

**Vale, Lawrence J.**

*Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

482 pp., ix

ISBN0-674-00898-7

\$US \$42.50

Thinking about public housing projects as “public neighbourhoods” highlights a variety of issues that are explored in this book. First of all, it reminds the reader that public housing is more than a system of subsidized shelter. Second, it emphasizes the extent to which their location influences their development. Third, in a society where privacy is foremost and community engagement a matter of choice, “a neighborhood that is meant to be *public* creates special strains” related to centralized control over the population and design of the area and its amenities (p. 7). With this focus, the story takes on a rather different flavour than the predominant emphasis in studies of American public housing on either policies and designs, or on the residents as a demographic concentration of individuals and households.

The book is based on rich historical studies of three Boston public housing projects, initiated between 1949 and 1954 that were selected for redevelopment in the 1980s after slipping into serious crises. The settings and politics of each site are effectively set out, giving the reader a clear idea of the place in the context of its early urban development. In hindsight, what is striking about the first years of each of these projects was how desirable they were for lower and even middle income Bostonians: “those who gained admission to the BHA developments between 1938 and 1954 either had superior political connections or could demonstrate excellent landlord references, a stable track record of earned wages, a two-parent family structure, U.S. citizenship . . .” (p. 25). Decline is seen as a result both of broader societal forces, as well as civil rights and other reforms, that reduced the powers of estate managers to select the “right kind” of residents. The story of South Boston’s West Broadway illustrates the complexity of the policy issues raised here particularly well: a tight-knit and politically active project population actively worked to keep non-whites out of their turf, with resulting high levels of violence. The pretty picture of locally based “social capital” that is currently influential in urban policy shows some of its ugly side here.

One of the strengths of this study is its comparative approach. One redeveloped project, Commonwealth, is widely seen as successful through its increased security, improved design, and residential satisfaction. Another, West Broadway, is more mixed in its results, and a third, Franklin Field, is generally seen as a failed attempt. Detailed analyses of the redevelopment processes

provide a variety of lessons for how and when such interventions can succeed. Critical factors identified include: effective engagement of the tenants and allowing their ideas and preferences to influence the plans; strong and committed management; and a broader neighbourhood that supports the project and provides facilities needed by residents. One lesson is the path-dependency of redevelopment: each project had its own features and dynamics deriving from its specific past, and cookie-cutter plans that neglect these features are unlikely to succeed. In other words, reclaiming public housing must take into account the path-dependency of particular cases, although the author does not use this terminology. However, Vale does not believe that history is destiny; while he agrees that certain characteristics reduce the chance of success, effective engagement with these challenges based on knowledge of them can result in positive “path-shaping.”

Those looking for simple “one size fits all” solutions will be disappointed. Vale doesn’t believe that private or public management is inherently better, that design determines outcomes, or that mixing incomes will necessarily improve community social capital. What he does believe is that, despite decades of often brutal mismanagement, tenants can be effectively engaged to work with concerned management to find solutions to some of the problems that have accumulated. Even here, he is no Pollyanna, recognizing that even in the best of the redevelopments, the economic circumstances of residents have not improved even while their satisfaction with their homes and neighbourhood has increased greatly. This is a well-researched, carefully nuanced story of three distinctive urban places. Not only will it provide a variety of insights into the politics of public housing redevelopment, it is also a captivating read along the way.

Alan Smart  
University of Calgary