

Talen, E., Menozzi, S., & Schaefer, C. (2015). What is a "Great Neighborhood"? An analysis of APA's top-rated places. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 81(2), 121–141.

**Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs v. The Inclusive Communities Project, Inc., No. 13–1371** (U.S. Supreme

Court, June 25, 2015). Retrieved from [http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/13-1371\\_m64o.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/13-1371_m64o.pdf)

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## "Great Neighborhoods" for Whom? Comment on Talen et al., "What is a 'Great Neighborhood'?"

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American urban planning emerged as a field at the turn of the 20th century through the combination of at least two distinct strands of urban reform. Roughly speaking, those in the "design" professions (architecture, landscape architecture, civil engineering) saw that American cities could be made more healthy, efficient, and livable through application of good urban design and investments in public infrastructure and amenities such as parks. The "social reformer" strand argued that American cities produced social exclusion because of unfettered real estate capital. American planning has always been an uneasy marriage between design and social reform elements, layered upon a political and economic system of fragmented governance, private property rights, and racial inequality. Planning's historical quest for professional legitimacy has often muted more radical calls for social reform and social justice. This debate never seems to recede from the forefront of planning; nor should it.

Talen, Menozzi, and Schaefer's (2015) article offers a brilliant and insightful reflection on this "central urban planning paradox" (p. 123). They find that those neighborhoods designated by APA as "great" do not fare so well in terms of housing affordability and social diversity. Great, yes, but for whom?

I really like this article and research. The authors are to be commended for it and for centering our attention on this important issue. If great cities and neighborhoods that planners help to create only become niche playgrounds for elites, then we have fundamentally failed. Social inclusion, equity, and affordability must be central objectives of planning, whether at the neighborhood or regional scales. If they are not, then planning risks becoming what its critics have long charged: a tool of established interests to maintain and reinforce social inequality. For planners, this issue

of spatial justice and equity is the defining urban issue of our time. I share the authors' frustration that APA's voice on these matters has often seemed agnostic.

Talen et al.'s (2015) research illustrates the deep conundrum of American planning. Amenities such as neighborhood quality, proximity, and public investment are capitalized into property values and therefore housing prices. If planning and design are done right, they should create positive spillovers and amenities that people value. This necessarily raises property values. People are willing to pay more to live in "great neighborhoods" with high levels of amenities. Good schools, good parks, accessibility to shops and transit: all of these good planning ideas necessarily will lead to increased property values. So it really is no surprise the Great Neighborhoods would have higher housing prices and less diversity. Great Neighborhoods have amenities and a quality of life that command a price premium in the real estate market.

The authors' research reminds us that housing diversity and housing mix do not necessarily translate into affordability and diversity, at least at a neighborhood scale. I do remain convinced, however, that housing diversity and housing mix at a metropolitan scale is associated with affordability and diversity. But this reminder is important for housing planning: A wider variety of styles and types of housing units will not necessarily lead to affordability and diversity in high-demand areas. Only aggressive legal and financial tools (inclusionary zoning, vouchers, land trusts, low income housing tax credits [LIHTCs], etc.) can produce affordable housing and social diversity in high-demand neighborhoods.

Because articles such as these can take on a life of their own, let us be clear what the authors are *not* saying. They are not saying that planners should give up on promoting the types of good urbanism that these neighborhoods represent: far from it. Just because new transit investments can produce significant gentrification (Kahn, 2007) and open-space preservation can produce social exclusion (Schmidt & Paulsen, 2009) does not mean we stop encouraging and planning for transit investments and open-space preservation. Talen et al.'s (2015) research reminds us that all

well-intentioned, best-practice planning can have exclusionary impacts when implemented locally and layered upon deep structural inequalities in society.

What this research reminds us—in addition to the well-considered suggestions to reform APA's designation procedures—is that affordability and diversity have to be consciously and actively planned and financed in high-demand and high-opportunity neighborhoods.

The larger implications of this research for planning and policy, however, are dependent on which theory of spatial justice we think should govern our thinking about neighborhoods and regions. Should we think of diversity and inclusion and affordability at a neighborhood scale or at a larger scale? How should that govern the always second-best policies and plans we make when constrained by property interests and limited funding for affordable housing?

I think of this conundrum through two cities where I have taught, Philadelphia (PA) and Madison (WI). The two neighborhoods in Philly—Society Hill in Center City and Chestnut Hill, an early streetcar suburb—and the one in Madison (Marquette neighborhood) are certainly “great” neighborhoods. I would gladly have lived in any of these if I could have afforded it. Density, housing diversity, historic structures, transit accessibility, walkability, shops, and restaurants: These places are great urbanism. But they are also very expensive compared with neighborhoods within a few miles. I can imagine places in each neighborhood where well-designed infill or acquisition and rehabilitation could produce affordable housing. But such projects would be incredibly expensive on a per-square-foot basis. For city officials or nonprofits

with limited (and declining) funds for affordable housing, is the best policy to spend more money on fewer units in these most expensive neighborhoods, or would it be better to produce more units of affordable housing in other, less-expensive neighborhoods?

Both Madison and Philly have other neighborhoods that someday could be awarded “Great Neighborhood” status by APA, and both cities have many neighborhoods I would nominate for “not quite as great as APA great but still pretty good” neighborhood awards. Given limited resources and land prices, would we be better off investing in affordable housing and diversity in these nearby neighborhoods? I sure wish I were smart enough to provide an unambiguous answer to these questions.

Planning always involves tradeoffs and unintended consequences. Even well-intentioned award systems such as the APA Great Neighborhoods program reflect the intractable nature of structural inequalities in American society. Shame on us as a profession if we neglect these self-critical discussions.

## References

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## Comment on “What is a ‘Great Neighborhood’? An Analysis of APA's Top-Rated Places”

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**T**alen, Menozzi, and Schaefer (2015) submit the list of recipients of the APA's Great Neighborhood (GN) designation to quantitative analysis to assess whether the neighborhoods accord with the goals of affordability and social diversity. They find the list wanting and suggest that these designated neighborhoods tend to be gentrifying areas that are losing their social diversity. The authors assert that we have an “opportunity to evaluate a

central paradox in American city planning: The more planners try to promote good physical design, the less affordable and therefore less diverse the neighborhood seems to become” (Talen et al., 2015, p. 121).

The authors find in the affirmative that good physical design lessens affordability as well as social and economic diversity. Overcoming this paradox is the challenge for the APA as it judges future GN award winners.

I question the authors' measure of affordability, which examines trends in median house values. When examining the issue of housing affordability, our primary concern is the incidence of very-low-income households who must allocate more than 30% of income toward total housing costs. If a