

Conclusion

Midway through my interview with Sadie, a Winter Flats custodian, her teenage daughter Mia came home from school. Sadie asked how her day was, and Mia shared that in her English class there were not enough copies of *Othello* to go around. As I left the home, Mia looked up from the cutting board—she was slicing carrots for the family’s dinner—to ask how I had applied to Harvard. Teachers at her school, she said, rarely encouraged students to apply to college.

A week after meeting Mia, I met Natasha, the 16-year-old daughter of an Eagle Hills respondent. Natasha, like Mia, came home while I was interviewing her mother. Like Sadie, Natasha’s mother paused our interview to ask how her daughter’s day was. As Natasha emptied her backpack of textbooks on the kitchen table, she said that her guidance counselor had just asked for a draft of a personal statement for college admissions. She then hurried up the stairs to practice her violin.

As these anecdotes suggest, students living in lower-income neighborhoods, even independent of individual family backgrounds, are less likely to achieve academically (Datcher 1982; see also Mayer 2002; 2001; Katznelson and Weir 1985). Reflecting the reproduction of disadvantage that occurs in low-income areas, the stories of Mia and Natasha suggest the urgency

with which the problem of economic segregation must be addressed. The stories presented throughout this project, though, also suggest the troublesome complexity of that endeavor. Economic integration demands that people share the sacred space of their neighborhoods,¹ bringing together people with differing values and disparate ideas about how those values are visually represented. Given the monumental difficulty of such a task, it is no wonder past attempts towards reducing economic segregation have been largely unsuccessful.

One proposed method has been to pull individuals living in impoverished neighborhoods out of those areas, and into more affluent areas with stable employment opportunities and high-achieving schools. Recently, 2008 Presidential nominee John Edwards structured much of his plan for reducing poverty around providing vouchers to families, helping them make the move from impoverished neighborhoods to middle-class suburbs (Kahlenberg 2007; John Edwards for President 2008). Edwards' idea is not a new one. The first program of its kind was Chicago's Gautreaux program, begun in 1976 in attempts to reduce racial segregation (Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum 2000). Although programs like Gautreaux and the one outlined by Edwards can be successful for individual families, they do not address communities plagued by economic hardship. For every family they help, they leave too many more behind.

Other attempts at reviving downtrodden neighborhoods have taken a different approach, aiming to redevelop low-income areas. Many of these efforts, though, have similarly ignored voices from the communities they seek to

¹ See Cohn (1979) for a detailed discussion of "home" as a cultural concept central to people's identities.

improve.² Rather than bringing families out into middle-class neighborhoods, these endeavors have tried to insert the ways of life of such neighborhoods into the downtrodden areas, often resulting in disaster—and eviction—for the current residents of those areas. In communities across the country, developers have drafted plans for creating new communities to literally replace what they consider blighted or depressed neighborhoods (Carpenter and Ross 2007, 2008).³

One of these communities is River Bend, home to Susan Mills, the single mom and meat counter employee whose story introduced this thesis. In the name of renovating the community, the adjacent city has declared that the residents' homes have to go altogether. Understanding that the compensation they are being offered for their mobile homes is not nearly enough to cover even the most affordable housing in the newly developed area, many are making plans to move out. They're boxing up their belongings, dismantling the rusty swing set, and putting their pink flamingoes out to the curb.

But it's not the loss of her property or her seemingly bleak future that bothers Susan most. It's the loss of her way of life, she says, that really gets to her. It's the planners coming in and dictating to her what a good neighborhood looks like. "They think they know what's best for me," she says, standing in the spot Franny and Filloyd once stood, looking down the street as drops of rain begin

² Bridge's (2006a, 2006b) discussion of visual displays of cultural capital in gentrified neighborhoods is relevant, suggesting that high-status individuals moving into previously low-status areas display visual markers of their status.

³ See, for example, the city of San Pablo, CA, a Bay Area suburban town in the process of renovating an older community of mobile homes into a modern, renovated, and affordable neighborhood (Redevelopment Agency of the City of San Pablo: 2008). The renovations will be carried out by an outside firm to fit city planners' vision, rather than incorporating resident voices (Lochner 2008, Thompson 2005).

to fall. Her eyes begin to tear up in the late afternoon sun. “They have an idea in their mind and they want [River Bend] to look a certain way,” she says. She apologizes for becoming emotional and continues. “They’re tearing down our houses, they’re changing our lives.”

As the rain starts to fall a little harder, I thank Susan for all the time she’s spent with me, and say goodbye. Pulling away, I can see the trash collector approaching in my rear view mirror. As I merge on to the highway, I know that Franny and Flloyd, Susans’ plastic flamingoes, are being dumped into the back of the garbage truck. After so many years, they are seeing River Bend for the last time. They see the duct tape holding windows together. They see the swing sets, rusty garden tools, broken lawn chairs, and moldy wood piles. To River Bend residents, these are relics of their neighborliness, of interdependence, of hard work. To the city planners, they are signals of neglect and laziness, unsightly blight.

As the flamingoes see River Bend for the last time, so too do the rest of us, because the community is changing. The residents are saying goodbye not only to Franny and Floyd, but also to the lives they know. The culture of the working-class residents—their appreciation of neighborliness, interdependence, and community—is being wiped out by the planners, who have their own ideas about what defines a good neighborhood.

When the River Bend redevelopment project is complete, the buildings finished, and the yards freshly mowed, those planners can sit back and look at their new community. They can see the open spaces reflective of privacy. They

can see the tall and orderly structures reinforcing individualism. They can see the modern architecture displaying open-minded cultural tastes. But what they will never see is their dream of an economically integrated community come to fruition. Their imposition of assumed values has further marginalized the people they sought to help, and their assumptions about the meaning and appearance of a good neighborhood have furthered the class divide they hoped to bridge.

What these planners, and their colleagues across the nation, can learn from this thesis is that the moral code of a community is as important as its structural soundness or aestheticism. The values of a neighborhood's residents are related to the satisfaction they find in their dwellings and the moral judgments they pass on their neighbors. And these values cannot be assumed. To consider them, those in charge must listen thoughtfully to the voices of everyone involved, and especially to those usually marginalized by a system that privileges the privileged and further disadvantages the poor. Any plan to reinvigorate a depressed area needs to lend an ear to these voices.

Doing so is no easy task. As this project indicates, class divisions run deep. But the way to bridge them is not to ignore them. It's to face them, confront them, and work together to forge a new future for our cities. Neighborhood planning from a participatory perspective means compromise. It means accepting new ideas. It means challenging long-held assumptions. But it also may mean a new type of neighborhood—one in which the dispositions you develop from birth don't lead you to view others with derision and contempt; in which people's differing values are a point of discussion rather than a source of animosity; and in

which the neighborhood where you are born does not limit the opportunities you later encounter.

And if along the streets of that neighborhood, Franny and Floyd find a new home, so be it.