

## **Book Review**

**When Public Housing was Paradise, Building Community in Chicago,** J.S. Fuerst (with the assistance of D. Bradford Hunt), Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 2003

A successful public housing programme in an American metropolis, Chicago, is the topic of this interview book by J.S. Fuerst, an experienced and devoted researcher of public housing and social welfare. By publishing this uniquely structured book on the blooming era of public housing, the author intended to challenge the prevailing belief that public housing areas are necessarily associated with poverty, misery as well as crime and that nothing better can be expected from them. Once, public housing areas, with their endless waiting lists, were considered as stepping-stones to a decent life. Today, they are seen as areas where one feels more comfortable driving past with all the car doors locked. Privatisation and residualisation in public housing are the new buzzwords, and not only in the USA. In Europe, where the state had formerly contributed so much to the provision of welfare institutions, the withdrawal of the public sector is already striking, especially in the post-socialist new market economies. This in itself could make readers in different socio-economic contexts interested in the book.

As the title suggests, the author focuses on the 1940s and 1950s, “when public housing was paradise” under the New Deal social welfare programmes. In those years the “reformed and robust” public housing programmes provided the conditions for social and economic security, concentrated welfare institutions, and established and maintained coherent communities. Public housing offered a firm basis for living a normal life; for the talented and lucky, it even meant a chance to build a career. It was a real paradise for a large number of people, especially African Americans, with the firm intention to take a step on the pathway to upward mobility. The interviews included in the book were held with people who were working on and also living in these public housing projects, people to whom the programme is indebted and people who are indebted to the programme.

The book takes a critical approach, trying to answer the ultimate question of radical and critical philosophy of science: What ought to be? This means studying “material and immaterial structures and relations that can be observed and critiqued and possibly changed”, accepting the primacy of “non-empirical evidences: ideas, values etc.” (Panelli, 2004, p. 18). Personal involvement and value judgement are not only allowed but actually welcome here. The recent process of privatisation and the consequential residualisation of the once so neat and desirable public housing areas are depicted as manifestations of the radical turn from the post-WW II politically and socially conscious, responsible, community centred socio-economic context to the over-individualised American society. What has emerged is a post-modern society, which is supported by political strongholds assuming that the government ought to retreat even more from its commitment to welfare and community building.

The book takes a chronological perspective, leading the reader from the times when public housing had the greatest reputation via the process of disintegration to the consequential disastrous general condemnation of the projects in the 1990s. Nonetheless, the interviews emphasise the issues affecting and most affected by the initial success of the projects.

The first chapter is centred on the major figures who envisaged and implemented the programme. The early staff members of the Chicago Housing Association are presented to demonstrate that personal commitment to a cause – the primacy of consistent leadership making no compromise in enforcing the rules – is essential if a programme like this is to work. The key words of the programme were tenant selection and high standards in management. That lasted for almost 20 years until the change in management and other overarching issues like racism finally prevented the housing programme from developing into a spearhead for integration. Thus, the programme could not achieve the goal of establishing successful mixed-race areas in Chicago. Yet, it did help many individuals integrate and “rise to positions of prominence in their communities” or simply become decent members of the middle class. The second chapter is devoted to the narratives of people who trace much of their success back to the “values and experiences acquired when they lived in the CHA’s early developments”. In the third part, individuals who now have a solid family and professional background tell what it was like to grow up in the public housing projects. The community members who made great or modest improvements on the life they had previously had

vastly outnumber the ones interviewed in the book. This is partly due to the fact that the welfare institutions generate internal integration, the chance to set and follow good examples. The book highlights the role of a good educational background alongside the importance of the good-quality housing provided by the programme. The community raised the level of expectations for academic advancement, an avenue which later proved to be most inspiring; people found their way out of the projects by taking the high positions that called for a good education. Civil institutions other than education had a marked effect on the tenants' quality of life and indirectly on their character. For instance, churches put emphasis on faith and togetherness and, according to the narratives, further strengthened community feeling, just like other activities such as sports and music did. Having read the first six chapters, one can hardly fathom why this successful programme was destined to fail. The accounts of those who saw the public housing projects blooming and in decay from the inside suggest that the factors that directly contributed most to the deterioration were the loosening of the role of management and the lowering of standards for tenant selection. Working families were gradually replaced by non-working families, which almost automatically meant social and physical downgrading. However, one can easily see the macro-economic and political motives behind the neglect and extensive demolitions as well as the limits of the rebirth of public housing as described in the concluding chapter.

Still, the book is optimistic in view as well as an easy read. One can enjoy reading it while finding out a great deal about the link between the contextual and the community levels: the way various factors on the macro-level tend to turn everything upside down in a neighbourhood and ruin the vision of many.

One more thing I learned was the importance of planting flowers.

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## References

- Panelli, R. (2004) *Social Geographies: From Difference to Action*, Sage, London/Thousand Oaks.