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The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing—Chicago, Illinois

Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall



The first time Hallie Amey learned that her home, and almost half of the housing project where it was located, was to be demolished to provide space for a new baseball stadium parking lot was when she read about it in the *Chicago Tribune*. Not surprisingly, she and many of her fellow residents were devastated. Less expected was their willingness to fight back.

This winner of a 2005 EDRA/*Places* Research Award

tells the story of a successful struggle by a seemingly disenfranchised group of public-housing residents to resist the combined forces of government and business. In doing so, it covers almost four decades of the history of public housing and one decade of the direct involvement by the authors, Roberta Feldman and Susan Stall.

The women residents of the 42-unit Wentworth Gardens on Chicago's South Side never expected to

Dignity of Resistance—Jury Comments

Brager: This seemed like a very strong project on a lot of different levels. It was a really impressive longitudinal study. They looked at people's experiences. They looked at people's proactive response. It was about physical space. It was about policy. I was quite impressed with it.

Vale: Fifteen years of work. This is, as far as I'm

concerned, as good as the work anybody is doing on public housing communities.

Harris: In my top-ten list of why it was good to come here, this is one of them. I didn't know about this book.

Cranz: The title is interesting—*The Dignity of Resistance*. In the end, they don't defend resistance as the way to

solve the public housing problem. They acknowledge that it isn't. But there is dignity for these people, these women, who have pulled it off in this context.

Brager: How do we think people can learn from this? How can the lessons either inform people's design of spaces or the management of the spaces, the way people

become activists in a decades-long struggle for adequate housing and civil rights. What initially motivated them was concern for the place they called home and for the impact of a new stadium on their neighborhood. Nevertheless, their transformation in the face of the concerted effort to remove them coincided with large and visible changes in the politics of the city and the country.

In tracing this story, the awards jury noted, the work provides a truly impressive longitudinal study that dispels many of the stereotypes of public housing residents. They noted how the personal involvement of Feldman and Stall also serves as a model for the engagement of university researchers in assisting disadvantaged communities.

A Place of Hope and Struggle

When it was built in 1947, low-rise Wentworth Gardens was one of the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA) first projects. During the early 1900s, the area in which it was built had been populated by European immigrants. But by mid-century it had come to be dominated by African Americans, who had migrated north as cotton production waned, seeking work in Chicago's factories.

In a deeply segregated city, Wentworth's original purpose was to address a serious affordable-housing shortage among low- and middle-income African-American families, particularly ones headed by single parents. However, under the entrenched administration of Mayor Richard M. Daley such public projects declined dramatically in the years that followed as a result of fiscal mismanagement, poor maintenance, and social problems that were largely ignored by local and state agencies.

Faced with the effects of this decline and final notice that their homes would be razed for no fault of their own, Amey and other residents turned to community activist Sheila Radford Hill for assistance. It was Hill who then sought to involve university researchers Roberta Feldman and Susan Stall.

Initially, Stall served as an organizer, while Feldman, an

architect, conducted an evaluation of the grounds and buildings. Everyone involved knew that if they were successful and the buildings were not to be demolished, they would have to be better managed and maintained to be livable.

Ironically, it wasn't until the two had been part of this effort for almost three years that they decided to write about it. It was then they realized their roles were shifting, and that there was much to be gained from telling an important story they were watching unfold.

According to Stall, to understand women's struggle for resources and the rights to space (and place), it was important to convey a full sense of the tension they lived under—"that it wasn't just a nice sweet story." And yet, in the face of significant barriers, "they were able to sustain it, as they have their relationship with each other."

Everyday Lives

The book begins by seeking to understand the context within which Wentworth Gardens emerged. It then moves to an examination of the troubled history of the project and U.S. public housing programs in general, an investigation of the private sphere and resistance, a follow-up on resistance in the public realm, and a conclusion in which the personal histories collide with layers of theory and research.

Within this overall framework, much of the story emerges from the oral histories of Wentworth Gardens residents. Throughout, the subjects are allowed to speak for themselves. Feldman and Stall were ready allies in this project. Once a week for almost ten years, they collected information about individual residents as well as the working groups and associations they formed.

Feldman and Stall felt it would be impossible to understand why the women were engaged in the kinds of activities they were by looking only at the conditions in which

Opposite: Unlike later public housing projects, Wentworth Gardens was originally composed of townhouses (foreground) and three-story walkup apartments (rear left). Photo courtesy of Susan Stall.

use and occupy and try to take control of their spaces?

Cranz: I think it holds up an example for other groups, possibly, around the country. "Look, they did it, and someone wrote a book about it. And somebody thinks it's important." It gives people courage.

Brager: So, it's really for people, and maybe policy-

makers, rather than for designers?

Cranz: You need to listen to users—that is its message. Don't ignore these people. Don't have whitewash committees where you say you have user support and you don't. So there's a message for designers too.

Vale: This represents of a small trend in the literature

on public housing that is about trying to explain the workings of communities of very low-income people in a way that provides enough detail and nuance for policy-makers to really think through what is being replaced when you replace public housing. And to not assume that all that is there is pathology, but to

they lived. It was necessary to appreciate their backgrounds to understand the strengths each brought to their struggle. Thus tales of daily life—of work, school, church, raising children, marriages and divorces—are situated within the residents' larger, collective struggle against powerful outside authorities.

As scholars, however, Feldman and Stall also felt it important to contextualize such personal stories within an analysis of public housing, land use politics, urban development, and public policy in the U.S.—as well as attendant theories of race, gender, and spatial form.

To understand the many dimensions of the struggle, for example, they use bell hooks's notion of "homeplace," as the intersection of public and private spheres, to formalize observation of how the lives of African-American women are often tied together through their domestic struggles. They also reference works by French social philosopher Michel Foucault to support their understanding of responses by the community organizers to established power structures. The study thus transcends its historical moment to lend theoretical insight into the lives of seemingly ordinary women shaped by adversity.

In the conclusion, however, the authors resist any tendency to romanticize the findings. Though they do call the women of Wentworth Gardens "heroes," it is in the sense of everyday heroes who might have preferred less contentious and challenging lives. Being a hero is also not the answer.

Throughout this book, we have sought to recognize and explain the significant resistance for transforming the material conditions of their daily lives and, in the process, empowering themselves for future actions. Although they are impressive, Wentworth activists' efforts cannot provide a model for ensuring viable housing. Wentworth women activists are well aware of the limitations of their resistance efforts as they confront them daily. Their accomplishments alone cannot stem the ongoing increasing dilapidation

of their buildings and grounds; cuts in social, educational, and health services; the ever-present drug and gang activity; and increasing unemployment and poverty.

The Struggle Continues

Clearly, an ongoing lack of investment in public housing by federal agencies, as well as declining interest by local political administrations, continues to take a toll on communities such as Wentworth Gardens. Yet, if the deterioration at Wentworth Gardens is endemic to public housing throughout the country, this story of dignity and resistance has much to teach. In this sense, the book emphasizes how larger policy decisions have real impacts on individual lives.

"We shouldn't say the answers are in the women's struggles," Feldman believes. "Actually, the women's struggles articulate what the real problems are."

For this reason, Stall and Feldman hope politicians and housing bureaucrats will read their book and get a better idea of the needs of those whose lives they control. The common view is that public housing residents are helpless victims. Yet despite continued challenges, the book tells how the women took responsibility for change, never allowing themselves to be cast as victims.

For example, when the Chicago Housing Authority decided to close Wentworth Gardens' laundry room because of the demands of managing the facility, the women residents took on the running of an on-site laundromat themselves. Rather than see this vital service removed, they founded a board to manage it, and eventually recycled their profits into the community in a variety of ways—as program funds, scholarships, and a capital fund for new equipment for the teen center.

Today Wentworth Gardens is undergoing a major rehabilitation to its buildings and grounds. But this is not indicative of present trends in Chicago or across the U.S. "Less than 2% of the Americans live in government subsidized housing developments, while rates of these other (industrial-

recognize the extent of strength of relationships and networks that have sustained the functioning part of these communities that have been under assault from so many other sources.

Hardy: It is interesting that they start from the premise that the place is valuable. Many people regard the whole idea of that type of housing as a failure.

Here the people are saying, "No, this has value, this is ours. We want it to be what it was intended to be."

They reinvented it, but on its original terms—which is startling. By and large, these places were thought of as the stepping-stones to something else—not inherently valuable on their own terms.

Brager: They were also comparing it to what their

options were. Given their demographics, given their economic status, it had value.

Vale: It really is also a very interesting example of where researchers have been engaged on multiple levels for multiple years as only what we have come to call action research can permit. They have emerged with both the stories intact and a set of theoretical



ized) nations are at least 10 times higher,” the authors note.

Locally, after the failure of many of its highrise developments, including the infamous Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green, the Chicago Housing Authority has largely given up building new units. As existing projects are torn down, their solution has been to hand displaced residents Section 8 vouchers.

The CHA does not track the residents who leave their projects. Where others in need will find adequate housing is a story that remains to be told. Without new investment in public housing, the options may be street corners and freeway overpasses.

frameworks that don't seem forced onto the material. You have terms that would appear as theory, but also would not be offensive or distant to the residents themselves. To talk about “homeplace” or “resistance” or “dignity” is to talk in a language that is theorized but also respects the people they're working with.

Cranz: It's a close, chronological, detailed account

of what happened. It's theorized. There's relevant literature cited. It works at a populist level and at a theoretical level.

Vale: And the racial issues are front and center here. This is fundamentally about race and gender in a way that is much less apparent in earlier neighborhood studies—and I think less romanticized. It also comes

out at a time, particularly in Chicago, when people are suing to stop the city from tearing down these horrible places out of a well-grounded fear of displacement. The role of women of color in leadership positions in Chicago is really a kind of national model in some of these cases. And these are very actively contested sorts of places coast to coast right now during the Hope VI program.

From the Streets to the Theatre

As an epilogue, it is interesting to note that some of what was captured by this study is now being transformed for the stage by Chicago playwright David Barr. The play will chronicle the injustices inflicted on the women residents, and their relationship to each other and to those who were drawn to their struggle.

In Barr's play, Feldman and Stall appear as characters in an opening scene. The playwright believes that in addition to being drawn to the larger story of the residents, theatergoers will be intrigued by why these two researchers chose to invest so much of their time in the effort, particularly when it never received funding—which, he notes, seems unconventional for university-sponsored work.

Barr feels that the tale of Wentworth Gardens will resonate with a wide spectrum of theatre audiences, that they will see similarities all around the country where people have been displaced from their basic needs. He wants to express how in the U.S. people have endured, and still endure, the loss of their communities.

When asked about the play, Amey—who is thrilled, if not a bit amazed, at all the attention Wentworth continues to receive—said, “When you are working at this, you really don't see all of it. You are always trying to find a way to get it done. But God has been good and has opened many doors for us. And I tell you with His help, we have been able to overcome many things. We are very proud.”

— *Lisa S. Sullivan*

Note

The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing was published in 2004 by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.

Announcement board showing resident-organized youth activities. Photo courtesy of Susan Stall.