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The real 'housos'

Reclaiming identity and place

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Introduction

Public – or, as we are now more likely to refer to it, social housing[1] – represents a very small and indeed falling proportion of Australia's housing stock, especially when compared to most European countries. From a peak of just under 6 per cent of dwellings nationally in the 1980s (10 per cent in South Australia), by 2006 social housing represented around 4 per cent of housing stock.[2] Government subsidies for low-income rental housing have been politically contested since the earliest federal government intervention following the Second World War, but at least until the early 1990s public housing provided affordable and secure housing for those households who could not afford to house themselves appropriately through owner occupation or private rental. Some 70 years beyond its inception and despite a similar situation of chronic undersupply of housing in major cities, and with the least affordable housing internationally, public housing is now perceived by many as a highly problematic form of tenure which exacerbates or even produces social problems rather than ameliorating them. As in the UK and USA, mass-produced estates containing concentrations of public housing are frequently characterised as incubators for crime and anti-social behaviour, residents' unemployment and poor educational outcomes. State-owned housing – not only the policy of providing assistance, but its actual physical form and location[3] – is now widely described as a 'failed experiment' and has

emerged as the target of a concerted campaign of reform and redevelopment.[4] A striking illustration of the public perception of public housing neighbourhoods in Australia can be seen in the popular television comedy *Housos*, which is discussed below.[5]

The roots of the social housing problem are described as both economic and cultural. Economic causes are understood to relate to work disincentives and poverty traps directly arising from the structure of housing assistance, while perceived cultural factors include the reproduction of poverty brought about by lack of sufficient role models of 'good citizens' and the predominance of inward-looking social networks amongst residents of discrete public housing neighbourhoods. These factors are reinforced by popular prejudice against, and stigmatisation of, public housing tenants.

In housing policy discourse, the urban form and geography of public housing, especially in large estates,[6] have thus come to be depicted as destroying its ability to assist tenants to improve their lives, while in the media public housing tenants are frequently portrayed as irresponsible and ungrateful receivers of public beneficence. However, historical analysis shows that key contributors to the problems experienced in public housing are not its design or specific geography but increasingly restricted eligibility associated with progressive reductions in funding over many years. Initially, public housing was targeted to assist low-income working families but gradually over time the demography of the tenant population has transformed through the increasing targeting of higher and more complex need groups such as ex-prisoners and people experiencing homelessness and substance abuse issues. As such, public housing is now a residualised tenure of last resort targeted at the most complex needs, so that low income alone does not guarantee access.

Nonetheless, 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.

Goffman's seminal work on stigma identified three categories of the phenomenon which were: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma (race, nation and religion). For Goffman, stigma arises through negative labelling and stereotyping of people that are depicted as possessing discrediting attributes, which leads to a 'spoiled identity'. Wacquant argues that a key omission in Goffman's thesis is a link to 'blemish of place' or a discredited neighbourhood reputation, which leads to what he terms

as 'territorial stigma'.[7] Territorial stigma can project a virtual social identity onto families and individuals living in particular neighbourhoods and thus deprive them of acceptance from others. Place and person become intertwined in negative representations although these may well conflict with lived experience. Consequently 'blemish of place' can add an additional layer of disadvantage to any existing stigma that is associated with poverty, ethnicity, disability or physical appearance. Community identity is thus constructed by outsiders to the territory, and stigma is associated with not only the neighbourhood but also the individuals who live there.

The consequences of experiencing 'territorial stigma' include: discrimination by employers and others on the basis of one's address or other spatial markers; impacts on health and well-being, and mental health in particular; differences in the nature and quality of local service provision; and threats to housing security associated with attempts to deconcentrate poor households, which may result in reductions in overall stock of social housing. Together these impacts become new factors regenerating stigma in a self-perpetuating cycle. In Australia, Warr draws particular attention to the role of television and other media whose 'negative … attention amplifies and cements the quotidian prejudices that are experienced by people living in "discredited" neighbourhoods',[8] and concludes that while global economic forces and government policy intervention are important mediators of territorial stigma, the 'unwarranted and unsympathetic attitudes and actions of outsiders … are key contributors to the difficulties of those living in stigmatised neighbourhoods'.[9]

The media is a key channel through which distinctions of class and territorial stigma are shaped, imposed and reproduced. Electronic media is easily accessible with 24-hour internet and television availability, so its realm is pervasive. In Australia and elsewhere Arthurson and others have shown that:

> The media has played an active role in supporting and embellishing pathological depictions of social housing estates as sites of disorder and crime, drawing on explanations that cite individual agency and behaviour as the problems.[10]

Stressed urban communities are frequently sought out by the media as settings for nightmarish portrayals of urban life that may serve or extend negative stereotypes. In the end it matters little if these localities in fact are, or are not, run down and dangerous places, and their populations

composed essentially of minorities and poor people, 'the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences'.[11]

Research from Australia and internationally also explores the disjuncture that often exists between media representations of estates and the lived experience of residents. Lapeyronnie, for instance, identified the tension between internal self-perceptions of the French *banlieue* experience and external images.[12] Residents of stigmatised places bemoan the fact that others and the media, in particular news and current affairs programmes, stigmatise their neighbourhoods and occupants, often without even having visited there or knowing the people. An alternative standpoint is that mainstream media needs to be recruited to challenge negative perceptions of estates, but in a time of sensationalist and xenophobic media discourse this seems unlikely to happen.[13]

Acceptance of the negative stereotype invalidates the legitimacy of any claims upon place making in urban areas by poor public tenants and, as a corollary, legitimises redevelopment through forced relocation and disposal of public assets through public–private partnerships. For affected tenants, 'voice' has usually taken the form of reactive consultation on details only after major decisions concerning redevelopment, relocation and population mix have been taken.[14] As suggested by Imbroscio, free residential choice 'often conceives the expansion of residential choice for the urban poor as involving merely the ability to exit their current neighbourhoods and enter others'.[15]

The 'social exclusion' of public tenants thus extends beyond the housing management arena to their exclusion from the research processes through which disadvantaged places have been defined as problems, and in which policy solutions are framed. Current urban studies debate offers limited engagement with micro-scale analyses of creative destruction cycles and consequences and particularly with the creative potential of local communities and public tenants themselves who are typically viewed as either passive beneficiaries or victims of redevelopment.

Situated knowledge and the production of culture

Bourdieu has shown how social order is inscribed through 'cultural products'.[16] These products include education, language and the media. Cultural products work through framing and reworking alliances over culture both symbolically and materially. This leads to an unconscious sense of acceptance of social differences and one's place in society both

in a social and geographical/spatial sense. In other words, through these cultural products meanings are attached to certain practices, places and events and these meanings are internalised even by those who themselves are being culturally defined.

Faced with threats of demolition and redevelopment of their dwellings, dispersal of tenants and communities,[17] and with persistent stigmatisation and demonisation in mainstream media,[18] some residents of public housing in Australia have used video and other creative media to create alternative cultural products.

Three examples are outlined below which emerged during a four-year project (funded by the Australian Research Council, St Vincent de Paul Society, UWS and Loyola University Chicago) entitled Residents' Voices: Advantage, Disadvantage, Community and Place. The aim of the project was to collaborate with residents to challenge conventional outsider approaches to understanding place and disadvantage by facilitating the emergence and validation of situated knowledge and 'insider' theorising about this relationship. Each is a response to stereotyping and stigma, and can be understood as a limited attempt to reclaim the identity of specific neighbourhoods or of public housing tenants collectively. Importantly, as will be shown, the residents involved in these projects do not set out primarily to change the views or actions of policy makers or other outsiders – although such an outcome might be welcomed. In each case, the primary audiences for their efforts were the participants themselves, their neighbours and other tenants.

The examples discussed below are, firstly, digital storytelling disseminated through a website; secondly, tenant-driven media analysis of the popular Australian television parody *Housos*; and, finally, a short dramatic film written and directed by tenants entitled *Into the Woods*. In each of these examples, public housing residents speak back to popular stereotypes, yet in each case their main purpose was not primarily to influence public perceptions or the policy agenda, but rather to reclaim and reinforce their own identity and connection to place.

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is a narrative-driven form of digital media production that allows people to share aspects of their life by making a short film, or audio or photographic essay. While digital storytelling is a relatively new visual methodology within academia, it has a much longer history in the media and the corporate spheres. With the addition of

increasingly affordable high-quality digital media tools – such as photography equipment, video cameras and voice recorders – digital storytelling is a performative practice that can be undertaken by almost anyone. As a practice, digital storytelling is very diverse and might produce short radio documentaries, photographic essays, participant-directed autobiographical films or stop-animation stories.

For the Residents' Voices Project we commissioned Information and Cultural Exchange,[19] a community arts organisation, to run our digital storytelling workshop as a capacity-building process for the university researchers and tenant collaborators. Lundby argues that increasing access to the Internet, low-cost or free software and the rise of social media rise have allowed some marginalised groups to redeploy 'the age-old practices of storytelling' to self-represent their own social experience.[20] Therefore, we wanted the residents not only to create a digital story through the workshops but, more importantly, to acquire the skills and knowledge to create and teach others how to create additional digital stories in the future. This workshop involved five residents and three university researchers. We conducted two technical sessions in a studio space and four content development sessions in a computer room at the local library near the residents' homes. In the first two sessions, the digital storytelling facilitators conducted classes on 'talking about personal stories', 'storyboarding for narrative development', 'using digital recording equipment' and 'using digital editing software'. In the four content development sessions, the residents drafted a narrative and recorded it on a voice recorder. They also collected a suite of photographs to match their verbal narrative. With help from the digital storytelling facilitators, the residents produced their digital story by building a photographic essay over the top of their oral narrative using movie-editing software. The stories covered topics including living in social housing with a mental illness, criminal activity and violence, interactions with law enforcement agencies, experiencing and addressing both personal and geographical stigma, and living in social housing with family members with complex needs.

Guillemin and Drew describe the academic digital storytelling process as follows: 'participants are asked by the researcher to produce photographs, video, drawings and other types of visual images as research data'.[21] However, we set out to challenge the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In our first digital storytelling project, we found that the production and consumption of the digital cultural products was more dynamic and contested than Guillemin and Drew suggest. Participant-generated visual methodologies are not bound

by the constraints of positivist empirical research frameworks, which define clear roles for the researcher and the researched. Indeed, one of the (student) researchers from the Residents' Voices team participating in this workshop was at the time a social housing tenant living in the neighbourhood alongside the other participants. Thus our digital storytelling project involved multiple stakeholders with complex identities that very clearly called into question the researcher/researched dichotomy. At the request of residents, in our project we exposed the 'researchers' to the same digital storytelling process as the residents, and the 'researchers' created digital stories alongside the residents about their experiences with social housing. Our project became a collective process of knowledge creation whereby all the participants became autobiographical researchers.[22]

Much of the literature on digital storytelling is focused on the way the participants have sought to deploy their stories to *talk back to*, or to *talk up to*, audiences of power. Others show how the storytellers have used their narratives to pursue 'transformations' of the social, cultural or political 'context in which it operates'. The case studies presented in this chapter outline a different suite of audience target groups and more nuanced forms of political action. They show that the storytellers have complex motivations for using digital storytelling and when freed from the constraints of external mediators, including researchers, the stories that they choose to tell can challenge our assumptions about their political motives.

In many cases, the people making digital stories do so with the aim of sharing their story with a particular audience. In the Residents' Voices digital storytelling project participants were offered the chance to share their stories with other residents, in locations around Australia and in the USA through publication on a website. The communicative aim was focused on horizontal connections between tenants rather than, at this stage of the project, of speaking directly to the powerful. However, participants did not all share the same understanding of the purpose or impact of their products.

Anita chose to tell a very shocking story about being consistently harassed and frightened by a regular visitor to her housing block, leading to her applying for an ultimately unsuccessful court order and eventually for a transfer to another location.[23] She did not appear in the video, and the images which she chose are not dissimilar to many tabloid images of public housing. However, at the public launch of the video stories Anita recounted the way in which telling the story had reinforced her belief in her own strengths and ability to deal with what life throws at her.

Lachlan was very enthusiastic about the project and produced a digital story but didn't want anyone to see the film, which was never released on the website, while Linda was happy to tell her story of moving out of the home she had lived in happily for decades as a sound recording, but provided no pictures. Peter's story was explicitly political and directly criticised the common stereotypes of public housing. He wanted policy-makers to see it and hear the story.

Housos

Housos is a satirical parody about the daily life of social housing tenants in the fictitious 'Sunnyvale' social housing estate which appeared on Australian free-to-air television from 2011, and has since produced a second series, a live stage production and a feature film. It is a highly embellished representation of Australian social housing estates where characters act outside of the law and common norms of society. The depictions of the social housing tenants draw on overdrawn but common caricatures and stereotypes – with characters such as Dazza, Shazza and Franky, portrayed as feckless individuals who shun work, survive on welfare benefits, indulge in substance abuse, routinely commit crimes and cause generalised disorder, along with highly dysfunctional families and relationships. Each episode is slapstick in tone and addresses a different theme. These include the housos' attempts to defraud the welfare system through feigning injuries that might qualify them for disability pensions, and drug-dealing activities involving transporting illegal steroids to Asia. (This story contains references to a real high-profile case which are unmistakeable to Australian audiences.) The final episode for the first series concerns plans for redeveloping Sunnyvale estate whereby the social housing tenants, facing relocation to other neighbourhoods, organise various forms of resistance.

Recent research on cultural representations of class draws on cultural capital[24] to identify the dominant contemporary depictions of the working class in the media as based on ridicule, disgust[25] and mockery,[26] claiming that disgust is winning out.[27] These representations of the working class are used as part of the processes of maintaining middle-class distinction, authority and security.[28]

Promotional materials provided by the producers of *Housos* include a satirical 'dictionary definition' of a houso that points towards

similar class distinctions and derogatory representations of social housing tenants.

> *houso* [how-zō], Informal: Often Disparaging.
>   noun: 1. an uneducated person who lives in social housing.
> 2. a bigot or reactionary, especially from the urban working class.
> Adjective: 3. Also, Housoish, narrow, prejudiced, or reactionary: a
> Houso attitude.

The term 'houso' has long been in common use amongst Australian social housing tenants, signifying identification with a common community experience. While it doubtless has wider currency and forms part of stigmatising language used by non-housos, in the above 'definition' it appears unequivocally pejorative, albeit used satirically. In the Australian context, the use of this term as the title of the programme immediately identifies a subject associated with very specific and well-defined urban spatial localities, evoking well-rehearsed and exaggerated stereotypes and popular perceptions concerning a jobless underclass.

As the programme commenced, a group of social housing tenants approached the Residents' Voices team to collaborate on a research project focused on perceptions of, and reactions to, the programme. Over the nine-week first season of the show participants watched the current episode and responded to key research themes and questions in a creative medium of their choice, such as mobile phone video diary recordings.

The project was designed to create opportunities for social housing residents ('real housos') to develop and express their own knowledge and understanding of the links between place and disadvantage as represented in *Housos*. A screening of the first episode of *Housos* was organised at the community centre in an inner-city social housing estate for an audience consisting of social housing tenants and community workers from across the city. The screening was followed by a panel discussion and question and answer (Q&A) session with audience members and a panel of 'experts' consisting of social housing tenants. The focus was on generating 'community knowledge' through collaboration, discussion and reflection of the television programme. Audience responses to the programme varied on a continuum, with some 'enjoying the show' and others expressing the viewpoint that the stereotypes drawn on in the programme would 'reinforce the stigma attached to social housing'.

In the course of this discussion tenants expressed interest in understanding how different people extrapolate meaning from a programme such as *Housos*. A second stage of the project thus focused on how tenant

and non-tenant viewers interpreted *Housos*, and how their understandings related to the tenants' lived experience.

Participants watched each week's episode in their own time and were asked to respond to the research questions by keeping an informal audio, video or written diary. The videos also captured participants' physical responses and other audio or visual clues – such as facial expressions – when they were discussing an episode of *Housos*. A final focus group consisting of the two tenant–researchers, a tenant community worker and tenant participant from the study reviewed and interpreted the study data. These data included the tenant and non-tenant audio, video and email diaries and a video recording of the initial expert panel discussion and the Q&A session.[29]

All of the participant groups used the show as a reference point to discuss real political and social issues around territorial stigmatisation and media representations of class based on their own experiences. They moved between discussing the imaginary characters and events in *Housos* to real-life social housing communities and policies.

> People do assume, simply because I'm on a pension and I live in social housing; I'm a drug addict, I'm a dole bludger, and I'm just the worst that can be. And this [*Housos*], I think, gives them the right to say they're right, and I'm no good because of where I live and what income I have [in the 'real world']. (Discussant).
>
> I used to be very shy about saying I live in Redfern and I'm not any more. I'm not, because I'm looking at it as a challenge to these other people. (Tenant F2)
>
> …why I got involved in this – was to challenge those public stereotypes. For a lot of reasons, but one is that it's like a chain around people's lives that pulls them back, because you've got all this public stigma that you're battling against when you step outside your designated zone. So that's one part of what this is about. So in this programme that's put on TV, it just heightened all of those public images…(Tenant F1)

However, *Housos* is clearly fictional, and police and housing managers are targeted by its satire along with tenants. Thus, we were open to the possibility that such a satirical and lampooning representation might have the effect of highlighting the processes of stereotyping and stigma themselves, and thus produce a more reflexive, even self-critical, response in the audience. We also sought to better understand the meaning that residents attached to media stereotypes of themselves and

their stigmatised neighbourhoods. The deliberately highly exaggerated characters and scenarios in *Housos* provided an excellent vehicle for resident researchers on the team to explore their own reactions to being represented in this way. Perhaps one of the most telling contributions to the tenant discussion of *Housos* came in response to a call from one participant for the producers to show more respect for the situation of tenants and to involve and consult them, from a tenant leader who said:

> Yes, and we could have given them so much better material than that.

Lost in the woods

The third example of resident cultural production has its roots in the earlier digital storytelling project, but the transfer of knowledge in this case was by no means direct. Rather, this project provides new insights about the emancipatory power of participant-driven visual methodologies, especially when these practices are freed from the disciplinary constraints of academia and the discursive constrains of talking back to the powerful with policy discourse.

The Residents' Voices team asked Information and Cultural Exchange to run the workshop as a digital storytelling capacity-building project for the academic and resident researchers. Throughout the workshop the university researchers took detailed notes about the structure and content of the workshop. The university researchers wrote this information up in easy-to-read fact sheets and placed these on the Residents' Voices website, largely as a resource for the residents who were completing the workshop. The assumption of the Residents' Voices team, at this point, was that the residents could come back to and use these resources in the future if they decided to create further stories or to train other residents in digital storytelling techniques. However, the residents of one particular street in the Villawood East estate, 25 kilometres west of central Sydney, took up these fact sheets in a different way.

After watching the Residents' Voices digital stories and reading the fact sheets, residents and community workers from the Woodville Community Centre contacted Information and Cultural Exchange to run a similar project in Villawood. Woodville Community Services funded the project. In this project residents took a leading role in all aspects of the production process, and, importantly, this included deciding to produce a film in an entirely different genre.

Information and Cultural Exchange employed film director Vanna Seang[30] and creative producer and dramaturg Nicholas Lathouris to work with the residents through the digital storytelling process. The residents worked with these professionals to brainstorm their individual and collective stories, and workshopped and improvised the script. They completed training in locational filming, film directing and film production and acting. Then they directed, shot and produced three films, which they released under the collective titled *Lost in the Woods*. The centrepiece is a naturalistic fictional drama set in the Villawood estate. The films were showcased as part of 2014 Indi Gems emerging filmmaker festival held in Western Sydney.[31]

The fictional film covers topics that clearly reflect the trope of discourses about public housing, such as domestic violence, community violence and drug dealing. However, the film moves well beyond the commonly deployed narratives about social housing to present lived experiences in a new light. The public tenant filmmakers also address issues of asylum-seeker settlement and detention in Western Sydney, which are largely absent from mainstream media. They challenge the boundary between fiction and experience, with one of the filmmaker residents stating in the film *The Making of 'Lost in the Woods'*, 'Some people could look at it as fiction, but for some people it could touch home'.[32]

Conclusion

Sociologists have been analysing and exposing the role that the media has played in shaping and reproducing territorialised notions of class and disadvantage for well over a decade. It is clear 'the media' is a key technology through which embellished depictions of class and disadvantage are mediated. These familiar narratives often focus on both interpersonal and neighbourhood-level disorder and crime.

The three resident-led media projects described above did not set out to provide new answers to the questions that might be raised in consultation exercises by housing managers or policy makers, but rather to facilitate the framing of new questions based on the powerful collaboration of local residents in the project design. The cultural analysis and cultural products produced by residents in these projects reconceptualised the media methods and tools that they could access and use to *talk back* to housing managers or policy makers, and indeed more importantly, to *talk back* to other housing research methodologies and knowledge systems. Central to this approach to knowledge creation

is the reconceptualisation of the social actors who design and participate in these media projects. The media products that are produced by the resident groups have the power to directly challenge conventional approaches to understanding place stigma and disadvantage.

On a number of occasions, during these three projects, participants made clear that they needed to talk to other tenants first, and did not feel comfortable or free to discuss their experiences or ideas with housing managers or researchers – especially while redevelopment and relocation was proceeding. A central concern is that tenants in areas targeted for redevelopment have severely limited choice, or voice, in key debates and decisions affecting their living environments, and, furthermore, that conventional policy-driven research on neighbourhood social conditions has effectively devalued the situated knowledge of public housing tenants, compounding their relative powerlessness. These projects aimed to create a space where tenants are able to express, exchange and theorise about the impact of the places they live on their lives, to validate their own knowledge, and to use it in ways which best suit their interests.

As Wacquant shows, the 'social exclusion' of public tenants extends well beyond the individual tenant and the housing management arena.[33] Residents have long been excluded from the research processes that define the 'problems' with disadvantaged people and places. They have been excluded from producing counter-narratives about these people and places, and they are excluded from the policy discussions about how solutions should be framed and implemented.