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## Editorial

# Putting the “public” back in affordable housing: Place and politics in the era of poverty deconcentration

We were in the final stages of completing this issue when Neil Smith passed away. Neil was an exemplary scholar and engaged public intellectual. He had been a strong supporter of the right to the city movement, and served as one of the academic advisors to the *We Call These Projects Home* report, around which this issue is organized. We dedicate this issue to his memory.

## Introduction

In 1992, the United States embarked upon a major experiment in housing and anti-poverty policy. The HOPE VI program marked an ambitious attempt to tackle the stubborn and interrelated problems of concentrated poverty, residential segregation, and affordable housing by breaking up concentrations of poverty and remaking entire sections of cities. Arguably, the most dramatic aspect of the experiment has been the demolition of thousands upon thousands of units of public housing and the relocation of many of their residents. Singled out as an especially toxic site of social pathology and symbol of urban decay, public housing became a focal point for policy makers and scholars in the 1980s concerned by the problems associated with concentrated poverty. HOPE VI's solution has been to tear down public housing, replace it with mixed income developments with far fewer units very-low income residents can afford, and relocate most of the former public housing residents.

The results have been dramatic. Between 2000 and 2008 alone, over 99,000 public housing units were lost, a rate of 11,000 per year. In 2008, Congressional Representatives Barney Frank and Maxine Waters called for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to impose a one-year moratorium on demolitions, stating that the loss of public housing had reached “epic proportions” (National Housing Law Project, 2009). After an investigation that same year, a report by the United Nations Human Rights Council on adequate housing in the US repeated the call for a moratorium on HOPE VI demolitions (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2010).

Scholars remain deeply interested in the HOPE VI program and others like it. However, while seemingly all angles of the experiment continue to be debated, as an anti-poverty and affordable housing policy it has largely been a failure. Despite some positive outcomes for some former residents who either returned to the redeveloped sites or moved to new neighborhoods, it has had little if any effect on poverty among former residents in general, and has actually exacerbated the crisis of affordable housing for the urban poor, and for renters, people of color and women in particular (Goetz, 2011; Stone, 2004). Further, while it has been argued that the “revitalization” of certain city spaces through the replacement

of public housing with mixed income development has been successful, comparatively little attention has been paid, by either scholars or policy makers, to what was lost in the process.

The occasion for this special issue is the release in 2010 of a provocative report by the US-based Right to the City alliance entitled, *We Call These Projects Home* (WCTPH).<sup>1</sup> The report is the result of an extensive seven-city participatory action research initiative on public housing that centers the voices, experiences, and analyses of public housing residents themselves, which are often absent from policy and scholarly debates. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, the researchers found that many residents believe public housing works, and object to the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of their homes and neighbors which underpin current policy. Further, the report contends that public housing plays a vital role in sustaining geographically-rooted social support networks and relationships upon which residents depend. Contributors to this issue were asked to respond to the report, in whole or in part, based on their particular areas of research and expertise.

The destruction of social support networks in the process of demolition, poverty deconcentration, and revitalization has received relatively little attention in assessments of deconcentration policy, though this appears to be changing. Therefore, our aim here is not to participate directly in the ongoing debates over the outcomes of HOPE VI and other deconcentration policies, but to focus attention on this loss and take seriously the demand in the report that public housing be defended and expanded. Given the spread of potentially chronic housing insecurity to more affluent sectors of the population, revisiting and perhaps even redefining the question of public housing seems appropriate and timely.

We locate in the politics of public housing destruction a struggle over the collective *right to place*. Although the issue of housing is a concrete expression of this struggle, it is not a sufficient analytical frame. As a number of the collected articles here detail, housing is one aspect of a broader social context in which low-income urban populations work to create homes and communities that sustain them in the face of social welfare austerity and, often, public hostility. Their struggles are struggles for housing, but also for homes, and in this we see an important contribution to the ongoing and wide ranging discussions of right to the city to the extent that they force us to consider the embedded, socio-spatial aspects of rights (Samara, 2012).

Certainly, as we experience increasing inequality and segregation in metropolitan regions across the United States (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011), we need to consider how the dispersion of

<sup>1</sup> See full report: [http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/We\\_Call\\_These\\_Projects\\_Home.pdf](http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/We_Call_These_Projects_Home.pdf).

low-income communities affects the ability of their members to survive and to mobilize social and political resources. Given their weak performance in reducing poverty and providing affordable housing, deconcentration policies may simply contribute to the suburbanization and re-concentration of poverty as more affluent residents seek to segregate themselves in city centers (Sink & Ceh, 2011; Slater, 2012). This reconfiguration of segregation is of particular concern here because of the centrality of mobility-induced “social mixing” in moving people out of “the projects” and to opportunity.

In the next section of this introduction, we outline some key questions about public housing and deconcentration in light of these concerns. We then provide a brief discussion of the pieces that make up this issue, including the opening article that is an adapted version of the WCTPH report, and the themes they raise. Finally, we end with a discussion of potential future research that the collected articles here suggest. Our hope is that this issue can contribute to a critical reassessment of current policy and practice, as well as of the research that informs them.

### **How does it feel to be a problem? Concentrated poverty, public housing and controlled destruction**

#### *The problems of concentrated poverty and public housing*

The roots of current policy approaches to poverty and segregation in the United States are scattered throughout the history of its cities over the course of the twentieth century, but we find two particularly important strands emerging from the post WWII era. First is the period of urban renewal, launched by the Housing Act of 1949. Although the program and its legacy have been debated for decades, arguably the most influential perspective to emerge from these debates and go onto shape public opinion and policy is that its failure demonstrated the limits of government intervention in “troubled” urban areas (Davidson, 2009). The second lies in the period immediately following, the 1960s, when widespread urban unrest forced suburban whites and the officials who represented them to acknowledge the civil rights problem in the northern part of the country, but which led to a reframing of this as the problem of “the ghetto.” Policy over the ensuing decades would in important ways reflect this substantive shift in context.

The growing sense among many officials and policy elite in the late 1960s that the nation was in the midst of an urban crisis, with the ghetto at its epicenter, emerged from a convergence of liberal and conservative ideas and debates around race, poverty, culture and the role and capacity of government (O'Connor, 2001, 2008). Over the next decade these ingredients began to coalesce into a new approach to urban policy, with New York City as one of the earliest, and certainly the most prominent, laboratories (O'Connor, 2008). The result was an approach to urban poverty and black/white segregation constructed around a belief in the futility of rehabilitating places, on the one hand, and the ideology of individual choice, mobility, and the market, on the other. As the vast scholarship on urban neoliberalism has demonstrated, these ideological shifts provoked substantial changes in the role of the state and the thrust of anti-poverty policy.

It was through the lens of these broad shifts that the specific problem of concentrated poverty and concentrated poor people came into view as natural and necessary targets of intervention. Both trace back to the earlier Chicago school of urban studies that evoked a “moral social order” to neighborhood race, ethnic, and class configuration and intersected with Progressive-era neighborhood reformers. Over time, the ghetto came to function as a socio-spatial expression of urban pathology and immorality that captured white anxieties in the post-rebellion era (Steinberg, 2010; Wacquant, 2002). By the 1980s, the government war on

welfare and drugs emerged to reinvigorate discussion at the national level about the “urban problem.” Concentrated poverty became a subject of much discussion and research while in popular culture the ghetto was rebranded for ideological consumption as “the hood.” Long-running debates around culture and poverty were revived and the neighborhood effects literature began its remarkable expansion (Crane, 1991; Marks, 1991). It was from this period, at the dawn of the Clinton administration, that HOPE VI emerged and the era of mass public housing demolition began.

#### *Public housing as pathology made concrete*

There has been perhaps no symbol of concentrated pathology as potent and ubiquitous as the public housing project. In retrospect, it is not surprising that as racial attitudes imbued urban public policy making in the United States in the last quarter of the 20th century, public housing and its residents became targets. Policy makers across the political spectrum painted housing projects as places of infamy that distilled the damaging influence of poverty on urban neighborhoods. Hysteria over public housing led some opponents to ascribe to the most marginalized urban residents and their physical dwellings an impressive ability to degrade entire cities (Husock, 2003). Against this, research challenging the deconcentration and demolition approach to affordable urban housing has drawn attention to the one dimensional and often cartoonish characterizations of public housing and its residents that has animated public debate, media coverage, and policy (Goetz, 2012; Sinha & Kasdan, 2012). Given this overwhelming negative portrayal, it is important to keep in mind that at the start of HOPE VI, only six percent of public housing nationwide was considered severely distressed (Wexler, 2001).

The conventional wisdom that the public housing program is a failure – and exacerbates or even generates social problems – is a central concern here, given its prominence by those who embrace deconcentration policies like HOPE VI (Manzi, 2010). Public housing has been positioned not only as a cautionary tale about the limits of certain forms of government intervention (and, subsequently, the potential of the market), but of comprehensive place based anti-poverty and community development approaches in particular. It is difficult to imagine that proponents of deconcentration would have generated the necessary political momentum to demolish affordable housing on such a grand scale, leaving many of their inhabitants to be scattered to the winds, without the ideology of demonizing concentrated poverty and its brick and mortar symbol. Lost in popular discourse and absent from policy is the history of public housing and a full accounting of its successes and failures (Sinha & Kasdan, 2012; Fraser et al., 2011; Williams, 2004; Bloom, 2008; Fuerst, 2005; Imbroscio, 2008; Vale, 2002; Venkatesh, 2002; Leavitt, 1993). Similarly absent is any serious acknowledgment of the positive aspects that physical proximity could have for residents who already struggled to access even basic resources and support (Cheshire, 2012; Manzo, Kleit, & Couch, 2008).

But the narrative that public housing collapsed due to what critics see as largely internal and self-perpetuating dysfunction has for the most part carried the day. The theory of concentrated poverty continues to provide a resonant, if simplistic, spatial explanation for inequality and racial segregation that leads almost inexorably to the demolition and dispersion solution (Crump, 2002).

Although the unfairly maligned Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 represented perhaps the last of a dying breed of place based interventions (Barr, 2005; Littrell & Brooks, 2010), from the 1970s to the present, the primary aim of housing policy vis-à-vis the urban poor has been to move them “beyond the long reach of the ghetto” (Polikoff, 2010, p. 149). The deconcentration policies of 1990s, despite some important variations, collectively took this one step

further in seeking to actively dismantle the communities that were left behind (Goetz & Chapple, 2010; Turner, 1998).

#### *Deconcentration, demolition, and the new politics of place*

The turn to deconcentration policies organized around markets, choice, and mobility did not signal a decline in the importance of place in urban policy *per se*, but it did represent a shift. The introduction of HOPE VI and related policies coincided with a period of massive urban renewal in major cities across the nation in which place once again became highly significant for policy and governance. Most often associated with urban real estate markets and gentrification, this wave of redevelopment dramatically reshaped large swaths of the urban landscape in terms of race, ethnic, and class composition, built environment and concentration of services (Harvey, 1985, 1989; Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2007; Smith, 1996). This is a very well documented story, and one by no means limited to the United States. But the transformation of deconcentration theory into policies that led directly to the demolition of hundreds of thousands of public housing units, most of which will not be replaced, and the mass relocation of many residents remains a surprisingly little discussed aspect of the recent “downtown revival” (Berg, 2012; Right to the City Alliance, 2010).

The revitalization of certain parts of the city through social and spatial transformation is one side of the new politics of place. The other involves the intended destination neighborhoods for displaced former residents of public housing, where opportunities reside. Deconcentration policy as it pertains to poverty reduction rests in large part on the principle that connecting individuals and families with places of opportunity – to already “developed” neighborhoods – can produce the kinds of results that older place based, community development allegedly failed to realize. Changing lives through changing places in this context seeks to take advantage of social and spatial inequalities by transferring populations between the unevenly developed sections of metropolitan regions. Once resettled, social networks and other resources previously denied to inner city residents would in theory become available to them.

Thus, engineering physical proximity to more affluent populations through mobility programs would contribute to overcoming residential segregation, and facilitate the social mixing of peoples that would lead to new social networks of support with more resources than the older networks dismantled by deconcentration. Whether or not this experiment has worked, or shows any promise of working in the foreseeable future, is of course the question that drives much of the ongoing debate we referenced at the outset. For our purposes, we refine the question to ask whether the wide-scale destruction of public housing and the communities they housed is worth the social costs, and whether future policy and practice moving forward should continue to operate on the premise that public housing and its communities are not worth preserving.

#### *The problem with the problem of concentrated poverty*

An important body of literature has emerged to challenge the assumptions and research behind deconcentration theory and policy. While it is not our intention to survey this literature here, we do think it is important to give some attention to these challenges, which provide important context for the Right to the City report and the collected papers in this volume, and which policy makers and even many housing and urban policy researchers seem to ignore. We single out the challenge to the notion of social mixing in particular, because of its centrality to producing the kinds of social networks upon which positive outcomes of deconcentration depend.

Many critics of deconcentration point to what they see as revised versions of the “culture of poverty” and “blame the victim”

arguments that support it. The issue, not unique to this debate, involves the question of how policy has been intertwined with historical representations of urban poverty, ethnicity, and race (O'Connor, 2001). In relation to deconcentration and the ghetto, it has very clear roots in the 1960s and the Moynihan Report's influential representation of the black family (Gans, 2011). The debate was reignited in 2010 and featured in a *New York Times* report on the “return” of culture in social science research on poverty (Cohen, 2010; Steinberg, 2011; Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010).

The issue surfaces in debates on housing and poverty deconcentration through the question of neighborhood level effects in reproducing poverty (Darcy & Gwyther, 2012; Goetz & Chapple, 2010). These are important debates because neighborhood effects research is often invoked to support policies aimed at moving people from poor, “opportunity deprived” neighborhoods and to more socio-economically diverse, “opportunity rich” ones. The role of this research in making deconcentration theory operational is highly problematic, however, given the lack of evidence demonstrating neighborhood effects on poverty, substantial problems with existing studies, and anything approaching agreement among researchers (Arbaci & Rae, 2012; van Ham, Manley, Bailey, Simpson, & Maclennan, 2012; Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2007).

Additionally, the neighborhood effects approach can be viewed as defining poor places primarily in relation to what they lack. This can both obscure the substantial resources and networks residents have mobilized – and which can sustain them in the face of structural deprivation – and the consequences of their destruction (Betancur, 2011; Cheshire, 2012; Fletcher, 2008; Fullilove, 2005; Gibson, 2007; Keene, Padilla, & Geronimus, 2010; Lipman, 2009). Indeed there is evidence that public housing is not as isolated as is often assumed (Talen & Kochinsky, 2010), and that redevelopment can actually move low-income residents away from necessary resources and support (Farmer, 2011; Putnam, 2007).

Another line of criticism situates the more local level focus of deconcentration research in the context of macro level processes and politics. Two aspects of this approach are relevant here. First is the extent to which housing and anti-poverty policy became implicated in broader struggles over urban land and resources as many US cities began a dramatic transformation of economy and governance in the 1970s, marked by an assertive market rationality that came to trump social concerns in policy at multiple scales (DeFilippis, 2003; Harvey, 2009; Purcell, 2002). “Policy relevance” in this context increasingly came to be defined by research that accommodated rather than challenged the political economy of the neoliberal city and its impact on low-income communities (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2006, 2009).

These changes were accompanied by shifts in ideology, through which the concepts of individual choice and mobility took on a particular resonance as a mechanism for rescaling and governing citizenship. Identified with the so-called Third Way politics of the 1990s, these involved principally a new politics of surveillance, regulation and distribution aimed at individuals that linked access to (diminishing) resources to proper behavior and a narrow civic morality (Rose, 2000). Housing policy has been singled out by researchers as an especially important arena in which individuals – disproportionately women of color – become the subjects of moral regulation and regeneration through social policy (Atkinson, 2006; Manzi, 2010; Samara, 2012). In this context, choice and mobility, for example, are intended as opportunities for “good people” to reach “good neighborhoods” while – less often remarked upon – those left behind are confronted by a more austere and punitive state (Fisher & Reese, 2011; Wacquant, 2009).

The success of deconcentration policy for those who are relocated to neighborhoods of opportunity rests upon the assumption that physical proximity, in some cases with support services, will lead to social mixing of different socio-economic groups and

positive social change, albeit largely at the individual level. It thus combines one version of integration with the more pragmatic goal of poverty reduction in an era of declining commitment to wide-scale and sustained anti-poverty programs. The importance of this dynamic to the entire theory of deconcentration pushes us to briefly examine the assumptions about what happens to those who actually make it to “good neighborhoods.”

Writing of the original Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program in Chicago, Andrea Gill reminds us that initially the plaintiffs of the lawsuit pertaining to the program did not envision mobility in the sense it is often understood today, but instead sought a “more ambitious program of metropolitan-wide *public housing construction and integration*” (Gill, 2012, p. 663. *Emphasis added*). The idea was not to demolish and reduce existing public housing stock, but to expand and integrate it with other forms of housing in a period of ongoing suburbanization. What resulted, however, was an early version market-driven urban policy that provided individuals with vouchers to enter the racially segregated private housing market, while largely ignoring the resistance to integration that produced segregation in the first place. The program provided “choice” in principle, and some level of support, but did nothing about the very real and severe constraints that shaped choice in practice (Lipman, 2009; Oakley, Ruel, & Wilson, 2008). Left to its own devices, “the market” simply reproduced the segregation (and distance from opportunity) the plaintiffs in Gautreaux had challenged. Gautreaux did less to usher in an era of desegregation than to smooth the transition from state-sponsored segregation leading to concentration of the urban poor, to market-driven segregation leading to their dispersion.

Remarkably, today’s social mixing programs and their proponents seem to have learned little from this history, and continue to operate on the assumption, despite voluminous evidence to the contrary, that physical proximity will lead to social mixing (Defilippis & Fraser, 2011; Allen, Camina, Casey, Coward, & Wood, 2005; Boyd, Edin, Clampet-Lundquist, & Duncan, 2010; Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Graves, 2010; Joseph, 2006, 2008; Joseph & Chaskin, 2010; Spalding, 2008). In fact, what the evidence strongly suggests is that spatial proximity does not reduce social distance, much less transform social relations of power (Arbaci & Rae, 2012; Bolt, Phillips, & van Kempen, 2010; Cheshire, 2012; Marcuse, 2002; Smith, 2000) and, following this, that socioeconomic mixing does not improve the life opportunities of low-income people. Rather than confronting the enormous expenditure of labor that went into the production of segregated cities, current policy implicitly treats the latter almost as an accident of history that relatively mild policy interventions can correct. Read from this angle, much of the support for mobility programs as anti-poverty and desegregation policy seems to misunderstand the role of race and class animosity in causing poverty concentration and residential segregation in the first place.

A more grounded perspective would consider that in a context of physical proximity, forms of micro-segregation emerge that sequester “opportunity” as effectively as redlining and older, cruder methods of opportunity hoarding. While these mobility programs may lead to the appearance of decreased segregation, at the level of census tracts, for example, what may in reality be happening is that more easily observable macro-concentrations of the poor are replaced by harder to spot micro-concentrations.

After 20 years of HOPE VI and 4 years of recession, we may have reached an important crossroad. There has been a surge in interest in alternatives to current approaches to a host of social ills that for a very long time were left to the vagaries of various market therapies. We see in the current period of housing crisis an opportunity to revisit what not too long ago seemed settled questions about the respective roles of state, market, and civil society in addressing pressing social problems, and to push for a pro-poor, anti-poverty

agenda across all sectors. We turn now to the articles that make up this issue and which, we think, may help to widen those opportunities, and then close with some specific thoughts on research for moving forward.

### Moving the debate forward

In their presentation of the research conducted by public housing residents and their research partners, Anita Sinha and Kasdan (2012) draw our attention to a number of key challenges the Right to the City report poses to public housing policy and the knowledge that informs it. The existence of the report is itself an indictment of the political marginalization of residents in the production of knowledge from which policy is drawn and, of course, in creating the resulting policy itself. While they share with proponents a belief in the importance of strong communities, they reject the idea that low-income communities have to be broken up in order to build them. Highlighting a central theme in the critical evaluations of deconcentration, they point to the importance of place based social networks of support for residents, and the impact of their loss through redevelopment and deconcentration.

Building on this fundamental principle, the report offers almost a point-by-point refutation of the major underpinnings of deconcentration and public housing policy. The authors underscore the historical and current importance of public housing for very low-income people, and the irony of a federal policy that drastically reduces the number of units available to this population. One issue of special concern that they point to is the ongoing pattern of disinvestment in public housing that contributes to an increase in vacant units and eventually the condition of “severe distress,” which is then used to justify demolition. In contrast to allowing this pattern to continue, they conclude by recommending a halt to demolition, filling existing vacancies, expanding democratic participation for residents, and building more public housing.

In the second piece for the issue, Megan Reid (2012) provides an important historical overview of activism and public housing, focusing on the centrality of women – and women of color in particular – to the work of building community. Further, she argues that in providing tenure security, public housing became not only a stable place for building and maintaining homes and social support networks, but also for mobilizing political power. The recent shift to deconcentration, and the push to move residents into the private market specifically, degrades both these processes. As Reid notes, echoing the problems with the original Gautreaux program, rental discrimination and sexual harassment in the private housing market create substantial difficulties for women trying to reestablish homes, while dispersion makes the reconstruction of both social and political networks very difficult.

Edward Goetz (2012) deepens the critique of discourses about public housing and residents, but also shows that residents have developed their own discourse of resistance. The prevailing “discourse of disaster,” he argues, has been central to the policy of demolition and deconcentration, as well representing a political marginalization of residents’ voices. He identifies three major themes underpinning the discourse of disaster: the pathologies of public housing, the negative effects of concentrated poverty, and the obsolescence of public housing. The discourse of resistance, on the other hand, stresses that public housing has served and can still serve as a place of home and community. Challenging the notion that the empirical data supports deconcentration, he closes with a discussion of the growing body of research supporting the claims of many public housing residents.

The next two pieces provide an important and informative perspective on relocation in Atlanta, which the authors of both pieces note has been at the forefront of public housing demolition in the United States. In the first, Erin Ruel and her colleagues (2012) offer



a fine-grained examination of resident concerns about and experiences of involuntary relocation. They found that younger families were more likely to see moving as an opportunity, while elderly residents were more likely to express resistance. However, across these groups, a vast majority did not believe their housing was beyond repair, although elderly residents were more likely to favor renovation over relocation. Residents also expressed concern about the loss of geographically accessible social support networks. The authors also found that the process itself needs to involve residents in a more substantive way.

In the second piece, [Danya Keene and Ruel \(2012\)](#) look more closely at the issues facing older African American residents in Atlanta, in particular the social support networks and geographically rooted communities they have developed in public housing. In being relocated through vouchers in the private housing market, these residents not only lose the social support networks that had been built over many years, but some are also forced to navigate a new life in neighborhoods that are as poor and segregated as the ones they were moved out of. The article point out that private market housing also tends to be less stable and more transient than public housing, presenting another barrier to rebuilding social ties and networks of support. Beyond the loss of social support, residents indicated that dispersion also made developing community leadership and opportunities for collective organizing more difficult. The authors end by emphasizing the importance of place based social ties for low-income residents, and cautioning against the expansion of the mass demolition program that was implemented in Atlanta.

The next two contributions provide some international perspective. In the first, [Michael Darcy \(2012\)](#) argues that the transfer of deconcentration policy to Australia has been carried out with little regard for local context, and is shaped more by ideology than a concern for, or input from, the residents of public housing. His research reveals that despite important differences between the US and Australian context, a number of troubling similarities exist. He points to the massive transfer of public, state-controlled assets to private hands that deconcentration facilitates, and the role of demonizing public housing and its residents in the process. Further, residents of public housing in New South Wales value their housing and the social support networks that emerge with a stable residence. Policy and policy-driven research, on the other hand, do not acknowledge, much less value, the investments community residents have made in their homes and neighborhoods over the years, or their situated knowledge about what is best for them. Despite this marginalization, residents use their physical proximity and social networks to produce their own research and analysis, as part of a cross-national project with partners in the United States.

In the next piece, [Alex Fenton and his colleagues \(2012\)](#) show that deconcentration and the loss of public housing do not necessarily follow just one path. In the United Kingdom, and London in particular, the state has not implemented the massive demolition and deconcentration program that we have witnessed in the United States, nor has public housing for the most part been allowed to fall into a state of “severe distress.” At the same time, the authors do find similar patterns of public housing loss, privatization, and displacement of lower-income residents. Though less intense and widespread than in the US, these have led to a net loss of affordable units in the inner city and the dispersion of many residents to the suburbs. London thus follows an increasingly common pattern of socio-spatial transformation, with lower-income residents being scattered around the urban periphery and more affluent groups concentrating at the center.

[Jay Arena \(2012\)](#) raises an important critique that is not addressed in the Right to the City research or the other contributions to this issue: the role that non-profit organizations and foundations can play in advancing demolition and deconcentration policy.

For the most part, critiques of deconcentration policy and research focus on the state, the private sector, and the interactions between them. Drawing from his extensive research on New Orleans, [Arena](#) argues that there are active networks driving this agenda forward that include government and the private sector, but also non-profits, foundations, and academics. The argument has important implications for formulating a strategy around the Right to the City Alliance’s political objective of ending demolitions and expanding public housing.

In his closing commentary, [Tom Slater \(2012\)](#) reemphasizes the importance of and relationship between housing, home, and community for working class and poor residents. He contrasts this with the seeming lack of concern among policy makers and many supporters of deconcentration for the trauma that the loss of these networks, or just the fear of their loss, can cause. In reviewing the contributions to the volume, Slater notices three themes related to this loss: the stigma which facilitates demolition and dispersion, the grief caused by displacement, and emplacement, or the attachment to place that policy often ignores but which figures so prominently in the experiences of residents. Building from this, he levels a critique against research driven by “policy relevance” in an era where housing and anti-poverty policy are shaped by “free market” principles and a punitive austerity rather than demands for social welfare and justice. In this climate, place based development that keeps communities intact is off the policy table, and demolition and dispersion are presented as the only alternative.

### Emergent themes and directions for future research

We believe the case against deconcentration has become compelling enough that for it to continue in any form, and at any scale, would represent a clear injustice. It is well past time to dislodge this established approach and chart new directions in research, policy, and political action more broadly. We close here with what we see as some of the more promising and pressing of these. Most already do receive attention from more critical researchers, some more than others, but without exception, and despite the mounting evidence, they remain marginal in practice. We see in these the potential of advancing an approach to research and action that is explicitly engaged with the rights of the most vulnerable urban residents to live without insecurity and fear in decent, affordable, stable housing.

First, and foremost, the research process itself needs to be opened up so that those impacted and potentially impacted by discourse and policy play a more central role in every stage of the knowledge production process – including in setting research agendas and mapping future directions. As the WCTPH home report and the participatory research project discussed by [Michael Darcy](#) show, this process can produce very different knowledge from that which has been used to shape deconcentration policy. At the very least, debates inside the community of researchers and beyond about future policy must include serious engagement with this knowledge. This of course requires that more researchers commit to assisting in its production and in overcoming its marginalization as legitimate knowledge. While not a new suggestion, it bears repeating given the extent to which it remains a neglected one, especially in the context of the affordable housing discourse.

The ideologically driven framing of public housing and its residents remains of central concern for those of us seeking to advance a just, comprehensive, and sustainable approach to affordable housing. Whether or not it is true that the so-called return of culture to the study of poverty manages to avoid the pitfalls of the past, or simply to avoid being appropriated, the ideological attacks on public housing and its residents will continue to play a role in demolition and deconcentration policy. We need further research into how these ideologies shape the conceptual frameworks within which

policy is discussed, formulated, and implemented. At the same time, we are in need of more research into efforts by residents to counter dominant narratives, both to challenge these narratives and offer alternatives grounded in their own experiences and analyses.

The fallout of deconcentration policies needs to be better understood, and there are a number of directions research on this topic can take. For example, there is a small but growing literature addressing the consequences of displacement for people who are moved from their homes and either never are able to return, or are kept away for many years. Because these are populations that can be difficult to track, more of an effort should be made to expand this literature, as an important aspect of determining what kinds of social and spatial changes deconcentration contributes to within and between metropolitan regions.

Related to this, more research is also needed to understand what happens in mixed-income residences and neighborhoods from the perspective of social integration on the one hand, and the potential for re-segregation, at either the macro or micro levels, on the other. Deconcentration advocates in the policy and academic realms have, for example, been quick to point to the historical roles of race, ethnic, and class prejudice in producing urban segregation. Their attention to these has been surprisingly superficial, however, in considering how they operate today and specifically, how they can sabotage the ends of even well designed policy. This is a significant oversight given the importance of socio-economic mixing to deconcentration policy.

The destruction of social networks through demolition and deconcentration is a large enough issue on its own to sustain a number of important subsidiary lines of research. Two in particular stand out in our view. First is the continued importance of place. As we noted earlier, deconcentration policy does not ignore place, but its advocates seems to miss how places, and concentration in places, allow low-income residents to build vital, broad networks of support. Premised on the ideological principle that the individual or individual family is the natural subject of policy, deconcentration efforts are unable to address the loss of these networks in any meaningful way. We require a better understanding of how residents use geographical proximity to create support networks, the opportunities and limitations they involve, and the consequences of their loss. Expanding this area of research will also contribute to overcoming narratives of pathology and distress that support displacement and dispersal.

Social support networks rooted in geographic proximity also appear to be crucial for political mobilization in marginalized communities. Due in large part to the ideological blinders imposed by deconcentration discourse, political mobilization by residents of housing projects, for example, rarely appears in pro-deconcentration discourse or factors into policy. Indeed one could be excused, after surveying this literature, for wondering if low-income communities of color have any real political life at all. Coupled with emerging evidence that relocation weakens political participation (Gay, 2012), the potential dilution of poor people's political power through deconcentration should be a front burner issue for researchers (Tracy, 2010).

Finally, we would encourage researchers to expand efforts to examine struggles for secure housing in the United States from a truly global perspective. When the United States underwent its first Universal Periodic Review before the [UN Human Rights Council in 2010](#), the most pressing human rights issue to emerge was housing insecurity ([International Alliance of Inhabitants, 2010](#); [United Nations Human Rights Council, 2010](#)). The release of the UN review in the same year that the Right to the City alliance released its own report on public housing demolition provides what we see as an opportunity to locate demolition and deconcentration within the framework of international human rights, tenure security, and forced evictions/relocation. Certainly some of the

work in this issue, as well as the growing literature on the processes and consequences of deconcentration, supports the move to pursue this line of research.

## Conclusion

With all of the interest expressed by scholars, practitioners, communities, and social movements in right to the city, we hope this issue contributes to the collective project of improving policy, practice, and, ultimately, the lives of people living in cities. Although our intention here is not to engage directly with theorizing a right to the city or urban social justice more generally, we see this issue as working at a more basic level in elaborating some of the issues from which we can draw out a critical urban theory (Brenner, 2009). Viewed in this light, what emerges from the analyses of public housing policy presented here is support for the idea that the right to housing must be an integral part of just urban policy. The contributions in this volume also suggest that housing alone does not fully capture, nor necessarily protect against, the negative consequences of even well-intentioned policy, or provide sufficient insight into how to create better policy and practice.

We suggest that a more comprehensive approach would locate the right to housing within the more fundamental framework of anti-displacement and a right to stay (Hartman, 1984; Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009). Given how significant a feature of urban policy and practice displacement is, and has been, in the United States and globally, the right to stay seems a crucial foundational right within the right to the city framework (Maackelbergh, 2012; Samara, 2012; Samara, He, & Chen, 2012). The provision of secure housing alone does not address the socio-spatial dimension of deconcentration policy, for example, in that its focus on individuals and individual families obscures the dismantling of communities/social networks that many residents value deeply and upon which they often rely. Bringing place into the equation in this way would emphasize the importance of geographically rooted ties that are too often ignored in policy but appear frequently in the analyses of many residents.

Historically speaking, the legacy of deconcentration in the late 20th and early 21st centuries may very well have little to do with its record on poverty reduction and residential integration, which in both cases have been minimal at best. Rather, the long-term significance of deconcentration could turn out to be its role in the social, spatial, and political destabilization of low-income urban communities of color. From this perspective, the politics of deconcentration shares important similarities with previous eras of urban renewal and ghetto segregation in the United States. Yet poor people in those eras found or created ways to organize and mobilize political power. It remains to be seen how this will be accomplished under present conditions; however, movements challenging exclusion and deprivation are emerging all across the urban world. In these we see countless opportunities for engaged scholarship to play a role, and we hope this issue represents at least a small contribution to this project.

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