We Live Here: Tenants and the Massachusetts Public Housing Reform Debate

By
Ruth Sappelt
B.A. English Literature, Peace and Conflict Studies
University of California, Berkeley, 2006

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning

at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Abstract

The embezzlement and corruption scandal surrounding the director of a local Massachusetts housing authority in late 2011 spurred a heated public debate about governance and efficiency in the state-funded public housing system. Governor Patrick, state agency heads, public and affordable housing professionals and experts and tenant advocates debated the degree to which the system should be centralized. Eventually, this debate was framed within the parameters of two opposing bills submitted to the state legislature. The Legislature's Committee on Housing took up the issue in June 2013 and will submit a third bill, widely considered to be the decisive measure, towards the end of the 2014 session. Tenant interests were largely absent in this debate. While existing regulations require housing authorities to encourage and fund local tenant organizations, many tenant representatives face retaliation from administrators. In this documentary film thesis, tenants whose organizing efforts have been suppressed discuss how they support one another, overcome stigma and advocate for the interests of their neighbors.

Thesis Supervisor: J. Phillip Thompson
Title: Associate Professor of City Planning
I began this research as a student midway through the Master in City Planning program at MIT, when I had no idea where it would lead. I had come back to school after several years of direct service work with homeless families. This work was urgent and critical, yet two aspects of it troubled me. On the one hand, despite our dedication, my colleagues and I weren't ending poverty. On the other, the programs our clients depended on were administered in a way that forced clients to relinquish some of the freedoms I find central to a meaningful life. Policies that limit food stamps spending, for example, dictate what a family can eat. And restrictions in public housing leases determine who can live together as a family and who can visit someone in their home. My clients didn't just give up their privacy when they applied for basic services, they gave up their autonomy to make decisions about how to manage and share their personal resources.

Like many before me, came back to school because I hoped to one day craft poverty policy that actually worked. But I was also pondering a question. I wondered if it was possible to create policies that provided the most destitute people with their basic needs and at the same time allowed them the freedom to live an actualized existence. In my application to the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP), I wrote:

One of the most fundamental realizations I have had in my work has been that happiness and personal fulfillment are not prescriptive. Not only is there no single solution to the circumstances surrounding poverty in a person's life, but top-down policies often fail to foster sustainable social change. I have learned about the importance of housing as a foundation for self-directed living, but have also witnessed the ways in which the autonomy of the poor and working class is compromised by public housing and other public systems. Abandoning the prescriptive, top-down solutions of the past leaves space for progressive, socially inclusive innovations ... based on client buy-in, wherein service recipients could enjoy more autonomy, a healthier, more independent sense of responsibility, and cultivate internal sources of motivation.

At the front lines of service delivery I had entertained a vague, abstract notion of high-ranking policymakers who determined how the resources that very low income people depend on should be administered. I thought these professionals lacked exposure to the client experience. Yet in my first year at DUSP, while interning at the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), I realized the causes of unjust social policies were more complicated than that. The policymakers at DHCD were smart, capable, and highly educated professionals, working quickly and diligently to craft the best housing and service delivery programs possible. In the project that I worked on, the problem was restrictions imposed on them: program mandates were being handed down by the Governor's office and the Legislature without the funding, tools or resources to properly implement them.

Massachusetts State-Funded Public Housing Reform

In the spring of 2013 I received a fellowship from the Harvard Kennedy School Rappaport Institute to spend the summer working on public policy in the Boston area. I went in search of a political setting for my summer fellowship, where I hoped to identify points of influence to improve poverty policy development. I selected a placement with the Joint
Subcommittee on Housing at the Massachusetts State Legislature. The Committee had just taken up investigation of two competing bills focused on reforms to the state-funded public housing system.

Committee staff were looking to understand the problems and interests at play in Massachusetts' public housing system, and get a sense of possible solutions. Reporting directly to its research director, I shadowed the Committee at public hearings and visits to housing authorities around the state. Additionally, I undertook one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders. I welcomed the opportunity to help research and craft a law with broad-reaching social effects at the state level, and the potential to set precedents for public housing reform nationally.

Summer 2013

My initial selection of interviewees was largely shaped by the recommendations of my supervisor, Kurt Stiegel. The interviews were for the benefit of the Committee's research and were intended to garner a better understanding of the issues at hand, various stakeholders' current practices around public housing administration, as well as their ideas for reform. I shared all of my findings with Mr. Stiegel.\(^1\) He also suggested many of the questions I asked in my interviews. These questions were shaped by the existing content of the debate.

The debate was focused on governance and efficiency within the system. These were important issues, and very real problems in some local housing authorities around the state. A struggle had emerged between the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), which was charged with oversight at the state level, and the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (Mass NAHRO), which represented the interests of the boards and executive directors at all of the housing authorities in Massachusetts. The Governor and DHCD saw the need for a centralization of administration and governance, commonly referred to in the debate as "regionalization." Mass NAHRO perceived a threat to the livelihoods of its members in this model and actively pursued solutions that would address issues of oversight and inefficiency while keeping hierarchies at the local level in place.

The subjects I interviewed during this time emphasized a range of issues, some of which had received more public attention than others. The most visible issues in the debate, which my interviews confirmed as priorities, were centered on the roles of DHCD, the local housing authority (LHA) boards and directors, and how to restructure the system towards greater efficiency and more effective oversight. I heard frequent mention of the need for performance standards, eliminating bureaucratic impediments to efficient operation, and the severe system-wide funding shortfall. From some quarters, there was a great deal of pushback to the Governor's "power grab," and an emphasis on the need for autonomy at the local level.

Some perspectives were more nuanced. One person I interviewed said that "you don't have to have local control to have a local voice." This person refuted the efficacy of a one-size-fits-all model and said that adjustments should be made across the state, based on the population of the area in question, the scale of local government, and whether the existing size

\(^1\) These interviews and findings are not specifically referenced here because they were conducted as confidential internal work for the benefit of the Committee. Neither I nor my interview subjects at the time knew that I would take pursue the topic for my Masters thesis.
and scale of the LHA make sense. What this person cautioned against unilaterally was the existence of multiple lateral governing boards.

I heard a great deal about how to structure a merger between LHAs, and whether such mergers should be mandatory or incentivized through state policy. I learned about the benefits of collaboration and heard arguments for and against the consortia model, wherein LHAs contract various functions out to other nearby LHAs. I learned about the federal Moving to Work program, which allows LHAs greater regulatory flexibility in order to pursue fiscal efficiencies, incentivize family self-sufficiency, and increase low-income family housing choices. And I learned about different ways to create a regional model that could be tailored to the needs of distinct localities.

In almost every interview, I heard about the Governor's Commission for Public Housing Sustainability and Reform ("the Commission.") Many participants complained that the Commission wasn't given enough time to come up with substantive findings. One interviewee told me that the Commission's agenda was prescribed and that it was instructed to produce recommendations, which it did. However, I was told, there was a lack of consensus on the Commission and so its report reflected the lowest common denominator, lacked the commitment of the Commission members, and was ultimately abandoned. Subsequent to the publication of the Commission report, the Governor's office issued a bill that proposed a highly centralized state-wide administration system. Mass NAHRO responded with a bill to protect directors, boards and operations. Shortly thereafter, at the same time that I was placed with the Committee on Housing, it scheduled a series of public hearings on the matter and began its tour of the state. The Committee planned to learn about the issues, interests and possible solutions before drafting its own bill.

The interviews I conducted as a summer fellow were rich. I had begun to formulate an understanding not just of the nuts and bolts of what was up for debate in public housing reform, but of the politics within the debate. I was witnessing and participating in the processes that I had pondered as a direct service provider. The issues in this case were complicated and contentious, and I still had many unanswered questions. In the fall of 2013 I decided to take the topic up for my thesis.

Fall 2013

Since my undergraduate studies, I have thought a great deal about the "user experience" in social policy and considered the often inefficient flow of information between policymakers and policy consumers. For years I had been considering how the ultimate consumer of a social safety net service could be engaged in its development. The public housing reform debate – the first of its kind in Massachusetts in decades – was a prime opportunity for me to learn about and possibly test these dynamics. I wanted to understand how the tenant perspective fit into the debate about public housing reform. With this goal in mind, in the fall of 2013 I undertook my own research to determine what an independent, de-politicized outreach process could do to inform the public housing reform debate in Massachusetts.

My thesis research asked: Would stakeholder engagement change outcomes of the policymaking process in the Massachusetts state legislature’s approach to public housing reform? I wanted to learn about the needs and desires of stakeholders and to understand to what degree their various interests were engaged in both the debate around public housing and the process for developing its solutions. I continued to interview stakeholders and to share my
findings with the Committee. At this point, both my questions and my choice of interviewees began to be shaped more by my own interests than to be dictated by the Committee.

Situating "We Live Here" within the Literature

As I prepared to continue my research, I read about participatory policymaking and governance and about participatory digital storytelling. I enrolled in a course on collaborative design at the MIT Media Lab, and I completed an independent film project documenting field work I had done abroad the previous summer. I learned about the power of direct, individual participation in all of these realms, to transform both the individual as well as the power structures and political systems that the individual interacts with. I came to this thesis wanting to understand how personal experience and insight could be leveraged to inform public issues through democratic systems, from the granular to the macro levels, and whether this could be a mutually beneficial process for both.

In the literature about digital storytelling I found ample evidence of its transformative potential. However, Marko also addresses its power to further vulnerate a disempowered person. Her work is explicitly sensitive to this, involving the storyteller in the editing process and allowing him or her to make the final determinations about publicity. Often, she finds, the telling of their story impacts the individual sufficiently and the storyteller feels no need to publicize it. Other times, publicizing stories of violence can incite further violence. In my research I encountered similar situations. While I undertook editing independently, I cleared the content with any subject who voiced hesitation, prior to including it. Ultimately, several subjects shared with me that telling their stories had a liberating and empowering effect. In particular the tenants I spoke with voiced an interest in continuing to stay in contact and to engage more with the issues brought up in our interviews. They hoped the issues that concerned them could be advanced through the film.

There is a plethora of literature about participatory methods and democracy. This literature is generally dedicated to understanding how to eliminate pervasive power imbalances and create structures within which individuals, groups and communities can identify and act on the public issues they find most pressing. Susskind, who I interviewed as a part of my film project, espouses the consensus building model for democratic engagement. He prescribes it as a supplement to the traditional legislative approach. He argues that public and political authorities can act more effectively within their prescribed roles if informed by the results of a consensus building process.

While my methods were not participatory, the content of my research was. I believe a consensus building process could have avoided a great deal of political turmoil around the public housing reform debate in Massachusetts, and I am certain it would have produced better results. However, whereas the consensus model is implemented on a case-by-case basis, my interviews with tenants and their advocates have left me envisioning permanent systems that take the model of democratic representation and justice down to a granular level. As was illustrated in this debate, without a robust, recognized and thorough system of representation,

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2 In addition to the cited references, I read numerous position papers, memos, letters and other documentation produced by public agencies and advocacy organizations, as well as all of the testimony submitted to the Committee.
backed by a neutral system that ensures accountability and enforcement, those who enjoy the highest degree of formalized power are likely to act with impunity.

**Accessing the Interviewee**

Although it was important to me to interview tenants, it was particularly difficult to gain access to them. I mentioned my interest in talking with tenants to many of my interviewees and invited them to share my contact information and literature about my project with any tenants who might be interested. And I began interviewing advocates and providers who worked with public housing tenants. This was where the substance of my interviews began to change.

The first of my pre-interviews with advocates was with Annette Duke of the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI.) She told me that a number of important concerns were missing from the two bills that had been proposed, including funding, resident services, and a cohesive vision for public housing. She suggested that a new way of approaching governance would involve a fundamental shift in how success was understood and measured. She called for recognition of not only how well LHAs comply with regulations around issues like eviction proceedings, but of how proactively and creatively they work to avoid eviction in the first place. She said that resident services need to be more extensive and more robust. She also called for a state-wide expansion of public housing. Ms. Duke emphasized that, although regulations enabling and protecting organized tenant participation in LHA decision-making processes have been in place for decades, tenants continue to be afraid to voice their input. She cautioned me that tenants would likely not be candid except in private, off the record conversations. While some tenant leaders do speak out, Ms. Duke said that all tenants in those housing authorities are at risk when they do. She said lawmakers should get out into the public housing developments and talk with the residents to understand their needs. Several other interviews I performed echoed Ms. Duke’s concerns.

**Using an Alternative Medium**

There were a number of reasons why I petitioned for permission to fulfil the Master in City Planning thesis requirement by making a documentary film in place of a written research paper. My research question was informed by the high value I place on stakeholder engagement and participatory practice. Especially for a project that examines stakeholder engagement in public decision-making processes, I wanted to produce a final product that was as accessible as possible to as many of those stakeholders as wished to use or consume it. If my findings could be used for the direct benefit of the communities I researched within, I wanted them to make that possible. I felt a film with a wide and interested audience would enable advancement of the issues the film’s subjects were most concerned with.

Additionally, I wanted to enable myself to effectively publicize findings that might be noteworthy within the professional public sector. The authenticity of characters on film would allow an audience of public policymakers to more deeply relate to the subjects. I thought that empathy might motivate policymakers to outreach to a broader set of stakeholders, and possibly to adopt more participatory policymaking practices. Because the audience can hear and see the interviewee, film enables a fuller representation of the subject and greater engagement in judging the subject’s motivations and character. A film would allow me to collect and synthesize the most salient and resonant findings visually and within a comprehensive narrative arc, providing a cogent and compelling argument in the event of significant findings.
McKee describes the effectiveness of fictional film stories to emotionally connect an audience to the film's subject and characters. He discusses the art of crafting a narrative arc that advances the content and significance of a story's theme along with the growth of its characters. I aimed to achieve something similar in a documentary format, but I was not prepared for the depth of this potential within the medium and methods of filmmaking. Not only did the medium enable an intimate communication of characters' emotions, but the medium itself in this case, enabled growth. I was able to use the power the camera bestowed on me as a starting point to challenge the imbalances in my and my subjects' roles within the moviemaking process. By inviting subjects to ask me questions, and even formally arranging for a subject in the movie to film and interview me, I started a conversation about power and expertise within the specifics of my project. This was transformational for both me as a subject and for the new interviewer. And, while the dynamic was not discussed explicitly within the movie, it introduced valuable content.

**Using a Qualitative Tool: The Interview**

**The Pre-Interview**

The qualitative interviews I performed were dynamic and open-ended. While my investigation was guided by a research question, shaped by a review of the literature, and structured by my own set of questions, the length and interactive nature of the interviews enabled rich, varied and surprising results. I approached my subjects with an interest in their expert opinions, not only their personal experience. Thus, I found them eager to share on both fronts. I crafted open ended questions, which allowed for a range of answers, but also asked follow-up questions and probed in areas of interest. One subject took the liberty of rejecting some questions and redirecting others. Thus, the questions served to introduce a topic, which subjects then reacted to at liberty. Because subjects helped define the conversation, I not only learned about my own points of interest, but discovered new issues and ideas. In this way, I learned more than just what I had set out in search of.

I began by interviewing the chairs of the Committee on the nature of their work and leadership. I asked how they knew when legislative reform was needed, what were the elements necessary for change and how the determined the best course of action on a broad range of issues. I wanted to know how they taught themselves what they needed to know in order to make decisions responsibly. But I also wanted to know what made them want to be legislators and how they interpreted and carried out their roles as representatives of constituencies. I learned that each of the Committee chairs not only backed himself with a staff he could rely on, but spent time in the community, meeting and hearing informally from his constituents, and actively seeking a range of expert information and advice.

Shortly after these two interviews, I finalized a set of questions for stakeholder interviews. Building off of what I had learned in my fellowship with the Committee, I developed several questions, which I honed in discussions with MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) Professor Ceasar McDowell and MIT Community Innovator's Lab (CoLab) Global Sustainability Partnerships Program Director Libby McDonald, each of whom have extensive professional experience with alternative qualitative methods. In order to access a range of opinions about the substance of the debate as well as the problems it sought to solve, I asked subjects for their thoughts on the proposed bills and what their hopes for reform had been at the outset of the debate. I was also interested in how the political impetus for change is
initiated, and I asked what the impact of the Chelsea Housing Authority scandal had been on the debate. In order to understand the legitimacy of stakeholder representation, I asked which stakeholders should be involved in the debate. Because I was curious how firsthand experience might shape professional decisions, I asked what the subject's own relationship to public housing was. Additionally, I wanted to remind both myself and my subjects of the ultimate reason for our discussion and see what a simple reflection on that would produce, so I asked what they perceived the purpose of public housing to be.

When I developed my thesis questions, I had already interviewed eight stakeholders. I now interviewed another fifteen stakeholders and experts. The bulk of these interviews occurred between October and December, 2013. However, one tenant contacted me in January and I interviewed her in February. Also, in April I reached out to two interviewees after determining that their expertise would be relevant as analysis and context in the film. I did not conduct pre-interviews with them.

I gained access to interviewees through several mechanisms. At first, all of the interviews I performed were as a representative of the Committee. Indeed, my affiliation with the Housing Committee was very helpful in this regard. The Committee was seen as neutral and also as powerful. Interviewees would often ask me for information about how the Committee planned to act, and whether it would issue a bill. I received suggestions for legislation and offers to pilot new administrative models. Most of the interviews lasted at least an hour, and subjects generally seemed eager to talk with me. I believe my affiliation with the Committee lent me status and legitimacy and made it easy for me to access almost anyone in relation to this issue.

Other times I relied on my role as a student, and I often also found the status of MIT to be on my side. Ms. Heyer of DHCD gave me well over two hours of her time, between our two interviews. An alumna of the MIT Master in City Planning program, she reflected on her career trajectory and we found common ground in our professional interests. During many interviews, after I had made a personal or professional connection with a subject, I was often given additional contacts. Professionals referred me to other professionals and experts in the fields of public and affordable housing, and tenants referred me to other tenants. The tenants I interviewed later reflected positively about the interviews. Ms. Jones-Jenkins and Ms. Stewart each volunteered to me that I had made their colleagues comfortable in our interviews and interactions, and that they enjoyed the experience and appreciated my outreach to them.

Spring 2014

The Filmed Interview

The core filmed interviews were selected after I had performed all of the pre-interviews. Whenever possible, I made an audio recording of the interview for subsequent review. In February I met with Libby McDonald, now a reader for my thesis, to discuss the story arc and my selection of interviewees. For each filmed interview, with the exception of my first interview with Ms. Stewart, I based my questions on the findings of our prior interview. I received feedback and suggestions for additional questions from Libby McDonald. I developed questions independently for the interviews with MIT Professors Lawrence Susskind and Lawrence Vale. Having taken a course with each professor, I grounded by inquiries in my knowledge of their research.
I filmed an interview with Tom Connelly, Executive Director of Mass NAHRO and Lizbeth Heyer, Associate Director of Public Housing and Rental Assistance at DHCD because they represented the dominant oppositional perspectives in the debate. I interviewed Senator James Eldridge, Co-Chair of the Joint Subcommittee on Housing. He represented the role of the Committee, which had taken the reigns in the public housing reform debate and would be drafting a third bill on the issue, effectively having the final word on the matter. All of these interviewees were prominent public figures in the debate.

I also planned to interview Annette Duke, whose ideas for reform were detailed and thoughtful, and were backed by years of direct experience both as a legal representative and as an organizer and educator of public housing tenants. I had attempted to schedule an interview with Gladys Vega, Executive Director of the Chelsea Collaborative, whose candid and compelling testimony I had heard at the public hearing in Boston, and which I include in the film. However, after a phone interview, Ms. Vega did not return multiple calls and emails requesting a filmed interview. Lastly, I would interview Susan Bonner. Ms. Bonner was the only public housing tenant I had spoken with by the end of the fall semester. An elderly woman, she had lived in public housing since the age of eight, had served on the Massachusetts Union of Public Housing Tenants (MUPHT) board for roughly 20 years, and was an elected commissioner on the board of her own LHA in Nahant. These individuals represented the range of the debate as I understood it: the prominent arguments by the state, by the LHAs, the public leadership of the Housing Committee, and the less prominent, though highly interested perspective of tenants, which would be represented by a tenant and an advocate to tenants.

As I proceeded, I added more interviews to the initial list. Ms. Bonner invited her colleague Lorelee Stewart, President of the Salem Housing Authority tenant organization to the interview I scheduled with her. I had not previously met Ms. Stewart and I surprised and compelled by her interview. She talked about the challenges of organizing and the violations that occurred at the LHA where she lived. We had very little time to talk that day, but I scheduled a longer interview with her afterwards, and spoke with her at her home. Her testimony was unlike any I had heard thus far. Ms. Stewart talked about the details of life at a housing authority under leadership she found repressive. She felt "abused" by the LHA and felt she had no recourse. My in-person interviews with Ms. Stewart prompted me to reflect on the phone interview I had had with Ms. Jones-Jenkins. I had struggled to extract a cohesive narrative from Ms. Jones-Jenkins' testimony, probably because our conversation was not directed by my questions. Unlike other interviewees, Ms. Jones-Jenkins did not wait for me to ask questions, but began talking before I had the chance to put any to her and continued recounting her experiences for well over an hour. She was referred to me by Jack Cooper, Executive Director of MUPHT. She had heard about my project from him and had also read the corresponding COUHES literature. She placed the initial call to me and likely came to the interview with a conceptualization of what she wanted to share with me. In many ways, this format was far more participatory than the one I had been undergoing. I scheduled a filmed interview with Ms. Jones-Jenkins.

Analysis, Story and Scriptwriting

Stories mix data and conclusions in a comprehensive, synthetic way. Story gives the audience a role in the analytic process, allowing the viewer to absorb and judge both the data and the conclusions -- not just analytically but intuitively. The viewer constantly asks how well
the story resonates with his or her own experience of the world. While scientific studies pose as irrefutable and are didactic, narrative invites the audience to engage critically and emotionally.

For me, film is not just the medium for my findings, but it is also the mechanism for my analysis. As I crafted my questions, sifted through my findings, and set aside many, many other stories that could have been pursued and weren't, my intuition, creativity, and personal and professional values were at least as engaged as my analytical, rational mind. Because clips from these interviews would function as parts of a mosaic to depict a cohesive story on film, my questions for each interviewee were designed to uncover the entire landscape of the story as they knew it. Rather than focusing on discreet aspects of public housing reform, I asked about everything from the scandal in Chelsea to regionalization models to the purpose of public housing, the subject's own relationship to public housing and his or her professional background. Despite the broad nature of the questions, I found subjects' responses to be disparate and specific: subjects brought their own analysis to the interviews. Naturally, I could not tell each of these stories, which simultaneously contradict and repeat each other.

Rather, the story I tell is my own. It begins by answering my research question, unveiling what had been obscured in the public debate around public housing reform: my analysis focuses on two tenant leaders who face impediments to organizing and participating in their housing authorities' administrative processes. It contextualizes these stories within the public housing reform debate, highlighting how disconnected tenant leadership is from it, despite the relevance of the one to the other. But the story is also about me. Filming, interviewing, writing and editing the movie, allowed me to challenge my complicity within this exclusive dynamic and test my ability to permeate it. And it begins to explore the alternatives. Ms. Stewart's reflects on what it feels like to be heard, and how the simple solicitation of her input changed her perception entirely of what she was capable of. Her experience confirms the value of deep, legitimate civic participation. It challenges public leaders to consider to what extent and through which mechanisms meaningful stakeholder engagement can take place.

My process was as subjective as the perspectives of each of my interviewees. But it was informed -- as I argue public policy should be -- by a range of viewpoints, values and interests. A lot of interesting, valuable information did not find its way into the movie because it was not essential to the story. My analysis of the findings shaped and evolved as I continued to collect data. In the in-person filmed interviews, I was aware of a social tension as I somewhat guiltily intruded on my interviewees' offices and homes, laden with video and lighting equipment. Setting up shots, I would move furniture and appliances and I was acutely aware of my subjects' vulnerability in the face of the camera. Often they seemed nervous, especially at the outset of an interview. Each time, I was surprised by the interviewee's willingness to engage in a filmed interview. Only Ms. Vega evaded my request.

I felt a sensitivity and respect for my relationship with each of the interviewees. I was grateful not just for their time but for their trust. I sent personal thank you cards to each interviewee, with the exception of Ms. Heyer, who I interviewed on her last day of employment at DHCD. I brought potted flowers to the tenants I interviewed, all of whom I visited in their homes. In particular with the tenants, I felt the need to reciprocate. Ms. Stewart and Ms. Jones-Jenkins expressed enthusiasm for the project. They told me they valued that I had sought out their input. My findings of the transformative experience of active engagement are explored further in the movie.
Especially following my interviews with tenants, I was keenly aware of what I perceived as an artificial power dynamic between us, aided by my camera and my purpose. As a student researcher and filmmaker at a high-ranking university, I had come to study these individuals. Yet they were already struggling to be heard within the power structures of their LHAs, which they perceived to be dictatorial. This additional dimension -- the relationship between me as the researcher and the tenants as the researched -- replicated a dynamic similar to the one I was studying. This was particularly troubling given that I claimed to be guided by the values of participatory practice. But it was also comfortable for me, and I was inclined to ignore it. One night, as I read Robert Weiss' *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, I had an idea. I was reading Weiss' discussion of the sociologist's role in a case study when I realized I needed not only to reflect on my own role in the interviews and incorporate this reflection into the film, but I needed to confront and challenge the power dynamic I had been sensing. I invited Ms. Stewart to come to my home and film an interview with me.

As she interviewed me, Ms. Stewart and I talked about my research, why I had pursued the topic, what I had found, and what I hoped the impact of my thesis would be. We also talked about why I had suggested that she and I switch roles and what the impact of it was on each of us. She reflected on how her contact with me had changed her perceptions about the possibilities for the scope of her own work as a tenant organizer.

**Limitations**

This research was overtly subjective. I do not claim to have proved anything or designed a new participatory system or research methodology. The context of my research was also very specific, even within the realm of public housing in the United States. Massachusetts' many small townships and relatively large supply of state-funded public housing each make it unique within the country. Lastly, I spoke with a very small number of people. Especially in the case of tenants, their individual experience and the circumstances in the housing authorities where they live are not necessarily representative of the experience of tenant leaders, even statewide.

Yet I believe that there is a universality to this story. Indeed, this is supported by the literature on both fictional and autobiographical storytelling, each of which emphasizes the cathartic effect of either telling or consuming a story. In this case, the topic of how public decisions are arrived at may be relevant to many contexts. And the personal experiences of power, justice, class, acceptance and transcendence are universal.

**Recommendations**

I learned many things while researching this film. But the most salient finding that is largely absent from the current public debate is that there are existing -- and long-standing -- regulations that enable and encourage tenant organizations at each LHA to participate in the governance of their LHA, and that these regulations are blatantly violated at a number of LHAs. Without a dedicated, neutral entity to enforce them, tenants have no recourse when the regulations are violated. Furthermore, tenants often suffer retaliation for organizing and attempting to exercise these rights. Again, they have no recourse to resolve the issue of retaliation.

Yet perhaps most importantly, I discovered that being heard -- being actively engaged and listened to -- is of significant value to tenant leaders in and of itself. Tenant organizations
not only benefit the organizers in this sense, but they enable organizers to represent the interests of an otherwise unrepresented but critically interested stakeholder group: all public housing tenants. Thus, the existing regulations enable what appears to be a very valuable right. And they leverage a huge cost-saving asset for the state, since tenants -- especially organized, politically involved tenants -- are arguably the most effective watchdog against the kind of crime and corruption that started the whole debate at the Chelsea Housing Authority. The regulations already exist. Ensuring LHA compliance with them should be a priority of reform.

An important aspect of enforcement is a mechanism for tenant organizations to seek recourse. Even if tenants organizations form and are recognized at the LHA level, they rely on LHA leadership to represent their concerns at the state level, where applicable. LHAs are represented powerfully at the state level, as evidenced by the influence wielded by Mass NAHRO in the public housing reform debate. Tenant interests should be similarly represented at the state level. MUPHT already embodies this role. Further investigation should be undertaken to determine what challenges the organization faces in leveraging influence commensurate with the level of interest it represents. The organization has only two staff people and yet it represents the largest stakeholder group. Is it in need of additional funding? If so, what is the logical source?

My research on public housing reform in Massachusetts is relevant beyond this specific subject area. While investigating the interests in Massachusetts public housing reform, I have found that stakeholder engagement is valuable in and of itself. I would caution against replicating the model used to engage tenants with LHAs in Massachusetts without critical review of the specific context in which it will be applied. However, the value of legitimate, sustained engagement of stakeholder interests is borne out not just in my research but in a large body of research on consensus-building and participatory practices. I believe these kinds of models are all the more critical for populations that are at the margins of public power processes. It is not enough to trust in the good will and due diligence of civic leaders. The question that remains for me is to what extent is it possible to formalize and institutionalize participatory policymaking, consensus-building and other inclusive democratic models in the public realm? Can these kinds of processes be formalized in such a way as to enable adaptation to the particularities and specific needs of discreet constituencies? The case of tenant engagement in local housing authorities in Massachusetts suggests that a permanent grassroots stakeholder engagement model may depend on a formalized and accessible neutral enforcement mechanism.
References


