environments. While one can identify numerous types of places where poverty flourishes or where a poor public needs assistance, regulated public environments receive their distinct characteristics through their relationship with the current system of poverty regulation where they are maintained through the apparatus of the state. “Regulation” speaks to the political, social, and economic context as expressed through the project of poverty management. “Public” includes both the sponsors and the intended beneficiaries of this project. It addresses the questions of who occupies this space, who makes decisions, and who has agency to create change. “Environment” combines regulation and public within a particular place and form. These three pieces are dynamic. They interact with each other and with larger public debates, ultimately reshaping the geography of poverty and opportunity in US metropolitan areas.