A New Home
Building Community in Chicago’s New Mixed-Income Public Housing

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A Community Under Construction

The success of the Chicago Housing Authority’s big bet on mixed-income housing arguably will hinge on whether the developments can become true communities

By Ed Finkel

Oakwood Shores’ Central Leasing Office and surrounding townhouses at Pershing and Vincennes on Chicago’s Near South Side have the look and feel of any other newly constructed housing development that’s marketing its units—and that’s precisely the point.

The development is a mix of single-family homes and apartments, as well as three-bedroom, two-bath townhouses, which currently rent for $1,433 a month. Interspersed with market-rate rentals, however, are tax-subsidized affordable units, as well as apartments that house residents who formerly lived in public housing. These units are subsidized by the Chicago Housing Authority as part of its Plan for Transformation, the massive program to remake public housing in the city, including replacing the city’s most devastated public housing projects—in this case, Ida B. Wells, Clarence Darrow, and Madden Park—with mixed-income developments.

When completed, Oakwood Shores is projected to consist of 3,000 units on its 94-acre parcel, a third of which will be for CHA residents. The development opened in 2004 as a public/private sector partnership led by national nonprofit urban housing developer The Community Builders and Granite Development Corp., which is developing the for-sale properties. Lee Pratter, The Community Builders’ senior project manager for the development, says the partners are working hard to make the development look “organic,” so no one can tell who leases a market rate unit and who is a CHA resident.

Seamless architecture doesn’t guarantee, however, that everyone who lives in Oakwood Shores will become, well, neighbors—in the deeper sense of knowing one another and interacting in mutually beneficial ways. Yet for many, some version of “building community” is a major part of what mixed-income development is supposed to be all about, at least as a benefit for public housing residents. Can the new developments foster social interaction among the different residents, break down prejudice, improve neighborhoods, and provide new opportunities for low-income residents?
Researchers Robert Chaskin (left) and Mark Joseph talk with local resident and activist Shirley Newsome near Oakwood Shores, one of the mixed-income developments that have attracted national attention.
“The bricks and mortar of a successful development like this in this economic climate are incredibly tough,” Pratter says. “The harder part is building a community and helping the residents take advantage of the opportunities.”

“All communities, at some level, are contested ground,” notes Robert Chaskin, an associate professor at SSA and deputy dean for strategic initiatives. “People from different backgrounds care about different things and have different expectations and priorities. This is raised to a pitch by the relatively extreme diversity, at least in terms of income, that’s being intentionally promoted in these developments.”

Chaskin and Mark Joseph, a former SSA post-doctoral scholar and now an assistant professor at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, are the co-principal investigators of a multifaceted study, “Building Mixed-Income Communities: Documenting the Experience in Chicago,” funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. They’re finishing a three-year phase of an ongoing investigation of how CHA’s new mixed-income communities are playing out, how residents are experiencing them, and what the policy and practical implications are.

The answers that are emerging are complicated. The research to date generally shows little interaction among people of different races and classes beyond very brief, informal, “Hi, how’re you doing?” types of exchanges. “There’s a certain amount of wariness. There’s not a huge yearning for people in these places to get involved in one another’s business. And most of them—in fact, most urban dwellers in general—are comfortable with that,” Chaskin says.

“It’s nice to say we’re going to have a night out to see Alvin Ailey—but at $40 a pop, what does that do to your public housing families?” says longtime local resident and activist Shirley Newsome, who lives near Oakwood Shores and served as a community representative during the CHA’s transformation process. “And a picnic on the grounds or a street party—for your market rate residents, that’s a mundane activity that they don’t generally participate in. It ends up being a public housing family picnic.”

“It’s early, so arguably one can imagine these kinds of interactions happening over time,” Chaskin says. “There’s also reason to be skeptical, given differences in education, income, and life experiences.”
or rehabilitating approximately 25,000 units of housing, which would match the number of CHA leaseholders when the plan began. More than 7,500 public housing units are planned in mixed-income developments that will replace more than 10 former CHA sites. To date, about 2,800 of these units have been built in mixed-income developments, which are typically one-third public housing, one-third affordable housing, and one-third market rate housing.

The notion that integrating formerly segregated people of different economic classes can have positive social benefits has been growing since the publication of former University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson’s 1987 book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which put forth an argument about the particularly pernicious effects of concentrated poverty on those who live in it. Deconcentrating poverty has become an increasing focus of federal housing policy, in part with the passage of the HOPE VI program in 1993.

But Newsome notes that in the long-run, she doesn’t necessarily think that neighbors will socialize in her community. “I think it’s an unreasonable expectation that people will automatically come together as one big happy family,” she says. Richard Sciortino, president of Brinshore Development, a partner in several of the mixed-income developments, agrees, and furthermore, says that the success of the program shouldn’t be measured by that metric.

“Neighborhood interaction is not a prerequisite for a high functioning neighborhood, nor is it necessary to improve the lives of the people living there,” says Sciortino, who argues that the CHA, development teams, service providers, and other partners are responsible to provide well-maintained neighborhoods with less crime and fewer anti-social activities. “We are presenting our children with a much healthier environment to grow up in,” he says.

For Joseph, that twinned question—whether building community is necessary and then whether it’s possible—is the core of their research agenda. “To what extent does the sustainability and ultimate success of these developments depend on some level of community and constructive, healthy neighboring?” he asks.

In addition to Oakwood Shores, Chaskin, Joseph, and their team are investigating two other developments: Westhaven Park on the city’s West Side, and Park Boulevard, in the city’s historic Bronzeville neighborhood. The Westhaven Park development, which has a larger proportion of public housing tenants than the other two, has probably experienced greater day-to-day interaction but also greater conflicts, Chaskin says, typically centering around “disjunction between different normative expectations and views about appropriate behavior, including the appropriation and use of public space in ways that some newcomers, homeowners, and higher-income people feel is inappropriate.”

Chaskin and Joseph are also investigating whether the mixed-income developments lead to better amenities and services for the public housing residents, as well as the extent to which mixed-income development is an effective response to the isolation of public housing populations from resources and opportunities. “There’s reason to believe that social networks matter,” Chaskin says. “We know, for example, that people find employment that way. But we’ve seen very little evidence so far of the kind of interaction [in the mixed-income developments] that would lead to that
kind of exchange of information between people of different backgrounds."

Joseph echoes Chaskin’s caveat about how early it remains in the life of these mixed-income communities. “Residents with whom we’ve spoken have been living there, in many cases, one to two years,” he says. “They’re really still just getting settled in these developments. The other point is, none of these developments are completed yet. The ultimate community that is going to be in place is still far from realized.”

To date, the first papers have focused on issues such as resident perceptions of their new environments, social interaction, and resident decisions about whether to return to a mixed-income development. Upcoming studies will include qualitative and quantitative research on topics that include social norms, governance, interorganizational collaboration, and racial dynamics.

Even as their research continues, Chaskin and Joseph are producing briefs on their findings to provide information directly to the CHA, developers, residents, and other interested parties to help shape the communities as they are being formed, in addition to academic publication. “Their findings provide important insights about the dynamics in these new communities while highlighting both positive outcomes and ongoing challenges that the CHA and its partners are working to address,” says Kellie O’Connell-Miller, a CHA spokesperson.

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NA 2007 PAPER BY JOSEPH, CHASKIN, AND HENRY WEBBER published in Urban Affairs Review, the authors point to another reason for building new mixed-income developments, one less interested in the benefits to public housing residents. This school of thought sees a strategy to redevelop vacant or underused, centrally located land in an economically lucrative, politically viable way.

“There are real tensions between some very different goals at play here,” Chaskin points out, “the social goals of re-creating and building new, well-functioning neighborhoods on the footprint of the most difficult public housing developments in ways that will benefit the very poor, on the one hand, and market-driven goals of making a profit and attracting investors on the other. Critics see [the Plan for Transformation] as a return to Urban Renewal, the playing out of a revanchist agenda that’s about reappropriating public housing lands in the city for the benefit of the more affluent classes.”

SSA Assistant Professor Robert Fairbanks argues that the Plan for Transformation has accelerated gentrification in the areas around Chicago’s downtown Loop, while dismantling existing communities of low-income residents in public housing. “The public policy assumption is that those community ties were the wrong kind of community ties,” he says. “That can be subject to rigorous criticism.”

Fairbanks, whose courses at the School include classes on the political economy of urban development and the history and philosophy of the welfare state, acknowledges that public housing prior to the Plan for Transformation “effectively segregated and isolated a group of poor, predominantly African-American Chicagoans.” But he contends that the privatized nature of mixed-income communities, combined with the intense screening methods that CHA requires of its residents for the developments, has led to considerable displacement.

“The screening of criminal records, work requirements, drug testing, is a way of weeding out the worthy poor from the unwor-
thy,” Fairbanks says. “I see this as an aggressive use of state power to offload a number of very vulnerable folks from what meager provisions they were receiving. The Plan for Transformation, as a whole, must be considered against a backdrop of late 20th century welfare state transformation and urban restructuring.”

O’Connell-Miller argues that the CHA valued residents’ social networks and communities in the former developments and continues to do so in the new mixed-income communities. “The Plan’s goal is to give families choices—between mixed-income and traditional sites, between geographic locations, and more—while also providing them with the services, resources, and opportunities they need to maintain economic stability and meet the screening requirements for their housing of choice,” she says.

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Building a comfortable, functioning community isn’t just a potential benefit to public housing residents, however. Joseph wonders how well even the market-rate side of these developments will continue to fare if community building doesn’t work.

“Without an intentional means of breaking through [racial and class] barriers, people tend to retain the assumptions they had going in,” Joseph says. “So much of the attention and energy, and resources around these developments have to go into the basics: demolishing old sites, building new sites, recruiting people, relo-

cating them. There hasn’t been a whole lot of attention paid to some intentional ways to build community.”

Before the Plan for Transformation, public housing residents have typically had tenant advisory councils. “The tenant groups are really important in terms of having a process for residents to give feedback to decision-making bodies,” says SSA Assistant Professor Jennifer Mosley, whose research centers around how citizens’ groups and other interest groups interact with government agencies. “But they’re also important for building trust between different kinds of residents, finding areas of agreement, and building social capital. Those are the ways in which civic engagement happens.”

The CHA tenant councils for residents in mixed-income communities are in the process of being dismantled, however, now that their large-scale developments are razed. And the condominium and homeowner associations that are emerging in the developments, by definition, only include buyers. Some of these associations are open to renters and CHA residents, but only owners can vote.

Chaskin says other attempts to bring together residents into a common forum to talk about community issues have not been “particularly successful so far, from the perspective of building community and reconciling tensions.” Some developers have made attempts to promote integration through social and recreational activities, for example, but people have tended to self-select into or out of such activities. “People assume certain kinds of activities are for certain kinds of residents,” he says. “It’s difficult to organize participatory structures that fully incorporate highly diverse populations.”

At Oakwood Shores, fledgling efforts have begun under the aegis of the Bronzeville Oakland Neighborhood Association (BONA). Renters meet with homeowners “a couple times a month” to discuss any issues and concerns and to build trust, explains Rosalie McCormick, a renter and secretary for BONA. “We’re just getting started. We’re getting our feet wet,” she says. “I’m not a bad person as a renter. You’re not a bad person as a homeowner.”

Deborah Thigpen, president of BONA, says that other management companies need to follow The Community Builders’ example in facilitating owner-tenant interactions. “That’s definitely needed to bring owners and tenants together, under one umbrella,” she says, adding that without such assistance, misperceptions persist. “We’re all a community. Most people think the CHA residents will bring down their property values and make the neighborhood worse than what it is, and that’s really not true.”

Ultimately, Joseph believes it will become necessary to promote a degree of what he calls “productive neighboring.” “Surely, not everybody has to become friends. But people need a way to voice issues and concerns,” he says. “To this point it’s not clear how that will happen or who has responsibility for facilitating that.”