Expulsions from public housing: The hidden context of concentrated affluence

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ABSTRACT

In this article I offer some critical reflections on the central analytical and political/policy issues emerging the special issue of *Cities* focused on the Right To The City Alliance's report *We Call These Projects Home* (*WCTPH*). I identify three conceptual threads running through the contributions to the special issue: stigma, grief, and 'emplacement', and I want to argue that a focus on all three is of fundamental importance in understanding the contemporary plight of the working class under the urbanisation of neoliberalism, and in informing possible strategies of resistance. I conclude with a critique of policy-driven housing research, and suggest that a highly critical focus on concentrations of affluence – including exploring the possibilities for dispersing the rich – is needed in order to support grassroots base-building endeavours like the WCTPH report.

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Introduction

> "It seems sometimes as if there is a systematic plan to expel low-income and unwanted populations from the face of the earth."
>
> David Harvey (2010, p. 245).

Human beings have no choice but to occupy a place in the world, and more often than not develop strong emotional ties to that place, so being *dis*placed by external forces – having that place taken away, given to someone else, or bulldozed – is among the most appalling of social injustices. Displacement involves the removal of a basic human need (shelter) upon which people depend absolutely – practically, socially, emotionally and psychologically. Displacement (and especially the threat of it) is a frequent occurrence for people living at the bottom of the urban class structure in cities throughout the world, to the point of it being epidemic in some societies (Clark, 2011; COHRE, 2010; Desmond, 2012; Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Harvey, 2010; Newman & Wyly, 2006; Porteous & Smith, 2001; Porter, 2009). Furthermore, rare are the instances where displacement results in some kind of beneficial or "resilient"[1] outcome for the displaced household; common

to the overwhelming majority of qualitative accounts of dislocation are disruption, humiliation, bitterness, pain and grief. It is therefore a moral and political necessity to identify the numerous causes of displacement, to recognise its many forms, to understand what it does to communities, and to agitate for the institutional and political-economic changes necessary to protect those vulnerable to it.

In this context I welcome and applaud the intervention that is the *We Call These Projects Home* (WCTPH) report, and also the contributions to this special issue of *Cities* that explore the questions raised by the report in a spirit of constructive engagement, commitment to praxis, and political urgency. The purpose of this commentary is to highlight and reflect critically upon what I see as the most significant themes to emerge from this overdue endeavour to expose and shatter the many myths surrounding public housing. By focusing, at last, on the voices of those who live (or have lived) in public housing, we encounter a compelling view from below that is wildly at odds with the view from above (expressed by, inter alia, politicians, think tanks, journalists and some scholars) that public housing is nightmarish, obsolete and best torn down. The most powerful challenge to what can only be described as housing policy idiocy has always been the collective voice of people contesting the relentless drive to knock down their homes, and I hope that this special issue of *Cities* provides a much-needed wake-up call to housing professionals and urban scholars content to take government funding to pursue research projects that are divorced completely from the lives and experiences of those they purport to study. A great deal of academic research does not even come close to challenging the assault on public housing documented in the WCTPH report, and in some cases appears to provide that assault with intellectual legitimacy (the cottage industry of 'neighbourhood effects' research being the most glaring illustra-

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[1] Resilience is a new policy buzzword in Europe traversing everything from ecosystems to cities, carrying with it the appalling implication that if people brace themselves adequately for a devastating blow (environmental catastrophe, economic meltdown) and weather the storm, everything will be fine in the end. It is favoured by rightwing governments and think tanks and, unsurprisingly, a huge amount of research funding is available if academics write proposals dressed up in the language of 'resilience'.

tion). In what follows I identify three conceptual threads running through all the contributions I was sent to read: stigma, grief, and 'emplacement', and I want to argue that a focus on all three is of fundamental importance in understanding the contemporary plight of the working class under the urbanisation of neoliberalism, and in informing possible strategies of resistance. I conclude with some thoughts on policy-driven[2] research and suggest where attention might be directed to support grassroots base-building endeavours like the WCTPH report.

Stigma

One of the more arresting passages of Goetz's contribution to this special issue is his documentation of what he calls a "vigorous discursive attack" on public housing occurring at the national level and in individual cities. Such is the frequency and intensity of the bombardment of negative depictions of public housing that Goetz rightly remarks that it is viewed by many of its critics not only as a failure, but as "an apocalyptic tragedy". Public housing in the United States is widely shunned, feared and condemned in the strongest possible terms from above and outside (by journalists, policy elites and some scholarship), and is usually treated as emblematic of all the urban and societal ills of our age, where vice, deviance and fecklessness collect, fester, and feed on themselves. The WCTPH report is instructive in this respect in its rigorous longitudinal content analysis of articles on public housing in major newspapers in eight cities, noting that the most common word printed was "gun", with "poverty", "crime", "gang", and "drug" not far behind. Correspondingly, there were virtually no articles at all that even mentioned any of the positive aspects of public housing, such as affordability, solidarity, kinship, community and home. To be sure, there are of course many difficult issues facing residents in public housing complexes, and these are well documented in academic and popular texts (e.g. Jones & Newman, 1998; Kotlowitz, 1991; Monroe & Goldman, 1988; Rainwater, 1970; Venkatesh, 2000). Whilst it would be naïve to paint an impression that daily life in public housing is somehow a positive experience across the board, the tendency for outsiders to focus only on extreme and serious episodes occurring in public housing – which are of course not unique to public housing – has played a significant part in the sorry trajectory of affordable housing provision in America and beyond.

One of the main weapons in the policy elite's arsenal is the activation and amplification of the intense stigma attached to public housing. When a particular part of a city becomes blemished by all kinds of derogatory images, terms and phrases, it makes the job of implementing drastic policies considerably easier for their architects:

> "Once a place is publicly labelled as a 'lawless zone' or 'outlaw estate', outside the common norm, it is easy for the authorities to justify special measures, deviating from both law and custom, which can have the effect – if not the intention – of destabilizing and further marginalizing their occupants, subjecting them to the dictates of the deregulated labour market, and rendering them invisible or driving them out of a coveted space." (Wacquant, 2007, p. 69)

The "blemish of place", to use Wacquant's phrase, impacts profoundly on residents in terms of their many strategies to deflect symbolic defamation, on their sense of self, and on the capacity of collective action (Pereira, 2007; Rhodes, 2012). It impacts on the actions of private operators, as address discrimination by employers can determine one's position in the labour market (Newman, 2001; Venkatesh, 2006; Wilson, 1996). The outsider gaze trained on certain spaces of notoriety also affects the operation of public services, for

example in differential welfare provision and in the formation of special policing strategies (Gray & Mooney, 2011; Jensen & Christensen, 2012; Sernhede, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, and as the authors of the WCTPH report note, the pervasive myth that public housing complexes are "urban hellholes" fuels the policy impulse to "deconcentrate" and "disperse" tenants. The stigma attached to disinvested working class urban quarters is of course not a new development, nor is it something confined to public housing in the United States, but what does appear to be new is the extent to which urban policy relies so heavily on the negative reputation of particular places in order to justify the expulsion of people from their homes. Even when public policies attempt to address a negative reputation of a particular place, they become so obsessed with a wholesale image makeover that they neglect the interests of residents in favour of greasing the engines of entrepreneurial urban accumulation via place promotion (Aalbers, 2011; Hall & Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 1989; Kearns & Philo, 1993; Peck, 2005).

The 'cottage industry' (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002) of scholarship arguing that there are causal "neighbourhood effects" plays a major role in sustaining the stigma attached to public housing. This was noted in the WCTPH report, and in the contributions by Goetz, Darcy, Reid and Arena. "Neighbourhood effects" stems from an understanding of society that adheres to one overarching assumption, that 'where you live affects your life chances'. It is seductively simple: somebody growing up in, say, a seven-bedroom mansion in an affluent suburban gated community will have far more chances in life than somebody growing up in an urban public housing project with high unemployment, poor educational attainment, and so on. The striking simplicity of this line of thinking has led to the emergence of analytic hegemony in urban studies: neighbourhoods matter and shape the fate of their residents – therefore, urban policies must be geared towards poor neighbourhoods, seen as incubators of social dysfunction. As Manley, van Ham, and Doherty (2011) explain, the initial stimulus to engage with neighbourhood effects was provided by Wilson (1987), who was persistent with the research question of entrenched unemployment in neighbourhoods exhibiting high poverty. He attributed 'joblessness' (to use his preferred term) not only to the refusal of employers to hire residents from certain neighbourhoods with a negative reputation, but to the very *concentration* of residents experiencing long-term unemployment. His arguments influenced a generation of scholars interested in far more than simply the labour market outcomes of 'concentrated poverty':

> "explanations of neighbourhood effects....include role model effects and peer group influences, social and physical disconnection from job-finding networks, a culture of poverty leading to dysfunctional values, discrimination by employers and other gatekeepers, access to low quality public services, and high exposure to criminal behaviour." (Manley et al., 2011, p. 153)

For the proponents of the thesis, then, it is the *neighbourhood* that is the problem to be addressed by policy, over and above the personal characteristics of its residents. Bauder (2002) captures the ecological thematics of the thesis succinctly:

> "The idea of neighbourhood effects suggests that the demographic context of poor neighbourhoods instills 'dysfunctional' norms, values and behaviours into individuals and triggers a cycle of social pathology and poverty that few residents escape. ...[It] implies that the residents of the so-called ghettos, barrios and slums are ultimately responsible for their own social and economic situation." (p. 85)

'Neighbourhood effects' is therefore more than just a concept – it is an *instrument of accusation*, a veiled form of class

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[2] By 'policy-driven' I mean research driven by the policy priorities of the state.

antagonism that has little or no concern for the institutional arrangements and political-economic conditions *outside* the very neighbourhoods under scrutiny (see Slater, in press). Applied to poor people, 'where you life affects your life chances' infers that the influences of what surrounds them cause and sustain their poverty – negative role models and miscreants prevent people from escaping an 'urban hellhole' and finding a job and a better life. In any society where class inequality is present, the poorest residents in the poorest quality housing in the poorest neighbourhoods become, via myriad forms of defamation, symbolic of complex discordances in the structure of society and are treated as if they were a cause of them. This almost invariably unleashes a discriminatory and stigmatizing argument: *that the clustering of a poor population category is causing neighbourhood decline.* Many scholars of the neighbourhood effects genre appear as quick to make sweeping assertions about communities into which they rarely (if ever) set foot[3] as they are to ignore the political implications of their scholarship. Bauder (2002) advanced a powerful critique:

> "The direct causality implied by neighbourhood effects models presents a simple and 'straight-forward' explanation for the social and economic marginality of inner-city residents, which entices through its use of quantitative methods and its claim to be objective and value-free. Yet…this literature makes ideological assumptions that remain unacknowledged by many researchers. One of these assumptions is that suburban middle-class lifestyles are normal, and inner-city, minority lifestyles are pathological." (p. 89)

It is such ideological assumptions that provide the scientific legitimacy for patronising policy pronouncements that 'mixing' communities will provide the poor with the neighbourhood 'role models' they need to improve their life chances. Yet the evidence for such an improvement from the largest experiment of its kind (the federal 'Moving to Opportunity' program) is thin at best, despite the bold claims of its architects and supporters (Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010). Life chances are affected by what you eat, what medical care you get, what colour you are, what education your parents can afford, and so on. To claim that 'where you live affects your life chances' is to reverse social and historical causation, for *your life chances affect where you live*, and where you live is a symptom of what position you are assigned by your superiors in the class structure – one link in the capitalist shackles that bind "the discontented, the alienated, the deprived and the dispossessed" (Harvey, 2010, p. 240).

Grieving for lost homes

> "*Moving people involuntarily from their homes or neighbourhoods is wrong.* Regardless of whether it results from government or private market action, forced displacement is characteristically

a case of people without the economic and political power to resist being pushed out by people with greater resources and power, people who think they have a 'better' use for a certain building, piece of land, or neighborhood. The pushers benefit. The pushees do not."
>
> Hartman, Keating, & LeGates, 1982, pp. 4–5, emphasis in the original.

The powerful words above appeared in a remarkable publication entitled *Displacement: How to Fight It*. It emerged as part of the San Francisco-based 'Anti-Displacement Project', a national campaign to protect affordable housing occupants from the displacement pressures of profiteering reinvestment in America's cities during the 1970s. The Project derived much of its energy from an early 1970s struggle[4] over the construction of San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center, a substantial convention, performing arts and public space complex in that city's South of Market neighbourhood. To create Yerba Buena, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency displaced over 4000 poor elderly tenants from Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs) in a particularly brazen case of land grab (Hartman, 1974). Something of the experience of displacement was later captured in retrospect by Hartman (2002) with poignant eloquence:

> "For many pensioners, accustomed to forty-dollar- and fifty-dollar-per-month rents, relocation was a terrifying experience… For older people in particular, personal friendships are perhaps the most important aspect of day-to-day life. Loss of familiar faces in the streets and in the hotel lobbies, of people to talk to, eat, drink, and play cards with is a severe shock. Similarly, the loss of stores, restaurants, and other commercial institutions can rob people of an important basis of stability, a place to obtain credit, to meet friends." (p. 66)

Throughout *Displacement: How To Fight It*, there was a total rejection of the neoclassical dictum of the "highest and best use" of particular land parcels, leading to an argument that competitive bidding for land fails to take into account the interests of those who occupy that land – what that bidding means for people without the means to bid (we should not forget that HOPE VI clearances have opened up hugely valuable tracts of urban land for gentrification, disguised by the bogus slogan of 'mixed-income redevelopment'). It was contempt for "highest and best use" and the influence of this notion on urban policy and planning that led Hartman to issue a plea for a "right to stay put" (Hartman, 1984). Hartman called into question conventional "cost–benefits" thinking in mainstream housing inquiry, in favour of an understanding of *displacement costs* as emotional, psychological, individual and social:

> "In seeking a new place to live, the displaced tend to move as short a distance as possible, in an effort to retain existing personal, commercial, and institutional ties and because of the economically and racially biased housing-market constraints they face. What they find usually costs more, has less adequate space, and is of inferior quality. Involuntary residential changes also produce a considerable amount of psychosocial stress, which in its more extreme form has been found analogous to the clinical description of grief." (pp. 305–6)

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[3] As Bauder implies, the neighbourhood effects literature is dominated by quantitative methods, particularly an obsession with regression techniques and 'controlling' for a range of individual and place characteristics in respect of trying to identify such effects. Yet there is a serious analytic flaw: regressions appear to show that it is not just that poor people live in poor neighborhoods, but that the neighborhood effects *exceed* what would be predicted by poverty alone. But even if that is true, dispersing the poor to wealthier places, as is almost always advocated, would only eliminate that incremental difference (the 'concentration effect'), without even pretending to address the institutional and structural arrangements driving poverty. The incremental 'after controlling for' logic and discourse is deeply misguided. It is underpinned by a ceteris paribus argument that is false: statistically controlling for characteristics of entrants into different neighbourhoods *does not make these individuals equal* because the processes of allocation through space are not random, and highly unequal.

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[4] This fight against the callous obliteration of a working-class quarter of San Francisco, led by a tenants' organization with the support of non-profit legal organisations, saw some impressive gains. After protracted litigation battles, half the units torn down in South of Market were replaced, and subsidised for permanent low-rent occupancy by federal and state sources and the city's hotel tax, with the tenants' organisation acting as developers and managers of much of the new housing. The slogan of the social movement against Yerba Buena summed up the protest: "We Won't Move".

Grief (or bereavement) is of critical importance in understanding the impact of displacement. "Grieving for a lost home" was in fact the title of one the earliest accounts of displacement via "urban renewal", a highly influential[5] essay penned by Marc Fried (1966). Fried was employed by the Massachussets General Hospital to survey nearly six hundred Boston residents displaced by a massive urban renewal scheme in that city's West End, where an entire working class neighbourhood (predominantly Italian-American) was officially labelled a slum and then razed to the ground in favour of high-rise luxury housing. Although the surveys administered were never reproduced in their entirety, some of the questions revealed by Fried are commendable in their simplicity, clarity and evocative qualities and thus, just like the WCTPH report under discussion, provide a valuable lesson in research design. For example, he asked respondents "How did you feel when you saw or heard that the building you lived in was torn down?", in addition to several questions on spatial identity, and on relocating and settling into a new area (two surveys were in fact conducted, 2 years apart, allowing for a revealing 'before and after' analysis of reactions to displacement). Fried's summary of the findings was as follows:

"[F]or the majority it seems precise to speak of their reactions as expressions of *grief*. These are manifest in the feelings of painful loss, the continued longing, the general depressive tone, frequent symptoms of psychological or social or somatic stress, the active work required in adapting to the altered situation, the sense of helplessness, the occasional expressions of both direct and displaced anger, and tendencies to idealize the lost place. At their most extreme, these reactions of grief are intense, deeply felt, and, at times, overwhelming." (pp. 359–60, emphasis in the original)

Reporting on data obtained from a series of questions on how people felt after being displaced, Fried noted the lack of ambiguity in the responses: "I felt as though I had lost everything," "I felt like my heart was taken out of me," "I felt like taking the gaspipe," "I lost all the friends I knew," "Something of me went with the West End," "I had a nervous breakdown." (p. 360). Fried was quick to report that these were not simply the isolated or extreme reactions of just a few residents, for of those who previously reported having liked living in the West End, "73 percent evidence a severe post-relocation grief reaction" (p. 364). Fascinatingly, even among those who were ambivalent or negative about the West End prior to their displacement, one third (34%) grieved severely for their lost homes. Whilst there was a minority of residents who welcomed the move to another area, and were satisfied with their new residential situation, these tended to be individuals in higher status employment – "outside the working-class category" (p. 373) – than many of their former neighbours.

When reading the voices within the WCTPH report and in many of the contributions to this special issue, the grieving for lost homes among the rubble of American public housing comes across just as intensely as in Fried's Boston. A few examples:

"You don't know where the bus is, where to go, you get on the wrong bus, you're stressed and disoriented. Your life is totally new and confusing. Once we moved to this neighbourhood, I became an outsider.... In public housing, everyone was friendly.

⁵ When Fried passed away in 2008, it was noted that his study had an "enormous impact in changing both the perceptions of policy makers and the policies that followed, as well as the general perception of the public, about the advisability of urban renewal as it was being practiced at that time" (John Havens, quoted in Marquard (2008)). Chester Hartman remarked that the study "had a lot to do with deflating urban renewal", whereas Elliot Mishler commented that it "affected the way in which urban planners began to think about what they were doing." Perhaps the greatest tribute came from a displaced former West End resident, Jim Capano: "It legitimized our cause. People realized you can't do this stuff." (Marquard, 2008).

I could count on folks to watch out for my children." (WCTPH report)

"It's like losing somebody in your family, you been in their family 31 years and y'all go separate ways."

"They uproot the old peoples and they have died. I'm serious. They [say], 'we don't want to go. We don't want to.' They got their flowers, their plants.... They all got their little pictures of the children and everything. They feel secure because people knew them."

One of Keene and Ruel's respondents attributed the death of several elderly acquaintances to acute grief associated with being involuntarily displaced. This is something well documented in the literature on displacement (Dumbledon, 2006; Fullilove, 2004; Hart, 1988; Jackson, 1972; Marris, 1986; Porteous & Smith, 2001). For instance, one of the people interviewed by John Western (1996) in his landmark study of forced evictions from the neighbourhood of Mowbray in apartheid-era Cape Town observed that

"A lot of people died after they left Mowbray. It was heartbreaking for the old people. My husband was poorly, and he used to just sit and look out the window. Then before he died he said, 'You must dress me and take me to Mowbray. My Mum and Dad are looking for me, and they can't find me in Mowbray.' Yes, a lot of people died of broken hearts." (p. 219)

Analysing such distressing data, Western remarked that it "seems coolly insensitive to ask whether there is any evidence of this impression being statistically valid" (p. 219). "Eviction from the neighbourhood in which one was at home", reported Marris (1986) in a study of slum clearance in Lagos, Nigeria, "can be almost as disruptive of the meaning of life as the loss of a crucial relationship." (p. 57). Similarly, in her conceptualisation of displacement as 'root shock', Fullilove (2004) explained that

"Root shock, at the level of the local community, be it neighbourhood or something else, ruptures bonds, dispersing people to all the directions of the compass. Even if they manage to regroup, they are not sure what to do with one another. People who were near are too far, and people who were far are too near. The elegance of the neighbourhood – each person in his [sic] social and geographic slot – is destroyed, and even if the neighbourhood is rebuilt exactly as it was, it won't work. The restored geography is not enough to repair the many injuries to the mazeway." (p. 14)

Once we come to understand – and communicate more effectively – that an involuntary change of home, like bereavement, can be a devastating disruption of the meaning of life for the person or family affected, only the very coldest and cruellest policy elites would not reflect on how they might feel if the positions were reversed.

'Emplacement'

"We can't understand the losses unless we first appreciate what was there."

Mindy Fullilove (2004, p. 20).

It was the manner in which displaced people dealt with the grief caused by losing their homes that enabled Marc Fried to grasp, in his words, "the importance of local areas as spatial and social arrangements which are central to the lives of working-class people." (p. 378) Grief associated with the loss of place was tightly connected to both loss of the physical structure of the dwelling and its environs (and with it, all the memories and symbolism they

contain, not just their practical use) and the loss of social network (the sudden removal of interpersonal relationships and daily routines, which are part of an individual's sense of being part of larger human and social entities). Crucially, Fried argued that

"feelings of being at home and of belonging are, in the working class, integrally tied to a specific place. We would not expect similar effects or, at least, effects of similar proportion in a middle-class area. Generally speaking, an integrated sense of spatial identity in the middle class is not as contingent on the external stability of place or as dependent on the localization of social patterns, interpersonal relationships, and daily routines" (pp. 365–6).

The contributions to this special issue are crystal clear on the inestimable importance of home, community and place to the lives of working class public housing residents. Ruel et al. note that "most residents of senior housing preferred to stay in public housing and have their building renovated", and after their displacement they reported a "drop in social support". Reid's crucial paper on the importance of considering the gendered dimensions of public housing in America offers the sobering[6] reminder that

"the policy of dispersing poor communities places women in especially precarious positions because of the potential for loss of material/emotional resources and increased vulnerability to domestic violence, rental discrimination, and sexual harassment."

From the research of a tenant action group in a Sydney public housing development slated for demolition, Darcy notes the "long term investments that tenants had made in their own homes and in building social networks", echoed in interviews conducted with other public housing developments in that city, where tenants expressed positive views on their place of residence, particularly with respect to social ties and having good neighbours. Goetz's careful dissection of the social scientific evidence on life in public housing paints a picture completely at odds with the stigmatising policy view that such places are social purgatories. Scientific inquiry utilising a wide range of research methods presents public housing as a place where life is tough, but bonds of mutual assistance, material support and solidarity constitute and indeed order patterns of social interaction. Keene notes the same in her study, where "kinship, belonging, security and support" characterise the public housing experience for so many, particularly the elderly.

The WCTPH report, and most of the papers in this issue, show exactly how and why places are coveted by those who stand to be removed from them. Crookes (2011) has helpfully called this strong attachment to place among the urban working class *emplacement*, something that he argues must be invoked whenever the displacement impulse among urban policy elites rears its head, for it aids in "shifting the focus of our attention from displacement to what is already there and what could be lost." Place attachment is especially strong in poor neighbourhoods, usually in direct response to marginalisation and residents' psychosocial and material needs – rendering the policy assumption that residents *want to leave* highly questionable (see also Goetz, 2003). To overthrow the hegemonic view – the 'dispersal consensus' (Imbroscio, 2008) – that people within public housing should be moved for the greater good of society, it seems essential to correct what Imbroscio identifies as one of the fundamental starting premises of that consensus, "that helping the poor where they live – through

place-based economic (or community) development – is destined to be of limited success." (pp. 121–2). Cheshire (2006) correctly designates the creation of 'mixed income communities' via "poverty deconcentration" as "policy hubris" and has elaborated why:

"Forcing neighbourhoods to be mixed in social and economic terms is treating the symptoms of inequality: it is on a par with applying leeches to lower a fever. At the same time, if there are welfare benefits derived from living in specialised neighbourhoods with other complementary households, the policy is directly destroying a potential source of welfare and a portion of the consumption benefits cities are capable of delivering." (p. 1241)

It is remarkable that the many advocates of demolishing public housing and dispersing tenants, and those encouraging and/or applauding deliberate disinvestment ("they run it down to tear it down"), do not see the hypocrisy of their position. These are often the same New Urbanist devotees who worry about the decline of social capital, the erosion of community ties, the lack of pedestrian-friendly landscapes and the sprawl of cities (recall that the Le Corbusian 'towers in the park' design of public housing was itself an anti-sprawl measure). In public housing, there are strong community bonds that stretch across generations, harbouring people who, as Megan Reid reminds us, "are not just interested in housing as a dwelling to reside in, but in housing defined more broadly, as something that should encompass family (broadly defined), neighbourhood, and community." But the deep roots working class people grow in the places where they reside – a use-value conception of space – are secondary to the totally dominant exchange-value (profit) ethos and mandate of those responsible for housing provision and urban planning. Cue the wrecking ball and the bulldozer, summoned and celebrated by so many even as the chronic affordable housing shortage worsens before their eyes. The result was noted long ago by Marc Fried (1966) in his concluding observation: "dislocation and the loss of the residential area represent a fragmentation of some of the essential components of the sense of continuity in the working class." (p. 377) Whilst there might be a danger that 'emplacement' gives too much weight to where people are, rather than how they are treated, it sadly still seems important to make the point that displacing people isn't some trivial little problem, or the unfortunate but necessary by-product of urban 'redevelopment' (see Porter, 2009).

Conclusion: Concentrated affluence and the dispersal of the rich

"In short, a policy predicated on the claim that the demolition of their homes will advance the interests of the very people whose homes are being destroyed is a preposterous sham."

Stephen Steinberg (2010, p. 222).

In North America and Western Europe, social science research takes place in the context of universities neoliberalising with stunning celerity, where the press of finding research funds to recover the costs of ever-increasing expenditure by university managers has come to dominate the functioning of academic departments, so much so that the award of a massive research grant carrying institutional overheads can be a fast-track to promotion (often regardless of the relevance and influence of the research, or the quality of publications arising from the project). Universities are becoming "ever more grotesque parodies of businesses" (Smith, 2001, p. 146), competing against each other for scarce resources, or as anti-gentrification activists fighting Columbia University's expansion into Harlem once put it, they are "multibillion-dollar, multinational corporations with major interests in the global equity markets and in local real estate development which also happen to give out degrees every May" (quoted in Smith (2008, p. 264)).

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[6] The severity of this situation should not be trivialised: in a recent study of evictions in Milwaukee, Desmond (2012) found women from poor black neighbourhoods to be evicted through the court system at "alarmingly high rates" (in the thousands), and eviction "not only contributes to their homelessness and poverty but also disrupts community stability" (p. 120–1).

This context means that all scholars are under greater pressure than ever before to secure substantial external funding, and it is to government funding bodies that most social scientists apply. The result is the serious subordination of scholarly to policy agendas, and the rise of policy-driven research at the expense of research-driven policy (and with it, decision-based evidence making instead of evidence-based decision making). The autonomous scholar, conducting research for reasons arrived at in the course of their engagements with knowledge and social life, is increasingly an endangered species, threatened with extinction by the rise to prominence of scholars guided primarily by the priorities and categories of state managers and the worries of the mainstream media. Wacquant (2009) has elaborated this trend:

> "On both sides of the Atlantic, autonomous researchers are also increasingly supplanted by bureaucratic experts, those shadowy scholars who deliver to government the answers that officials wish for and who, above all, accept the questions posed by politicians. In point of fact….there is a huge deficit of collective reflection on the collective organization of scientific work and on the changing nexus between research, the media, money, and politics. This deficit fosters scientific heteronomy and, through it, the diffusion of the monopoly of neoliberal "one-way thinking" which has truncated and paralysed public debate for the past decade." (p. 124)

The massive literatures on "neighbourhood effects", "concentrated poverty", on the behaviour of the "underclass" and on "mixed income communities" did not emerge by happenstance or purely out of intellectual curiosity or even a sense of social justice – they speak volumes on how political and policy developments and the funding bandwagons they create drive the scientific agenda. It is frankly an embarrassment for mainstream housing scholars across the United States that it has taken this long for a rigorous and penetrating study (the WCTPH report) to appear of what public housing residents think of public housing together with the suggestions they have for it – and for it to be penned not by scholars based in universities with fantastic resources, but by grassroots base-building organizations! In light of this embarrassment there are important questions to be asked about the role of social scientists in public life, and how they might recover a sense of civic duty rather than fulfil obligations to sponsors with dubious motives. A first step is surely to reject the absurd *false choice* that gets tabled by policy-oriented scholars with alarming regularity: that poor communities can *either* continue to live in disinvested housing, *or* have reinvestment that results in their displacement (see DeFilippis, 2004, p. 89). This reasoning reflects a lack of critical imagination, and is anchored in the incorrect assumption that place-based improvements cannot be implemented in the interests of poor communities.

Desmond (2012) has recently spelled out our contemporary predicament as follows:

> "The fundamental issue is this: the high cost of housing is consigning the urban poor to financial ruin. We have ushered in a sad and unreasonable moment in the history of the United States if thousands of poor families are dedicating upward of 80% and 90% of their income to rent." (p. 123)

This fundamental issue is not a natural development – it is something that has been *allowed* to happen, and therefore it is a reversible situation. The solution is simple, but way off a political radar locked on dismal austerity measures: the preservation and restoration of what public housing is left, together with the mass construction of new public housing, amidst an extended programme of basic income and living wage security, and substantial investment in education. The financial ruin of the poor was triggered by the actions of those carrying the most political and policy influence – a transnational 'overclass' of financial elites, banking cartels, legal professionals, think tank intellectuals, economists – the list is long and well known, designated recently (for better or worse) as "the one percenters" (Ketcher, 2011) They usually have several residences, and live amongst their own kind, sealed off behind walls and electric gates and security systems, and even receive generous subsidies in order to live like this:

> "Most Americans think that federal housing assistance is a poor people's program. In fact, relatively few low-income Americans receive federal housing subsidies. In contrast, about three-fourths of wealthy Americans – many living in very large homes – get housing subsidies from Washington in the form of tax breaks. These tax breaks subsidize many households who can afford to buy homes without it." (Dreier, 2006, p. 105).

Furthermore, these subsidised housing developments of the rich are characterised by high levels of criminality, antisocial behaviour and declining social capital – in short, they are microcosms of some of worst societal problems of our age. It is therefore essential, as urban scholars and social scientists, to reflect upon why there is an absence of research on such *concentrated affluence* and the dysfunctional behaviour of residents utterly insulated from the dignified daily struggles endured by those their actions and decisions affect. Correspondingly, it is high time to start pushing and agitating for policies aimed at dispersing the rich when their concentration and fecklessness played a major role in grievous collective disasters such as the 2008 financial crisis.

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