Urban regeneration, scale and balancing social mix

Dr Kathy Arthurson, Program Leader, Cities, Housing and the Environment, Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

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The social inclusion and place based disadvantage workshop was held on the 13th of June 2008 at the Metropole Conference Centre in Fitzroy, Victoria, under the auspices of the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Research & Policy Centre and the Victorian Government’s Department of Planning & Community Development. It was hosted by Paul Smyth, facilitated by Allison McClelland, and coordinated by Kristine Philipp. These proceedings are aimed at fostering, informing and stimulating public reflection, discussion, debate, research, and policy initiatives to address one of the central challenges facing contemporary Australian governments, industries and communities.

The following papers were presented at the workshop:
Associate Professor Scott Baum – Making space for social inclusion.
Dr Zoë Morrison – Place, social inclusion and ‘cultural justice’: reflections on the British experience – a place-based social exclusion policy case study
Professor Paul Smyth – Social inclusion down under
Professor Ruth Fincher – Issues of scale: a place-based view of social inclusion centred on redistribution, recognition and encounter
Mr Damian Ferrie – Social inclusion and place-based disadvantage: what we have already done that is valuable for the future
Dr Tim Reddel – Reframing governance and service delivery by ‘place and partnership’: some ideas and lessons from Queensland
Professor William Mitchell – A return to full employment is a precondition for social inclusion
Dr Jo Barraket – Social inclusion, employment and social enterprise
Mr Tom Bentleigh – Places and mainstream services
Professor John Wiseman – Strengthening social inclusion through place based action to improve mainstream services
Professor Bill Randolph – Locating social exclusion: the case of Sydney
Dr Kathy Arthurson – Urban regeneration, scale and balancing social mix

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About the Author
Dr Kathy Arthurson is Program Leader, Cities, Housing and the Environment, at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.
Email: karthurson@swin.edu.au

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Research & Policy Centre
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy VIC 3065
ABN 24 603 467 024
Phone: (03) 9483 1364
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Introduction

Recent Australian research maps the contemporary patterns of concentration of spatial disadvantage, due to structural economic change, across metropolitan cities and regional centres (Baum et al., 1999). Within these studies, the communities identified as the most vulnerable to change, in terms of income levels, labour force engagement and the presence of disadvantaged residents, are social housing estates and areas of concentrated low income private rental housing. In tandem with the economic changes, concentrations of social housing tenants have been perceived as having significant associations, whether rightly or wrongly, with a range of issues including anti-social behaviour, crime, welfare dependency and depictions of a socially excluded underclass eschewing work and disengaged from mainstream norms and values. These depictions have been reinforced over the past few years internationally by civil disturbances experienced on social housing estates, including in Australia (Macquarie Fields and Redfern in New South Wales), France (St Denis, Poissy, Clichy-sous-Bois) and the UK (Bestwood, Nottingham).

Whilst the debate about a socially excluded underclass has been contentious, it has contributed to the stigmatisation of areas in which social housing is concentrated. This affects social housing tenants through increased difficulty in gaining employment due to negative perceptions of particular areas and lack of role models in terms of employment participation and educational achievement. There are also other implications, such as poor quality local services and lowered local amenity. Recent reforms to implement tighter assessment criteria for accessing social housing mean that these issues around concentrations of disadvantaged tenants are likely to increase rather than decrease. These circumstances have prompted renewed interest by urban and social planners and housing policy makers in the idea of ‘social mix’.

Substantial amounts of public and private sector funding are being spent on regenerating disadvantaged Australian neighbourhoods with high concentrations of social housing. Whilst regeneration initiatives involve a range of strategies such as physical improvements to the housing, local employment projects and resident participation, many of the projects also focus on changing the balance of the ‘social mix’ within the neighbourhood to create more socioeconomically diverse communities.

Conceptualising Social Mix

Within the context of urban regeneration social mix is commonly described as:

- The socioeconomic variance of residents within a particular spatially delineated area, such as the neighbourhood, that is the balance of the mix of middle-income and low-income residents;
- A mix of housing tenures (homeowners, social housing tenants and private renters), as compared with a neighbourhood characterised by concentrations of homogenous social housing;
A mix of age groups, for instance, often referring to the levels of youth and aged residents in relation to high-rise social housing towers; and

Ethnic mix

What is evident from the literature and policy debates is that social mix is an ambiguous concept that is often interchanged with use of the term ‘tenure mix’, although changing tenure mix does not necessarily result in the desired changes to social mix. For instance, in the UK the “Right to Buy” scheme sold social housing to existing tenants benefiting many to become home owners but did not change the socioeconomic mix of the neighbourhood – instead the scheme merely changed the housing tenure of some social housing tenants.

An old idea with a long history

The idea of social mix is not new as there is a long history of pursuing social mix in urban planning, although the idea waxes and wanes at different times as do the objectives and meanings attached. Sarkissian (1976) and more recently Arthurson (2008) detail that historically a continuing theme of the ideals set for social mix are about the necessity for propinquity between poor and better-off residents. The underlying rationale is that propinquity enables the poor to become good citizens through the instrument of middle-class role modelling and leadership. This reasoning assumes that residents’ patterns of socialisation in disadvantaged areas are largely restricted to the spatial scale of local neighbourhood with limited social networks/contacts beyond the immediate area.

Social mix has informed Australian and British new town planning policy since the post second world war years of the late 1940s. As Peel (1995) illustrates through exploring the construction of the suburb of Elizabeth by the South Australian Housing Trust, in the late 1950s, support for social mix in Australia derived from the British model of new town planning. This model depicts socioeconomically homogeneous communities as problematic due to the resultant social class segregation. From this perspective, the nub of the issue is that concentrations of like residents within particular neighbourhoods, experiencing low-incomes and educational levels and reduced access to employment, reinforce and exacerbate the problems of inequality. What is novel about the recent enthusiasm for social mix, in both Australia and the UK, is the linking of the concept to urban regeneration and addressing social exclusion, rather than the planning of new build estates as in the past. Atkinson and Kintrea (2000), for instance, detail how in UK regeneration policy, the Labour Government’s focus on tackling ‘social exclusion’ witnessed a recent resurgence of interest in creating ‘mixed’ income communities on social housing estates.

Social mix and the supposed benefits

One of the key strategies to achieve a more balanced social mix is through diversifying housing tenure, via lowering concentrations of social housing and increasing owner-occupied housing within the neighbourhood. This is generally achieved through demolition, sales and replacement of obsolete social housing with private housing to attract higher income groups to move into the neighborhoods. In some Australian states, regeneration involves permanent relocation of social housing tenants to social housing in other neighbourhoods. Generally, the
overall effect is to lower the concentrations of social housing in the regeneration area and reduce the wider level of social housing stock.

As numerous commentators contend, support for social mix is based on the assumption that in neighbourhoods of concentrated mono-tenure social housing, residents are segregated from the activities of mainstream society, characterised as they usually are by homogenous social groups. Common characteristics of residents include experiencing high levels of unemployment, low income, poor educational outcomes and higher instances of mental and physical health problems than in other neighbourhoods. The positive effects of residing in neighbourhoods with a more balanced social mix are thought to include:

- Improved access to social networks, which link residents to other opportunities such as employment;
- Positive role models to assist in integrating residents into the ‘appropriate’ behaviours of wider society. This factor is linked to ameliorating problems of crime, low education retention rates, poor health and high unemployment;
- Decreased postcode prejudice and lowering of the stigma associated with residing in neighbourhoods that are perceived as negative or undesirable; and
- Increased access to a range of health, education and community services that is difficult in areas of concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage due to service ‘overload’ within these particular neighbourhoods.

Overall, balancing social mix is associated with facilitating positive change for disadvantaged residents on social housing estates. However, within the international literature and policy debates, the sociological understanding of space as a context for social interaction has not been clearly conceptualised or often explored as a framework for understanding the effects of social mix.

**Social mix and scale – a snap shot of the findings**

The international literature on social mix was reviewed from 1990 until 2007. This included 57 journal articles, 13 reports, seven conference papers and three book chapters. Two important themes that emerged as the review progressed were first, the importance of scrutinising the scale at which social mix is implemented, and second, the impact of lifestyle in determining levels of social interaction in mixed income neighbourhoods.

Overall the literature suggests that:

- little social interaction takes place between residents across different housing tenures in mixed tenure neighbourhoods.
- where social interaction does occur, it is more likely between residents with similar socioeconomic characteristics – it generally involves casual interaction, such as in playgrounds and hallways or through volunteer activities. Children are more likely to interact than adults.
• social interaction is more likely to occur across tenures where owner and rental housing is spatially integrated or where owners have connections in the neighbourhood, such as children attending local schools.

• schools are key institutions to facilitate mixing between residents across different housing tenure groups – but this is only possible if everyone sends their children to the local schools.

• where low income tenants are relocated to other neighbourhoods some maintain ties outside of the area with their previous residential neighbourhoods, still attending church or socialising there.

• in the busy world of today many residents’ activities take place outside of the local neighbourhoods – eg. shopping, recreation, visiting friends and relatives.

• not surprisingly some studies have found a direct relationship between the level of spatial integration and the contact that occurs between owners and renters. Interaction is not facilitated if social housing is grouped in particular streets, down one side or as a clustered groups of units or with social housing tenants mainly located in houses in other separate of the estates, to home owners.

Issues:

• within many studies the scale of implementation of social mix is unclear, so this makes it difficult to understand/gauge effects – for instance, are households in every income group included on each floor of a particular building or do they occupy different parts of the buildings? Is the building or street a more meaningful social scale of analysis than the estate?

• whilst generally, owners and renters do not seem to mind living near to each other, resistance increases exponentially as spatial geographic proximity between the tenures increases. Jupp (1999, 45) found higher levels of cross-tenure contact between residents (and no conflict) where there was street-level mixing of housing – so he advocates for pepper potting of different housing tenures but cautions that even then the levels of social interaction studied ‘are hardly sufficient to create a considerably more inclusive society’. Conversely, Beekman et al. (2001) found that street-level mixing led to conflict – so does not advocate for pepper-potting, Dansereau (1997) argues that scale is a desirable goal at the neighbourhood rather than building or housing cluster. Advocates for a hierarchy of spaces from private to semi-private to semi-public to public so people can choose when to mingle or stay apart. For instance, parks and shops as sociability cannot be dictated by design, only allowed for or facilitated.

• Policy conundrum – policies targeting social housing to high need tenants are at odds with social mix policies.

The findings highlight the role that scale plays as a mediating factor in social mix policies. They point to the importance of giving thought to how advantaged and disadvantaged groups
will interact within mixed income neighbourhoods through urban regeneration along with the relevant geographic scale for consideration of mix.

The questions I want to raise for discussion are:

1. At what level should social mix policies be operationalised? - there are numerous different spatial geographic dimensions available– including at the level of home, cluster, block, street and neighbourhood – these are likely to have different outcomes for residents.

2. Do we believe that social interaction at the neighbourhood level is an important aim of social mix policies in order to encourage social inclusion? – but it appears the case that in contemporary society most people’s social networks and links (especially home owners) extend way beyond the local neighbourhood – so how relevant are social mix policies?

3. In relation to the scale of implementation of social mix, is a fine grained scale of social mix realistic or even desirable - perhaps it could lead to conflict rather than social inclusion? – and given the impact of policies targeting social housing to high need and complex tenants.

4. Does it impact on social inclusion if residents of a spatially defined area do not mix? How many of us mix with our neighbours?
References


