Charles M. Haar and Demetrius S. Iatridis, Housing the poor in Suburbia

Pyriotis Yannis

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Housing and Social Integration


The authors of the present volume are convinced that racial integration of the nation’s residential patterns, most particularly through the location of low-income housing in suburbia, is the most crucial domestic urban issue facing America in the 70’s (p. 1). Indeed, liberal reformers concerned with the problems of the American cities, have concentrated on the policy of opening up the suburbs to low income groups as a way of correcting metropolitan inequalities and reforming city ghettos. Anthony Downs states the logic and the objectives of this policy in his Opening Up the Suburbs to house the urban poor (p. 2) to house the urban poor in the suburbs, in small clusters, where they will be placed under the hegemony of middle-class values and they will adapt middle-class social and economic patterns, benefiting from access to the growing suburban job market, from special economic advantages, subsidies, etc., and from quality social services, especially schooling, available in the suburbs. Iatridis and Haar provide a detailed exposition of the problems encountered in the attempts to implement this policy, in five different suburban settings.

1. It is questionable whether the issue is one of racial segregation primarily, and not one of class. It has been shown that suburbanization does not appear to vary with the proportion of the population that is black. See Bennett Harrison, Housing and Social Integration (Washington: Urban Institute, 1974, pp. 77-8).

relation to the mass of information, they aim at exposing the complexities of the issues in terms of leverage points, the role and behaviour of actors and change agents, the effectiveness of various tactics and their interdependencies.

What emerges, is the difficulty of the problem and the multiplicity and complexity of factors that affect it. Ultimately, however, the limits of the policy are determined by the logic of this multiplicity and complexity. This logic emerges very clearly from the historical development of American cities. The attempts to understand metropolitan imbalances and inequalities as consequences of individual choices and maximizing behaviour, or of inefficient public policy, are inadequate. The problem is a manifestation of social relations. Economic processes and public policy have combined in assisting the exploitation of the inner city by the suburb. The inner city is left in a chronic fiscal crisis and the urban poor are locked up in it. Drained of its resources, it acquires the characteristics of an export economy: new jobs and the skilled workforce move to the suburbs, housing is owned by absentee landlords, the fiscal base gets very weak, social services and schooling continually deteriorate, political control is lost to the suburbs.

Public policy has served suburban interests by confronting undesirable bottlenecks and irrationalities, such as the decline in profitability, commuting problems, lack of skilled work force housing, loss of valuable central location sites, lack of safety, etc. Thus, 90% of all housing built under the Urban Renewal Program in the 50’s has been middle-and-upper income; New York City has spent $160 million per square mile of cleared land in subsidising the difference between the present market value of land and land value in its present uses.

The irrationalities that are developing suggest that opening up the suburbs and regional planning is not adverse to suburban interests. As an example, it was estimated that 150,000 blue-collar jobs were created in the New York suburbs in the 60’s, while only 50,000 blue-collar workers found homes in those suburbs.1

It is in sight of these interests that the design and implementation of these policies must be analyzed. The authors, correctly emphasize that local issues are only «the tip of the iceberg», and that the main issue is «the dynamic network of interrelationships between housing and other basic public policy issues... bearing directly on national-regional urban development, residential segregation, racial and economic inequalities, redistribution of income-power-status -services, and national investment policies» (p. 283). Their contribution to the analysis of these issues lies in their formulation of a number of pertinent and timely questions.

YANNIS PYRIOTIS


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