



BOOK REVIEW

Douglas S. Massey, Len Albright, Rebecca Casciano, Elizabeth Derickson, and David N. Kinsey. *Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Siting affordable housing is one of the most contested issues facing community development professionals. The mere mention of a proposed subsidized housing development in or near a suburban community often prompts a visceral response from residents who represent the most intolerant segments of the community. Often this response evokes racist and classist stereotypes that block the development of affordable housing and the integration of communities. In *Climbing Mount Laurel*, Massey, Albright, Casciano, Derickson, and Kinsey debunk many of the widely held stereotypes about the impact of subsidized housing development in the suburbs. Their analysis of the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes (ELH) neighborhood in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, provides readers with clarity about the true effects of affordable housing development in suburbs. This book makes a significant contribution to the literature due to its multifaceted treatment of affordable housing outcomes and because it highlights key components of effective policy implementation. It is highly salient for scholars interested in the promotion of equitable housing and community integration. At the same time, it is instructive to practitioners and policymakers interested in promoting the development of affordable housing as one component of broader efforts to affirmatively further fair housing.

For a relatively short book, *Climbing Mount Laurel* covers a lot of ground. It begins with a discussion of the theoretical and policy rationales for housing mobility programs and then introduces the specifics of the development of the Mount Laurel case study. The first three chapters of the book explain how a local, nonprofit-led initiative to build affordable housing in the late 1960s evolved into a statewide movement advocating for the adoption of regional fair-share housing policy. The authors discuss the two key New Jersey Supreme Court decisions, *Mount Laurel I* in 1977 and *Mount Laurel II* in 1983, which formed the basis for the state's fair-share housing policy. They also discuss how this led to the enactment of New Jersey's Fair Housing Act of 1985 which cleared the way for the development of the 950 unit ELH neighborhood. After explaining the legal and legislative battles that produced the state's fair-share housing policy, the authors summarize the physical design and financial structure of the ELH neighborhood. What comes out of these discussions is an appreciation for the almost insurmountable difficulties advocates had to overcome in order to insert an affordable rental community in the suburbs. In total, over 35 years passed before the ELH neighborhood was completed. During that time, most of the original African American residents who organized efforts to develop affordable housing in Mount Laurel were displaced. Among this group was the ELH neighborhood's namesake, Ethel Lawrence, who died a few years before construction began on the project.

After establishing the policy foundation for the book, the authors turn to a discussion of the outcomes that affordable housing development had for residents. This analysis is dealt with using mixed methods analysis which examines crime and property statistics, data obtained from community surveys, and qualitative results from semistructured interviews. Methodologically, the authors provide readers with a comprehensive framework for analysis that deepens our understanding of subsidized housing in the suburbs. One dimension of this analysis challenges widely held perceptions that affordable housing development will result in increased crime, increased taxes, and depressed property values in the communities where it is sited. The analysis of the ELH neighborhood finds no evidence

for these effects. Another dimension of this analysis measures the degree to which residents' fears about negative outcomes of affordable housing materialize in host communities. Again, the authors find that the development of the ELH neighborhood was relatively unnoticed and uneventful for surrounding subdivisions.

Finally, the authors turn to the measurement of the outcomes for residents living in suburban, affordable housing. Several dimensions of these outcomes are examined. The findings suggest that ELH residents' social networks remained intact or were reconstituted in a relatively short period of time after they moved into the neighborhood. The authors also found that exposure to neighborhood disorder, negative life events, and psychological stressors were reduced by moving to subsidized housing in the suburbs. Perhaps the most compelling findings relate to factors affecting economic and social mobility. Suburban renters experienced increased employment and income mobility. Moreover, their children benefited from access to suburban schools and linked recreational and supportive services provided in their new neighborhood.

It is noteworthy that many of these benefits were, in part, attributed to attention paid to the design and implementation of the ELH neighborhood plan. The decision to design the ELH neighborhood in a manner that blended in with the surrounding community was beneficial to resident outcomes, since this approach to aesthetics helped to remove the stigma associated with affordable housing. The management of the ELH neighborhood also included a systematic tenant screening process, attention to property maintenance, and linkages to on-site community services and programs. The management plan for the property included the creation of a neighborhood watch program and regular community meetings designed to identify residents' needs and build social capital in the neighborhood. It also included the provision of recreational programs and after-school tutoring services for youth in the neighborhood.

Through the use of mixed methods analysis, *Climbing Mount Laurel* makes a compelling statement about the benefits that suburban, affordable housing development can offer to disenfranchised and marginalized groups in society. Simultaneously, the authors bring forward evidence that rejects claims that affordable housing is a threat to communities. In the end, the authors provide a powerful analysis of one of the most pivotal affordable housing experiments in the United States. The insights and perspectives offered are important since opposition to affordable housing persists and systematic, empirical analysis of this nature offers scholars, policymakers, and practitioners some of the best tools for meeting it head on.

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