THE PARADOX OF URBAN SPACE

Inequality and Transformation in Marginalized Communities

Edited by Sharon E. Sutton and Susan P. Kemp
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INEQUALITY AND TRANSFORMATION IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

EDITED BY
SHARON E. SUTTON
AND
SUSAN P. KEMP
This book is dedicated to the low-income and minority youth and adults throughout the country who, through their tenacity in improving their lives and their communities, give us hope that a better, more just world is possible.
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2.1 Owing to the lack of a proper title, SHA was able to purchase 165 acres atop one of Seattle’s highest elevations for the construction of High Point, paying just 60 percent of its appraised value in 1940. By 2001 SHA had sold 45 acres of the original parcel.

2.2 After decades of neglect, SHA declared High Point a “tear in the urban fabric.” With HOPE VI financing, the site was redeveloped as mixed-income housing, the most panoramic portions being reserved for market-rate condominiums.

3.1 Whereas Seattle neighborhoods with close proximity to pristine parks and shorelines are predominantly white and wealthy, neighborhoods with fewer parks and the worst water access have low white population and low household income levels.

4.1 A public housing neighborhood in the Pacific Northwest that was designated as severely distressed. Although the local housing authority called for its demolition, this was a community in which the tasks of everyday life unfolded for community members.

5.1 This model, one of the projects presented at Friday’s community forum, developed from a sketch made at Tuesday’s visioning session. It shows the Colman School at the center of many other treasured neighborhood landmarks, connected by pedestrian-friendly streets.

8.1 The CHA adopted the nation’s mid-twentieth-century urban renewal approach, developing super blocks of high- and mid-rise public housing that became known for poverty, violence, and institutional neglect. Yet Chicago’s public housing also became known for extraordinary tenant activism as occurred in Wentworth Gardens, a low-rise development built for black World War II workers just before the rise of super blocks.
9.1 Built by local volunteers on land leased indefinitely to ICDA, the Danny Woo garden provides space where low-income, elderly residents can continue the agricultural heritage of their homelands. The garden, which has expanded over time, operates as a public-private partnership involving ICDA, landowners, the city, and other relationships (such as with UW) that yield volunteers.

9.2 Undergraduate and graduate students work as a team in the NDBS, collaborating with clients and public agencies to benefit an underserved community. Since 1989 they have maintained a presence in the Danny Woo garden, creating numerous structures that help make this steeply sloped land safe and accessible.

9.3 In schools of architecture, students typically present their work to other faculty and practitioners, using rarefied language to discuss such issues as aesthetics, tectonics, and form giving. In the NDBS, students learn to communicate in plain English about such issues as cost, functionality, and safety. Here undergraduate student Arnold Ramoso uses illustrations produced by his classmates to describe a design proposal to ID residents.

9.4 Sustained contributions by the NDBS have built a legacy of understanding, trust, and mutual respect between students and gardeners that gets handed down from project to project. While students are learning how to build something useful for the community, gardeners are learning how to be informed consumers of design.

9.5 The NDBS requires an unusual degree of interdisciplinary teamwork and cultural responsiveness. No one student’s design gets built, but rather a consensus evolves among the students and between the students and their client. Here three students—from left to right, Greg Miller, Alison Waldsmith, and Kevin Armstrong—discuss how to incorporate the feedback they received from ID residents.

9.6 The projects NDBS students build establish a very real presence for the low-income Asian gardeners, each installation making their displacement by encroaching development more difficult. Here students hack through overgrown weeds on ground-breaking day in 2003.
9.7 Because the Danny Woo garden serves as a locale for many community rituals, it has become a concrete symbol of community pride and spirit. Here a gardener tells students about the importance of this site in the everyday life of the community at a dedication ceremony for their 2003 installation.

9.8 As a community-university partnership, the NDBS obtains funding from multiple sources—the university’s Howard S. Wright Endowment, local businesses, foundations, and the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. Because students supply design and construction services as part of their professional education, these funds are devoted solely to materials. Shown here is a newly installed path from the street that provides a legally accessible route into the garden.

10.1 Latifah Griffin, then a GIS student at Cheyney State University, used a digital camera and GPS to record the content and location of outdoor advertisements like these outside a gas station in North Philadelphia.

11.1 Map showing spatial distribution of the landmarks community members identified as assets in their neighborhood, among them a local minimarket, a historic church, and a tiny informal park.

12.1 This diagram illustrates how we position ourselves during the editing process, specifically positioning our voice, or point of view, in relation to our subject, purpose, and audience.

13.1 The Parker Residence, designed by Brett Zamore Architects to house a family of six, cost $130,000 to build in 2007. AFH’s Biloxi Model Home Program facilitated its funding, design, and construction.

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5.1 Participants demographics
Foreword

People reflect the places they inhabit because places interpenetrate the human body, heart, and mind. Fundamentally, places matter. But so often, they are invisible, simply there. Places do not come into consciousness unless their inhabitants experience them as distressed, as rapidly changing, or as exceptionally beautiful. In modern Western cultures—in which the virtual becomes more real every day and in which professionals and experts have taken over the making of the spatial world—place has become the background of everyday life, neutral and inevitable. But such perceptions, or lack thereof, belie the unremitting presence of place in human life, especially for those confined, literally, in the margins of society.

Perhaps it is the invisibility or “naturalness” of place that makes its use as a site of power so effective. Through policy and habit, dominant groups have throughout time sequestered the most desirable, resource-rich places, selecting who has access to those places, enforcing such access through laws, and communicating through specific spatial practices who is welcome and who is not. The naturalness of place masks its use in power relations, making critical work difficult but not impossible, as is evident from this book, which uncovers and articulates the power of place to constrain and oppress marginalized communities.

Once activist scholars and practitioners, who form the audience for this volume, recognize the idea and materiality of place as contested terrain, the world of possibility changes. They can uncover and transform place from a site of oppression into a site of resistance and hope. The stories in *The Paradox of Urban Space* demonstrate how bringing place into consciousness and realizing that everyone has the potential to be makers of place changes not only the place but the people as well. The authors refer to the process by which place is claimed as “placemaking,” which can involve small everyday activities such as sweeping the stoop and planting a garden or major activities such as taking legal action against a housing authority. Placemaking makes and unmakes communities within a milieu of institutional, cultural, and identity politics.

In the United States, so-called community development “experts” use their knowledge to circumscribe the places of the disenfranchised. These
experts, according to John Dewey, are “inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all.” The knowledge and power of such experts, when overlaid onto impoverished places, have destroyed lives, homes, and communities in the name of “improvement,” from slum clearance to urban renewal and HOPE VI redevelopment. Even though expert-driven community development has been, and continues to be, the dominant practice of making places for low-income communities of color, the popular and scholarly press offer inspiring examples of people demanding control over their places and lives and demanding that experts accept their knowledge as legitimate. The stories in this book reveal a more open and vulnerable form of practice that situates expert knowledge within the context of local place knowledge, resulting in shared knowledge, strategies, and collective action.

The collaborative work of placemaking as a site of resistance and transformation is one of the few remaining spaces for true democratic and participatory action in a media-saturated world. Democracy cannot be taken for granted; it is fragile and “depends on us to sing it into existence each day, through our intimate, creative, and courageous use of its opportunities to bring care to all that is public and wild.”

This book sings of the power and insistence of both youth and adults to make their places and hence their lives. These stories of research and practice offer a model of a different kind of expertise committed to collaboration and mutual vulnerability, resulting in a shared power-to-do rather than power-over, a model grounded in the critical work of scholars who name and reveal the practice of placemaking as liberating. The Paradox of Urban Space reminds us of how a democracy works when places matter.

—Lynda H. Schneekloth, Professor
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Notes
Introduction: Place as Marginality and Possibility

Sharon E. Sutton and Susan P. Kemp

Place matters to the quality of human existence. Place is not a static, empty backdrop for social relationships. It is neither an architectural model, Geographic Information System (GIS) map, census tract, Google Earth image, nor cyberspace; rather place “is filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations.”1 Place is a dynamic material form—a process that requires cultural interpretation and brings people together in particular relationships. Place makes social structures endure; patterns activities; embodies cultural norms, identities, and memories; expresses ecological values; and plays a role in creating and sustaining people’s sense of self. Place has purposefulness; it provides a framework not only for daily routines and actions but also for spectacle and revolutionary change. Within place, difference is produced, sustained, negotiated, and resisted.2

On the one hand, we maintain that place lies at the heart of the persistent structural inequities experienced in low-income ethnic minority communities.3 Historically, dominant societies have imposed hegemonic conceptions of space and time, not only through force (conquest, imperialism, colonialism) but also by controlling mental structures and material practices, for example, by naming, measuring, and mapping the spatial world.4 Throughout America, spatial policies and practices standardize the landscape to benefit dominant groups—guaranteeing profits for developers and individual property owners—while normalizing dominant values and lifestyles. The downside of this standardization occurs in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods, in which a high percentage of minority residents and concentrated poverty go hand-in-hand with a slew of inequities, including substandard housing, inadequate schools and social services, higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes with a higher
proportion of income paid in rent, more unwanted land uses, and lack of access to healthy foods.\textsuperscript{5}

A given locale both reflects and contributes to one’s social status. It offers certain material resources—housing, education, health care, services, transportation, employment, nature, recreation, even food, air, and water. It also offers social and human resources—normative behaviors and values, social networks, and cultural practices. Because these resources vary markedly depending upon the real estate value of a particular site,\textsuperscript{6} resource-rich neighborhoods with high property values become ones of choice for affluent families, while deteriorated neighborhoods become ones of last resort for impoverished racial and ethnic minority families. At the same time, negative stereotyping of poor neighborhoods as disorganized, dangerous, toxic, and pathological tends to flow down and attach to residents. These realities shape one aim of this book, namely to demonstrate that place comprises a major source of inequality and oppression for communities of color.

On the other hand, we maintain that the way forward to social and environmental justice requires the involvement of low-income communities of color in redressing place-based inequities on their own terms. Thus, although we view place as a context in which communities of color experience racism, poverty, and environmental degradation, we also believe that place can become a site of collective action to achieve a more just, fair society. When low-income people come together to change their surroundings, they are making tangible improvements in untenable sociospatial conditions, for example by turning vacant lots into gardens, cleaning up polluted rivers, reclaiming streets ruled by gangs, commandeering the local media, reinvigorating indigenous practices, or creating affordable housing, jobs, and services where none exist. Moreover, they are making decisions about how to share what they have in common. In marginalized communities, involvement in decision making not only helps adults and youth develop practical skills; it also engages them in exercising their rights as citizens, in articulating a vision of how the world ought to be, and in developing a sense of interdependence. For these communities, place serves as a context for struggle, everyday action, and collective transformation.\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, we will argue that place—this multifaceted concrete and notional mirror of social values and hierarchies—has profound relevance not only for individual well-being but also for achieving the ideals of a participative, democratic society.

The argument we put forth herein is a timely one as the race- and place-based gap between haves and have-nots continues to widen. Notwithstanding changing demographics and race relations, a looming environmental crisis brings a new sense of urgency to such unrelenting
problems as urban poverty, uneven development, and residential segregation. In considering place both as a site of oppression and transformation, we are seeking to unravel the persistent inequality of opportunity in communities of color while also proposing strategies for engaging their participation in developing more equitable metropolitan areas. Previous 1960s-inspired approaches to development sought to encourage grassroots participation in improving inner cities for marginalized populations while motivating the civic engagement of residents. Despite advances in advocacy and participatory planning and design, a prevailing concept of local control, its signature characteristic, doomed this approach. Although local control in inner cities typically referred to grassroots involvement in shaping top-down federal and state programs, more broadly it meant the right of citizens to control local boundaries. Under the banner of local control, resource-rich municipalities were able to hoard opportunities at the expense of other more needy ones, “reinforc[ing] and redefin[ing] local control in such a way as to retrench and eventually undermine the scope and promise of civil rights.”

We believe that today’s social and environmental challenges demand an alternative to the city/suburb, black/white, rich/poor dichotomies of the post–Civil Rights era. Future scholars and professionals must be able to conceive a metropolitan landscape that enhances the quality of life for an economically and culturally diverse population while conserving natural resources and embracing the full participation of previously marginalized communities of color. As the Earth’s ecosystems reach their carrying capacity and even the politically and economically powerful begin to feel the effects of environmental degradation, the poor and powerless will find inescapable such ravages as heat stress, flooding and droughts, inadequate food and water supplies, and unfavorably altered habitats and ecosystems. These fundamental threats to the survival of disenfranchised populations call for a new approach to equitable development that considers how people can share resources not only locally but within a regional and global context. This book seeks to lay a foundation for the new thinking and action that such an approach will require.

Although some of our chapters take a national or international perspective, about half focus in the Puget Sound region of Washington State, which is an ideal site for investigating our topic. This region is part of the Puget Sound Georgia Basin ecosystem, a watershed that extends from northern British Columbia in Canada to central western Washington in the United States. The area has one of the most diverse ecosystems in North America, underpinning its quality of life, economy, and collective ethos. We believe Puget Sound case studies have broad relevance first and foremost because the demographics of this region will soon be the national