

## Comment on James E. Rosenbaum, Linda K. Stroh, and Cathy A. Flynn's "Lake Parc Place: A Study of Mixed-Income Housing"

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### *Abstract*

Rosenbaum, Stroh, and Flynn confirm existing community leader perceptions that this model mixed-income development in the predominantly low-income South Side of Chicago has produced a positive residential environment. Increased tenant voice, not role modeling, seems to be a factor in producing increased resident satisfaction with the building and a strong sense of commitment to the mixed-income alternative to exclusively low-income housing projects. The extra resources invested in physical improvements and the extraordinary media attention paid to this model project may have created a "Hawthorne effect," which also produced higher levels of satisfaction. The existence of this successful model is not sufficient to provide more housing alternatives; community-based advocacy for more mixed-income developments is needed.

**Keywords:** Low-income housing; Development/revitalization; Policy

### **Introduction**

In light of reduced support for affordable housing, cuts in welfare programs, and increased emphasis on building a middle-income tax base in cities, successful models of mixed-income housing developments are increasingly attractive. The Rosenbaum, Stroh, and Flynn study is a significant contribution to our understanding of how such mixed-income public housing developments work and how they can provide subsidies for the working poor and create a supportive social environment that can give residents more control over their lives and futures. Policy makers who shaped Lake Parc Place (most notably the Chicago Housing Authority's former chairman, Vince Lane) were attempting to attack the concentrated poverty that imprisons the urban poor in a world with no apparent avenues to opportunity. Using the writings of William Julius Wilson as a foundation, these policy makers placed strong emphasis on rules and role modeling as a way of changing what some see as the dysfunctional behavior of some low-income families.

Rosenbaum and his colleagues have clearly provided important data that confirm what many observers already sensed in watching Lake Parc Place during its early years and have contrasted it with

nearby public housing projects. Lake Parc Place is physically distinct from other Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) “projects.” To anyone who has visited the CHA complexes seven blocks to the west, Lake Parc Place looks and feels like an oasis in the midst of failed public housing projects. The Stateway and Taylor high-rises stretch along a one-and-a-half-mile band of barren, mostly treeless land along the Dan Ryan Expressway and resemble prisons, with grates enclosing outside hallways and windows, sewage pipes that run through unheated stairwells and sometimes freeze and crack in the winter, and sporadically functioning elevators that generally cannot meet the test of Chicago winters, where 20-degree-below-zero temperatures can play havoc with elevators unprotected from the elements.<sup>1</sup>

Even before one looks closely at the social environment of Lake Parc Place, it is evident that this is a different kind of housing development. Framed by clusters of shade trees, it is close to Lake Michigan, possesses amenities absent from many other public housing developments (wooden kitchen cabinets and ceiling fans in the apartments, and a wading pool in a small park area behind the buildings), and is set off in one corner of the predominantly low-income mid-South Side of Chicago. On an absolute scale of housing quality these may be modest residences, but compared with other CHA buildings they are luxury apartments.<sup>2</sup>

The article raises a number of valuable questions, both directly and indirectly. First, the researchers were unable to determine whether role modeling was taking place because residents resisted answering their questions about whether or not employed residents served as role models to unemployed residents. Interviewees were more willing to talk about their levels of satisfaction with the building and its management. That finding is significant in and of itself. It suggests that residents feel that there are more important accomplishments at Lake Parc Place—namely the creation of a pleasant place to live and raise children—than the effect of role models. Second, did all the investment in physical plant, the extra thought in developing a management plan, and the substantial media attention create an environment in which tenants felt special and were

<sup>1</sup> These projects have been the subject of numerous documentaries, newspaper series, and books. With few exceptions, this attention has focused on the many negative aspects of the projects, which concentrated Chicago’s poor into a few census tracts to the point that in 1980, 10 of the nation’s poorest neighborhoods were in Chicago and were all CHA developments (Ziemba 1984).

<sup>2</sup> With the current process of deconcentration of public housing, the rehabilitation of existing units, and the construction of new mixed-income units, the face of some of Chicago’s public housing is changing from this stark picture. Nevertheless, this has been the dominant negative image—and reality—of public housing in Chicago for the past few decades.

encouraged to become boosters of the experiment? Finally, although not a focus of the research itself, the article begs the question of how this model can be used to address housing needs of the larger low-income community.

### **Role modeling versus tenant voice**

The researchers never address the central issue of role models. Residents were asked about whether or not nonproject, working neighbors served as role models, but, as the researchers point out in a footnote, while "the idea was certainly familiar to them . . . the project people found this idea rather insulting, implying that they were childlike, inferior, or needing improvement." The negative reactions caused the researchers to drop the role-modeling questions from the survey. This reaction on the part of project residents is itself a significant finding and should not be relegated to a footnote. It implies that an important issue is who sets the behavioral standards for the residential community, who is in control, and ultimately what control people have over their own lives.

In fact, another recent ethnographic study of Lake Parc Place found that the majority of residents—project and nonproject residents alike—feel a sense of ownership in the success of the complex and feel that their involvement—not management initiatives or role modeling—has been key to Lake Parc Place's success. In a 1998 ethnographic study based on interviews with networks of tenant leaders and community leaders outside the development, sociologist Maryann Mason concludes that while policy makers and CHA leaders focused on increasing interaction between tenants in different income groups, the majority of Lake Parc Place residents were more concerned with making sure that management maintained the quality of services and enforced the rules. Consistent with the findings of Rosenbaum and his colleagues that residents were insulted by the idea that their behavior could be manipulated by "role modeling," Mason's interviewees "placed a high value on maintaining their privacy within the development. Attempts to explicitly manipulate their behavior and values through modeling were seen as an intrusion on this privacy" (Mason 1998, 212).

Rather than focusing on role modeling or cross-income group interaction, tenant leaders stressed the importance of their own watchdog function over management. According to Mason, they found that "the performance of management more directly impacts the quality of life within the development than neighbor interactions, and therefore it is operations management which concerns the tenants more directly" (p. 213).

Residents' desire to have a voice in management of the buildings may not have been as visible during the first two years of the Lake Parc Place project, when Rosenbaum and his colleagues were completing their study. At that time, RESCORP—an outside management company with a good reputation—was still managing the development, and residents may have been happy to let the company manage the building. Lake Parc Place was new, and things were going relatively smoothly. It may have been a decline of management services at Lake Parc Place in 1995 and 1996 that made the residents' desire to control building management more visible. Three years into the project, when Circle Management took over, residents perceived a deterioration in maintenance standards and a reduction in responsiveness to their requests. This perception stimulated stronger resident involvement in the building. As Mason puts it, residents “managed the management.”

One sign of success and of residents' taking control of their lives, their homes, and their community is the strong sense of ownership that residents feel when talking about the mixed-income apartment buildings. In Mason's study, interviewees felt that Vince Lane, CHA, and building management had taken too much credit for the success of Lake Parc Place; residents themselves played a key role. As one explained, “The success of Lake Parc Place comes 95 percent from the residents, not management. They collect the rent and provide the maintenance people. We stay on top of security, we stay on top of maintenance, we stay on top of everything. Because this is our home, this is where we live” (quoted in Mason 1998, 203).

Self-determination and control may also be critical factors in the long-term success of such a mixed-income development. How do you get everyone to buy into the process? One very effective way is to give everyone voice. It is lack of voice that has contributed to public housing residents' feeling separate from, and at odds with, housing authorities. It has been shown that increasing residents' voice in project decisions has increased resident satisfaction and the general quality of life within low-income housing developments (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation 1981; Peterman 1988; Van Ryzin 1994). Perhaps the question that needs to be asked is not how to put role models into a building or how to ensure that rules are obeyed, but rather how to create a sense of ownership and leadership that nurtures commitment on the part of all residents. It may be involvement in the political process of protecting quality housing that builds the civic participation and self-determination that are hallmarks of those middle-income communities that the low-income tenants are supposed to emulate. Of course, quality housing needs to be produced before this process can take place.

## Building quality housing and a Hawthorne effect

It is quite possible that the significant investment in the property, along with the excitement that CHA Chairman Vince Lane nurtured in his staff, and the media attention produced the satisfaction levels and commitment to the development that Rosenbaum and his colleagues and Mason have found. Is this a Hawthorne effect, wherein a group of CHA residents have come to see themselves as special as a result of all the attention paid them?<sup>3</sup> To what extent do this investment and attention explain the overall positive levels of satisfaction among project residents and nonproject residents alike? It would not necessarily diminish the importance of the researchers' findings if this investment and attention did have a profound effect on attitudes. Rather, it would merely demonstrate that the requisite building blocks of a successful mixed-income development are a combination of working and nonworking poor *and* investment in the physical plant and management of the building. To truly understand whether the mixed-income character of Lake Parc Place was a positive factor, one would have to compare Lake Parc Place with another development on which as many resources and as much attention have been lavished, but whose residents are exclusively low income and unemployed.

It may be that these physical improvements are more important than any change in the normative environment that is at the heart of the Lake Parc Place management philosophy and the focus of this research project. I do not mean to diminish the importance of safety, reduced vandalism and violence, and environment respectful of neighbors; these are critical elements of a livable community. However, in the long term, are these elements most effectively maintained by management rules and role models? Willingness to adhere to rules is a product of individuals' recognition that the rules have been developed by a legitimate authority—one that represents and looks out for their interests. When you feel that you are part of the system and are benefiting from it, then you obey the rules. If you are outside the system, *and* there doesn't seem to be any payoff for obeying the rules, *and* the rules are imposed from above, then there is little incentive to obey those rules and even an incentive to resist or break them. Again, might it not have been the management's responsiveness to residents in making repairs, keeping public spaces clean, and providing security that created satisfac-

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<sup>3</sup> "Hawthorne effect" refers to an experimental result that is produced more as a consequence of attention paid to subjects during an experiment than of the experimental variable that is being manipulated. Subjects may perform tasks more efficiently, or in the case of this housing "experiment," express higher satisfaction rates because of the attention that experimenters (or policy makers) are paying them. The term derives from General Electric's Hawthorne plant, where this phenomenon was first documented during productivity studies in the 1930s.

tion among all residents, rather than merely the presence of “obedient” nonproject residents who accepted the rules? A final issue is what all this means in providing housing and opportunity to families segregated into low-income urban neighborhoods.

### **A need for community-based advocacy**

Given the positive characteristics of this mixed-income development, how can more Lake Parc Places be produced to revitalize communities that have experienced decades of disinvestment and misinvestment—misinvestment in the sense of segregating thousands of low-income families into high-rise buildings in just a few communities? Just because income mixing is a “good idea” and residents of the buildings like it does not mean that mixed-income advocates can withstand cutbacks in government support for affordable housing or put the brakes on a free-market economy in which developers see low-income neighborhoods as investment frontiers and low-income residents as obstacles to be moved.

One cannot criticize the researchers for not moving into a discussion of larger strategies to bring about more mixed-income properties, but the research does beg the question of how we move from this one mixed-income development to more extensive mixed-income projects. Also, given the fact that the majority of the low-income population lives in private-market, non-government-subsidized housing,<sup>4</sup> how do we extrapolate from the Lake Parc Place experience to the for-profit market? Given the process of gentrification in low-income neighborhoods, where new investment typically leads to displacement of low-income residents by middle-income homeowners and renters, the question may even be how do we *protect* housing such as Lake Parc Place from market-rate redevelopment? This is not a hypothetical issue; development and displacement pressures are mounting in the neighborhoods north and south of Lake Parc Place.

A recent front-page headline in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Pitt 1998) read “Home Sales in City Soar to New High.” Unapologetically celebrating the replacement of low-income housing with middle-income housing, the accompanying article cited statistics indicating that the community just to the north of Lake Parc Place had seen me-

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<sup>4</sup> For example, approximately four out of five recipients of government support (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, and food stamps) in Chicago live in non-government-subsidized housing. (Data discussed by the Housing Subcommittee of the Cook County–City of Chicago Welfare Reform Task Force, September 3, 1998.)

dian housing prices for attached homes (town houses, condominiums, and lofts) jump 26 percent between 1995 and 1998; in the community just to the south, median housing prices for detached single-family homes increased a whopping 67 percent over the same period (Pitt 1998). These price increases are indicative of powerful development forces often encouraged by local government policies—as has been the case in Chicago. These forces may ultimately threaten any kind of mixed-income development.

The need to focus on more than norms, role modeling, and management is important. Resident involvement in the building (and not just the additional CHA resources and more carefully planned building management activities) has had an effect on the quality of life at Lake Parc Place. We also should look at the effectiveness of various organizing efforts by community groups to preserve affordable housing against powerful outside political and economic forces. Documentation of the early successes of mixed-income developments together with an understanding of the broader political organizing efforts of affordable housing advocates (and mixed-income development advocates) appears to be the necessary combination to bring about new housing models.

One good idea or one good model does not guarantee change. Policy makers will have to be pressured not only to preserve existing quality low-income and mixed-income housing but to develop more such projects. Such pressure will happen only with a stronger community voice and local organizing efforts. Community development corporations, local churches, local community organizations, block clubs, tenant associations, local banks, local foundations, and local businesses will play critical roles in improving opportunities for low-income residents. Other research has emphasized that grassroots organizing of tenants and community is as important in preserving affordable housing as successful models themselves (Atlas and Dreier 1986; Kolodny 1986; Nyden and Adams 1996). Rosenbaum, Stroh, and Flynn's evaluation of an innovative mixed-income development needs to be read in tandem with literature on community organizing. Together, they can provide an understanding of the formidable challenges that low-income families (employed and unemployed) face in preserving quality housing and securing a major stepping-stone to a stable social and economic future.

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