Politics, community and social dilemma: Where to from here?
Blue Towers: a political struggle over the right to the city

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Abstract

The right to the city has emerged over the past two decades as a significant site of political struggle in most Australian cities. Gentrification, the decline of public housing provision and housing affordability issues have contributed to increasingly divided cities. This article focuses on the political struggle of one group of public housing residents in inner Sydney. As a result of insufficient supply and increased targeting those most in need, public residents are now some of the most disadvantaged community members in New South Wales. A confluence of political, economic and social factors has resulted in public housing residents becoming highly stigmatized. This context provides the backdrop for exploring the efforts. Drawing on an in-depth case study, this paper examines how one group of residents sought to build a sense of community and assert their right to the city whilst negotiating the use of power by the state which hindered residents’ efforts to act collectively. It concludes that community development principles (particularly empowerment, advocacy and alliances) provide a bulwark against neo-liberalisms individualizing and privatizing tendencies.

Introduction

This paper explores how one group of residents in a public housing complex in inner Sydney sought to assert their right to the city through empowerment, community building and counter-narratives over a period of seven years. Through examining the micro-practices of resistance, it reveals the value of community development principles in supporting poor people’s right to place.

Blue Towers

The Blue Towers complex (not its real name) is a high rise complex with 150 properties, of which 89% have single residency. Over 80% of the residents are aged 45 years and over, with just over a quarter of the residents aged over 65 years of age (Unpublished data, Department of Housing, 2014). Located in a socially mixed neighbourhood, residents of Blue Towers enjoy access to high quality community assets and programs. The complex is located in the highly desirable, increasingly gentrified, inner-city close to services such as a major hospital with drug and alcohol and mental health units, and is well serviced by public transport which allows for easy access to commercial centres. Residents of Blue Towers have markedly different experiences to many of their neighbours. Rather than facing abandonment on the fringes of the city (Kelaher et al., 2010:381), Blue Towers residents face the challenge of negotiating the gentrification of their neighbourhood, the loss of working class cultural practices and stigmatization. In the immediate neighbourhood, old industrial land and factories have been converted for expensive private housing. According to the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (SEIFA), which considers variables such as low income, low levels of education and unemployment, Blue Towers is in the 10th percentile for disadvantage within Australia. In comparison, the areas directly surrounding the public housing complex range from the 79th percentile and through to the 100th percentile (ABS, 2011; City of Sydney, 2014). The median household incomes in the areas directly surrounding the public housing area are between $800-$2,118 dollars per week higher than those of the residents of Blue Towers (ABS, 2011; City of Sydney, 2014).

Residents have consistently reported concerns about safety within the building and from pedestrians who transit through the complex. Relationships within the complex are often strained or even violent. In the past decade, there have been three deaths at Blue Towers, two from suicides from the building and another treated by the Police as suspicious. Over the past three decades the residents have seen new arrivals with increasingly complex needs, particularly those recently released from prison, and those with drug and alcohol addictions and mental health problems. The majority of residents rely solely on Government benefits as their form of income, and as such, levels of food insecurity are notably high. Years of policy uncertainty about public housing stock has created high levels of anxiety and fear among residents about the security of their housing. Asset sales and renewal projects are underway in nearby public housing communities adding to this anxiety. Blue Towers has over recent years experienced ongoing maintenance problems and as the building ages, State Housing faces significant upkeep challenges.

Glebe Community Development Project

The Blue Towers case study which forms the basis of this article arises from the experiences of the Glebe Community Development Project (hereafter Glebe CDP). Since 2004, the Faculty of Education & Social Work at the University of Sydney has employed community development principles to work with neighbouring public housing communities, in partnership with key stakeholders including the NSW State Housing Department. The activities of the Glebe CDP working with residents of Blue Towers respond to the ‘complex and multifaceted’ issues facing public housing residents (Turnbull, 2016:26-27). The Glebe CDP’s broad aim has been to
‘improve the life opportunities of residents’ through facilitating participation in decision making, working collaboratively to achieve change, enhancing access to services (including education, health and leisure) and advocacy (University of Sydney 2015). Such an approach, however, does not receive widespread support, with Sanaa and colleagues (2013:320) arguing that many governments view community development approaches with suspicion, even hostility and deem them a failure. This perspective permeated the relations between the Glebe CDP and State Housing in relation to Blue Towers.

Review of the literature

Housing has emerged as key policy challenge, often discussed in terms of ‘affordability’, with widespread concern about the capacity of low-income earners to access affordable housing (Anglicare, 2016; McKenny & Ting, 2016). Housing costs remain the largest expenditure item for low income households and access to affordable housing is central to wellbeing (Rowley & Ong, 2012; Anglicare, 2016). Groenhart & Burke (2014) argue that the housing crisis puts at risk the political and social stability arising from the provision of affordable and appropriate housing. In a similar vein, Morris (2013) argues that the state’s role needs to be more than merely the physical provision of housing and must include building community wellbeing.

In November, 2014 the New South Wales Government released a Discussion Paper which, among other things, envisaged a ‘system that does not perpetuate disadvantage and dependency’ (NSW Government 2014:7). In the Plan, the Minister declared that ‘we want to encourage residents in social housing to be aspirational, not generational’ (2014:4). In keeping with social policy in many fields and countries, the market was envisaged as key to resolving some of the challenges facing the government in relation to housing provision for low income people (Arthuson & Darcy, 2015). Asset sales, redevelopment and diversification of tenure and outsourcing management to the non-government section were key strategies in the Plan (Inner Sydney Voice, 2016).

Research in the housing field over recent years has been dominated by quantitative studies (see for example Kratz, et al, 2015; Wood, et al, 2016). This research (like the political debate) has primarily focused on the economic factors that hinder or may facilitate greater access to affordable housing. When public housing residents are invited to share their experiences, this is often examined through the lens of ‘place based disadvantage’ (see for example Cheshire, Pawson, Easthope & Stone, 2014; Byron, 2010) with less focus on their rights as citizens (Morris, 2013; Darcy, 2013). The lived experiences of those in public housing has attracted less scholarly attention than the economics of government involvement in housing provision. This is surprising given what some scholars (Darcy, 2013; Morris, 2013) and activists (Inner City Voice, 2016) argue is at stake: the right to place of poor citizens in the city. Samaa and colleagues suggest public housing ‘is a core aspect of a broader social context in which low-income urban populations work to create homes and communities that sustain them’ (2013:319). Access to affordable housing enables citizens to create dignified and meaningful homes’ (O’Brien, 2013:10). Stigma, de-concentration (as expressed through redevelopment and social mix policies) and demand (as expressed through waiting lists) all impact on the day to day lives of residents (Kelaher et al., 2010; Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013; Darcy, 2013). Julie Foreman captured some of the resultant anxiety among residents at a public meeting to discuss redevelopment at Waterloo in comments such as: ‘why do I have to lose my home, my community, my security?’, ‘I am afraid of moving away from my health supports and friends’, ‘I feel like my life will be on hold for the next 5 years’, and ‘why didn’t you take the last 10 years of consultations into account?’ (2016:12), sentiments which echo the experiences of some residents in other estate redevelopments over the past decade (Morris, 2017; Millers Point Community, 2016; Dang, 2008).

Research undertaken by Lisa Dang (2008) into residents’ experiences of earlier redevelopment of housing estates in Minto and Bonnyrigg focused on the Government’s approach of ‘resident consultation’. This ‘consultation’ is symbolic of what Darcy (2013:370) calls ‘reactive consultation’, after major decisions have already been made that will fundamentally alter resident’s lives. Dang’s participants who lived in public housing reported feeling shocked and powerless in their interaction with State Housing and the Government. Interestingly, Government staff also suggested that the ‘consultation process’ in Minto was poor, with the lessons drawn on to inform consultation and participation in Bonnyrigg. Despite this Dang concludes: ‘renewal projects are planned predominantly for the benefit of future communities, and existing communities in public housing estates are still being ignored in the decision making and planning of renewal projects’ (2008:94)

Methodology

The Glebe CDP employs a community-based research framework (Caine & Mill, 2016; Frankel Merenstein, 2015) to build knowledge with public housing residents, students, community development workers and academics on the social justice outcomes of social policies and programs. The Blue Towers case study is grounded in the day-to-day experiences of residents and engaged with issues of personal, communal and structural power (Caine & Mill, 2016:14). Research questions arise from the community and reflect issues of importance to the community, such as residents’ wellbeing and experiences of services (Frankel Merenstein, 2015). Like other participatory forms of research (e.g. Stoecker, 2013), community-based research seeks to ‘develop practical knowledge that is relevant to the community’ (Caine & Mill, 2016:19).

This article reports on an in-depth case study (Yin, 1984) of collective resident-driven activities within a single public housing complex over a period of seven years. The public housing complex is understood as a bounded system with particular patterns of behaviour (Stake, 2003:135). This article aims to describe the particular case in sufficient detail to enable readers to ‘vicariously experience these happenings, and draw conclusions’ (Stake, 2003:141). Schell (1992) argues the case study is ‘unparalleled for its ability to consider a single or complex research question within an environment rich with contextual variables.’ Rather than focusing on the particular case study intrinsically, however, this study sought a more instrumental engagement with the general issue of community building among public housing residents (Stake, 2003:137). The case study was chosen for the opportunities to learn it provided, particularly about collective action, community development and power in the context of neo-liberalism. Data were collected for the case study through participant observations, project
and increase their sense of belonging. The first exemplar is of the Blue Towers Action Group (‘BTAG’), a self-organised advocacy forum. The second, related, exemplar is the management of vandalism of power boxes.

The final exemplar relates to the management of a Drop-in Centre supported by resident volunteers. These exemplars highlight resident struggles for greater influence over their day to day lives. They provide examples of the micro-political struggles of everyday people in the face of the neoliberal state. They reveal how the use of power by the state can disempower residents and undermine their efforts to act collectively.

**Blue Towers Action Group**

In 2008, residents within Blue Towers, with the support of the Glebe CDP, established the Blue Towers Advocacy Group (BTAG). BTAG provided a collaborative forum for residents to raise issues of concern, make links to services that may be able to assist and participate in decision making processes that impact on their everyday lives. These types of forums are identified in the community development literature as a key strategy in community building (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2011; Oliver & Pitt, 2013). BTAG identified issues affecting all residents and was not a forum for individual complaints. It arose after residents were excluded from significant land use development decisions which had the potential to double the occupancy levels on the property and massively reduce green space. Theoretically and practically, BTAG aimed at ‘rehabilitating the system’—there was no question of challenging the ownership or control of State Housing, rather a desire to create a collective voice and present persuasive alternative cases or positions (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2011:20-21).

BTAG invited representatives from State Housing, the City of Sydney, the local Member of Parliament, the Glebe CDP and NSW Police to attend the meetings. The monthly meetings of BTAG identified common concerns and developed specific advocacy strategies in relation to these concerns. Agenda items for the meetings are identified through consultation with residents and always included ‘Other business’ enabling residents to raise other issues. BTAG enabled residents’ direct access to information and decision makers. Attendance fluctuated, occasionally reaching 30 residents although a core group of seven resi-

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**Limitations**

The community narrative that informs this article is that of the researchers. The case study methodology, whilst sensitive to particular patterns of behaviour, is re-told by and through the researchers (Stake, 2003:144). Specific voices or narratives are foregrounded, whilst others (particularly the state) are less prominent. The knowledge and understandings emerging from the case study are socially constructed, produced by social interaction, rather than a single truth. The knowledge that emerges from the case study is not claimed to be generalizable to all similar settings; however, knowledge can be created by the case study’s familiarity with other cases or experiences (Stake, 2003:146-147).

**Findings**

This section aims to provide three in-depth exemplars of the efforts of some residents of Blue Towers to influence decisions, act collectively.

**New Community 8**
State-wide telephone service, an example of the neo-liberal shift towards outsourcing (maintenance had been contracted out by the Government) and a reduction in public services. State Housing encouraged BTAG to join with a neighbouring forum which the Department had established and endorsed (Neighbourhood Advisory Board or NAB). This represented a rejection of autonomous, self-directed, resident action which has been a pattern in State Housing’s dealings with other public housing communities (Darcy, 2013; Young et al., 2013). Residents’ ongoing frustration with building maintenance, expressed within BTAG and beyond, reflected the impact of poor building conditions on their day-to-day lives. Lifts regularly failed, often with residents trapped inside, but also isolating elderly people with poor mobility within the high rise building. Water pressure to the building regularly failed, leaving people unable to shower. Communal amenities, such as laundries, stairwells and gardens, were poorly maintained.

There is extensive evidence of links between environment and wellbeing, particularly mental health (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2013). These were complex-wide problems, not individual residents’ or unit problems. The State-wide telephone line documented and responded to residents’ concern in a piecemeal and fragmented way (if at all), for example, suggesting residents use bleach in their toilets to remove the stain. This reflects the individualisation of responsibility and a rejection of collective action and responsibility (including that of State Housing). Many residents had memories of an Estate handymen, employed by the government, to maintain the building. This type of public service has been lost and ongoing maintenance outsourced to private companies, in keeping with the neo-liberal shift in public services generally. Gilchrist & Taylor (2011) argue that supporting resident participation in decision making also generates a greater sense of collective responsibility for estate upkeep and helps establish standards of neighbourly behaviour (2011:20).

With State Housing’s refusal to engage with BTAG, their capacity to draw on the knowledge and expertise of residents was lost. BTAG public housing residents were positioned not only as problems but also, perversely, as passive in solving the problems facing the community. This was particularly evident in the second example, the vandalism of power boxes.

**Power boxes**

Blue Towers, built in the 1930s, has separate electricity circuits and a locked power box for each floor. The electricity wiring has not kept pace with technology and struggles to meet demand. On a regular basis, the safety switch trips, cutting electricity to a whole floor of units. When this occurs, residents are required to call the State-wide maintenance line and report the fault. Wait times for fixing this ‘fault’ may be up to four hours, when all that is required is for someone to open the locked power box and flick the tripped switch. This issue was raised in BTAG with a view to developing a better response in collaboration with State Housing. Residents were directed to the ‘proper’ process, which was the State-wide maintenance line. In the meantime, some residents dealt with the power outages by breaking the lock of the power boxes and flicking the switch. This action was framed by State Housing as vandalism and another example of the ‘problem’ residents at Blue Towers.

BTAG suggested one resident on each floor be given a key to the power box and be given the responsibility of flicking the switch. Rather than enter into a dialogue with BTAG about an acceptable solution to all parties, State Housing developed a ‘solution’ internally (that is without resident consultation or input). Internally, they decided that the motivation behind breaking the lock on the power box was to read the meter so individual residents could budget for power bills. State Housing decided to provide individual residents quarterly updates on their power use, with a staff person putting hand-written notes under each resident’s door. It was decided to trial this for 12 months to see if the ‘vandalism’ to property was reduced. Residents interpreted this as suggesting they could not be trusted, with little of value to contribute and dependent on the State. Ironically, BTAG’s vocal opposition to this ‘solution’ was portrayed as both ‘needy’ and passive.

**Drop-in centre**

For seven years, a volunteer committee of residents from Blue Towers operated a weekly Drop-in Centre in a neighbouring Council hall, with minimal support from formal agencies. The Drop-in Centre created a social environment for residents to meet and interact with each other. Oliver & Pitt (2013) argue that physical ‘space’ is central to building a sense of community and belonging, noting the difference between resident-created spaces and those formally created for residents by agencies. Free tea, coffee and biscuits were provided as well as free newspapers from a small grant from State Housing. Activities offered at Drop-in over the years include card games, table tennis, gentle exercise and crafts. Each year, Drop-in hosts a Residents Christmas Lunch, which for many residents may be their only social celebration of Christmas. The Drop-in Centre allows residents to build stronger relationships with one another in an environment that is separate to their small units, which often are not conducive to fostering friendships. A core group of six residents has volunteered at the Drop-in Centre over many years with a further dozen residents involved more irregularly. Most residents interact with one another in small groups, and have built friendships with each other. As such, the Drop-in Centre has had success in building stronger ties between community members, building a sense of community and belonging. Some residents blocked out the time in their diaries each week to ensure they were able to attend the Drop-in Centre.

The Drop-in Centre also hosts a food relief delivery from OzHarvest. The volunteer committee organise, serve and clean up after the Oz Harvest delivery. Volunteers have struggled over the years to manage the demand for the OzHarvest food delivery (which regularly attracts 70 residents), seeing the Drop-in Centre dramatically shift from being a relaxed social environment to a food relief service. The somewhat chaotic nature of the Drop-in Centre during this time reflects the underlying issues of food insecurity and poverty.

State Housing historically provided small grants to support the activities of the Drop-in Centre although it operated independently. In 2014, however, it decided to intervene in the management of the Drop-in Centre with a view to re-establishing order and safety, due to ongoing concerns about behaviour during the OzHarvest food delivery. State Housing suggested the volunteer committee and the Drop-in Centre should formalise its structure and impose much greater controls on the OzHarvest food drop (including...
punitive sanctions). These strategies focused on individual behaviour rather than the more systemic experience of food insecurity. Due to this intervention, key people were alienated and withdrew from the Committee, feeling control of the Drop-in Centre was shifting away from residents. This misunderstanding of the processes enabling the Drop-in Centre to function was highly detrimental as ‘the way in which people engage with the spaces they inhabit is the key to finding a way to work with and support them to find and release their capacity to be active’ (Oliver & Pitt, 2013:189).

Rather than an example of ‘failed community development’, the Drop-in Centre demonstrated the potential impact of very small investments of resources in building a sense of community and belonging.

Discussion

Housing low income people and the social composition of areas such as inner Sydney has emerged as a site of political struggle. The state’s involvement in the housing market, particularly through the provision of public housing, is a highly contested and contentious policy area. Sometimes, what is lost in economic policy debates are the experiences of people seeking to create a ‘home’ for themselves in public housing through their own efforts, acting together to influence decisions affecting their lives and build a sense of community and belonging.

The Blue Towers Action Group, although not without its challenges, sought to provide a vehicle for residents’ to pursue social and collective action. It sought to generate a sense of communal worth by advocating for improved maintenance and communal amenities. The adversarial stance taken by State Housing over time undermined the potential of BTAG as a forum for collaborative problem solving or community building. This reluctance to engage with those most affected by policies is symptomatic of neo-liberal policy making more broadly (Bamforth et al, 2016). Ironically, this adversarial stance created a ‘crisis’ or opposition around which residents formed a shared communal identity (‘us’ vs. ‘them’). This shut down the potential of collaborative problem solving as was clearly demonstrated in relation to the vandalism of the power boxes. The Drop-in Centre exemplar demonstrates again the importance of space, particularly autonomously inhabited space. In urging the volunteer committee towards more formalisation and procedural, the values and norms that maintained resident engagement over a period of some seven years were not recognised or valued. Those working in public housing estates or with disadvantaged people more generally need to consider carefully the notion of space and how spaces are inhabited.

The Blue Towers case study is symptomatic of the poor understanding of community processes and community development practice more broadly (Bamforth et al, 2016). Community development practice is premised on the capacity and desire to shift power (Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011). It requires those with power to willingly share it with others, founded on trust. BTAG’s positive experience with some institutions, such as NSW Police and local government, showed the importance of the desire to shift power.

Gentrification, spatial inequality and the so-called redevelopment of public housing in inner Sydney encourage on the rights to the city for poor people. The residents in public housing complexes such as Blue Towers are finding their place in the city change and their rights to the city undermined. Traditional working class places of employment (such as light industrial factories) and leisure (such as harness racing) are being relocated to the periphery of the city. Whilst community development practices can support the establishment of forums such as BTAG to assist resident advocate for their rights and influence decisions that affect their lives, there is an urgent need for the formation of broader political alliances. Protecting the rights of poor people to the city requires community development practice that focuses on both local and systemic change. Public housing provision across Sydney is littered with examples of individual community resistance, most recently through Millers Point. Without forming a broad-based political movement around the right to the city, however, individual estates are ‘picked off’ (i.e. ‘re-developed’) leading to asset sales, one by one.

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