

Chapter 33

The Politics of Space Appropriation: A Case Study of Women's Struggles for Homeplace in Chicago Public Housing: An Abstract¹

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Roberta M. Feldman is an architectural educator, researcher, and activist who advocates for and supports socially responsible design. Dr. Feldman's work focuses on housing and community planning and design, with an emphasis on underhoused Americans. Presently, she is engaging in participatory research with community women activists in Chicago Public Housing. An associate professor and Director of Graduate Studies at the School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Chicago, Dr. Feldman also is Editor of the Journal of Architectural and Planning Research, an international, multidisciplinary resource for professionals and scholars.

Susan Stall is a teacher, activist, and sociologist. As a housing activist Dr. Stall coordinated two conference projects: "Women and Safe Shelter: Creating and Recreating Community" in 1986, and "Women and Public Housing: Hidden Strength, Unclaimed Power" in 1987. As a community consultant, she has worked with residents in public housing, including representatives from Wentworth Gardens, to form the citywide advocacy organization, Chicago Authority Residents Taking Action (CHARTA). Dr. Stall's research focuses on women and community-building in both rural and urban settings. Dr. Stall is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, Northeastern Illinois University. In addition, she coordinates the Student Internship Program and is a core faculty member in the Women's Studies Department at NEIU.

Appropriation of place is conceived of as a fundamental process of "becoming-at-home." It is a concept that has been used to describe how people create, choose, take possession of, personalize, modify, enhance, and care for, or simply intentionally and routinely use the residential environment to make it their own.

The focus of current inquiry has been on the universality of the individual experience of appropriation of place. This chapter seeks to extend this inquiry and situate the inquiry within its socio-political context. This concept will be examined in the context of the power relationships that frame people's transactions with the residential environment. In particular, we will examine how racism, sexism, and classism intersect to mediate people's relative power to appropriate place and its outcomes.

In the United States public housing is the residence of many of this nation's poor. It houses primarily low-income, minority, female-headed households—one consequence of the feminization of poverty. This housing environment is beset by high crime rates, poor maintenance and services, and physical deterioration. For policy makers and the public alike, the role that women in public housing have played in their struggles to save their homeplaces, as well as the struggles of other low-income women of color, all too often remain invisible. Information from an ongoing case study of the history of women residents' activism in one Chicago public housing development, Wentworth Gardens, offers an alternative portrayal of women's struggles to save their homeplace. Our participatory research findings demonstrate how women resident activists, despite actual limited power over the places they live, persist in a continual struggle to appropriate places within their housing development in order to improve their own and their neighbors' lives. These appropriated places include the on-site field house and the laundromat. In the process of taking possession of, modifying, and utilizing these spaces, residents cultivate confidence, skills, and collective resources for greater social and political power.

The activism of women at Wentworth Gardens illustrates the importance of considering the homeplaces in which, and over which, the everyday power struggles to maintain households and communities are manifest. To take control of the physical settings of their housing development, Wentworth women have had to defy conventional conceptions of their capabilities and institutional regulations of their rights to control these settings. Their ongoing struggle for the appropriation of

homeplace has not only provided a site for resistance, but has itself come to be resistance. Finally, these local struggles suggest that homeplace is an accessible and central site for groups of limited resources to engage in social change.

Note

¹ Forthcoming in *Women and the Environment*, in the *Human Behavior & Environment Series*, Irwin Altman & Arza Churchman, Eds., Volume 13.