

# Shifting Meanings in Low-Income Housing Co-operatives Through Participation in Built Form

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## Summary

The authors, both architects, describe their past (separate) work which has led them to a shared understanding of participationally designed housing environments. An examination of the current situation in New York City brings them to question the meaning of ownership in recently created housing co-operatives by low-income residents. In particular, it appears that residents frequently hold on to the meanings consistent with their old landlord-tenant relationship, despite the fact that, in a co-op, residents are actually owners. The fact of ownership, according to the literature on participation, should result in a direct shift in meaning for processes involving residents. The fact that this shift of meaning seems not to have occurred in many cases leads the authors to stress participatory change projects in the physical environment that are conceived and directed towards the purpose of shifting meaning.

## Résumé

Les auteurs, tous deux des architectes, décrivent d'abord comment leurs expériences passées individuelles les ont amenés à une perception commune du processus de planification de logements avec la participation des habitants. Un examen de la situation actuelle à New York City les conduit à mettre en question la signification de la condition de propriétaire dans des coopératives d'habitation récemment créées avec des habitants de condition modeste. Il apparaît souvent, en particulier, que les habitants demeurent fidèles à des significations en accord avec leur ancien statut de locataires, bien qu'ils soient devenus propriétaires dans le cadre des coopératives. Selon les travaux de recherche sur la participation, le fait d'être propriétaire devrait amener un changement de signification des processus impliquant les habitants. Le fait que ce changement de signification n'a, dans de nombreux cas, pas eu lieu amène les auteurs à insister sur des projets visant le changement physique des constructions avec la participation des habitants, projets qui doivent être élaborés et structurés de telle manière qu'ils encouragent une transformation de l'élément 'signification'.

## 1. Introduction

The names alone are evocative ... "Hell's Kitchen ... The South Bronx ... Harlem ... Bedford-Stuyvesant ...". For some New Yorkers who grew up in these places - and for some who still live there - these names recall a rich fabric of life and history all at

odds with their current infamy. It seems impossible that Harlem was once a cultural mecca and a place of renaissance, while today its imagery is one of vacant lots, burned-out buildings, and boarded-up windows. Yet, some parts of Harlem 60 years ago had destroyed buildings and some parts of Harlem today still serve as an African-American and Hispanic cultural mecca.

Some (if not most) planners seriously believed that the huge urban renewal highway and building projects of the 1950's and 60's could "revitalize" cities. Today it seems impossible to even imagine that wholesale destruction of block after block of occupied housing could lead to urban repair and tranquillity. How could they, we ask from our perspective today, fail to see the web of supportive relationships which sustained residents, adequately or not, but nevertheless sustained them?

### *1.1. Shifting meanings*

We want to describe some of our earlier work and current interests, centering again on a theme of shifting meanings; meanings of place and meanings for people; meanings which change or are changed. In the past we have learned about the complex relationships between meanings in the physical environment and meaning in community organizations. This will lead us back to New York City and our approach to low-income housing co-operatives.

D. Chapin worked for 15 years as part of the ARC Group in Cleveland, Ohio. The ARC Group immersed itself in various institutional settings and created physical changes in buildings, involving users directly in design, construction and evaluation.

By involving group home residents in changing their own home environment, the ARC Group saw a measurable change in residents' attitudes towards the neighbourhood in which they lived. While the residents, before that, had seen their neighbourhood as hostile and dangerous, after working together and developing what we called a sense of camaraderie, the meaning of their neighbourhood changed and they saw it as a more positive place to be experienced and explored. The relationships between changing the physical place and changes in people were complex, indirect, and not very predictable (Architecture Research Construction, Inc., 1985).

In another undertaking, the ARC Group employed residents of a long-term mental hospital ward who had been represented to us as having no building skills. Rather than accept this, we assumed that people had some skills and had the ability to learn new ones as they were needed. In fact, we saw real skill development. But, more important, we saw a developed sense of competence. Apparently the ability to make changes, while requiring particular skills, is also a matter of self-image.

In a document advocating new housing options for consumers of mental health services for the State of Ohio, we purposely talked about the *wishes* of consumers as well as their *needs*. "Needs" would be an acceptable term if "mental patient" were an acceptable term. But a "wish" is something that belongs to an empowered person, not to a labelled dependent. In this small way, we hoped to promote dissatisfaction with the limited range of housing options available to consumers.

A last example from the ARC Group's work involves questioning assumptions by proposing physical changes not consistent with those assumptions. In a group home for developmentally disabled adults we proposed locating a washing machine and dryer in the living room rather than out of the way, in the basement. Given the im-

portance of this equipment in the lives of the residents, it is perfectly reasonable to think about laundry equipment in this way.

E. Glunt's interests emerged while being director of a community design center in the Northwest Barrio of Denver, Colorado, and continued while working statewide in rural and urban settings on public service projects as a staff member of the former Center for Community Development and Design at the University of Colorado. His work in Colorado was heavily influenced by a participatory and consensus-oriented community development model usually associated with third world and rural American settings.

An important principle in the application of a community development process in a complex urban environment concerns starting small and building upon whatever individual and group skills exist in a community. For example, a community development effort in Denver began with helping a neighbourhood resident feel comfortable with expressing her opinions at neighbourhood meetings and then led to her organizing her block to work on planting curb strips (the area between a sidewalk and a street). This informal group organized into a block association and took on a project to design and build a local park. This led to more organization and the forming of coalitions with other neighbourhood groups. Eventually, this group was a founding member of a neighbourhood development corporation which continues to do housing construction in its neighbourhood.

To E. Glunt, an important part of trying to apply community development methods to urban settings involves a shift from confrontational to co-operative strategies in community organizing. In some community settings, the general problem at hand is not by any means only shifting to actual distribution of power within a group or between groups but, equally important, shifting the meanings held by individuals in the group and between groups. For example, in low-income housing co-operatives, residents needed to shift their meanings of home and control to stop seeing themselves as helpless and victimized. Shifting meaning led them to work hard towards making it a reality and they eventually were able to achieve legal status. This new mutually shared meaning about home as a place of collective action and control developed from an initial response to crises that were based on existing social relations and attachments.

In a co-operative organizing process, it is important for people to both understand the mutual human capacity for rational processes (such as formal decision making) as well as non-rational processes (such as developing a sense of community meaning between individuals and between groups). Conflict resolution in a setting where cooperation is a desired outcome is a process of "peeling back" the layers of meaning between conflicting positions until a common ground can be found. For instance, "helplessness" had to be peeled back to the shared meaning of "home".

From that starting point, an interactive participatory process can be undertaken (such as changing the physical environment), until such point that a new conflict arises. The resolution of the new conflict is once again a "peeling back" the layers of individual meaning to find a common ground which allows for a mutual sharing of meaning.

## 2. Housing in the United States and in New York City: The Context for our Current Interests

The United States Housing Act of 1949 proposed (but never delivered) a "right to decent and affordable housing for all Americans...". Despite the failure of this federal act to assure a right to housing, it is true that in the United States both real income for virtually all groups, as well as the availability of affordable, decent housing increased for nearly three decades after the Second World War. However, both these trends reversed, starting in the early 1970's. Since then, real income has decreased for middle and lower income groups. An increasing proportion of low-income households consist of persons of colour and are headed by women. Dependent children account for the greatest increase in people living below the "poverty line". At the same time, portions of the affordable housing stock have been destroyed, and the total number of available housing units in relation to the total population has decreased. Gentrification has also preempted affordable housing units and made them less available to low-income people. In other words, there are fewer and fewer housing options for those who are most in need.

In the United States, housing is a problem in all geographic areas and it is a problem for all but a few. This is true for urban, suburban, and rural people, despite the fact that the housing crisis most often imaged in the popular media is an urban housing crisis. The people who experience this problem most acutely are those who are homeless. There are homeless people visible in all geographic areas of the United States, and they also are urbanites, suburbanites, and rural inhabitants (Roth, 1985).

Even that publically-owned housing which does exist is under attack. Various proposals to "privatize" public housing have been made and, meanwhile, federal support for even minimal physical maintenance of existing public housing has been removed. Public housing is in a severe state of decay. The social and economic climate in the United States presently assures that any housing proposals not dependent on and supportive of the private sector will receive severe scrutiny with an assumption of questionable legitimacy.

The picture presented here might lead one to expect open mass conflict, demanding responsible social action; one would expect a state of emergency to be declared and an all-out effort to stop this misery to be made. In fact, the problem is not imaged this way at all. It is portrayed as the result of individual flaws instead of as a social failure. Neither homelessness nor the failure of the private sector to provide housing was an issue in the 1988 federal election.

### 2.1. *Housing in New York City*

There are an estimated 2'803'000 housing units in New York City<sup>1</sup>, with about one third occupied by their owners. The remaining two-thirds are rented. The landlord-tenant relationship is the prevailing model. In New York City especially, this is characteristically an antagonistic relationship, with symptoms of this antagonism including never-ending controversies over city programs of rent control and rent stabilization. New York City has 166'000 low-rent public housing units with a waiting list of 200'000. Here, the city itself is in the landlord role. This housing stock is also vulnerable to national trends towards removal of support for public ownership.

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All of our housing statistics for New York City are from Stegman, 1984.

There are an estimated 147'000 privately-owned co-operatives accounting for 18 percent of all owner-occupied housing units in New York City. We can be sure that very few of these are low-income co-ops. Until recently, co-ops were another option not available to low-income people and those organized by church groups in the 1970's may have been the first.

Between the late 1960's and the early 1980's, approximately one million residents left New York City. There are many reasons for this, some of which are related to the boom and bust cycle characteristic of capitalism, both within cities and between regions. But the story would be incomplete if we did not mention racism, anti-urban bias, and suburban development. Development of the suburbs depended on subsidies through federally insured loan programs and highway construction programs. That highways cut through and destroyed urban neighbourhoods is an indication of anti-urban bias and racism.

In some parts of New York, this population loss left the private real estate market so weak that owners preferred to abandon their buildings rather than attempt to sell them or continue to lose money operating them. We also note that many buildings had simply been allowed to decay by irresponsible landlords, so that buildings were more vulnerable to abandonment as other pressures rose. Further, extraordinarily high interest rates in the early 1970's made it profitable for owners to insure their buildings for higher than market value and then burn them down. Abandoned sections of Bedford-Stuyvesant remain today as testimonials to these acts. During this same period, the City of New York became the "owner of last resort" of 120'000 vacant and occupied buildings, estimated to contain over 300'000 housing units. The process of ownership transfer pivots on the failure by owners to pay taxes.

## *2.2. Low-Income Housing Co-operatives in New York City*

The City of New York has responded to its "owner of last resort" status by creating, within its bureaucratic structure, programs that offer tenants the opportunity to be involved in self-management with the intent of the building being eventually purchased by its residents as a low-income co-operative.

In addition to these programs created specifically to deal with the huge city-owned inventory of substandard housing, all co-ops are subject to rules imposed by governmental agencies. A co-operative organization is a legally defined organization with a state charter, and with a board of directors. There is a legal definition of the "shareholder". There are also restrictions placed on limited equity corporations which result in conditions being imposed on the future sale of co-ops.

Another organization, the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB), through a contract with New York City, provides extensive training on how to manage a building and meet legal requirements. It is important to be aware that once this training is complete the co-op is essentially on its own, to sink or to swim.

More than 700 low-income housing co-ops have been created in areas of New York such as Harlem, the South Bronx and Bedford Stuyvesant. Unfortunately, an alarming number of these newly created co-ops are reverting, once again, to city ownership.

It is important to grasp the instability of the situation in which members of a newly-formed co-op find themselves. In our discussion of the housing context in the



Fig. 1 Typical Limited-Equity Co-op in Upper Manhattan, New York City

Fig. 1 Coopérative d'habitation typique située dans l'Upper Manhattan, New York City

United States and in New York City, we tried to show how far outside of the legitimized norm a low-income co-op would fall. This involves a group of people who have spent much of their lives in powerless roles, suddenly staking a claim to a new form of ownership. Instead of seeing themselves as isolated individuals, they must suddenly participate in a joint venture of mutual support.

Finally, we note again that the city government views its role as having been completed once a building has become a co-op. At that moment, city agencies treat a low-income co-op as if it is the same as any other housing. Therefore, support from city agencies is removed at a most crucial moment in the history of a low-income co-op.

### **3. Problems with Low-Income Housing Co-operatives**

The obvious problem for low-income co-ops is poverty. Co-ops in well-to-do neighbourhoods are not failing. The most direct way of supporting low-income co-ops would be to attack poverty, directly.

#### *3.1. Organizational Problems*

Organizing and running a co-op requires skills which impoverished people have relatively few opportunities to develop. Residents generally, and men in particular, have less experience in structured organizations than people with higher incomes. On the other hand, it would be foolish to underestimate the skills required simply to survive with a low income, including the necessity of dealing with intransigent bureaucracies. Organizationally, low-income co-ops allow a low margin of error because of limited resources.

#### *3.2. UHAB Management Audit*

The "Management Audit" process was instituted in late 1987 by UHAB as a first step towards providing technical and organizational assistance for established (as opposed to forming) low-income housing co-operatives. HERG (*Housing Environment Research Group*) became involved with the process in 1988, when several UHAB staff members asked for a critical evaluation of the Audit process.

As a side note, we think that it is important that the process of UHAB asking HERG for assistance was developed over several years. It was the result of trust building and a desire to work towards mutual support between the two organizations. The current collaboration between UHAB and HERG has been trying to recognize the symbiotic need of academic research to be "legitimized" by relating to real world problems and the need for the work of those working on real world problems to be "legitimized" in the eyes of policy makers by academic research. The net result is that both organizations now often make funding proposals which include the other.

Our first contact with UHAB were made through the research of TIL buildings in the early 1980's by Leavitt and Saegert (1990). Our most recent collaboration began in 1987, when several HERG staff members met with UHAB staff to discuss the results of previous research efforts and to solicit comments, ideas and future directions. There was a degree of skepticism by some UHAB staff members about the usefulness of academic research on their day-to-day processes. A breakthrough of sorts came when HERG was asked to evaluate the Audit process. The original Audit focused most



Fig. 2 Typical Limited-Equity Co-op in Upper Manhattan, New York City

Fig. 2 Coopérative d'habitation typique située dans l'Upper Manhattan, New York City

clearly on legal issues, budgeting, and the formal organization. Drawing on current housing and community research literature, the Audit was modified to include building histories, the physical conditions of the buildings themselves, and a deeper view of co-op organization.

The Management Audit serves more than one purpose. On one hand, it results in a product. The Audit can be an analytic basis for helping co-op members produce a clear plan for improvements. On the other hand, the Audit is also important as a process, in that it involves co-op members directly in making visible their own building management and decision making style. A discussion, for instance, on how conflicts are handled within the organization usually raises conflicting points of view. The discussion then becomes both a means of producing information and an instance of conflict management in and of itself, providing opportunities to improve these skills.

As the management audit has evolved, two sets of values have been built in. These are the idea that particular attributes define, first a "competent" co-op and, second, a "good" co-op. In a competent co-op, there is more than just a "sense of community", but also an organization that operates effectively. Therefore, the management audit attempts to learn if members can collaborate effectively, achieve a working consensus on goals and priorities, agree on ways and means to implement goals, and proceed to take action.

Beyond competence, the Audit attempts to help the co-op define for itself whether it is good in terms of primary group relationships such as the degree of diversity, and the extent of tolerance of conflict; in organizational issues such as autonomy, viability, power distribution, participation, and the degree of commitment; and in exterior issues such as how the co-op fits into its neighbourhood and how it relates to other co-ops.

Each of the nine Audits completed so far has been different from others, but typically Audits have included five common features:

1. Three several-hour sessions with the co-op's board of directors, bringing together from 4 to 15 people in a focused group discussion and survey.
2. A professional inspection (with co-op shareholders accompanying) of the building's condition, basement to roof.
3. Interviews, face-to-face, of someone in each apartment, carried out by a term formed by HERG. The interview content has been developed with co-op residents and UHAB.
4. Individual and group interviews, used to help understand the quality of life of people in the building.
5. A historical assemblage recognizing that a building's present is only a moment in time, sometimes producing a rich and colourful picture of the building and neighbourhood.

We should note two points of concern expressed by co-op members participating in the Audit process. First, there is the possibility that the report will be critical and damage the co-op or its officers. An aspect of this potential damage is that we would reinforce the idea that these are people in need of help. Second, for those who do not

understand how often conflicts are a part of life in housing co-ops, it is easy to imagine that being seen as conflict free is tremendously important.

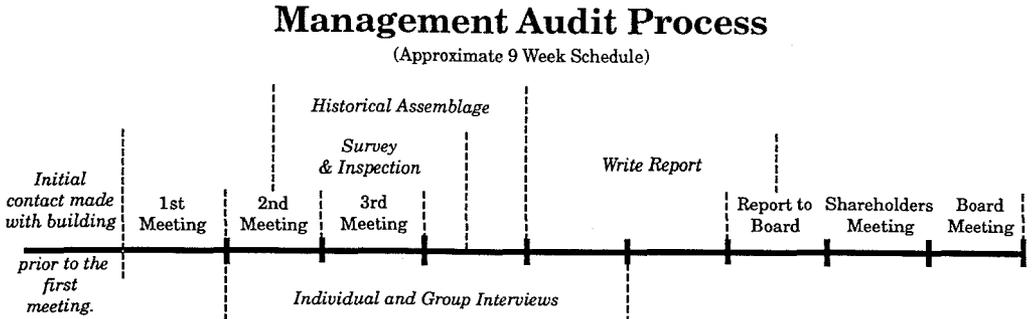


Fig. 3 Schema of Management Audit Process

Fig. 3 Schéma du Management Audit Process

While not the intended central product, the Management Audit process has found a significant problem in that shareholders do not usually understand the differences between co-operative relationships and tenant relationships. It is difficult to pin this down, especially since so many things in New York seem to work in an adversarial mode, with landlord-tenant conflict being a primary example. So far, we have found several pieces of evidence that suggest that the meaning of the role of shareholders has not been understood and is still seen as a tenant role. Of the buildings audited, most had tenant organizations to fight landlords (Leavitt & Seagert, 1990). References have been made to this often in statements such as: "We first organized a tenant organization". At shareholders meetings, we have often observed what is evidently an adversarial relationship. Board members say that they are beleaguered, just as would be a landlord. Based on observed discussions, it is apparently true that problems within buildings are looked at by shareholders as problems of the board, rather than problems for everyone. Finally, in some buildings, a lack of involvement among residents leads to leadership by a clique.

While it is early to be certain, we think that this evidence, along with the context of housing that we have described, calls for a shift in meaning. The power relationship between shareholders and co-operative officers is different from the power

relationship of tenants and landlords. *Apparently, the meaning of this difference has not come alive for co-op members.*

### 3.3. *Problems of Physical Environments*

The buildings made available in these programs are some of the worst housing stock in New York. There are problems of structural decay, energy inefficiency, and inoperable mechanical systems. These buildings are dilapidated in every aspect.

The geometry of space in old buildings exacerbates problems of contemporary living, regardless of whether the building is a co-op or not. Conceptions about the safety of "public" spaces - hallways, multiple building entrances - have changed and can no longer be based on assumptions that someone is always at home, overseeing. This shift in meaning has occurred because of drug use, crime and poverty itself.

There is usually very little storage space within apartments. Basement storage spaces were once popular, but they are impossible to make secure. A common concern is that there is no place for kids to play inside or outside that can be seen by adults, other than one who has nothing to do other than watch over children.

"Co-operative" implies a need for places to hold meetings of small and large groups and of places to carry through the co-op's business. But, how can these spaces be made secure and safe? Where should they be located? Households change in size. What alternatives are there to accommodate shareholders' changing space needs when the building size does not change?

## 4. **Shifts in Meaning Through Changing the Physical Environment**

There are several areas beside that of shareholder-officer relationships where a shift in meaning may be called for. How should the meaning of "home " change in a co-op? What differences in meaning are implied in the relationship between the individual, the group, and neighbours? Here we see similarities between co-ops and some of our earlier experiences, which we have described. This suggests some changes in new co-op ventures through intentionally changing the physical environment. This is possible even now, because money is available in small grants and loans provided through existing city programs.

We want to propose this open process because it is a way of building and maintaining group identity, empowerment and sense of ownership; because skills emerge, unacknowledged talents are recognized, and mutual respect is enhanced; and finally, we think that organizing around physical changes is yet another way of helping people develop positive co-operative relationships with each other in a building, avoiding the adversarial landlord-tenant relationship. In the early history of co-ops, residents often involve themselves in minimal physical changes because they are necessary for survival. Later they recall the feeling of being a founder or a pioneer and remember the need for mutual support. But this process has not sustained itself. Part of what we need to know is why and what is needed to make it happen.

Earlier on we emphasized the problems in the condition and the spatial geometry of the available buildings. We mentioned the shift in meaning of public areas in housing, such as hallways and multiple entrances, so that what was once seen as shared, communal space is now seen as unsafe and threatening. Reshaping this spatial

geometry is certainly one means of shifting its meaning back to communal space and, in this sense, each of these problems is also an opportunity.

We also recognize that these same buildings represent opportunities which are simply not present in housing designed more recently, generally, and not available in housing designed specifically for low-income people. These opportunities make it all the more positive to think of instituting a process of ongoing physical change. An example unique to older buildings is the opportunity to restore the original, intricate detailing, both inside and out. We mention this because it is easy to assume that this sort of resurrection would have no meaning for low-income people, given the pressures they face in merely surviving. But in one of the co-ops surveyed, this care for the past is an important activity in the life of the inhabitants.

Another example of a unique opportunity results because the interior partition walls of older buildings are usually not structural. This means that it is possible - though difficult - to alter interior space to accommodate particular circumstances such as a very large household. This opportunity is not available in housing designed more recently to minimum standards, since this housing is usually tightly constrained by interior walls which act both as partitions and as building structure.

We want to emphasize that the point of a process of participatory physical change is to achieve a shift in meaning overall in the life of co-op residents. Thus, any part of the process must also be concerned with its side-effects on, for instance, the organization itself. In our past work, we have often started with techniques of tiny comprehensible changes. An example is to paint large swatches of 3 or 4 paint colours as a way of involving all in making a decision about what the final colour selection should be. This approach of starting small and building towards big requires more research, but our experience says that it achieves an important level of involvement and participation by people for whom it is a new experience.

This example of a small change such as selecting paint colours will serve as an appropriate ending to our discussion. It symbolizes a process of selection occurring in both the physical environment and in the organization; it both values the individual and it values the group. It is a small movement in the texture of life, but it is the place where meaning lies.

## 5. Conclusion

We have described in this paper some processes that we think are useful and positive in our work. However, there are also processes that we want to avoid. They are processes which exclude participation and co-operative involvement: conventional urban design processes; "mega-participatory" planning digesting a sampling of opinions; design guidelines (because they transmit ideas about built form but not about meaning); and direct translation (untouched by human hands) of environmental social science research into design.

We also see a number of unresolved issues looking at participatory options for shifting meanings in low-income housing co-operatives through participation in built form. How can all of these processes be informed without destroying participation? How can co-op residents be inspired towards new possibilities when people have every right to be content with just a "house"? How can ongoing participatory processes be paid for? And, finally, how can links be built between established co-ops and those newly forming that will be mutually beneficial?

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