



NUMBER ONE

Urban renewal: what's it all about?

Urban renewal is coming to a public housing estate near you. In 2008, the Tasmanian State Government announced a new urban renewal project in the Hobart suburbs of Bridgewater and Gagebrook. It described the project as a 'blueprint' for future redevelopment. The planning process would, among other things, change the mix of public and private housing in these communities. The announcement was in line with the Australian Government's housing reform agenda, which includes the reduction of 'concentrations of disadvantage' through redevelopment to create 'mixed communities'. The federal Minister for Housing has described such communities as 'the way of the future'.

What is urban renewal?

A wide range of activity falls under the 'renewal' banner, including:

- physical upgrades to housing and streetscapes;
- the sale or demolition and redevelopment of public housing to reduce the concentration of public housing in an area;
- changes in the management of public housing, including the transfer of stock to community housing associations;
- improvements in service delivery; and
- community development.

'Urban renewal' is a term often used for strategies that focus on upgrades to housing and streetscapes. 'Community renewal' is a term often used for social, economic and community development activities. 'Neighbourhood renewal' is a convenient umbrella term for both forms of renewal.

The 'problem': concentrated disadvantage

The problem that neighbourhood renewal is supposed to solve is that of 'concentrated' or 'locational' disadvantage. Indicators that a community is 'locationally disadvantaged' include high proportions of people on low or very low incomes, high unemployment rates, poor public transport, limited access to employment and high levels of anti-social behaviour.

Communities become places of disadvantage due to a range of causes. These can range from economic factors, such as industry restructuring and the loss of 'blue-collar' jobs, through to policy decisions, such as the allocation of public housing to the most disadvantaged people.

One of the main reasons why policy-makers are concerned about concentrated disadvantage is the theory of 'area effects', which argues that poor people living in poor neighbourhoods experience worse outcomes than poor people who live elsewhere. Supporters of 'area effects' argue that the lack of services, opportunities and alternatives in a community feed further disadvantage, creating a culture of poverty. However, even though the arguments for area effects sound compelling, the research evidence for it is limited. It is difficult to attribute particular 'effects' to specific causes because so many other forces may be playing a part: forces such as the welfare state, the economy and stigmatisation. Some researchers do not believe area effects exist at all.

Another issue of concern is **stigmatisation**, or the negative way in which the neighbourhood, the people in it and the problems they experience are perceived. These negative perceptions can lead to 'postcode' discrimination by employers, lack of responsiveness from the police or public housing authorities and the withdrawal of services and investment. They can also have devastating personal consequences. People who live in stigmatised communities report feeling judged and looked down on by outsiders. This can lead people to withdraw from the wider community.

Stigma is particularly attached to public housing and public housing tenants. The main reason for this is the targeting of public housing to those most in need.



It's not just a public housing problem

However, concentrated disadvantage is not just a public housing problem. It affects private renters and home owners as well. Even though many public housing communities do suffer from concentrated disadvantage, this is *not* evidence that public housing itself causes disadvantage.

Public housing communities are complicated places. For example:

- not all public housing estates are in disadvantaged locations – some are located close to shops, services and public transport.
- public housing areas can have strong and supportive communities.
- public housing areas are diverse – even the most stereotyped broadacre estates contain home owners, people in professional employment and two-parent families.
- public housing tenants are individuals – they have their own opinions about their communities, and they don't always agree with outsiders or with each other.

Research challenges the idea that living in public housing is always unpleasant and that public housing tenants are passive victims of stigmatisation. Studies have found that residents are actively involved in challenging stigma, that people are often very attached to their homes (even if outsiders view the houses as 'inadequate') and that residents find that the benefits obtained from a sense of belonging in the area make up for the social problems that might affect that place.

The 'solution': urban renewal and social mix

Public housing authorities have tried a number of responses to the 'problem' of concentrated disadvantage, including training, skills development and employment programs, upgrades to housing and the urban environment and resident participation projects. But one of the most popular solutions is social mix.

Social mix in this context means a mix of home owners and people who rent. In public housing estates it is achieved by either the demolition of existing public housing and its replacement by a newly constructed mix of public and private housing or the upgrade of existing public housing and its sale on the private market. The goal is to ensure that the area contains a greater 'mix' of low income public housing tenants and higher income home owners.

'Social mix' has been around for a long time. For its 19th century advocates, it offered a way to dilute the 'undesirable' behaviour of the poor and provide them with appropriate, middle-class role models. Much of this 19th century rhetoric is still around today, including concern about the behaviour of the poor and the idea that the middle class will be role-models for low income earners.

Compared to what has gone before, urban renewal to promote social mix is becoming increasingly radical, moving away from the construction of new, purpose-built mixed housing estates towards the dramatic transformation of existing neighbourhoods. These projects are being explicitly linked to the new social policy framework of 'social inclusion'.

This information sheet is based upon the discussion paper 'There are people living here: exploring urban renewal and public housing estates' by Kathleen Flanagan, published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania. The discussion paper contains much more detail on this and other issues to do with urban renewal and includes an extensive list of references. The full discussion paper can be downloaded from www.anglicare-tas.org.au.