

Urban Planning and Negotiations - Social Housing and Ethnicity

Elise Henu
Institut d'Aménagement Regional
Université d'Aix-Marseille III
12 Residence du Grand Vallat
13710 Fuveau, France
Tel/FAX.:+33 44 2 681504
E-mail.:Elise.henu@caramail.com

The research project began in 1996, with a case study in one of the most distressed neighbourhoods in one of the largest cities in France, Marseille. The inhabitants of this neighbourhood have now been relocated to new housing for low income families, near the apartment complex which has been studied in the second case study in the last year. This apartment complex of social housing is currently being demolished. Therefore, its inhabitants, as the tenants of the other case study complex must be rehoused. The current research focuses on rehousing, planning policies, participative negotiations and ethnicity. Each of these concepts have been carefully elaborated in my research since I started on the project. This will be the focus of the presentation at the Ph.D. Workshop, while giving a historical description of the main theme of my thesis: urban planning and negotiations.

The main topic : urban planning and negotiations.

While studying the demolition of the distressed neighborhood in the first case study, the primary goal was to understand how people would react to an urban planning operation; in this instance, the destruction and relocation of their homes. The research began with an investigation of the social and ethnic backgrounds of the inhabitants. It was found that the residents all came from the same village in Kabylie (an eastern region of Algeria). Their employers in Marseille had not provided them with housing, only a small piece of land near the industrial plants at which they were working. Therefore, they were forced to build simple houses for themselves and their families to live in, which formed what could be described as a shanty town. Through the economic, urban and social transformations, closure of factories, loss of jobs etc., these families have had to endure increasing social exclusion and persecution. This exclusion and intense

poverty within the community resulted in the complete isolation of the neighborhood, which in turn, has become a racially segregated part of the city.

Beginning with this acquired knowledge, the research commenced with studying the effects on the lives of the residents of the urban planning operation, i.e. the demolition of the «shanty town» and relocation of its inhabitants. However, after meeting with the families and discussing the rehousing issues, it was discovered that in addition to their concern for the disruptions to be caused to their day to day lives, the inhabitants were equally concerned with the negotiations which were being held in order to complete the project; *negociations* which were determining how, where and when the residents were being relocated. The question of *empowerment* of the local residents thus became an obvious matter of concern, although the group of people were definitely at the lower end of the social ladder. But they did not like to be «planned for», they wanted to take part in the process.

As a result of these findings, the topic of this thesis is now: "Urban planning negotiations". Within this main theme several subtopics such as, social housing and ethnicity will be addressed. It will be shown that although ethnicity plays a strong role in social identity, community, location and space seem to have an equally strong affect.

Relevance of planning knowledge.

The two case studies which have been chosen are both characterized by *social housing*. In each case, one can observe the extreme social sensitivity which is necessary in all forms of urban planning. The question of urban development encompasses many trying issues such as, poverty, ethnicity and spatial, economic and political exclusion. When discussing an urban development project, these issues, along with the question of how people will react must be taken into account. The possibility of harnessing and channelling the energy of the people may be realized only through open communication, understanding and mutual respect. This is easier said than done. Currently, the French inner-cities are built around a complexity which is misunderstood and unknown to social and political workers. Therefore, the only way to truly develop these areas is to take the time and effort to understand the people who inhabit them. This would require extensive

community outreach in which the government representatives are building relationships with the people and through which an exchange of trust and understanding can develop. This idea of community based development is quite new in France, and means that local authorities (political or institutional) will have to face new ways of *negociation* with, and *empowerment* of, people living in those areas.

When discussing community based development, the question of *ethnicity* must also be considered. The differences between reactions which stem from ethnical issues must be distinguished from those which stem from social and spatial issues. However, the influence which the one has on the other must also be taken into account. In France, the term ethnicity is quite new and is thus, often misunderstood. It has just recently entered the political and scientific vocabulary. Also, French sociology has been silent about its definition and use. The first elaboration of the concept ethnicity came from the American School of Sociology in Chicago.

Research Methodology.

These main topics will be studied through the two chosen case studies; the Kabyle neighborhood and the apartment complex.

In order to complete this task, "living research" will be necessary. This means that social outreach and on site interviewing will be conducted. Actual inquiries started in February 1999, after a long period of on site preparation. Much time was needed to be accepted as a researcher in the neighbourhoods and to become integrated into both the lives of the inhabitants and into the local political systems. This preparatory phase in the research process is crucial for this and future studies of this kind.

Stage of research.

When this was written, the preparatory research was in its final stages and the information which had been gathered over the last year was used to prepare the interviewing process. The thesis and target topics had been defined and on site interviewing began in the spring 1999.

Major obstacles

One of the most important requirements in this study is time. The need for time and patience is encountered at every stage. For example, it is only now, after two years of research that the title of this study is able to take form.

Apart from the need for time, one of the major problems faced in this study is the need to be integrated and trusted by the inhabitants which are being studied and by the institutions with which one must negotiate. The interviewees are often sceptical and hesitant to give personal information to outsiders, while the public institutions require extensive personal information to accept research of data files in each case study.

Further complicating the situation are the topics of investigation, themselves. In the above described case studies, subjects such as ethnicity, poverty and segregation are addressed, all of which are considered highly sensitive issues. Institutions often resist to address these topics, while the people living in the case study areas fear disclosing the truth.

Preliminary results.

The scientific and political debate over ethnicity raises many questions. For instance : Does ethnicity exist ? Why and how can ethnicity be discussed ? Is it a cultural state or a social process? What is the role of the French society in the understanding of ethnicity ? What are the interests in and the fears of this word's effect on the development of research and on public policies ?

This study aims to discover the effect of ethnicity on negotiations of social housing planning. What we often mis-categorize as "ethnic" situations seem to be more realistically expressions of social and spatial identities and exclusion. The influence of ethnicity is only one aspect of the complex social dynamics which exist in these neighborhoods.

Ethnicity is defined not only by cultural heritage, but also by one's interpretations of customs and beliefs. The word ethnicity encompasses both cultural and social influences and is the result of one's interpretations of such influences.