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Perspectives on Affordable Housing and the Reality of Public Housing in Asheville

“Already in childhood their lives are crushed mentally, emotionally and physically, and then society develops the myth of inferiority to give credence to its lifelong patterns of exploitation, which can only be defined as our system of slavery in the twentieth century”. (King, 1967) Dr. King’s forty-year old description of the effect the “emotional pressure cooker” of life in the ghettos has on young children remains chillingly accurate. These children are physically excluded from society and feel the effects of that exclusion from the very beginnings of their lives. Isolation from birth translates to isolation that continues in public school systems districted according to neighborhoods and largely funded by property taxes. Lack of affordable housing pushes people into housing projects and many factors act to keep and isolate them there, more often than not invisible to society. “Our cities have constructed elaborate expressways and elevated skyways, and white Americans speed from suburb to inner city through vast pockets of black deprivation without ever getting a glimpse of the suffering and misery in their midst”. (King, 1967) It is easy for society to ignore a problem when it can naively claim ignorance of even noticing it.

King describes the emotional impact of being invisible to society. “As I think about the anatomy of the ghetto, I am often reminded of a passage from W.E.B. Du Bois’ autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn: It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation...It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the*

world...” (King, 1967) These prisoners are neighbors, a child’s classmate, someone’s daughter or son; they are innocent prisoners, and the glass that keeps them separated from society is the collective inaction of ineffective policy.

Once African-Americans began moving into predominately white neighborhoods in the 50’s and 60’s they encountered ‘white flight’ in which their white neighbors moved even farther outside the inner city taking job opportunities and economic growth with them. This continued all throughout the nation as whites decided they would rather move than have black neighbors. “The suburbs are white nooses around the black necks of the cities, housing deteriorates in central cities; urban renewal has been Negro removal and has benefitted big merchants and real estate interests; and suburbs expand with little regard for what happens to the rest of America”. (King, 1967) The white phenomenon of the suburbs serves to further the racial segregation evident in residential location. “The immorality of segregation is that it is a selfishly contrived system which cuts off one’s capacity to deliberate, decide, and respond”. (King, 1967) Such a capacity to decide where to live, where to work, and where to go to school is cut off through the unavailability of affordable housing in desirable communities. This was furthered by white flight because good communities, career opportunities and schools literally followed the affluent white majority as they fled the inner city. The isolation of low-income communities leads to what King describes as a “vicious circle. You can’t get a job because you are poorly educated, and you must depend on welfare to feed your children... you are condemned to the jobs and shops which are closest to your home. Once confined to this isolated community, one no longer participates in a free economy”. (King, 1967) This cycle ensures that the underprivileged become unprivileged and that the lower-classes become the underclass.

“The plantation and the ghetto were created by those who had power both to confine those who had no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. The problem of transforming the ghetto is, therefore, a problem of power- a confrontation between the forces of power demanding change and the forces of power dedicated to preserving the status quo”. (King, 1967) King’s answer to this problem of power is the collective action of the powerless to create a powerful movement. Power, says King, “is the ability to achieve purpose”; and achieving that purpose means appealing to the status quo. “I doubt if the problems of our teeming ghettos will have a great chance to be solved until the white majority, through genuine empathy, comes to feel the ache and anguish of the Negroes’ daily life”. (King, 1967) King advocates non-violent protest and embraces the ideology of black power as black empowerment by embracing self-worth. However, his non-violent approach must not be confused with a passive approach.

Demanding change and attacking the systems which prevent it, King looks to the failing legal system. “Open-occupancy laws theoretically apply to population centers embracing tens of millions, but grim ghettos contradict the fine language of legislation”. (King, 1967) The question remains, if numerous structures are in place, why do citizens still face housing discrimination, fateful residential zoning, and limited access to decent, affordable housing? King was killed before he could see the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, but his criticism of laws that are conveniently applicable unfortunately resounds still today. “The legal structures have in practice proved to be neither structures nor law. The sparse and insufficient collection of statutes is not a structure; it is barely a naked framework. Legislation that is evaded, substantially nullified and unenforced is a mockery of law”. (King, 1967) Such a mockery of

law has created a mockery of society, one in which the prospect of equality and affordability are unlikely to coincide without the efforts of a determined many.

“The American housing industry is a disgrace to a society which can confidently plan to get to the moon”. (King, 1967) Society reached the moon, which makes the lack of a legitimate housing industry all the more embarrassing. The need for affordable housing in this nation is extremely urgent, as a substantial portion of the population lives in inadequate low-income, government subsidized, or public housing. “While we cannot resolve the issues of decent, integrated housing immediately, we are now making the choices which will determine whether we can achieve those goals in forthcoming decades. We cannot afford to make these choices poorly”. (King, 1967) At the time of his writing during the height of the civil rights movement, he had the courage and knowledgeable foresight to warn off inevitable frustration. “To lightly dismiss a success because it does not usher in a complete order of justice is to fail to comprehend the process of achieving full victory”. (King, 1967) What follows are the many setbacks of the city of Asheville in the area of public housing, and a few successes in terms of community action programs involved in the fight for widely available affordable housing.

Tavis Smiley opens his bestselling book *The Covenant with Black America* with an exchange between black labor leader A. Phillip Randolph and President Roosevelt. Prompted by Roosevelt, Randolph explains steps to be taken on a national level to elevate the status of African Americans. Roosevelt apparently agreed with everything Randolph said but insisted, “Now go

out and make me do it". (Smiley, 2006) Smiley attempts a collective "go out and make me do it" call to action, detailing changes that must be made in health care, employment, law enforcement, education, and housing to lessen the disheartening divide between white and black citizens.

Affordable housing is being built, but this housing is in low-opportunity areas. A family can afford to rent or own such a property, but they will not have the same access to recourses that another home-owning family would have. "In the United States today, where you live literally determines access to opportunity. Your address dictates whether you have access to good schools and jobs, grocery stores, parks, and other important amenities. The availability of affordable housing in neighborhoods of rich opportunity, therefore, has become the next battleground". (Smiley, 2006) When quality of education, job opportunities, and recreational facilities directly correlate with zip code the concept of equal opportunity becomes a myth. A whole segment of the population is denied equal opportunity on a purely residential basis, one that more often than not defines their degree of upward social mobility. "There is a direct link among where we work, where we live, how many resources (both time and money) are spent on transit and on housing, and our opportunities". (Smiley, 2006) Rich job opportunities simply are not located in low-income neighborhoods and residents must leave to seek decent employment. People of lower incomes are less likely to own cars, and an unreliable system of public transportation further complicates the prospect of obtaining fulfilling careers.

Smiley offers ideas for individuals, communities, and elected officials; yet to truly affect progressive change, all three must work together. Individually, he promotes joining affordable housing projects such as Habitat for Humanity, putting away portions of individual income in

saving or home loan accounts, and working to find multiple means of transportation including public transit and walking. Over all, his advice to the individual is to “let your voice be heard” and to “hold all leaders and elected officials responsible and demand that they change current policy”. (Smiley, 2006) He also insists that the demand for progress must be a community-wide effort. “The black community must band together if we are to end the systematic discrimination that persists by isolating affordable housing choices far from good schools and jobs”. (Smiley, 2006) All communities must work to insure that the three-tiered system of change that Smiley has outlined is indeed followed. Smiley details what leaders and elected officials need to do to promote such necessary change. Some solutions, such as “increase African American homeownership” seem too broad to be legitimately implemented while others, “ensure African American representation on transportation planning bodies” and “fund and support fair housing enforcement to eliminate unfair treatment” are more accessible. Smiley expands on these solutions by explaining inclusionary zoning. “Local officials can use the most promising mixed-income housing tool, ‘inclusionary zoning,’ requiring a portion of every new market development to include a percentage of affordable housing”. (Smiley, 2006) This solution still encounters the problem that new developments are getting farther and farther away from the inner-city and in order to avoid obvious transportation problems public transit must be dramatically expanded.

The solutions Smiley provides give a concrete answer to King’s question “Where do we go from here?” While some may question the reality of his ideas, what is most important is that he outlines critical steps to take in trying to answer the overwhelming problem of indecent housing. As King was quick to point out, the importance of any small change in a positive

direction must not be overlooked. However, there have been too many small changes that have not led to substantial collective change. Lack of affordable housing in opportune locations has meant that a significant portion of this nation's population has inadequate access to desirable jobs and good schools. The isolation of their residential areas acts to keep citizens isolated from society while simultaneously allowing society to cite those in low-income housing as the root of their own problems. The ways that society defines a problem determines whether or how they plan to fix it. By defining the problem of minimal affordable housing in desirable locations as a problem of the poor and a result of their inefficiency, society justifies minimal, if any, change in the status quo.

*Any applicability
in Asheville?*

Bibliography

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Mechanics
9.5
Content
8
Overall
8.5