Chapter 11

The Historical Construction of 'The Public Housing Problem' and Deconcentration Policies

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Introduction

From its inception, mass-produced public housing played a major role in the post-World War II (WWII) reconstruction and economic development of Australian cities. At this time public housing estates provided an efficient solution to a number of social, economic and political problems. These included a severe housing shortage, serious affordability issues, and trade skills and infrastructure deficits. Although consistently representing a very small proportion of total housing stock (4% as of 2006, AIHW 2009: 5) when compared to European standards, and while it remained politically contested, up until the early 1990s Australian public housing provided affordable and secure housing for those households who could not afford to house themselves appropriately through owner occupation or private rental (Chapter 9). Some 70 years beyond its inception and despite a similar situation of chronic undersupply of housing in major cities, and the least affordable housing internationally, public housing in Australia is now perceived by many as a highly problematic form of tenure which exacerbates or even produces social problems rather than ameliorating them (Arthurson 2012b). Mass-produced broad-acre estates containing concentrations of public housing are frequently characterised as incubators for crime and anti-social behaviour, residents' unemployment and poor educational outcomes (Pinnegar, Randolph and Davison 2011). Not just the policy of providing assistance through state owned housing, but its actual physical form and location is now widely described as a 'failed experiment' and has emerged as the target of a concerted campaign of reform and redevelopment (Troy 2011).

This chapter examines the historical shift in Australian housing assistance policy with a particular focus on the way in which the geography (especially spatial concentration) of contemporary public housing has come to be conceptualised as destroying its effectiveness. In recent debates the roots of this problem are generally understood as cultural and economic: cultural causes being the reproduction of poverty brought about by lack of sufficient role models of 'good citizens' and the 'bad side' of social capital, allied with popular prejudice and stigmatisation of public tenants; economic mechanisms are related to work disincentives and poverty traps directly arising from the structure of housing assistance. Given the depictions of spatial concentration as an underlying cause of these

issues, the solutions are also frequently couched in terms of the geography of public housing, that is to say, dispersal.

Drawing on Australian empirical and participatory research conducted in three states over recent years, we provide an alternative account of Australian social housing provision to the one which underlies most contemporary policy debate about processes of residualisation and concentration. We argue that, rather than focusing on a simple explanation about proximity of tenant households as a cause of problems, reduced supply and various forms of tighter targeting have impacted on the demographic mix of tenants to increase stigmatisation, and exacerbate housing related poverty traps. The international research findings on the practices of housing authorities designed to de-concentrate public housing are also called upon to help assess the likely success of policies designed to address social problems through relocation of tenants and implementing small scale geographic tenure mix.

Historical Context

Deconcentration and tenure mixing has emerged over recent decades as the preferred strategy of public housing managers across the industrialised world, in particular in the USA and UK (Darcy 2010). Housing authorities in all Australian states, supported and encouraged by Federal funding agreements, have pursued a program of demolition and redevelopment of estates aimed at 'de-concentrating' public housing and dispersing public tenants amongst mortgage-paying, or at least private rent-paying, neighbours. New developments arising on former public housing sites are designed to achieve 'social mix' – often of no more than 30 per cent subsidised tenants – which, it is argued, will offset the stigma and prevent the cultural reproduction of negative values and behaviours which compound the disadvantage of poor households (Coates and Shepherd 2005). As in the U.S. (Imbroscio 2008; Chaskin and Joseph 2011), this policy has sparked considerable research and academic debate (Arthurson 2002; 2008; Darcy 2010; Ware et al. 2010) but apart from some changes to tenant consultation and participation practices, has continued substantially unaltered for a decade.

Despite the similarity in the contemporary diagnosis of public housing problems and chosen intervention strategies, the history, sociology and geography of Australian public housing is distinctively different from its international counterparts. As in the US and UK, the earliest examples of public housing in Australia emerged in the early 20th century and were associated with slum clearance or 'social hygiene' strategies. The design of estates such as Dacey Gardens in Sydney sought to move poor households away from the overcrowded inner city to lower density suburban sites. Dacey Gardens was constructed following World War I but was never completed. Somewhat ironically, this 'garden suburb' was planned partly as means of reducing anti-social behaviour associated with the inadequate housing conditions of poor households in inner city areas. Within just a few years, it was widely described as a failure and the Housing Board set up to administer it was abolished (Pugh 1976). Troy (1997: 16) accounts for these events with reference to insufficient funds provided by the incoming conservative State government in 1922, and

'ill-founded criticism … [and] critical attitudes similar to those expressed 50 years later by opponents of public housing programs'.

Despite these early problems, because of its multiplier effects in creating increased demand and employment in allied building and urban development industries, in times of crisis public housing construction has regularly been enlisted in pursuit of achieving national economic objectives (see Chapter 9). This aim was explicit in the Commonwealth Housing Commission report in 1944 and featured in subsequent Commonwealth State Housing Agreements (CSHA) through the second half of the 20th century. Nonetheless, political discourse surrounding public housing has consistently framed it as an inferior form of tenure, not in a legal sense but in a social one where 'the private home rather than public housing was seen as … the font of civic virtues' (Murphy 1995). As summarised by Ruming et al. (2004: 235):

> Housing policy over the last 50 years has been structured around a politically initiated ideology of home ownership as normal and beneficial, and public housing as an inferior form of tenure.

From the late 1950s through to the 1970s, public housing dwellings were mass-produced in relatively large scale concentrated projects developed as part of the stimulatory strategy of the Keynesian/modernist welfare state, to provide affordable housing for the low income urban industrial workforce. As opposed to the high density, high rise, form which dominated US and UK public housing in the 1960s, and later became the focus of deconcentration policy in those countries, the bulk of Australian public dwellings were single family dwellings and low-medium density row housing on greenfield suburban and urban fringe sites. Unlike the UK and European experience, public housing in Australia never exceeded around 6 per cent of housing stock, except in South Australia where housing policy was explicitly deployed as a strategy to attract investment in manufacturing industry through downward pressure on wage costs, and where it reached as high as 10 per cent of dwellings in the 1980s (Marsden 1986).

Even during the Fordist 'long-boom' years with expansionary Keynesian economic policies in full swing, public housing never enjoyed unequivocal support. Paris et al. (1985) argue that there have always been at least two competing discourses of social housing in Australia which they characterise as '*public* housing' and '*welfare* housing', with the latter achieving clear dominance in public policy debates for at least the last quarter of a century. They argue that,

> It is incorrect … to suggest that an established tradition of public housing has only lately been undermined. Rather, during the 1970s we witnessed the consolidation of the traditional conservative welfare approach. (Paris et al. 1985: 107)

Housing Estates

Around half of public housing dwellings in Australia are located in geographically concentrated developments, or 'estates', of between one hundred and several thousand units, the bulk of which were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s on 'greenfield' sites at
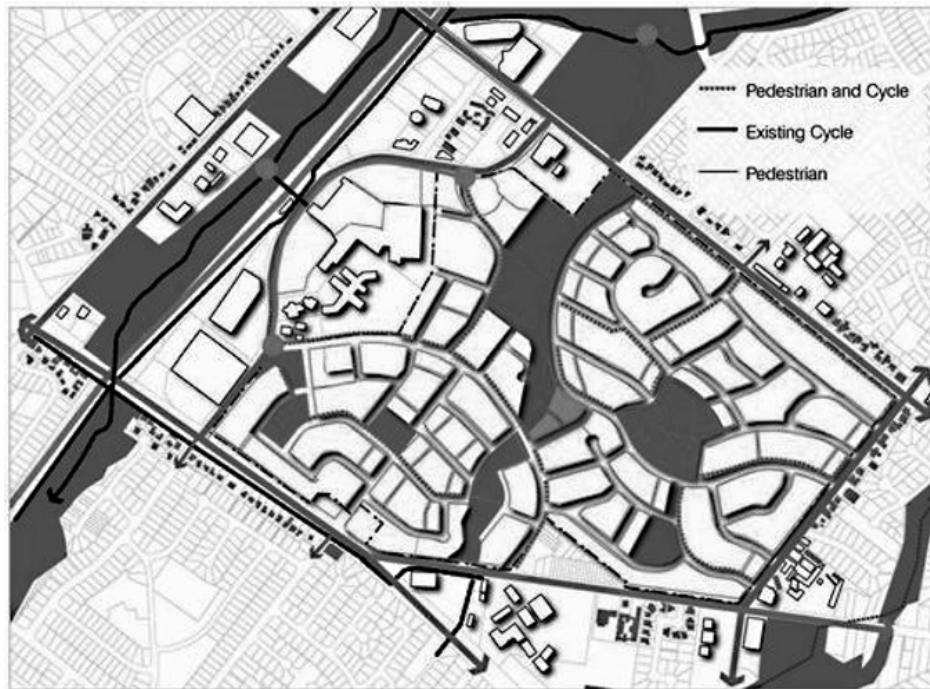
Figure 11.1   Radburn style estate with cul de sacs at Bonnyrigg Estate in NSW

Source: NSW Government Premiers Council for Active Living, Case Study Bonnyrigg Living Communities Project, http://www.pcal.nsw.gov.au/case_studies/bonnyrigg_living_communities_project/ descriptioncontext.

the urban fringe. These usually comprise a mix of detached and row housing, walk-up apartments, and a small number of medium rise (up to 10-storeys) blocks. Less than 10 per cent of dwellings nationally are located in high-density tower blocks and walk-up apartments close to centres of large cities.

Greenfield development allowed housing authorities to experiment with urban design, and in NSW planners of suburban estates embraced the principles used to develop the planned community of Radburn, New Jersey in 1929. These principles sought to create new kinds of spaces for social interaction and community life 'in the motor age' (Stein 1957) by separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic, replacing the traditional grid street pattern with

> houses grouped around small cul-de-sacs, each of which has an access road coming from the main roads . . . The living and sleeping sections of the houses face toward the garden and park areas, while the service rooms face the access road . . . to further maintain the separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, a pedestrian underpass and an overpass, linking the superblocks, were provided. The system was so devised that a pedestrian could start at any given point and proceed on foot to school, stores or church without crossing a street used by automobiles. (Gatti, n.d.: 1)

This typical arrangement for a Radburn Estate is illustrated in Figure 11.1.

As with the 'garden cities' of an earlier age, Radburn style estates sought to bring about cultural and behavioural changes amongst tenants through their geographical and design features. By the mid-1990s, these estates had experienced decades of chronic under-investment in maintenance of dwellings and public spaces. Increasingly stringent allocation policies had focused on the most needy; local drug dealers frequented poorly lit pedestrian underpasses; and, large poorly maintained common areas became 'no-man's-land'. Confusing cul-de-sacs with houses placed back-to-front were easily identified and stigmatised as places of last resort housing for workless, welfare dependent households, and this 'experiment' in public housing 'design' was widely deemed by many as a failure.

Deconcentration Debate

While over time the concentration of public housing in estates has come to be depicted as destroying its effectiveness, historical analysis shows that key contributors to the problems experienced in public housing are not its design or specific geography but progressively tighter targeting for entry coupled with reductions in funding, and the effects of economic and industry restructuring. The latter factor led to large-scale losses of jobs particularly in manufacturing industries on which many public housing tenants relied for their livelihood. Initially public housing was targeted to assist low income working families but gradually over time the demographic makeup has transformed through targeting increasingly higher need and complex groups, such as ex-prisoners, and people experiencing homelessness and substance abuse issues. As such public housing is now considered a residualised tenure targeted to the most high need and complex groups, and low income alone does not guarantee access.

The Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty conducted in the mid-1970s also played an inadvertent role in the development of this situation. The report identified that the most impoverished groups tended to reside in private rental rather than public housing (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty 1975). Based on this finding the inquiry recommended implementing new forms of income redistribution, for instance, cash transfers, targeted specifically to private renters. This group varied significantly from the low-income working tenants then in public housing. As Peel (1994) has pointed out, while the proposal was non-housing specific it would have allowed the housing authorities to charge market based rents and recover their costs making the system financially viable. But in practice the findings of the Inquiry were used selectively to argue that better off public tenants were being subsidised to the detriment of more impoverished groups that were thus unable to access public housing. These contentions bolstered support for the idea that public housing should be targeted only to people with the greatest need. Soon after the CSHA (Commonwealth of Australia 1978) proposed implementing market level rents to encourage 'better off' public tenants to move into private rental, although as a concession the States agreed to set 'market related' rents (Troy 1997: x).

At the same time as Federal Government direction under the CSHA moved to implement tighter targeting of admission to public housing, the negative effects of economic change were impacting on the delivery of public housing and existing tenants. A series of economic recessions in the 1970s and 1980s led to loss of jobs in manufacturing

industry that coupled with the narrower targeting resulted in estates with high levels of public housing increasingly becoming characterised by concentrations of residents with low incomes, poverty and high unemployment rates.

The issues of administering to an increasingly complex tenant group and maintaining ageing public housing stock was exacerbated by major declines in funding levels for public housing provision and renewal. According to Hall and Berry (2007), sustained reductions in the real value of capital investment in new social housing over the 30 years up to 2007, and consequent decline in the proportion of housing stock it represents, leading to stricter targeting of allocations and reduction in security of tenure have produced a generally less viable and harder to manage public housing sector. Between 1989 and 2001 the reduction in funding for public housing equated to around 26 per cent (Jacobs et al. 2013). The net effect of this process has been to reinforce the perception of failure – not just of policy, but of whole communities – and thus to instil a profound sense of public tenants as 'failed citizens' who are unable to produce the conditions for a standard of everyday life such as that enjoyed by owner occupiers (Jacobs et al. 2011).

Notwithstanding a one-off injection of funds as part of the 2008/2009 Federal stimulus package in response to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the lack of funding has meant virtually no net additions to public housing stock over several decades (see Chapter 12). Consequently attention turned to issues of how to fund the ongoing maintenance and renewal of the existing ageing post-war housing stock mostly built in the 1950s and 1960s. The first attempts at renewal of public housing estates in Australia commenced in the 1990s as a response to escalating management issues along with emerging problems of anti-social behaviour on some housing estates. In response to these issues and considerable attention from tabloid media, Housing NSW pioneered a program of 'Neighbourhood Improvement' which included community development activities, public space upgrades, closing off pedestrian walkways and fencing front (or back) yards, in an attempt to 'de-Radburnise' some estates. The program was popular with tenants and resulted in a marked drop in transfer applications and refusals of housing offers in those areas where it was implemented (Bijen and Piracha 2012). Nonetheless it was soon discontinued for lack of funds, and before the decade was out had been superseded by a far more radical form of intervention.

Whereas initially the focus was on physical renewal of ageing public housing assets, as awareness increased that physical design changes made little difference to behavioural and other social problems experienced on the estates, attention turned to concentration of public housing as the problem and 'social mix' policies aligned with physical renewal as a solution.

In contemporary Australian estate regeneration policy, social mix strategies have become the preferred means to create more viable communities. These social mix strategies are couched in terms of deconcentration, diversifying housing tenure and socioeconomic mix of existing social housing estates and interspersing social tenant households with homeowners, homebuyers and private renters. The idea is that through interaction with homeowners public housing tenants will be provided with models of exemplary behaviour that lead to other positive outcomes such as access to employment and educational opportunities. Social mix approaches also usually incorporate an important housing design element: whereas the aim is to disperse social housing tenants amongst private market

neighbours, housing designers and managers frequently stress the need for the dwellings themselves to be indistinguishable, although this is not always achieved (Arthurson 2012a). Just as they were in the original design of estates, the spatial geography and design of social housing are being employed to produce changes in the culture and behaviour of tenants.

Neighbourhood Effects

A consistent narrative has been deployed to explain the social conditions which are observed in urban areas dominated by public housing tenure and to justify deconcentration and dispersal of public tenants. This locates the roots of poverty in the behaviour and values of the poor themselves which are believed to be reproduced and reinforced by local cultural dynamics arising from the geographic concentration of their homes. This theory of 'neighbourhood effects' draws on a few seminal texts such as Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged* and Venkatesh's (2009) *American Project*. A growing body of work in the social sciences seeks to develop methods to prove and measure the effect of local social geography on social and economic outcomes for poor households (van Ham and Manley 2010). Yet more research is focussed on understanding the dynamics of social interaction in newly developed 'mixed-income' developments which replace concentrated public housing (Allen et al. 2005; Chaskin and Joseph 2011; Graves 2010).

Despite Wilson's (1987) emphasis on the consequences of de-industrialisation, and his rejection of the cultural causation of poverty, urban managers and policy-makers have focussed almost exclusively on the 'concentration effects' which, Wilson (1987) argued, isolate poor communities from economic opportunities. Rather than confront the macro social and economic forces which, under the banner of the free market, divide large cities, they have reverted to a former explanation of urban disadvantage, found in the 'social hygiene' and slum clearance movements of the late industrial revolution and Oscar Lewis' (1961) 'culture of poverty'. The first step in addressing poverty is thus to disperse poor households amongst the self-reliant working population of homeowners where 'successful' cultural patterns can be observed and learned, and the cycle interrupted.

It is not possible here to adequately review the many deconcentration and dispersal programs which have emerged in North America, Europe and Australia since the mid-1990s (see Porter and Shaw 2009). However, it is fair to say that isolating the impact of the local neighbourhood from the urban conditions which lead poor households to live in them, and from the effects of housing quality, access to jobs and services, and a myriad of personal and family characteristics, has proved to be an elusive goal, while the benefits to poor tenants of being removed to mixed income neighbourhoods are highly contested, not least by tenants themselves.

Public Housing from Solution to Problem

Through the lens of neighbourhood effects, public housing, once promoted by government as a solution to urban poverty, now appears in social research and urban policy as a cause

of it. The theory of cultural reproduction of poverty through 'neighbourhood effects' provides the necessary social justification for returning publicly owned land to the market by claiming that relocation of tenants is in their own best interest. The media has added fuel to these ideas, particularly high rating 'tabloid' television current affairs programs that frequently and enthusiastically report any incidents of anti-social behaviour or perceived irresponsible or undeserving tenants, as evidence of fundamental problems inherent in subsidised and state managed housing (Arthurson 2012b). In enthusiastically adopting the theoretical notion of neighbourhood effects as a rationale for breaking up estates researchers, policy makers and housing managers have focussed attention on the perceived deficiencies of social housing communities and the malign effects of disadvantaged households residing in proximity to each other. Policy and consultation documents produced to justify specific redevelopment projects usually refer to selected indicators to present a narrative of community life in need of urgent intervention (Darcy 2010).

Nevertheless, the evidence is equivocal and several reviews that assess the overall research findings conclude that notwithstanding their living near to each other, the limited interaction that occurs between home owners and social housing tenants is unlikely to lead to the supposed potential benefits ascribed to these policies (Smith 2002; Holmes 2006; Arthurson 2012a). Considered by some just as spurious is the idea of role model effects in relation to employment opportunities or the expected raising of life aspirations for public housing tenants (Holmes 2006). In their study van Ham and Manley (2010) found that although living in a deprived neighbourhood is negatively correlated with labour market outcomes this was largely so for homeowners but not public housing tenants.

As Luxford (2006: 3) points out, 'it is not necessarily the concentration of public housing *per se* that creates stigma. Rather, it is the allocation of housing to only those who are the most disadvantaged in our community. Indeed, in Australia, Ruming (2011) has shown local opponents of dispersed social and affordable housing projects have frequently adapted the definition of 'concentration' to encompass anything more than one or two dwellings in a hundred. In Ruming's (2011) study, local residents demonstrated little appreciation or interest in the subtleties of new management structures or subsidy arrangements, they simply associated subsidised or affordable housing projects with public housing, often referring to all projects as 'Housing Commission' thus invoking the historical discourse of inferiority and the undermining of civic values and community life. Goetz (2004: 7) warns that under conditions such as this, strategies to address poverty by dispersing social housing may be counterproductive:

> the deconcentration argument provides the basis for low-poverty neighbourhoods to continue to oppose subsidized housing, by linking social pathologies to concentrated poverty, and concentrated poverty to subsidized housing. In the end, there is something perversely uniting about the deconcentration argument – it leads to almost universal resistance to subsidized housing.

While the development of social and affordable housing in the form of smaller dispersed projects is undoubtedly preferable to large poorly located and under maintained estates, the legacy of previous practices means that new developments must be carefully managed

to avoid recreating the conditions of stigma and exclusion that currently apply to estates, albeit at a smaller and more personal scale. As Ruming et al. (2004: 238) caution, places of social mix may become new spaces for social exclusion through identification of 'us' and 'them' due to the unequal material conditions experienced by public housing tenants whereby they represent some of the disadvantaged social groups in contemporary society.

We now examine how some of these ideas about neighbourhood effects and deconcentration policies have worked in practice in Australia through drawing on some research vignettes of Carlton (Victoria) and Bonnyrigg (NSW) estates. The redevelopment of Carlton Estate (Lygon Site) in Melbourne was originally planned to break down social barriers between housing tenure groups through a mixed income development implemented as a 'salt and pepper' model of social mix where public and private units were situated in the same buildings. Financial constraints of the GFC and pressure from the private sector partner (the developer) meant that the Department of Human Services and the Office of Housing instead agreed to construct a complex of three buildings segregated by housing tenure (one public housing building and two private buildings) with separate secured entrances and car parks. The development includes an enclosed courtyard garden that is enclosed by and visible from all three buildings but only accessible to residents in the two private buildings. In addition a wall was constructed that not only physically but also symbolically separates public and private residents from each other (Levin et al. 2014).[1] This situation poses the key question of how the social integration aspects of the project will be achieved.

Likewise in the larger showpiece Bonnyrigg redevelopment project west of Sydney, Housing NSW set out to demonstrate best practice in many key aspects of deconcentration policy. The aim was to replace approximately nine hundred public housing dwellings, which made up 90 per cent of the estate, with a new suburb of more than two thousand units, only 30 per cent of which would be subsidised social housing and the remainder privately owned and occupied. This was to be achieved through a public-private partnership under which responsibility for physical redevelopment, sale of new dwellings and management of continuing social tenancies would pass to a private consortium (Rogers 2013). Importantly, the consortium involved not just a developer and facilities manager, but also a non-profit housing association that would manage tenancies and conduct community development and consultation activities. Exterior design of social housing dwellings was to be indistinguishable from private dwellings. Transfer of the management of tenancies to a non-government landlord also contributed to the financial viability of social housing on the site since unlike tenants of State Housing Authorities, Housing Association tenants who qualify for Commonwealth pensions and benefits can also receive rent assistance. However, rather than increasing the income of tenants, Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments are added in their entirety to the rent payable to the Housing Association, thus effectively capturing Commonwealth funding for the project which would not otherwise be available.

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1 For more detailed information, additional resources and analysis of the Carlton Redevelopment project see the VicHealth website for a full research report (http://www.vichealth. vic.gov.au/).

At the time of writing, more than half a decade after the commencement of the redevelopment, the Bonnyrigg project illustrates some of the structural issues inherent in this approach. Firstly, the social mix objective of the project relies on the idea that owner-occupiers, as mortgage holders, will be stable neighbours with a stake in the area and will underwrite an aspirational local culture based on employment. However, as the financial viability of the project relies on sales, buyers are not constrained to actually live on the estate and up to half of the private dwellings sold to date are not owner occupied but privately rented. Research is still being conducted into the impact of the mix strategy on outcomes for tenants, but this certainly calls into question some key features of the rationale deployed to justify the project. Far more significantly, sales have not met expectations and the private development company that was the lead player in the private consortium responsible for the project, has now declared insolvency (Rogers 2013). Given the chronic undersupply of well-located housing in Sydney, and the fact that new houses in Bonnyrigg were offered at prices well below similar property in surrounding areas, it is clear that the stigma associated with public housing remains a factor, even where it represents only 30 per cent of households.

Conclusions

In current debates public housing concentration is linked to reproduction of a culture of poverty whereby public housing tenants are depicted as rejecting employment for a life on the dole. As such public housing concentration is depicted as an obstacle to successful welfare reform. However the issues are more complex than this and as such appear unlikely to be resolved by simply drawing on public housing geography as a solution.

An alternative explanation for the concentration of unemployed tenants is that the move to narrower targeting, which began in the late 1990s has resulted in concentrations of households in public housing that have fewer opportunities in the labour market. Consequently it is not surprising that households in public rental compared to other housing tenures have low rates of economic participation. They may also lack skills or have lower levels of training and education or be unsuccessful in seeking employment due to lack of transport and stigma associated by some employers of living in public housing. In addition due to targeting to high need groups, public housing tenants are often unlikely to seek paid employment due to ill health, old age, disability, and carer responsibilities for children (Wood et al. 2009).

There is little question that current rent-setting formulas provide a disincentive for employment and a poverty trap. Tenants' rent increases or benefits such as income support reduce if they take up paid employment or increase their hours of employment or they may have to exit public housing. In many instances they only have access to low paid employment, which creates welfare or poverty traps whereby there may be no financial benefits from taking up paid employment. These outcomes are supported by research illustrating that recipients of housing assistance are more likely to be in unskilled or casual work with low rates of remuneration (Wood et al. 2009).

Owner-occupiers often perceive public housing households as bad neighbours and in mixed tenure communities often attribute problems, such as inappropriate social behaviour, as due to the presence of public housing in the local neighbourhood (Bretherton and Pleace 2011; Arthurson 2012b). The negative associations of public housing tenants are reinforced by insensitive portrayals on television and in print media. It is not uncommon for public housing estates to be portrayed as sites of crime and disorder, such as the characterisations of 'Sunnyvale Estate' as depicted in the SBS television program 'Housos' (Arthurson, Darcy, and Rogers 2014). Jacobs et al. (2011) identified that few positive stories about public housing are reported in the media, as negative stories are more likely to appeal to mass audiences. Thus in reality there is considerable pressure for journalists to deliver negative stories. Reports focusing on public housing estates typically document neighbour disputes drawing on sensationalist reporting, and utilising particular phrases such as 'neighbours from hell'. These media reports presenting a pejorative narrative of public housing estates are rarely challenged (Hastings 2004). The way housing policy issues are reported can be instrumental in setting political agendas to address the problems. Many of the narratives about socially disadvantaged groups in the media maintain that individuals are to a large degree responsible for their own disadvantage. The causes and effects of structural inequality are largely overlooked within mainstream media discourses, discounting structural explanations of disadvantage and compounding the negative effects of stigma.

Poverty deconcentration programs in the US and Australia are almost exclusively focussed on public housing neighbourhoods. Of course this is because government authorities 'own' the land and the dwellings and so they can intervene with relative ease. Many poorer households not living in public housing are driven by the market to concentrate in the least expensive parts of the city, the same market forces cause the value of certain areas to change and poor households to move on. Public housing concentration, however, is the product of policy rather than market forces, and so requires policy intervention in order to allow the realisation of changing urban land value. The theory of cultural reproduction of poverty through 'neighbourhood effects' provides the necessary social justification for returning publicly owned land to the market by claiming that relocation of tenants is in their own interest. So despite the equivocal evidence, housing managers and policy makers have enthusiastically adopted the theoretical notion of neighbourhood effects as a rationale for radical programs of dispersal of tenants and large-scale redevelopment of land.

As has been shown, public and social housing in Australia has historically been politically contested and has incorporated multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives. The simple aim of providing low income households with secure affordable housing outside the uncertainties of the private market has existed alongside an agenda which sought to use housing as a tool of social engineering designed to improve the situation of poor people by changing their behaviour. From the slum clearance and garden suburbs of the early 20th century, through the Radburn estates of the 1970s to contemporary deconcentration projects, housing location and design was expected to improve tenants social networks and behaviour, to make them healthier, more motivated or more responsible. The perception of public housing estates as a 'failure' does not arise from their failure to securely and affordably house people (which has more to do with decades of under investment) but the

failure to turn public tenants into responsible citizens who work and pay their own way rather than relying on taxpayer assistance.

Despite this somewhat dire analysis, secure affordable housing, even in the context of social housing concentrations, continues to be the most important factor underwriting the ability of poor households to participate in community life, including education and even employment. But in the early 21st century, public housing tenure has reached a stage of crisis. The gradual narrowing of targeting to only high need and complex tenants, reduced supply of public housing and insufficient funding in the past and leading up to now has meant the sector lacks a long term investment plan to enable public housing to grow and be better configured to meet current and future tenant needs. State Housing Authorities have not made the case for the funding and support needed to address the long-term viability, growth and provision of stronger connections with support services in homelessness education and health. Within the sector there is recognition that a new approach is needed but also pessimism about the future and fear that it is ill equipped to deal with the challenges of demographic change and demand for housing (Jacobs et al. 2013). Public housing does not have the political clout of other sectors such as health to fall back on. Given the complexity of these issues it seems incongruous if not counter-productive to focus on public housing concentration as the main problem.

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