Rethinking Residential Social Mix: A Path to Real Reform?

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In the early 1970s, there was a huge amount of interest in the idea of "social mix" or the "planned residential community" in Australia – as elsewhere. At the University of Adelaide, where I was a postgraduate town planning student, several of us wrote Masters theses on the topic. My thesis research (Sarkissian, 1975) yielded an article in *Urban Studies* (1976), based on an earlier paper (Etherington, 1974). In the 1976 article, I issued a challenge to scholars and practitioners, asking for better answers to questions about matters such as: emulation of our "betters"; positive views of diversity; engagement in common cultural and social pursuits; real; additional opportunities for underprivileged people in residentially mixed areas; opportunities destroyed by mix; does residential propinquity actually leads to greater interaction and tolerance among dissimilar people?; the benefits (if any) of middle-class leadership; efficiency and costs of services; and which groups tolerate mix best.

In the intervening years, I have tried to keep the debate alive in Australia with an update (Sarkissian, Forsyth and Heine [1990]) and an evidence-based study of mixed-tenure retirement housing (Sivaciyan and Sarkissian, 1991).

But generally, I have sat back for 37 years and waited for an answer. And none has been forthcoming.

That is, until the publication of the brilliant and exhaustive "last word" on this subject, edited by Gary Bridge, Tim Butler and Loretta Lees.

Thank you!

This is the book we were waiting for in the 1980s, which saw another resurgence of interest in the socially mixed community.

In the meantime, I've listened to all manner of rubbish about this planning concept. In one embarrassing meeting, in 2004, a senior government bureaucrat was answering a question from a representative of an influential NGO about the reasons behind the 30 percent public housing target his department had selected for a large community renewal project. "We made that decision after an exhaustive review of the evidence in the literature," he claimed. I nearly fainted. If such a study existed, I'd surely have heard of it. Of course, he had made it up. No such study existed and he'd not even looked.

Now we finally have the study we were waiting for in *Mixed Communities: Gentrification by Stealth?* (2012). It's much better than I could have imagined, although the findings are very challenging. It's comprehensive, evidence-based and cross-cultural. Arguing that social mix is just another way of talking about gentrification, the editors and contributors in the 18 chapters set out the case for social mix and then pretty much demolish it. They claim that this book is possible now because of the increasing professionalisation, internationalisation and mobilisation of policy makers and policy transfer. I agree. It was not easy to track down relevant, cognate studies three or four decades ago.

Bringing us up-to-date with the current discourse, they argue that the concept of mixed communities re-emerged in the 1990s in reaction to the large concentrations of socially homogeneous populations of poor people in Western Europe and North America. (And in Australia, I'd add.) One dominant objective of mixing programs was to deconcentrate and dilute large concentrations of low-income and poor households. Another important aim was to combat the flight of the middle class from central cities to the suburbs (not an issue in Australia to the same extent).

I was amused to read that "the concept of social mix . . . is vague and slippery, it is not easily defined . . . and . . . planners and policy makers can, and do, use it in different ways." Further, "the rhetoric and the reality of social mix rarely match up" (pp. 6-7).

The editors identify three main lines of argument reflected in the chapters that follow:

1. Social mix is a one-sided strategy seldom advocated in wealthier neighbourhoods. Thus, it is a "transitory phenomenon" – a stage on the way to complete gentrification (social homogeneity).

2. Will people *actually* mix? There is little evidence of substantial interactions between or among populations and few shared perceptions of community.

3. Some policies and programs hark back to the Herbert Gans's (1961) arguments about the benefits of social mix in terms of stability and lack of conflict (read: social control).

The book's aim is to show how social mix policies are accepted and sometimes deployed uncritically, often in the face of evidence that suggests that they will not be successful. The three main objectives of the study are to:

1. Demonstrate the proliferation, deficiencies and similarities among social mix studies internationally:

2. Evaluate the claim that gentrification can break down socially segregated or socially homogeneous, deprived areas in positive ways; and

3. Advance debate about social mix policies.

I believe that this book achieves both its aims and its three objectives. The five thematic parts and eighteen comprehensive chapters are written by geographers, sociologists, urban researchers, policy analysts and a CEO of the largest

redevelopment project in Europe. So, academics and practitioners: just what such a project needs! The editors and contributors consistently question the evidence base for the effectiveness of social mix policies.

I was reminded of my first book (Sarkissian and Heine, 1978), which traced the origins of the idea back to English Quaker George Cadbury's Bournville, when I read that "as a 'moral landscape' it is hard to argue against social mix" (p. 9). Cadbury's work in creating a mixed-tenure, socially mixed industrial village was all about the moral high ground. I read all his letters and I could taste the powerful moral suasion of his arguments.

If this book does nothing else, it makes it clear that we cannot continue to make – and implement – policy with regard solely to the terrain of a 'moral landscape'.

One of the chapters that stood out for me was David Ley's thorough, thoughtful analysis of the pioneering social mix policies, projects and outcomes in the False Creek South neighbourhood in Vancouver. I had a small role with Jacqueline Vischer in the first evaluation of the effectiveness of social mix in that community in the late 1970s (Vischer Skaburskis, Planners, 1980). In 2007, I lived there for several months, in a co-op. I experienced social mix at first hand and I was impressed. A study in Toronto, however, claimed that there were negative impacts in Toronto of a social mixing program and that they are likely to increase.

The Australian study by Kate Shaw claims that there are no social mix *policies* in Australia, only *strategies*. I am not sure that is correct. However, there is much of value in her detailed study of several large-scale housing estates in Melbourne. She concludes that estate redevelopment constitutes gentrification. Having worked on a large-scale one in Sydney, I was dismayed to hear of that finding, though not really all that surprised, to be honest.

In other chapters, there are calls for "modesty in the claims by proponents", especially in the case of the U.S. program, HOPE VI.

Perhaps the best way to sum up this excellent book – and its significant contribution to planning discourse – is to quote Paul Cheshire from Chapter 2:

> Not only is there almost no good evidence that poor people benefit in welfare terms from having richer neighbours, there is some evidence that people – both richer and poorer – gain welfare from living in neighborhoods – again subject to their choices being constrained by income – with compatible peers rather similar in lifestyle and needs to themselves (p. 18).

In the years I've debated with myself and others about the benefits and disbenefits of residential social mix, I've always been attracted to the view from the Left: that solidarity confers many benefits, however rough things might be. I live in a tiny low-income, rural community where many people are very poor. Yet when it comes to social capital, activism, a sense of solidarity and helping one another, this community is as strong and resilient as they come.

It's time I reconsidered the contested terrain of the moral landscapes of my planning youth. This book has set me on a path to real reform. Hopefully, it's a peaceful path.

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