

TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP PARTICIPATION?

Exploring the Nexus of Power, Culture and Revitalization in a Public Housing Community

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ABSTRACT

Since 1993, public housing authorities across the country have been involved in efforts to revitalize over 100,000 units of public housing through a competitive grants program called HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere). This program, administered by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was created to “eradicate severely distressed public housing.”¹ Essentially, the goal of the program is to replace dilapidated housing with new units, and to disperse pockets of poverty by creating mixed-income communities. This requires the demolition of existing on-site housing, the development of a new master plan and the construction of a new housing development. Because of the intention to create a mixed-income community, this also means a net loss of public housing units on site. Notably, HUD has also mandated that the redevelopment of HOPE VI communities involve the participation of current residents and the broader community in which the site is situated. While this is an important requirement, it creates a tension between exclusion and inclusion, as residents are involuntarily displaced, yet their input is sought through the master planning and relocation process. This paper focuses on a particular HOPE VI site on the southwestern edge of Seattle, Washington in order to understand the unique dynamics of a community in transition, specifically those related to power, culture and participation. This site, known as Park Lake Homes, is comprised of 569 units that house an extraordinarily diverse population. There are over 35 different languages spoken by residents, although Cambodian, Vietnamese, Somali and Arabic predominate. Many residents are refugees from their home countries. The fact that the community is so ethnically diverse, and composed of public housing residents who are among the poorest and most vulnerable of American households,² only adds to the complexity of the dynamics within this community. Through observations of a series of public meetings and community design workshops,

as well as interviews with residents, the early phase of the redevelopment process is examined to ascertain the extent and nature of participation, and to shed light on residents’ experiences and opinions of the process. In doing so, this research will compare efforts to garner participation in the redevelopment process with people’s lived experiences. Implications for empowerment, cross-cultural communication and what constitutes positive community change will also be addressed.

ENDNOTES

¹ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. (Oct. 21, 2003). Notice of Funding Availability for Revitalization of Severely Distressed Public Housing.

² Housing Research Foundation (2001).