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Social mixing through densification? The struggle over the Little Mountain public housing complex in Vancouver

Marit Rosol¹

¹Department of Human Geography, Goethe Universitaet Frankfurt/Main, Theodor-W.-Adorno-Platz 6, 60629 Frankfurt/Main, Germany, rosol@geo.uni-frankfurt.de

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Abstract

In times of peak-oil and the on-going 'urban renaissance' (Porter and Shaw 2009), urban densification becomes increasingly more important. Densification is promoted not only for environmental reasons – in the sense of developing more compact and thus more sustainable cities – but also, as is the case in Vancouver, in the name of 'social mixing'. Taking the conflict over "Little Mountain" – the oldest public housing complex in the province of British Columbia, Canada – as example, the article shows the conflicts that can arise in the process of densification. Despite the protests of residents and their supporters and without any concrete plans for redevelopment, almost all of the once 224 social housing units were demolished in 2009 to make room for at least 1,400 market condos (besides the 1-for-1 replacement of the social units). The example shows that densification processes that lack social measures for securing tenure for long-time residents lead to the displacement of poorer people, and to increased socio-spatial disparities. Furthermore, densification will not alleviate the affordability crisis but intensify it, if all the additionally created housing units will be market-housing only. Based on this example, the article shows that a purported social-mix policy is mainly motivated by recapturing prime real-estate, and identifies the rhetoric of 'social mixing' as 'gentrification by stealth' (Bridge et al. 2012).

Zusammenfassung

In Zeiten von "Peak-Oil" und einer „Urbanen Renaissance“ (Porter and Shaw 2009), gewinnt die Nachverdichtung der Städte eine immer größere Bedeutung. Eine Verdichtung wird dabei nicht nur aus Umweltschutzgründen gefördert – mit dem Ziel einer kompakteren und damit nachhaltigeren Stadtentwicklung –, sondern, wie es auch in Vancouver der Fall ist, auch im Namen einer „sozialen Mischung“. Anhand des Beispiels „Little Mountain“ – der ältesten Sozialwohnungsanlage in der Provinz British Columbia, Kanada – zeigt der Artikel die Konflikte auf, die im Prozess der Verdichtung entstehen können. Trotz der Proteste der Bewohner_innen und ihre Unterstützer_innen und ohne einen konkreten städtebaulichen Entwicklungsplan wurden 2009 fast alle der einst 224 Sozialwohnungen abgerissen, um – neben dem 1:1-Ersatz der Sozialwohnungen – Platz für mindestens 1.400 Eigentumswohnungen zu schaffen. Das Beispiel zeigt, dass Verdichtungsverfahren zur Verdrängung von ärmeren Menschen führen und sozialräumliche Disparitäten verschärfen, wenn flankierende soziale Maßnahmen fehlen. Zudem lindert eine Verdichtung die Wohnungskrise nicht, sondern verstärkt sie, wenn die zusätzlich geschaffenen Wohneinheiten lediglich hochpreisige Eigentumswohnungen sind. Anhand dieses Beispiels zeigt der Artikel, dass eine Politik der sozialen Mischung vor allem auf die Inwertsetzung von Immobilienlagen zielt, und identifiziert die Rhetorik der „soziale Durchmischung“ als „heimliche Gentrifizierung“ (Bridge et al. 2012).

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1. Introduction

On December 16, 2014 the last of 45 buildings of British Columbia's oldest social housing complex, Little Mountain in Vancouver, was demolished. For the time being, this marks the end of a story of more than seven years of housing struggle in a city with by far the highest housing prices in Canada, a lack of affordable housing and a severe homelessness problem (Tomalty and Alexander 2005). Little Mountain will be the first example of the implementation of a new provincial policy of converting public housing into mixed-income communities and using the profits generated through privatization to finance new supportive housing elsewhere in the province (Government of BC 2006).

A program of demolition of social housing complexes to make room for mixed developments was launched already in 1992 in the U.S. with the HOPE – Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere – VI program, but is still relatively new to Canada. The first example in Canada was Don Mount Court in Toronto between 2004 and 2008, where additionally to the replacement of 234 public housing units 187 townhouse condominiums were developed (August 2014b)¹. Little Mountain, the first project in British Columbia, however is taking redevelopment to an altogether different scale: The land is privatized outright and when Little Mountain will be eventually rebuilt, it will, besides the 1-for-1 replacement of 224 social housing units destroyed, feature at least 1,400 privately-owned condominiums in medium- and high-rise buildings.

The official rationale for the destruction of the provincially managed social housing complex, apart from the 50-year-old buildings needing repair, was to create a “high quality, higher density, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable community” (BC Housing and CoV 2007: 2). Although these sound like valuable goals, not surprisingly and as in other cases, planning processes aiming at intensification are a source of conflict in Vancouver, because they – other than new developments – interfere with sensitive social structures of historically evolved neighbourhoods. Therefore, although intensification has to be acknowledged for environmental reasons as an important tool for fighting urban sprawl, it still needs socially responsible and cautious approaches. In this article, I will argue that the Little Mountain story is a particularly good (or

better: sad) example of how intensification of the city, which could be generally an important and apt instrument for more social and ecological sustainability, is used for the ever more competitive and entrepreneurial city. As I will show, it is a further attempt to attract the well-off sections of the populations and discharge the state, province and municipalities from their responsibility for creating and retaining social housing, and along the way make profits from selling the land to a private developer. This policy can lead – as in this case – to the displacement of the most vulnerable residents, and it does not only provide no solution to the problem of unaffordability but even exacerbates it.

The article will interpret and explain this struggle by situating it within the literature on ‘social mixing’, ‘urban renaissance’ and gentrification. Since fostering ‘social mixing’ by creating a mixed-income and mixed-tenure community figured prominently in all official announcements, it will also be the focus of the critical analysis in this article. The purpose of the paper at large is to tell the story of Little Mountain as a story of chances lost regarding social and environmental goals, a story that is at the same time paradigmatic for the general changes in housing and urban policies.

The empirical section is based on 12 months of fieldwork in Vancouver in 2007/2008 as part of a wider study on Vancouver CityPlan Community Visions, another field visit to Little Mountain in September 2009 as well as extensive document analysis until February 2015. The material includes interviews and conversations with residents and supporters, and the analysis of newspapers, policy documents, open letters and web-sites. The newspaper analysis included several national and regional newspapers as well as a systematic analysis of all articles in the local daily Vancouver Sun and the weekly Vancouver Courier that mention Little Mountain until February 2015. Another most valuable resource was the 331-pages-long Master's thesis from geographer Thomas Thomson (Thomson 2010), based on extensive archival and empirical social research. Besides his thesis there are to my knowledge so far no academic texts on the social conflict over the Little Mountain redevelopment².

In what follows, I will firstly summarize the academic debates on densification and social mixing which frame the analysis of the conflict around the

redevelopment. Subsequently, I will give a short introduction to housing policies in Canada and contextualize the Little Mountain conflict by showing the salience of affordable housing and increased densities in Vancouver. In Section 5, I will tell the story of the struggle around Little Mountain, and in Section 6 discuss the official rationales and the problematic effects of this specific process of intensification. Finally, I will conclude with what we can learn generally from this case.

2. Urban intensification and social mixing

2.1 Urban Intensification and sustainable urban policies

Urban intensification has gained much salience within the last years. Intensification or densification³ means to increase the concentration of buildings, residents and activities in previously developed or undeveloped urban areas, partly through infill, but often through redevelopment including demolishing and rebuilding of entire neighbourhoods. In times of peak-oil and climate change the necessary re-orientation away from further suburbanization and urban sprawl becomes an important requirement. Further suburbanization is not only seen as a threat to nature and agricultural land, but has also been criticized for its mono-functionality, its transport and other infrastructure pressures onto the core urban areas, and generally for its segregating spatial and social effects. Advocating a higher concentration of buildings, residents and activities or a 'compact city' thus is a central element of a more sustainable urban policy based on the following two major environmental claims: It is supposed to prevent further urban sprawl (and thus preserves the countryside) and foster a more efficient land use, and to reduce car and energy use as well as climate change emissions through less need for motorized traffic and an increased population base for public transport (Korthals Altes 2007; Newman and Kenworthy 2000; Boyko and Cooper 2011; Burton 2000). Although it has been also established that transportation needs are certainly not distance-related and urban-form based only and a sustainable city needs many more – and maybe even more effective – measures, by now the importance of compact, mixed-used, bicycle-friendly and walkable neighbourhoods, where housing, work, retail and leisure are in close proximity to each other, is widely accepted and the 'compact city' has become a leading concept of urban and regional planning (for a fuller discussion see Häußermann and Haila 2004; Jenks et al. 2000; Westerink et al. 2013).

2.2 Social mixing

Intensification is pursued not only in the name of the environment and a more sustainable urban development, but also in the name of "social mixing". Also in the case of Little Mountain, demolition was legitimized by referring to social integration and mixing: "It's [Little Mountain] been underutilized. (...) We want to replace it (...) but it just won't be social housing. It's very important to integrate people" explained BC Housing Minister *Coleman* (cited in *Thomas* 2007).

Socially mixed neighbourhoods are a major and very popular planning and policy goal of state-led interventions in many countries in Western Europe and North America. This is closely related to 're-urbanization' trends, i.e. the movement of middle- and high-income and for a long time typically 'suburban' households back to the inner city. This leads necessarily to conflicts with long-term residents of usually a lower social status. In consequence, the 're-urbanization' of the middle-classes often results in forcing poorer households from the centre of cities to the periphery (*Brake and Herfert* 2012; *Colomb* 2007; *Glynn* 2012; *Lehrer et al.* 2010). In this context, the idea of social mixing has evolved from a progressive urban policy in the 1960s and 70s towards a policy leading to gentrification (this is particularly well demonstrated for Vancouver by *Ley* 2012). As *Lees et al.* contend, gentrification, understood as the movement of middle-income people (and capital) into low-income neighbourhoods causing the displacement of the low-income residents, is nowadays "rhetorically and discursively disguised" (*Lees et al.* 2012: 1) as social mixing. That the goal of social mixing is frequently just used as disguise becomes obvious, if we look at concurrent urban policy interventions. Important urban policies in the UK such as the 'Right to Buy' and cuts on housing benefits, for example, often take the opposite direction, i.e. leading to further segregation (see, e.g., *Tunstall* 2012). Social mixing is moreover criticised as a 'one-sided strategy', as it is rarely advocated in more affluent neighbourhoods. And social-mix policies frequently aim at recapturing prime real-estate by replacing or upgrading former social housing estates (cf. for the case of Melbourne *Shaw* 2012; for Toronto *August and Walks* 2012).

What are the underlying assumptions of social-mix policies? The 'promise of social mix' is based on the belief that the spatial concentration of poor people will deteriorate their opportunities and exacerbate social exclusion. Thus, 'deconcentrating the poor' – mainly by bringing in middle-class residents – is advocated as a

solution. The spatial proximity to middle-class neighbours should provide low-income urban residents with access to social and cultural capital, as well as political and economic resources brought in by their new neighbours, thereby improving their individual life chances. Reality does not hold up to this hypothesis though. What actually happens in 'mixed neighbourhoods' can often be characterized rather as strategies of avoidance and of social distinction than of social interaction (*Le Galès* 2012: 27), expressed for example through school choice (see also *Butler* and *Robson* 2003). Even more, as *August* empirically shows for the first Canadian example of Don Mount Court, "middle-class residents often used their political influence and social capital to the detriment of [public housing] tenant safety and quality of life" (*August* 2014b: 1161) and tenants "were on the receiving end of much antagonism than benevolence" (*August* 2014b: 1177).

This observation is theoretically further explored by *Davidson* (2012). He concludes that the inability of achieving social mixing in gentrifying neighbourhoods is not simply a policy failure but unavoidable because "a socially inclusive society will not be achieved through any attempt to include people into a society that, by definition, relies on excluding social differences" (*Davidson* 2012: 248). Also *Lees* et al. show the impossibility of social mixing through gentrification, since "social mix is but a transitory phenomenon on the way to complete gentrification" (*Lees* et al. 2012: 7) and again – now up-scaled – social homogeneity (this is also empirically demonstrated for Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto based on quantitative data by *Walks* and *Maaranen* 2008). As *Cheshire* points out furthermore, even if contacts would increase, "(l)iving together with richer neighbours may not make poor people any better off". Empirical studies show instead the 'benefits of living with peers' (*Cheshire* 2012). This perspective points out that social homogeneity of a neighbourhood might indeed prevent conflicts and increase political power of marginalized communities (for the weakened tenant power through socially mixed redevelopment see again the Toronto case in *August* and *Walks* 2012). In any case, it is not the neighbourhood that makes people poor, but poor people can only afford to live in certain, disadvantaged, neighbourhoods (e.g. *Cheshire* 2012).

The misleading analysis of the spatial definition of poverty and exclusion results in inappropriate solutions, i.e. the call for spatial interventions. However, social inequality cannot be eliminated through spatial mix-

ing (*Rose* et al. 2013). Since exclusion and poverty are mostly related to unemployment, instead job creation and training as well as saving and improving social and affordable housing are thus more adequate to tackle those problems (*Ley* 2012). In sum, the rhetoric of social mixing deflects "attention from structural roots of poverty and racism and disinvestment in low-income communities" (*Lipman* 2012: 111). As a result, social mixing policies do not tackle the origins of poverty and exclusion, but often support gentrification, which ultimately causes the displacement of low-income urban residents and not the betterment of their lives.

As will be discussed in Sections 5 and 6, this is also the case in Vancouver. Prior to that I will give a short introduction into the general context of the Little Mountain redevelopment: social housing policies in Canada (Section 3) and densification in Vancouver (Section 4).

3. Social housing in Canada and British Columbia

Little Mountain, the first social housing complex in British Columbia was a response to a serious shortage of affordable rental housing. Such social housing became possible through the 1949 national public housing program (*Leone* and *Carroll* 2010; *Hulchanski* and *Shapcott* 2004). Social housing basically means non-market housing and includes public housing (governmentally owned and managed), cooperative housing, private non-profit housing (usually managed by a NGO, church etc.), supportive housing (for groups with special needs like seniors or mentally ill persons), and in some provinces like Ontario also municipal non-profit housing (*Hackworth* and *Moriah* 2006).

This first social housing program in Canada was in fact miniscule and produced only about 850 housing units per year throughout the country. Only after the National Housing Act of 1964, an effective social housing program was launched, producing about 200,000 units until the mid-1970s. In the mid-1980s under a conservative federal government severe cuts to the program were made. By 1993 all federal support for housing was withdrawn and the responsibilities were devolved onto the provinces (*Hulchanski* 2002; *Leone* and *Carroll* 2010). Municipalities – different to, for example, German cities – never played an important role in housing, and although involved through providing zoning rights and sometimes land, and through partnering in special-needs housing, they neither have the mandate nor the resources for cre-

ating a substantial public housing stock. The down-load of responsibility did not involve the transfer of resources or autonomy, leading to a decline in social housing stock (*Hackworth and Moriah 2006; Mah and Hackworth 2011*). As a result, Canada has the second-smallest social housing stock of any major Western nation (after the U.S.), is the only G8 state without a national affordable housing strategy, and has the most private-sector-dominated, market-based housing system of any Western nation (*Hulchanski 2002*)⁴.

In the province of British Columbia social housing falls into the responsibility of the British Columbia Housing Management Commission (BC Housing), the provincial crown agency that also manages Little Mountain⁵. The 'Homes BC Program' initiated after devolution produced 3,800 social housing units in Vancouver from 1994 to 2001, but in 2002 the whole program was cancelled and the focus shifted towards supportive housing for the homeless and seniors (*Mah and Hackworth 2011: 70*). The Little Mountain redevelopment is the first example of this new provincial housing policy that basically departs from social housing provision and investment into permanent social housing stock. This is legitimized officially as follows: "(...) households, whose housing problems stem solely from low income, will be helped through a new rental assistance program in the private rental housing market, where most already live." (Government of BC 2006: 4). However, already in 2002, a federal Task Force on Urban Issues pointed out in an interim report: "The shortage of affordable housing is one of the biggest challenges affecting economic competitiveness and quality of life. Municipal governments and housing providers cannot meet the demand for affordable housing and emergency shelter. (...) As competition for existing housing stock intensifies, tenants at the lower end of the market increasingly have no choice but to turn to shelters or remain in already overcrowded conditions" (Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues 2002, May: 17-18; cited in *Hulchanski 2002: 5*).

The imbalance between housing needs and housing stock has surely not improved since then, particularly not in the urban centres. Moreover, the focus on the "most vulnerable populations", and thus on supportive housing for a socially rather homogeneous population, also contradicts the emphasis on social-mixed and integrated communities put forward for legitimizing the destruction of social housing and also of Little Mountain (see also *Thomson 2010: 225*).

4. Densification in Vancouver

Vancouver is a fast growing city, characterized by a housing affordability crisis. The city of Vancouver has the highest housing prices in Canada (*Somerville and Swann 2008: 2, 7; Royal LePage 2009*) and since 2005 an extremely low rental vacancy rate of under 1%. In this overheated property market, affordability is an urgent matter that affects not only low-income groups but more and more the middle class (*Peck et al. 2014*). The end of federally funded social housing happened at the same time as rapid population growth occurred in Vancouver, thus intensifying an already severe housing crisis (*Hackworth and Moriah 2006: 516*). Between 1991 and 1996, Vancouver was the fastest growing metropolitan area in Canada with 14.3% growth rate (City of Vancouver: 15.6%). Between 2001 and 2006 the growth rate dropped to 6.5%, but there is still an average growth of 6,500 people a year just in the City of Vancouver. Today, 600,000 inhabitants live in the City of Vancouver and about 2.3 million in the metropolitan region. Traditionally Vancouver's urban form is characterized by a dominance of single-family homes, while commercial activities are restricted to main streets, a business district in the downtown and light industrial lands along coastal and river shores. Because of still ongoing growth pressures, the issue of densification has been on the agenda and discussed controversially since the 1980s (*Tomalty 1997: 44f.; cf. also Ley et al. 1992; Mitchell 1996*).

The change of urban form already started with the erection of residential towers in the downtown's West End in the 1960s and with the creation of mixed residential communities on former brownfields in False Creek South in the following decade (*Ley 1980*). The late 1980s up till today experienced another massive increase of residential densities in the downtown and along False Creek, being now characterized by mostly condominium towers (*Ley 1996; Punter 2004*). High residential densities are hence not new to Vancouver, but mostly restricted to the downtown. By the late 1980s, channelling growth into redevelopment projects of brownfield sites was not an easy option anymore, since most of these areas had been built out or were still needed as light industrial lands (see *Ley 1996; Olds 2001; Hutton 2008*). Thus, planners started to look for intensification opportunities in low-density areas, which comprise still most of the City of Vancouver's land area (*Rosol 2014*). This of course was also in the interest of the development industry that was always looking for vacant space and pressuring for the redevelopment of single-family areas⁶.

However, attempts at re-zoning for densification were resisted by homeowners and other residents in these areas, who wanted their neighbourhoods to remain as they were (*Mitchell 2004*: Chapter 4; *Punter 2004*: 149ff.). In this situation, in 1995, after three years of extensive and innovative participation, 'CityPlan: Directions for Vancouver' was approved by the Vancouver City Council, in which Vancouver residents gave their consent to allow growth in Neighbourhood Centres in the low-density parts of the City. Although a success concerning creating consensus around intensification and diversification of housing stock in low-density neighbourhoods (see for a longer discussion *Rosol 2014*), because of slow and incremental implementation, the actual impact of CityPlan regarding intensification is seen as only modest (*Punter 2004*: 166f.; *Seelig and Seelig 1997*, and Interview 8, March 2008, former councillor). Re-zoning for multi-storey housing in most cases still has to be requested and reviewed for each individual property. Thus, the intensification of single-family areas, although ongoing in Vancouver, is a slow and costly process. Developing instead just one single parcel of land of over 6 hectares, which is moreover located in Vancouver's geographical centre besides "Vancouver's horticultural jewel"⁷, the 52-hectare Queen Elizabeth Park, and thus on prime real-estate ground, seems a much easier and more profitable solution. This is exactly the parcel that houses BC's oldest public housing complex: Little Mountain.

5. The struggle over Little Mountain

5.1 The destruction of Little Mountain

In the 1950s, Little Mountain was built under the first national public housing program with public, mostly federal, money on previously undeveloped federally-owned swampland. The 224 units were opened in 1954. From the beginning it was planned as a mixed-income community with a progressive rent scale determined at 20 % of household income (*Thomson 2010*: 96). The housing complex consisted of two-storey walk-up apartments with one-, two- and three-bedroom suites and two-storey rowhouses with three bedrooms. Its physical design reflected the influence of the British Garden City movement with ample green spaces – over 77 % of the site was open green space (*Thomson 2010*: 7, see also maps and photographs of the site on pp. 2, 72, 102, 156-164) – between clusters of houses as opposed to the highly dense "slum tenements". About 50 years later, the provincial government decided in

the name of densification and "social mixing" that the buildings were not worth maintaining and should be replaced by a much denser development of mid- and high-rise buildings to be built by a private developer.

When in early 2007 the federal government transferred ownership of the land to the provincial government, the province finally acquired the legal possibility to proceed with the already longer planned privatization of the land (cf. *BC Housing 1998*: 18-19). As soon as in March 2007, at the same day that plans for redevelopment of Little Mountain became public through a newspaper article, residents received a letter from BC Housing offering them assistance to find a new home (*Bula 2007a*). This happened without a proper redevelopment project proposal or an agreement about the future of the site with the City of Vancouver (CoV), which ultimately has to grant development permission⁸. To prepare the privatization of land, relocation (or better: displacement) of the at the time about 800 residents immediately started without consultation nor much time to prepare (*Thomson 2007*). As one of the residents explains: "(BC) Housing keeps saying it's relocation, we say it's displacement. (...) If they were able to find us accommodations in the community, that's relocation because then you're still able to benefit from all the ties and support and services that you have. When you are being forced to move out of the community, where you have everything, to another area completely, that you may or may not be able to access everything from, that is displacement" (cited in *Thomson 2007*: 25, interview conducted in 2007). In contrast to the way public housing redevelopment was organized in Toronto, at Little Mountain relocation of the tenants (and demolition of the buildings) preceded any community consultation, which only started in January 2010.

By July 2007 already 96 households (out of 198) had moved out. In the fall 2008 only 30 households remained on the site and only 10 by September 2009. Relocation was enforced and accelerated using a range of measures like persuasion, incomplete information, false promises, intimidation, and technical means like boarding up still inhabited buildings in September 2008 (*Bula 2007b*; *Thomson 2010*: 242ff., 258ff.). Tenants and supporters complained about the "coercive and manipulative practices that BCH (BC Housing) staff were using to rush tenants into accepting relocation, sometimes into situations that were not appropriate to their needs or circumstances" (*Jacobs 2014*). Moreover, the majority of Little Mountain ten-

ants were relocated to other public housing projects in Vancouver by moving them on top of the waiting list, thus putting additional pressure on the already limited public housing stock (Thomson 2010: 252).

In 2008 the BC government selected the private developer Holborn Properties. After the 2008 crash of the real-estate market the re-development of the site was stalled for a year, leaving the houses boarded up and empty until November 2009, when the site was eventually bulldozed to make room for at least 1,400 market condos⁹. By the end of 2009 only four residents were able to remain after a long and strenuous fight for their right to stay put: a disabled woman, two blind senior citizens (both passed away in 2014), and a pensioner that was finally evicted in November 2014. The last of the buildings, that housed the four residents, was demolished in December 2014.

5.2 Protest and critique

In May 2007 the protest against the redevelopment began with a march along the adjacent Main Street, an increasingly gentrifying and trendy shopping street. Importantly, the tenants of Little Mountain were not protesting against redevelopment or higher density per se, but against the degree of densification, their displacement, the lack of a consultation process before relocation and demolition started, and the privatization of public land meant for social housing. They also criticized that there will be a replacement of the destroyed social housing units only in numbers of units, which increase to 234, but not in square meters. Replacement units will also have only one or two bedrooms, thus there is no replacement of three-bedroom units and rowhouses that are especially important for families. And although tenants are allowed to move back into the new social housing, this is restricted in the 'Relocation Agreement' each tenant had to sign¹⁰. Activists were also very aware of the fact that they were fighting not just for themselves: "This community knows that it's not just about this site. It's not just about the people who are there right now. (...) We know (...) we're potentially setting (...) a precedent" (Interview 22, July 2008).

Furthermore, critics pointed out that BC Housing plans went against the "Riley Park/South Cambie (RP/SC) CityPlan Community Vision", a local neighbourhood plan following up from the CityPlan consensus, which the Vancouver City Council had approved only two

years earlier in 2005. This vision, inter alia, allowed increased densities and even a redevelopment of the Little Mountain site, but rejected developments higher than four storeys. As one resident and also member of the RP/SC Community Vision Implementation Committee explains: "The community has said from the beginning that they were not against an increase in density, it's the methods and the degree of densification (...) that's counter to what our visions process says" (Interview 22, July 2008). However, the province and even the City itself did not accept this official city policy. In the Memorandum of Understanding between the two bodies it is stated: "Both the City and BC Housing acknowledge that buildings taller than 4 storeys contradict the RP/SC Vision, but believe that buildings taller than 4 storeys in the site's redevelopment should be considered" (BC Housing and CoV 2007: 2).

Although the first redevelopment plans planned to complete relocation by spring of 2008 and a completed redevelopment by 2010, residents who refused to leave were worried about these ambitious promises. Protesters demanded a phased process – so people could stay longer in their homes – and secured relocation. As one resident clarifies: "What [residents] have been against and disappointed with is the manner in which things are being done. That families are being strongly urged to move now when in fact, because of all the preparatory stuff that needs to be done, construction likely won't start until after the Olympics"¹¹ (Interview 22, July 2008). Some tenants therefore resisted relocation and stayed as long as possible. This, however, became increasingly difficult as more and more people were leaving (see Thomson 2010: 254ff.).

Already in May 2007 Little Mountain tenants and their supporters formed 'Community Advocates for Little Mountain' (CALM)¹². They organized housing stands, i.e. public rallies or pickets and street marches for social housing in the whole Vancouver metropolitan region, attended meetings, spoke to politicians, wrote letters, and gave countless interviews. CALM used creative tools like street art, art-ins and 'urban knitting' where boards sealing windows and fences were covered in yarn designs, they sold mock shares of the B.C. Prime Minister's house, and camped to protest against displacement and demolition, and for the support of social housing and tenants rights (for a detailed visual and written description see Thomson 2010: 172ff.). Also, a documentary film is being shot but still seeks funding for being finalized¹³.

5.3 After the demolition

In April 2013, more than three years after the site was bulldozed and just before the provincial election in May, construction finally started. Because of the advocacy of the remaining tenants and their supporters, in October 2012 an agreement by the B.C. government, the CoV and the developer permitted one social housing building to be constructed ahead of the re-zoning process for the rest of the site (Cole 2013). The agreement also allowed the four residents in the last Little Mountain building, who received eviction notes in August 2012, to remain in their homes (Bula 2012). The building for low-income independent seniors and people with disabilities was completed in August 2014¹⁴. The 53 units will be the first of the 234 one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments that will replace the units lost.

Despite this success: years after displacing the low-income inhabitants of Little Mountain, only a tiny fraction of the original inhabitants will realistically be able to relocate back to the site. In the meantime, 220 units of social housing have been lost for years. As for the rest of the development, eight years after the displacement of the first tenants, it remains unclear when construction will start, not to mention when it will be finished¹⁵.

6. Discussion of the official rationales

What has all this been for? The official discourse emphasises the 'better use of the land' through denser redevelopment and the chance for a "mixed-income and diverse neighbourhood" (BC Housing 2013). The goal stated in an agreement between BC Housing and the CoV was to "create a high quality, higher density, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable community", to increase housing options in Vancouver, and generate funds for the development of social housing in Vancouver and elsewhere in the province (BC Housing and CoV 2007: 2).

Thus first, redevelopment has been justified here as elsewhere on the basis that social mixing will create more social capital for low-income families at Little Mountain. However, as an extensive empirical analysis (Thomson 2010, 2007) shows, Little Mountain was an example of the high level of social capital that existed, of the benefits of living among peers, of the strong ties between the residents but also its integration into the larger community, of their solidarity and

social organization – far from being 'socially isolated' as many of the social-mix proponents insinuate. Those ties have been capped in the process of redevelopment. As one of the last and most activist residents, *Ingrid Steenhuisen*, explains in a newspaper interview: "When they destroyed the buildings, they destroyed more than buildings. They destroyed a well-functioning community" (cited in *Pablo* 2014). Residents also had never been consulted if they would like to see more social mixing and it does not seem to reflect their desires. For example, one long-time Little Mountain tenant remarked, "mixing is not the government's problem, it's a personal problem. If people want to go and live with rich people, they can go and rent in their place" (cited in *Thomson* 2010: 237).

Second, according to a 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between the City of Vancouver and B.C. Housing, half of the money gained through the sale of the land is to be reinvested in housing in Vancouver (including the replacement of units at the site), the rest will be used to finance housing elsewhere in the province. And indeed 1575 new housing units will be created on 14 sites provided by the City of Vancouver with proceeds from the sale and redevelopment of Little Mountain (BC Housing 2010)¹⁶. However, it is questionable that this will create additional housing units that would not have been built otherwise. For its 2010 Olympic bid (submitted in 2002) the City of Vancouver promised to increase its social housing stock but it remained unclear how to come up with the funds. Thus, it is not unlikely that the proceeds from the Little Mountain sale will be used to meet commitments made previously (*Thomson* 2010: 228ff.).

Moreover, proceeds are being reinvested in supportive housing in order to reduce visible street-homelessness, not in social housing. However, „this is taking from one group of poor people to give to another group of poor people“ (*Thomson* 2010: 176) and potentially leads to pitting different groups of the poor against each other. The BC government seems to rest on the assumption that the private market will provide for low-income single households and families – which is obviously not the case¹⁷. And, as housing activists demand, supportive housing, which is of course important, should be financed through general revenues. Paying for supportive housing by privatizing public housing has been called "selling the house to buy furniture" (*Jacobs* 2014)¹⁸. What is more, for the promise to reinvest sales gains into social housing elsewhere, the City of Vancouver waived its usual re-

quirement that any new major development has to include a minimum of 20 % social housing (BC Housing and CoV 2007). This requirement would have meant building at least about 100 more social housing units, which is still not very much given the high demand for affordable housing. Finally, so far it also remains unclear what will happen with the other 50 % that are supposed to provide social housing elsewhere in the province (Thomson 2010: 231f., after 2010 no other sources regarding this topic can be found).

Also interesting is the fact that the whole process was not cheap for the province. According to an article in the Huffington Post, BC Housing paid \$ 400,000 until June 2012 for relocation expenses (Hasiuk 2013). This means that the province rather pays for vacating land in order to privatize it instead of spending the money on creating or properly maintaining public housing. That gentrification and not social equity is the goal also seems proven by the fact that all the additional density created will not be serving the goal of affordability, but will be market units. As David Chudnovsky, a former member of the provincial parliament from the left-leaning New Democratic Party NDP argues: "They're privatizing an important asset of the people of British Columbia, in exchange for what? In exchange for simply replacing the 224 units of social housing that were here before. No increase, [...] Holborn will build hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of units of condos that are expensive that don't speak at all to the real problem of the city, which is the crisis of affordability, for families, for poor people, for older people, for young people" (cited in Cole 2013).

Also a member of the RP/SC visioning process who was not a Little Mountain resident expresses her anger and disappointment: "I guess I'm angered that we have so little say in (...) the process. (...) Not everyone can afford the high rents. (...) And that would have been a perfect site for affordable housing to come in, besides social housing, and that's not happening" (Interview 23, July 2008)¹⁹.

Thus and apart from the individual hardships the former inhabitants of Little Mountain had to go through, this case points to a broader problem: In a city desperate for affordable housing, land owned by the provincial agency responsible for housing is privatized rather than used for creating more affordable housing, and the increased density will not be used for an equal increase in the number of subsidized units. The chance to set a positive example was not taken.

7. Conclusions, lessons and outlook

The demolition of post-war public housing in the name of social mixing is ongoing in Canada (Lehrer et al. 2010; August 2014b; August 2014a). This article looked at the first example of this policy in British Columbia. Little Mountain was supposed to set a precedent for the further privatization of public housing estates in the province, the new approach in BC housing policy (Government of BC 2006). However, so far it has been a fiasco: Eight years after the displacement of hundreds of former residents not even the re-zoning process has been finalized, no development permit has been granted, and no construction start is in sight. If it serves as a precedent, one can hope that only by showing how not to do redevelopment. In fact, it shows at least three severe planning and policy failures:

1) Management of relocation:

The management of relocations shows a lack of participation and consultation of persons directly involved. In a city that prides itself with its reputation in community participation and decades after the scathing criticisms of 'urban renewal', a major redevelopment has been initiated without any participation of tenants and the general public. Hundreds of people have been displaced, well functioning buildings that could have been used for at least eight more years were demolished, and the pressure on social housing has been increased – without a concrete redevelopment plan let alone a re-zoning and development permit. There was no pressing need to vacate or demolish the complex – except for making it more attractive to a developer by selling a cleared site (see also Jacobs 2014). The displacement of Little Mountain residents and the demolition of all but one building before a community consultation process even started also precluded other options to be considered and an active participation of long-time residents in the consultation process.

In Toronto Regent Park's redevelopment, in contrast, residents were informed a year in advance and the existing community was kept largely intact during phased construction. Also in Don Mount Court in Toronto, the whole process seemed much better coordinated and, not wanting to deny other criticism, it started with a community consultation process quite early on. Former residents were able to relo-

cate four years after demolition (*August* 2014b). Thus, the whole approach taken by BC Housing seemed needlessly destructive and reveals a severe democracy deficit.

2) Profit-seeking orientation of public (housing) agencies and the withdrawal from social responsibilities:

The destruction and inadequate replacement of post-war social housing units is particularly problematic in times without a (federal) public housing program. All the public housing still existing is a remnant of long-gone times. Instead of keeping and preserving those remnants as one of the few tools that mitigate the housing crisis in metropolitan city-regions, they are attacked by the very agencies that should preserve them and whose mandate should be to provide housing for the population that cannot afford market prices. Selling public land to private developers furthermore does not only affect the housing supply today. It also means that the government gives away an important tool and options for action concerning the housing crisis in the future. Or as one resident puts it: "That's a lot of public land that is going to be sold at the expense of the future of this province" (Interview 22, July 2008).

3) The denial of the right to the city for those who cannot afford it:

As in other cases the redevelopment and the privatization of land is officially justified with financing housing developments in other parts of the province. It is argued that with the money gained through the land sale many more units could be built in peripheral regions with lower land prices. It is of course cheaper to build in nonurban, peripheral places. However, it is in the centres of the metropolitan regions where the need for affordable and social housing is greatest. It is also here where the offer of jobs on which low-income households depend is, although badly paid, greatest. This ignorance towards the housing needs of the less privileged furthermore ignores the fact that also low-income residents, all the pink- and blue-collar workers, keep a city and its economy functioning (*Scott* 2006; *Peck* et al. 2014).

It does not seem to be a political goal anymore to build an inclusive city for all. Instead poor

people are relegated to places less central, less desirable, less accessible. As in other cities with tremendous housing pressures and no political will nor policies to create and sustain adequate housing for those who cannot afford market prices, Vancouver is increasingly driving lower-income and working class households out to the suburbs (*Ley* and *Lynch* 2012; *Peck* et al. 2014; *Slater* 2006). Thus, "social-mix" redevelopment politics pursued as in the Vancouver case in fact result in homogeneous, gentrified and exclusive inner-urban areas (see also *Thomson* 2010: 233). Through public housing redevelopment gentrification can now move into areas previously thought as 'un-gentrifiable' (*Hackworth* 2002; *Lehrer* et al. 2010). Scholars have termed this as 'state-led' (*Lees* and *Ley* 2008) or third-wave (*Hackworth* and *Smith* 2001) gentrification.

In sum, here as elsewhere, referring to social mix and higher densities has legitimized demolition. However, the increased density will not be adding to the social housing stock. And as in the case of Toronto and in other examples, the main argument of critics of social-mix policies and market-led intensification holds also true in the Little Mountain case: If policy-makers truly intent on "ameliorating problems related to residence in disadvantaged communities [they] should focus on funding for social programs and transformative change, rather than on public-housing demolition and state-driven gentrification via mixed-income redevelopment" (*August* 2014b: 1160).

Because the private market simply does not provide housing for households with low income, what is needed is more and not less governmental engagement of all levels in the housing sector (*Ley* and *Dobson* 2008). This includes particularly providing and preserving social and affordable housing for example through the expansion of public housing in the process of densification (see for a similar argument *Lehrer* et al. 2010: 88).

In the case of Little Mountain, not only have the former tenants mostly been displaced. Also the chance of using increased housing densities on land that already belonged to a public housing agency to tackle one of Vancouver's most urgent problems has been lost. The example of the replacement and upgrading of the former social housing complex also shows that purported social-mix-policies are mainly motivated by recapturing prime real-estate. Insofar the demolishing of Little Mountain also marks another lowpoint in the long

decline of Canadian federal and provincial policies for creating and sustaining social and affordable housing and thus a further withdrawal from a commitment to the human right to adequate housing for all.

It will be important to observe the further process: what the physical design and social composition of the complex will be, if former residents will relocate, how the sales gains are used for creating social and affordable housing in Vancouver and beyond, and in how far social interaction will really take place in the then 'socially mixed' community. And it will be important to watch over if and how BC Housing will learn from the Little Mountain experience and change its approach in the future. Apparently a new policy is already emerging: In October 2014 it became public that another housing complex in Vancouver is being sold, marking the beginning of a massive divesting of public property (Bramham 2015). BC Housing now intends to sell 350 properties to non-profit organizations. Selling to non-profit organizations can be problematic because, apart from the further loss of public property, it alters the character of social housing from being a human right and a governmental responsibility to a charity that is conditioned to certain rules and behaviour that will be fully controlled by the successful bidders.

The Little Mountain story shows the many community concerns in a growing and increasingly unaffordable city – equitable land use, meaningful community consultation, socially responsible approaches to densification and affordable housing – and how insufficiently they have been dealt with. It certainly did not set an example of how to accomplish both greater density and affordable housing – something we still need to see. But it is and will remain also an important story of community engagement and activism for social and affordable housing in Canada.

Notes

¹ The second project, Regent Park in Toronto, the largest of Canada's public housing stock with over 2,000 units and about 10,000 tenants, started in 2005 and will take about 10 to 15 years for completion (Schipling 2007; August 2014a); <http://www.torontohousing.ca/regentpark> (accessed 19 Feb 2015).

² Different to, for example, Regent Park in Toronto also the history of Little Mountain has been remarkably little researched and documented. Research on housing issues in Vancouver focuses mostly on the Downtown Eastside, re-

portedly Canada's poorest urban neighbourhood (Peck et al. 2014: 407).

³ Whereas intensification refers to the intensified use of spaces, densification is a purely quantitative measure. However, both terms are used synonymously (Westerink et al. 2013: 476).

⁴ In the 1990s there were approximately 650,000 units of social housing in Canada (or 6.5 % of the total housing stock), including 205,000 units of public housing (2 % of the total housing stock) (Schipling 2007: 9). Since then numbers have dropped even further. After the downloading of responsibility for social housing, Canadian Housing Statistics no longer capture the number of social and affordable housing units across Canada and exact numbers are difficult to obtain (Housing Services Corporations (HSC) 2014: 2).

⁵ "In 2012/13, roughly 98,000 households in 200 communities throughout the province of British Columbia were assisted through subsidized housing. (...) BC Housing directly manages 7,200 of the public housing units. Non-profits, co-operatives, and private corporations manage the remainder of the units" (Housing Services Corporations (HSC) 2014: 8).

⁶ Developable land is limited in the Vancouver region because the city is situated between the Georgia Straight and the Coastal Mountains and close to the U.S. border.

⁷ <http://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/queen-elizabeth-park.aspx>; 12/05/2015

⁸ Current zoning (i.e. the permitted land use) for Little Mountain allows for 4 storey heights and about 800 units only. The CoV thus has to approve re-zoning for higher densities which involves Council approval and a public hearing. The development permit will also be issued by the CoV, subject to conditions like the provision of community amenities. A Memorandum of Understanding between BC Housing and the CoV was signed later, in July 2007, and only in June 2012 the Little Mountain Policy statement was approved by the City Council.

⁹ The exact size and density of the project are still undetermined. The province first announced that up to 2,000 units could be developed, the developer had been thinking about up to even 3,000 (Thomson 2010: 233). The figure of 1,400 market units and a maximum height of 12 storeys (plus the 1-for-1 replacement of 224 social housing units and an addition of 10 units for urban Aboriginals) were established in the Little Mountain Policy statement approved by the City of Vancouver in June 2012 (CoV 2012). However, final heights and unit numbers will be determined in the re-zoning process and the development permit, which has not been issued yet (as of Feb 2015).

¹⁰ For example, they have to move back "upon completion of the property", into a suite and at a date of BC Housing's choosing (Thomson 2010, Appendix III Relocation Agreement).

¹¹ The XXI Olympic Winter Games took place in Vancouver in February 2010, thus almost three years after relocation started.

¹² see <http://www.my-calm.info/>, 12/03/2015.

¹³ <http://www.littlemountainfilm.com>

¹⁴ It will be managed by a private, mennonite non-profit organization, thus will not categorize as public housing anymore.

¹⁵ According to *Thomson* (2010: 176) in 2010 the estimated completion date was 2023 (i.e. 14 years after demolition!). The re-zoning application was submitted in 2013, but the process has been on hold and a development permit has not been issued because the developer refuses to agree on several key features required by the City, particularly regarding number of units and community amenities to be provided by the developer (see *Jacobs* 2014). Holborn also seeks to sell all residential units first before construction begins (<http://www.vancouverlittlemountain.com/about/faq/>, accessed 19 Feb 2015).

¹⁶ Nine of them were opened before June 2014, the last is anticipated to be completed in 2016 (*Rossi* 2014).

¹⁷ For example, as *Thomson* explains, the Rental Assistance Program (RAP) for low-income families with at least one dependent child established in 2006 was not able to allow the former residents of Little Mountain access the tight Vancouver private housing market (see also *Bula* 2007a). Therefore, in order to facilitate Little Mountain tenants relocation, BC Housing allowed enhanced rental subsidies above the usual RAP rates for a limited time and for Little Mountain tenants only. This shows that “the regular RAP is an inadequate replacement for purpose-built social housing for families” (*Thomson* 2010: 245). This also shows that public money is rather spent for paying inflated rents to private landlords than for keeping or increasing the public housing stock.

¹⁸ *Ned Jacobs* is a Vancouver community activist and son of urbanist *Jane Jacobs*.

¹⁹ Affordable housing does not serve households with very low incomes and is usually defined as housing for which households do not have to spend more than 30 % of their income for rent or ownership payment (*Mah and Hackworth* 2011) or as “programs where tenants pay rents at 80 % of the market rent of the area” (*Housing Services Corporations* (HSC) 2014: 1).

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