

# How and why does community opposition to affordable housing development escalate? “Unsupported development” in Parramatta, NSW

Gethin Davison<sup>1</sup>, Crystal Legacy<sup>1</sup>, Edgar Liu<sup>1</sup>, Ryan van den Nouwelant<sup>1</sup>, Awais Piracha<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales  
<sup>2</sup>University of Western Sydney

**Abstract:** In response to a deepening housing affordability crisis and an impending economic downturn, governments in Australia recently introduced a host of policy initiatives and legislative mechanisms in an effort to boost the supply of affordable housing. In NSW, most proposals for affordable housing development in recent years were uncontroversial, but there was fierce and high-profile opposition from community members in a small number of Local Government Areas (LGAs). Here, opposition campaigns received widespread media coverage and gained significant political traction. While there is an extensive inter-disciplinary literature on NIMBYism and the factors that underlie community opposition to affordable housing, particularly in the US context, almost no research has sought to examine the reasons that community opposition escalates in some places but not others. Through a mixed-methods retrospective case study of an ‘extreme’ instance of community opposition to affordable housing development in the Western Sydney LGA of Parramatta, this paper looks at how and why community opposition to affordable housing escalated between 2009 and 2011, addressing this gap in knowledge. The paper finds that the fierce opposition to affordable housing development in Parramatta was based partly in prejudice against affordable housing residents and issues to do with the planning assessment process, but may also have been fuelled by political manoeuvre.

## Introduction

The de-concentration of affordable housing is a key strategy for governments in Australia (Darcy 2010), but the development of such housing in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods often generates opposition from local community members.<sup>1</sup> This opposition goes by many names but is perhaps best known as the “NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) phenomenon” in both academia and public life (Dear 1992; Schively 2007). The international literature suggests that community concerns about affordable housing development usually centre on three main sets of issues: the potential impact that development would have on crime rates and property values in the host neighbourhood; the imagined characteristics and behaviours of future residents; and the physical form and appearance of the buildings proposed (Tighe 2010; Nguyen, Basolo et al. 2012). Objectors unhappy with an affordable housing proposal will often make written submissions to planning authorities, arrange petitions, lobby politicians, sometimes they may even pursue legal action or resort to threats and vandalism (Dear 1992; Iglesias 2002; Galster, Tatian et al. 2003). The opposition in many cases can result in lengthy delays and forced amendments to projects and can create an environment in which compromise between development proponent and objectors becomes impossible. Sometimes, it may also undermine political and public support for affordable housing provision more generally and have implications for the integration of prospective affordable housing residents into host communities (reference anonymised for review).

Following three decades of reduced investment in affordable housing development by governments in Australia and a consequent decline in the proportion of the total housing stock that the sector represents (Jacobs, Atkinson et al. 2010; Troy 2012), a series of government initiatives aimed at supporting an increase in affordable housing supply have been introduced in Australia since 2007. Of these, the most significant have been the National Rental Affordability Scheme, a wide range of mechanisms for securing affordable housing through the planning process (Davison et al., 2012) and the investment of \$5.25 billion in the construction of nearly 20,000 new dwellings under the Australian

---

<sup>1</sup> This study is concerned with community opposition to affordable housing. Definitions of “affordable housing” vary across the Australian states and internationally, but we use the term, following Gurran *et al.* (2007), to refer to housing which is affordable (in that it accounts for no more than thirty per cent of gross household income) for low and moderate income groups across home ownership, private rental and government rental tenures. This definition of affordable housing then includes traditional social housing (owned by governments or not-for-profit housing providers), as well as other forms of sub-market and market housing for rent and purchase.

Government's Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan (KPMG, 2012). In New South Wales (NSW), the introduction of a new state-level affordable housing planning policy in 2009 and the implementation of the NBESP together resulted in more than 6,000 affordable housing dwellings being constructed between 2009 and 2012, most of them delivered in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods as part of multi-unit projects of twenty dwellings or fewer (reference anonymised for review). While most of these developments were uncontroversial, there was fierce and high-profile community opposition in a small number of localities (Ruming 2011; Shelter NSW 2012; Ruming 2013). Here, objectors were able to achieve widespread community support for their campaigns and to gain significant political traction. Many proposed affordable housing projects were delayed and some abandoned, and the opposition campaigns were enthusiastically reported in the media under headlines such as "Ghetto coming to a suburb near you" (The Telegraph 2010).

Through a mixed-methods case-study of one of these "extreme" cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of community opposition to affordable housing in NSW, this paper considers how and why conflicts over affordable housing development escalate. Previous research on the phenomenon of community opposition to affordable housing has focused on the concerns raised by objectors, the oppositional tactics used, and the extent to which objector concerns are justified. However, the reasons that people participate in protests against affordable housing and the ways in which those protests gain scale and intensity have not been the subject of study. This paper addresses this gap by looking at how and why community opposition to affordable housing escalated in the Parramatta Local Government Area (LGA) in Western Sydney, one of the NSW localities where opposition to affordable housing development between 2009 and 2011 was at its most fierce and widespread.

The Parramatta case-study formed part of a larger research project concerned with the phenomenon of community opposition to affordable housing across three Australian states.<sup>2</sup> Twenty people were interviewed for the Parramatta case-study: eight representatives of NSW Government housing and planning authorities; three officers from Parramatta Council; three local politicians; three non-government affordable housing developers; and three non-government affordable housing advocates. The aim with the interviews was to identify the concerns raised by opponents of affordable housing development and the factors that led to the escalation of opposition campaigns. In addition, 154 doorstep interview-surveys were conducted with householders in areas of Parramatta where there had been opposition to affordable housing developments between 2009 and 2011. These interview-surveys consisted of questions about the factors driving the opposition in each area and the tactics used by objectors. Finally, 401 written submissions made to planning authorities in opposition to affordable housing proposals in Parramatta between 2009 and 2011 were analysed for manifest and latent meaning (Babbie 2007).

### **Local context**

In 2009, the NSW Government introduced a new planning policy known as the State Environmental Planning Policy (Affordable Rental Housing), referred to in this paper as the A-SEPP (NSW Government 2009). In NSW, there are two forms of statutory planning instrument. State Environmental Planning Policies (SEPPs) are NSW Government policies that deal with issues of State significance, while Local Environmental Plans (LEPs) are land-use plans prepared by councils for local areas. Where there is a conflict between these two tiers of policy, SEPPs override LEPs. The principal aims of the new A-SEPP were to encourage privately-financed affordable housing development and streamline planning assessment for projects delivered by the State Housing Authority (SHA). Among its many provisions (Davison, Gurran et al. 2012), the A-SEPP overrode council planning controls to make certain forms of privately-financed low or medium density infill development permissible in all residential zones, irrespective of council planning controls, so long as a proportion of the dwellings provided were rented as affordable housing at sub-market rates (NSW Government, 2009). Where such forms of development were already permissible in an area under an LEP, the A-SEPP offered density bonuses to private developers for projects that incorporated affordable housing. All privately-financed affordable housing projects proposed under the A-SEPP were to be assessed by local council planning authorities, as would any other development application of equivalent scale.

---

<sup>2</sup> Reference anonymised for review

The A-SEPP also made one and two storey SHA projects, comprising 20 dwellings or fewer, permissible without consent. In effect, this meant that the SHA could self-assess its own housing developments without the need for consent from a council planning authority. The timing of the A-SEPP's introduction in 2009 was significant because the Australian Government's NBESP invested AUS\$5.25 billion in the construction of new affordable housing that same year (KPMG 2012). It was therefore possible for many of the new affordable housing dwellings to be delivered through the NBESP to be self-assessed by SHA officers under the provisions of the A-SEPP.<sup>3</sup> The Australian Government mandated that the total construction cost for each new dwelling delivered through the SHI should be no more than AUS\$300,000 (Shepherd and Abelson, 2010). In order to achieve this, the SHA opted to construct most of its 6,000 new dwellings on land that it already owned, obviating the need for land to be acquired for development (ibid.). As a result, the development of SHI dwellings in NSW was often clustered in areas where the SHA had large land holdings.

Most of Sydney was not directly affected by the A-SEPP provisions, either because the SHA owned no land locally, or because market conditions meant that the A-SEPP provisions made no financial sense for private affordable housing developers. However, in some parts of the city, especially in middle-ring and outer suburbs, these two initiatives together brought a significant increase in levels of affordable housing construction (Davison et al., 2012). In most of these places, the development was uncontroversial and there was little or no opposition from local community members (Shepherd and Abelson, 2010). However, in a small number of LGAs across the state, opposition campaigns gained widespread community support, attracted media attention and became highly-politicised (Shelter NSW, 2011; Ruming, 2013). In order to understand how and why the opposition to affordable housing escalated in these places, discussion now turns to events in perhaps the most high-profile of them: Parramatta.

### **Community concerns about affordable housing development in Parramatta**

Located 23km west of Sydney's main commercial centre, Parramatta is both the focus for commerce in Western Sydney and one of Australia's oldest settlements. Owing to Sydney's asymmetrical urban form, it also lies at the geographical centre of the Greater Sydney Metropolitan region on key road and rail corridors. The Parramatta LGA comprises a total area of 61km<sup>2</sup> and is home to around 170,000 people (ABS, 2011), although the commercial centre serves a much larger population than this. Parramatta's residents are socio-culturally diverse and highly-educated, although typically earning less than the median income for NSW and Australia and with a higher unemployment rate. Although there are many high-rise buildings in Parramatta's commercial centre, much of the LGA consists of low-density residential areas dominated by freestanding single-storey dwellings.

Unpublished data from Parramatta Council suggests that thirty-nine affordable housing developments were proposed in Parramatta between 2009 and 2011. Thirty-one were privately-financed and eight were being developed by the SHA as part of the SHI. In total, 401 submissions were received against these thirty-nine proposals, with the number of submissions received against individual projects ranging from one to 130. The first step for the research team was to build a picture of the most common concerns that people raised about these developments, based on the content of their submission. As shown in Table 1, the three most common issues raised by submitters were parking provision, built form and amenity for neighbouring properties (usually privacy or daylight access). Quotes reflecting key themes in the submissions data were also recorded, and will be used below to illustrate important points.

**Table 1: Concerns raised in formal submissions made against affordable housing proposals in Parramatta LGA (2009-11), from a total of 401 submissions against 40 development applications.**

Issue of concern raised by submitter (I oppose the development proposal because of the potential impact on...)	Percentage of submissions in which this concern was raised (from total of 401)
--	--

<sup>3</sup> There were avenues other than the A-SEPP for assessing SHA housing funded as part of the NBESP – see Ruming (2013) and Shepherd and Abelson (2010) for more detail. However, this paper focuses on opposition to those developments that were assessed under the A-SEPP provisions.

Parking/traffic	84%
Physical inappropriateness / overdevelopment	73%
Amenity for neighbours	72%
“Out of Character”	62%
Planning assessment process not legitimate	43%
Crime and safety	40%
Property management	40%
Low income of future residents	24%
Transiency of future residents	20%
Own property de-valued	15%
Environmental / infrastructure issues (flooding, sewerage etc.)	12%
Antisocial behaviour	3%

Source: Submissions accessed through Parramatta City Council’s “My Development” online planning portal

Interviewees explained that these three main concerns were most often linked to the way that the A-SEPP overrode council planning controls to make certain forms of development permissible for affordable housing when those same development forms would not be permissible for market housing under planning controls in the LEP. For instance, the A-SEPP’s parking standards were less onerous than Parramatta Council’s and many objectors could not understand why affordable housing developments could be approved under the A-SEPP when they incorporated fewer parking spaces than required by the Council. Similar concerns were raised with respect to the physical form of buildings proposed under the A-SEPP (Figure 1). As a Parramatta politician explained, both residents and politicians were uncomfortable with the way that the A-SEPP made multi-unit affordable housing development permissible in areas zoned in Parramatta Council’s LEP for single-family housing only:

*We felt uncomfortable because [the A-SEPP] introduced medium density development – the housing stock we had in the main was single dwellings and they were in traditional neighbourhoods...Under our planning scheme, medium density housing wasn’t permissible. So the [affordable housing developers] effectively were bringing in developments which a normal developer – your average developer – wouldn’t be able to do.*

**Figure 1: Multi-unit affordable housing developed by the SHA in a Parramatta street otherwise dominated by detached dwellings (Photo: Gethin Davison)**



Some submitters questioned the legitimacy of the A-SEPP assessment process on the grounds that it overrode Council planning controls for parking or built form, claiming that this removal of planning powers from locally-elected representatives was a violation of their rights:

*In our view, the AHSEPP 2009 substantially diminishes our rights, by removing significant planning powers from our elected representatives in the community, thru allowing the Minister dictatorial powers of veto and a "God-like" approval of developments.*

The submissions data also reveals, however, that concerns about the characteristics of prospective affordable housing residents were raised in almost a quarter of submissions and crime and safety in forty percent. Indeed many submitters were explicit that their objection was simply about not wanting affordable housing in their neighbourhood because of who might live there:

*We find the thought of "affordable housing" and the type of people it will attract, quite sickening. Whether we like it or not, it is a proven fact that once these types of buildings are*

*erected, problems arise in the neighbourhood and large blocks of units become ghettos or slums ... [the types of people] affordable housing and units attract, are ones from the lower parts of society – non-house proud people, ones that don't care about the environment or their neighbourhood and what are called society's "lowest of low". Why should our neighbourhood of respectable home buyers and taxpayers have to be subject to living next to these types of people???*

This framing of the issues was not uncommon. Submitters would often position themselves as “solid citizens” or “taxpayers”, raising concerns about the “quality” of future affordable housing residents. Another common statement was that an area already had its “fair share” of affordable housing or that it was unfair for homeowners to be subsidising affordable housing residents to live in such a desirable area; some submitters argued that affordable housing was not appropriate for this location and should instead be sent “out west”, referring presumably to Sydney’s outer west. While the characteristics and/or behaviours of affordable housing residents were raised as concerns in almost a quarter of submissions, there was a widespread view among interviewees that this understated the prevalence of the prejudice that existed. For many, concern about prospective residents was seen to be *the* principal reason for objections to affordable housing in Sydney. These interviewees pointed out that objectors often do not raise the characteristics of residents explicitly in written submissions, both because they know that this will gain them no traction with planning authorities, and because they do not want to reveal their prejudice in a document that would ultimately be publicly available.

### **The escalation of community opposition to affordable housing in Parramatta**

In addition to the analysis of submissions data, we spoke to many people who had been involved in opposition campaigns against affordable housing proposals in Parramatta through doorstep interview-surveys. A total of 154 interview-surveys were conducted in nine areas of Parramatta where affordable housing proposals had been opposed by community members since 2009. Respondents were asked what tactics had been used by objectors and how oppositional actions had been organised (reference anonymised for review). Where more than a handful of submissions had been received against development proposals, local residents usually recalled that one or several ringleaders had driven and co-ordinated the opposition campaign. These were typically people living close to the development site. The ringleaders had created pro-forma submission templates, door-knocked to obtain signatures for petitions, arranged community meetings, attended and spoke at council meetings, lobbied politicians and contacted the media in an effort to publicise their campaign. Some participants who had been involved in opposition campaigns against affordable housing proposals explained to us that they had only really engaged in the opposition because community ringleaders had encouraged them to do so. In the cases where large numbers of submissions had been made, supporters had also sometimes been recruited through existing networks such as residents groups and school parent teacher associations.

A key tactic used by objectors to affordable housing development in Parramatta was the lobbying of local politicians. What objectors found in many cases was that local politicians in Parramatta were also opposed to much of the affordable housing development coming through under the A-SEPP – both privately-financed and funded through the NBESP. Politicians from Parramatta Council consistently attacked the NSW Government in the media over a perceived lack of community consultation on SHA developments and the inappropriate physical form of many affordable housing proposals. As discussed above, these politicians were angry about the way that the A-SEPP removed planning powers from councils and made certain forms of multi-unit affordable housing development permissible, irrespective of Council planning controls. However, what many other interviewees suggested to us was that the involvement of politicians in the opposition in Parramatta was actually more about them attempting to further their political careers than it was about the affordable housing development itself.

A NSW election was scheduled for March 2011, meaning that the opposition campaigns in Parramatta between late-2009 and early-2011 coincided with a period in which political candidates were canvassing for votes. It had been a Labor State Government that introduced the A-SEPP in 2009. In the run-up to the election, some candidates from the opposition Liberal Party were said by interviewees to have made promises to voters in the Parramatta community that the A-SEPP would be abolished should the Liberals gain power in 2011. Several interviewees claimed that the involvement of politicians in the opposition to affordable housing around this time was “*about votes and nothing else*”. They suggested that some political candidates had sided with objectors as a way of getting column space in newspapers, while simultaneously gaining political support from disgruntled

objectors and discrediting the Labor candidates against whom they would be competing in the 2011 Election. As a former politician explained:

*[The opposition] was more than just being [about affordable housing being developed in the area] ... there is a high degree of political competitiveness in some council areas. And certainly that was the case in Parramatta – that councillors would compete for column space in local newspapers and in my mind would sometimes take positions that weren't even their own positions, just to garner some support or in fact more likely just to have a negative impact on an alternative candidate. So what happened was that the politics [of the opposition to affordable housing] were sort of exploited in a very cynical way by some councillors...*

Six months before the NSW election in September 2010, the Mayor of Parramatta – who was due to stand as an Independent candidate for the seat of Granville in that election – took the decision to erect 3m steel signs outside nearly thirty affordable housing developments proposed in the Parramatta LGA by the SHA.<sup>4</sup> The signs proclaimed that the development proposed for those sites was “*Unsupported Development: brought to you by the State Government*” (Figure 2). In many cases, the erection of the signs was accompanied by a visit from Council politicians to homes in surrounding streets, through which householders were alerted to the proposed affordable housing developments and the Council was distanced from them. As one Council politician recalled:

*... In many cases too I'd be on the front foot. When I see these [affordable housing projects] being advertised I'd be out there with a letter, telling people – this is going to happen in your neighbourhood...So I didn't sort of hang around and wait for it to happen, for people to get upset. It happened the other way around.*

The erection of the signs came fourteen months after the A-SEPP was introduced and eighteen months after Parramatta Council had published an affordable housing strategy in which it was stated that “*action*” was needed to address the lack of affordable housing. What this quote reveals, however, was that by mid-2010 not only were Council politicians involved in the opposition, they had actually become key agitators. Interviewees explained that the erection of the signs gained much media attention and made residents even more fearful of affordable housing proposals, leading ultimately to higher levels of opposition to individual development proposals. Some affordable housing developers apparently even had to leave site meetings around this time because of the hostility that they encountered from irate residents, one explaining that it was “either that or we were going to get bashed”. A private developer recalled that in the panicked atmosphere that the signs helped generate, their firm's proposals were being opposed by community members in extraordinary numbers simply because they comprised affordable housing.

**Figure 2: Parramatta Council's Unsupported Development signs outside the development site of an affordable housing project proposed by the SHA (Photo: Peter Malone)**

---

<sup>4</sup> The City of Parramatta is divided into five electoral wards with each ward represented by three local politicians. In the 2008 local government elections, six local politicians were elected to the Council from the Australian Labor Party and six from the Liberal Party, with the remaining three members being representatives from various Independent parties. The Mayor at this time was a representative of the Woodville Independents who was also due to stand in the NSW Election.



The campaigns of opposition to affordable housing proposals in Parramatta continued into 2011 and in March 2011 the Liberal-National party coalition gained a landslide victory in the NSW election. Three months later and the newly-elected NSW Government was announcing that multi-unit affordable housing developments would no longer be permissible under the A-SEPP in areas where only single-family housing was permissible under council planning controls. Interviewees explained that as a direct result, many privately-financed affordable housing projects that had been proposed under the original version of the A-SEPP were refused consent by councils. As they pointed out, this meant that the Liberal candidates who had promised voters in Parramatta they would put a stop to affordable housing development if they gained power were true to their word.

### **Discussion**

Proposals for affordable housing in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods are often subject to opposition from local community members (Dear 1992; Hogan 1996; Galster, Tatian et al. 2003; Press 2009; Ruming 2013). Between 2009 and 2011, the number of new affordable housing dwellings being constructed in NSW increased dramatically due to the combined effects of the NBESP and A-SEPP. While most of the development projects proposed were not especially controversial, there were a handful of LGAs where the opposition was able to achieve sufficient scale and intensity to gain political traction and make media headlines. The coverage of these escalatory cases in the media can – and did in NSW between 2009 and 2011 – give the impression that affordable housing development is something that is universally opposed, while the fiercest opposition campaigns can have serious consequences for developers and residents of affordable housing. This being the case, it is important to understand how and why community opposition campaigns escalate.

In Parramatta, community opposition to affordable housing development began in mid-2009 with small groups of residents living close to proposed SHA projects making written submissions to planning authorities and raising concerns with Council politicians, with this occasionally gaining coverage in the local media. One year later, the opposition was being driven by council politicians and an atmosphere had been created in which residents had become militant about any affordable housing proposal. The range of concerns raised by objectors and the strength and geographical spread of the opposition across the LGA recalls Cohen's concept of "moral panic" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Cohen 2002); a state of public alarm and anxiety had emerged in Parramatta in response to the perceived threat that affordable housing was seen to pose for established values and interests.

Interviewees generally believed that opposition to affordable housing development in Parramatta had tended to be fiercest where there was no precedent for multi-unit housing or affordable housing, and where incomes and the proportion of local residents who were homeowners, rather than renters, was high. As shown in Table 1, our analysis of 401 submissions against affordable housing proposals in Parramatta between 2009 and 2011 suggests that parking/traffic, physical form/density, and amenity (overlooking, shadowing, privacy etc.) were the most common concerns raised by objectors, with these issues raised in over seventy per cent of submissions. While there are broad similarities between the results from Parramatta and those from equivalent work in the USA, property values tended to feature less prominently in Parramatta submissions than they have done in data from the

USA (National Law Centre, 1997; Galster et al., 2003; Tighe, 2010). The sense that the proposed development was “out of character” was also an issue in over sixty per cent of submissions, with this being about both physical and social form; the character of the neighbourhood’s physical environment and the character of prospective affordable housing residents were both of concern to some objectors, supporting recent work that argues that neighbourhood character is at once physical and social (Dovey et al., 2009; Davison and Rowden, 2012). Over forty per cent of submissions questioned the legitimacy of the A-SEPP planning approval process. Here, considerable resentment was apparent in many submissions, particularly regarding the ways in which the A-SEPP could override local planning controls for parking and physical form: submitters could not understand why this was possible. At one level, many of the concerns raised by objectors about parking and physical form can be seen as not unreasonable – as many developments proposed under the A-SEPP did contravene LEP provisions.

The fact that a proposed project would be occupied by relatively low-income people was raised as a concern by nearly a quarter of submitters in Parramatta, with a fifth raising related concerns that the people living there would be transient. However, interviewees suggested that concerns about the characteristics of residents were likely to be under-represented in the submissions data, with many people concerned about the characteristics of affordable housing residents choosing not to make this explicit in their written submission. Many interviewees believed that despite the findings from the submissions data, the characteristics of prospective residents was, in fact, *the principal concern* for most objectors to affordable housing proposals. What was particularly troubling to us was the number of submissions in which clear prejudice was apparent against affordable housing residents, with insulting and offensive language often used: affordable housing residents were described as being “riff raff” and of low quality or character, with common associations made between affordable housing residents and drug addiction, crime, unemployment, alcoholism and paedophilia. It was also clear from submissions and interview-survey data that many people in the Parramatta community were completely confused about what affordable housing was, who lived in it and who it was managed by – most believed that even affordable housing being developed by private or NFP developers was “Housing Commission”. Alongside recent work on the stigma attached to affordable housing in Australia (Jacobs, Arthurson et al. 2011), we believe that our research in Parramatta (see reference anonymised for review) highlights a real image problem for affordable housing in Australia at present.

There is no reason to believe that prejudice against affordable housing residents is any more pronounced in Parramatta than it is in the various other parts of NSW where there was little or no controversy about affordable housing development between 2009 and 2011. Partly the high level of opposition in Parramatta was a product of the sheer numbers of affordable housing dwellings being proposed. The SHA owned large areas of well-located land in Parramatta and much of this was subsequently redeveloped in 2009 and 2010 as part of the NBESP. Unlike many other parts of Sydney, market conditions in Parramatta also meant that the density bonuses offered to private developers under the A-SEPP made sense financially (Davison et al., 2012). However, based on our analysis of submissions data and discussions with interviewees and interview-survey participants, we believe that there were a further two factors that led the opposition to escalate in Parramatta: the effectiveness of community ringleaders and the involvement of local politicians in opposition campaigns.

With respect to many of the fiercest and most high-profile opposition campaigns in Parramatta, participants in the interview-surveys often told us that there were a small number of ringleaders who wrote pro-forma submission letters, arranged petitions, visited the homes of neighbours to encourage them to participate in the opposition, lobbied local politicians and contacted the media. The skills of these ringleaders and the level and types of resources available to them, including their social networks, often had a major bearing on the success (or not) of the opposition campaign. Where there were no motivated and well-resourced ringleaders driving the opposition, campaigns in Parramatta tended to remain highly-localized. A key tactic for ringleaders was to lobby local politicians and where they were successful in gaining the support of local politicians, their opposition campaigns often gathered momentum quickly. Without local politicians from Parramatta Council attacking the NSW Government in the media, erecting the “Unsupported development” signs and door-knocking in an effort to raise local awareness of SHA development proposals among local residents, it seems certain that the opposition to affordable housing in Parramatta would not have been nearly as high in profile, nor as widespread.

What many politicians in Parramatta found particularly objectionable about much affordable housing development between 2009 and 2011 was the way that local planning controls in the LEP were being

overridden by the provisions of the A-SEPP to permit certain forms of development that would not otherwise have been permissible. However, many of our interviewees not from Parramatta Council were in no doubt that the involvement of local politicians in the opposition was also motivated by the opportunity that they perceived for political gain. Some politicians were said to have seen an opportunity, through involvement in the opposition, to discredit the NSW Labor Government, increase their own media profile, and gain local support from voting community members. Interviewees felt that it was easy for these politicians to scaremonger in an effort to gain support or discredit opponents because there was already so much underlying prejudice against affordable housing residents. As one stated:

“...the problem with affordable housing is [that] it’s very easy for politicians to exploit the fears of the community by telling them that you’re going to get a slum next door to you.”

Clearly there are close links between this quotation and our comments above about the image of affordable housing.

### **Conclusion**

Although most affordable housing development in NSW between 2009 and 2011 was not especially controversial, the reaction from community members in “extreme” cases (Flyvbjerg 2006) such as Parramatta was seen by interviewees for this research to have had an influence on the outcomes of the 2011 NSW Election and to have ultimately led to significant amendments being made to the A-SEPP in the same year. This is not to mention the resources that were put into the opposition by community members and local politicians and the financial costs faced by private developers. There are also other unquantifiable impacts that may result from such high-profile opposition to affordable housing: it may act to further stigmatize subsidized housing, generate increased fear of affordable housing residents and damage faith in government and planning assessment processes. Perhaps most importantly, it can potentially have serious implications for the integration of affordable housing residents into host communities. Elsewhere, we have set out detailed recommendations for mitigating or addressing community opposition to affordable housing and preventing opposition campaigns from escalating (reference anonymised for review). As such, we will keep our final thoughts brief in this paper. With respect to the Parramatta case study, we believe that our findings suggest a few crucial points.

Firstly, affordable housing has a major image problem and unless its image can be improved, there will always be a good chance that opposition to proposed projects will be encountered and that this opposition will escalate in some cases. Currently, affordable housing is associated by many members of the public with poorly-maintained high-rise tower blocks and suburban estates, and with residents who exhibit a range of problematic and/or criminal behaviours. Secondly, a perceived conflict between local and NSW planning policies was a factor contributing to the escalation of the opposition in Parramatta, generating or exacerbating resentment and giving people another reason to object to affordable housing development. Thirdly, it seemed that many of the people who had engaged in opposition campaigns had been encouraged to do so by community ringleaders. Had there been more extensive community involvement in decision-making – including education about affordable housing – and/or had affordable housing developers been able to identify these potential ringleaders and to try to bring them onside as supporters of the proposal with some agency in its planning and design, some of the opposition may have been avoidable. Finally, local politicians played a key part in the escalation of the opposition in Parramatta. Whether this was about problems with the affordable housing development being proposed or about gaining political advantage, it is clear to us that the most important measure in preventing the escalation of community opposition to affordable housing from escalating is for developers to build strong relationships with local politicians and gain their in-principle support. If affordable housing can be made part of the political or policy mandate for local politicians then they are unlikely to engage in stunts like the erection of the Unsupported Development signs, and far more likely to support an affordable housing proposal where it faces opposition from residents.

### **References**

- Babbie, E. (2007). The Practice of Social Research. Belmont, CA, Thomson Wadsworth.
- Cohen, S. (2002). Folk Devils and Moral Panics. New York, Routledge.

- Darcy, M. (2010). "De-concentration of Disadvantage and Mixed Income Housing: a Critical Discourse Approach." Housing, Theory and Society 27(1): 1-22.
- Davison, G., N. Gurrán, et al. (2012). Urban renewal, affordable housing and planning: emerging practice in Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales. Melbourne, AHURI.
- Davison, G. and E. Rowden (2012). "'There's Something about Subi': Defending and Creating Neighbourhood Character in Perth, Australia." Journal of Urban Design 17(2): 189-212.
- Dear, M. (1992). "Understanding and Overcoming the NIMBY Syndrome." Journal of the American Planning Association 58(3): 288-300.
- Dovey, K., I. Woodcock, et al. (2009). "A test of character: Regulating place-identity in inner-city Melbourne." Urban Studies 46(12): 2595-2615.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). "Five misunderstandings about case-study research." Qualitative Inquiry 12(2): 219-245.
- Galster, G., P. Tatian, et al. (2003). Why Not In My Backyard? Neighborhood impacts of deconcentrating assisted housing. New Brunswick, New Jersey, Center for Urban Policy Research.
- Goode, E. and N. Ben-Yehuda (1994). "Moral panics: Culture, politics, and social construction." Annual review of sociology: 149-171.
- Gurrán, N., V. Milligan, et al. (2007). International practice in planning for affordable housing: lessons for Australia, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- Hogan, J. (1996). Scattered-site housing: characteristics and consequences, US Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Iglesias, T. (2002). "Managing Local Opposition to Affordable Housing: A New Approach to NIMBY." Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law 12(1).
- Jacobs, K., K. Arthurson, et al. (2011). The stigmatisation of social housing: findings from a panel investigation. AHURI Final Report 166. Melbourne, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. 166.
- Jacobs, K., R. Atkinson, et al. (2010). "What future for public housing? A critical analysis." Final Report Series of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute 151: 1-41.
- KPMG (2012). Social Housing Initiative Review Housing Ministers' Advisory Committee.
- National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (1997). Access delayed, access denied: local opposition to housing and services for homeless people across the United States. Washington D.C., National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.
- Nguyen, M. T., V. Basolo, et al. (2012). "Opposition to Affordable Housing in the USA: Debate Framing and the Responses of Local Actors." Housing, Theory and Society: 1-24.
- Press, M. (2009) Community Engagement and Community Housing: Lessons and practical strategies for Local Government for responding to contested community housing proposals.
- Ruming, K. (2011). Understandings of Social Mix and Community Opposition to Social Housing Constructed under the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan. State of Australian Cities 2011. Melbourne.
- Ruming, K. (2013). "'It wasn't about public housing, it was about the way it was done': challenging planning not people in resisting the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan, Australia." Journal of Housing and the Built Environment: 1-22.
- Schively, C. (2007). "Understanding the NIMBY and LULU Phenomena: Reassessing Our Knowledge Base and Informing Future Research." Journal of Planning Literature 21(3): 255-266.
- Shelter NSW (2012). Localism and affordable housing. Sydney, Shelter NSW.
- Shepherd, N. and Abelson, P. (2010) Review of implementation of the Nation Building and Jobs Plan in NSW and potential applications for other projects, report produced for NSW Government, [http://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/taskforce\\_pdf/other/NBJP-Review-Part-1-Report.pdf](http://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/taskforce_pdf/other/NBJP-Review-Part-1-Report.pdf), accessed 4 December 2012

The Telegraph, 2 January 2010, Ghetto coming to a suburb near you, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/property/ghetto-coming-to-a-suburb-near-you/story-e6frezt0-1225815358851>, accessed 27 November 2012

Tighe, J. R. (2010). "Public Opinion and Affordable Housing: A Review of the Literature." Journal of Planning Literature 25(1): 3-17.

Troy, P. (2012). Accommodating Australians: Commonwealth Government Involvement in Housing. Sydney, Federation Press.