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# Three Public Neighborhoods



Location: Boston, Massachusetts

Author: Lawrence J. Vale

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West Broadway,  
after renovations

Photos: Lawrence J. Vale

When Lawrence J. Vale began exploring Boston's most troubled public housing neighborhoods fifteen years ago, planners and policymakers had already begun a long-term debate about turning such places around.

Yet little was known about how residents themselves assessed these communities. Did they regard these places as unlivable environments that required wholesale demolition or major reconfiguration? Given a choice, what did they think was worth saving or modifying?

Vale's findings, often surprising, remain timely as federal and local housing officials are engaged, through the HOPE VI program, in a wide-ranging reconsideration of the physical, social and management structure of public housing. He argues that public housing has not failed everywhere equally, and urges a careful examination of the specifics of each community—one that regards design as one of many factors that should be considered in reviving these places.

Vale, an Associate Professor in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, concentrated his inquiry on three developments—Commonwealth, West Broadway and Franklin Field—that the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) considered to be among its most troubled. All could be characterized as large developments that comprise their own neighborhoods, although their configurations differ and the communities surrounding them vary considerably.<sup>1</sup>

The developments, originally built for World War II veterans and their families, had come to house tenants with lower incomes and a greater need for support services. By the late 1970s, they were plagued by severely deteriorated structures, high crime rates and poor management (as were a number of other BHA properties). Vacancy rates as high as fifty percent made redevelopment more feasible, as tenants could be relocated on site while it took place.

From 1992 to 1994, Vale and his graduate student assistants cultivated relationships with tenant groups and leaders at each development. His independence from the BHA (funding came from foundations and MIT) and his research approach helped him gain the residents' confidence and candor. Vale's team worked with tenants to develop a 100-question survey, then trained and paid tenants to administer on-site interviews, which were conducted in English, Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup>

By the time interviewing began, improvements had been completed at all three developments.<sup>3</sup> The design approaches were derived from a combination of Oscar Newman's "defensible space" research, state standards and the desire to make the appearance of public housing more middle class and less institutional.<sup>4</sup>

### Findings

One of Vale's most striking findings was that the developments could be a source of empathy and community for residents, who often expressed a strong ambivalence about whether it would be better to remain in their neighborhoods or to leave. He described this type of place attachment by coining the term "empathological," which "marks the uneasy confluence of social center and economic wasteland."

The changes the residents sought most strongly, and which they ultimately appreciated most, involved private, interior spaces. The larger apartments, which accommodate family needs better (larger dining areas allow families to eat together at one sitting), were valued more highly than the public space and site design changes.

The interviews provide strong support for Newman's "defensible space" research, which has so influenced the design of new and redeveloped public housing. Residents spoke of feeling safer, and began leaving personal items such as lawn chairs in their front yards. Even after the



West Broadway, buildings not renovated in first phase of project



West Broadway, after renovations



Commonwealth, after renovation



renovations, security trumps other concerns at all three developments, suggesting the limits of a defensible space approach in affecting either the perception of crime or actual crime rates.

Vale suggests that an evaluation of the overall success of the redevelopment efforts might be better represented by seven measures that capture the complex interaction among physical and non-physical factors. Indeed, his research concluded that the most successful redevelopment took place at Commonwealth, which BHA had predicted was best suited for redevelopment. BHA's multi-factorial analysis of the potential for renovating its projects, which considered design as only one of eighteen factors, was perhaps on the right track in suggesting the limits of design alone in trans-

forming public housing. Since the interviews were conducted, Vale has maintained contact with tenants and management at the three projects, which provides a longer-term perspective to his findings. Vale argues that there is no one moment at which the success of a place can be assessed, and that longitudinal follow up, or what he calls "trans-occupancy evaluation," is necessary.

Vale's findings have already expanded the national discussion about the options for public housing, through publication in eight articles and book chapters since 1994. He is now completing two related books that will provide the citywide and local historical context for the three public neighborhoods.

—*Barbara Stabin Nesmith*

#### Notes

1. West Broadway, located in Irish Catholic South Boston, opened in 1949 with 972 units; Commonwealth, located in predominantly white Brighton, opened in 1951 with 648 units; Franklin Field, built in a predominantly Jewish part of Dorchester that quickly became African American, opened in 1954 with 504 units.
2. Interviews were conducted at the three developments being studied and two other BHA developments, Orchard Park and Bromley Heath, that had not undergone redevelopment.
3. Approximately three quarters of West Broadway's three-story buildings had been redeveloped between 1977 and 1991; an additional phase of redevelopment is now underway. Franklin Field's redevelopment was completed in ten years (1977–1987) and Commonwealth was entirely redeveloped in six years (1979–1985). Altogether, the BHA spent an average of \$400,000 per unit in current dollars.
4. Major changes included reconnecting dead-end streets with the street grid; decreasing the overall density; increasing apartment sizes; replacing some units with community facilities, such as a day care center; redesigning entryways to provide more individual or semi-private access to units; adding private outdoor space, such as back yards or porches, for some units; eliminating most common stairwells and public access to roofs from stairways; and adding design elements such as pitched roofs, color or variations in materials.

Commonwealth housing,  
site analysis  
Graphic: Stephan E.  
Tise, R.A; Mark Wilhelm

## Jury Comments

GRIFFITH: There's a strong correlation here between research and design. And then the loop back, the fact that they looked at the product of design that had been tied to research. And then validated and reinforced the research.

KLEIN: The research method involved tenants in shaping the questions that were asked in tenant interviews, and hiring, training and paying residents to do the interviews. The researchers looked at these places from inside the world of the people who lived there, in terms of how they see it.

GRIFFITH: The study closes the circle of a stream of thinking, this sort of Oscar Newmanesque thinking, becoming part of the culture of design. Someone went back to take a look, asking, "Let's see if this really works, or if we're just mouthing off." They found out that the things that were done are important and meaningful. However, it is an equally important finding that not all the things are important to the degree, or with the energy, that we think they might be.

KLEIN: Another interesting point was the trans-occupancy evaluation, in which the place was seen as mutable and changing, so that there was no one time at which the success could be assessed definitively. Also, this issue of what the researchers call "ambivalent place attachment," which was seeing how, from the residents' point of view, the housing project, which from the outside might seem like an undesirable environment, was a place. It was a practiced space.

OLIN: The news is a little surprising, because it says these places aren't as universally bleak and grim as we have been led to believe. I found the research disturbing because I had assumed that I knew what was wrong with those kinds of places, and what to do about them.

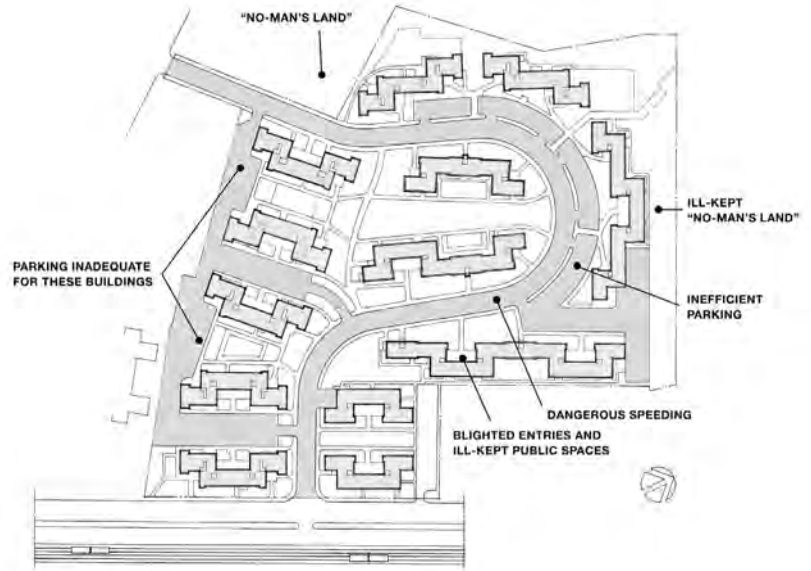
FRANCK: I really appreciate how thoroughly they investigated what was done, and how it was done, the process. This isn't just going in and seeing afterwards what the results were, it's also really documenting how those places were redesigned.

KLEIN: The research doesn't assume any kind of architectural determinism. The measures of success include, besides such things as recognized design quality, issues such as tenant organization capacity, progress on economic development.

GRIFFITH: It doesn't take *A Pattern Language* off the shelf.

OLIN: I worry that some of this work will be used as an excuse to hide behind existing conditions and not make changes, to a kind of relativism that makes people afraid to make decisions or judgements. The study does give us new information and sets us free in another way. So I guess we have to learn to live with it, this much more uncertainty.

FRANCK: I think the research presents the issues as being more complex than that. I don't think people can easily say, "Oh, there's no point." Some of the differences the study talks about vary from project to project, so in one place a change might make a difference and in another place it might not, but there are all kinds of possible explanations for that.



## Measures of Success in Public Housing Redevelopment

What measures might be used to evaluate the success of a public housing redevelopment? Vale notes that many different criteria have been used, and that "personal and professional identities often dictate the lens through which redevelopment is seen." He suggests that there are at least seven dimensions of success, all of which matter to the overall success of a project: "redevelopment efforts can fall short because of a failure in any one of these seven areas, and a failure in one area exacerbates problems in all others."

*Smooth implementation.* Adhering to budgets, timetables and performance standards for construction and relocation.

*Recognized design quality.* Awards from professional organizations, tenant recognition of physical improvements, and overall public opinion about the new development's look and feel.

*Improved tenant organization capacity.* Increased quantity and quality of tenant participation in tenant organizations, as well as recognition by tenants and management of the importance of their collective contribution to redevelopment and ongoing maintenance.

*Enhanced maintenance and management performance.* Improved performance on measures such as work-order turnaround times and overall cleanliness, as well as higher maintenance standards and better staffing.

*Improved security.* The reduction of crime through design changes, better maintenance, stricter management and increased policing.

*Progress on socioeconomic development.* Providing opportunities for residents to address the root causes of poverty, such as offering educational or employment opportunities on-site.

*Resident satisfaction.* Residents' overall evaluation of satisfaction with the development, expressed in terms such as desire to stay or desire to leave for a dissimilar type of housing.

## Source

Lawrence J. Vale, "Public Housing Redevelopment: Seven Kinds of Success," *Housing Policy Debate* 7:3 (Washington, D.C.: Fannie Mae Foundation, 1996).