

# Inclusionary Housing and Inclusionary Neighborhoods in China

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## ABSTRACT

As housing prices soar and economic disparities increase across China, a growing number of cities have adopted inclusionary housing policies as a local means to produce public housing and foster economic and social inclusion. These policies require developers to provide a certain percentage of public housing in every new market-rate development. Based on a literature review, this paper first investigates the definition of inclusionary neighborhoods through the lenses of New Urbanism and 'sense of community.' An inclusionary neighborhood can provide its residents with a high level of social interaction, reinforced community identity, and strong community attachment, regardless of members' different socioeconomic backgrounds. This paper then explores two elements that can affect social inclusion on a neighborhood scale, namely the physical design and community-building activities of a neighborhood. Based on fieldwork conducted by the author in the summer of 2019, this paper looks at inclusionary housing developments in the city of Zhengzhou, China and further examines the relationship between these two elements and the creation of inclusionary neighborhoods. Finally, this paper considers how local governments and designers can work together to best achieve inclusionary neighborhoods in China.

Inclusionary housing policies first appeared in the United States during the 1970s in response to the housing affordability crisis and residential segregation of the preceding decades. Such policies helped create affordable housing and foster economic and social inclusion without relying on direct public subsidies, instead tapping the economic gains created from rising real estate values. Over the past two decades, inclusionary housing not only entered the mainstream of housing policy in the United States but also spread to other Western countries, including Canada, England, Ireland, France, and Spain, where it has taken different forms reflecting varied housing policies and land-use regulations.<sup>1</sup>

On the other side of the world, skyrocketing housing prices affect most cities in China, which is in the midst of massive real estate development after the country's real estate market was reborn in 1998. Housing affordability has become a pressing social issue in China, causing tremendous social discontent. Under strong social and political pressures, China's central government restructured its public housing system in 2007 and made ambitious plans to expand public housing provisions for low- and moderate-income households in the following five-year period.<sup>2</sup> Local governments bear overall responsibility for providing and allocating public housing units based on local socio-economic conditions, but they are under the purview of the central government's strong directives.<sup>3</sup> To relieve budgetary pressures, many cities in China have moved from government-led, large-scale, and concentrated public housing developments to a market-driven, scattered, and incremental approach, which requires new market-rate housing developments to include a minimum proportion of public housing units – similar to inclusionary housing policies in the West.<sup>4</sup>

Inclusionary housing in China is still in the stage of exploration. It is implemented primarily as a strategy to increase the

supply of public housing, whereas fostering social and economic inclusion appears to be a secondary goal.<sup>5</sup> As researchers and policymakers realized that large-scale concentrated public housing developments cause and will continue to cause residential segregation and aggravated poverty, inclusionary housing policies are also tasked with addressing these concerns and promoting social and economic integration within communities.<sup>6</sup> However, scholars have raised questions and debates around how inclusionary housing addresses its goal of fostering inclusion. Can inclusionary housing achieve a higher level of inclusiveness than homogeneous housing? Recent Chinese studies have indicated mixed results: some found mixed living in inclusionary housing developments helped increase economic and social opportunities for low-income residents, whereas others have indicated that due to the primary goal of fulfilling the government's public housing quota, inclusionary housing in China has not yet achieved the mission of fostering social and economic inclusion.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

This conflict may result from the fact that there is no clear and consistent expectation of what social goals inclusionary housing developments should achieve. To initiate the discussion, this paper investigates what inclusionary housing should contribute to the neighborhood, and additionally, what an inclusionary neighborhood should look like. This paper explores the definition of inclusionary neighborhoods in the light of New Urbanism and 'sense of community.' Discussions on these two notions barely touch upon public housing developments; nevertheless, they shed light on the idea of socially inclusive neighborhoods. This paper presents two elements from this line of thought that may contribute to the development of inclusionary neighborhoods – the physical environment of a neighborhood and community-building activities. Next, this paper draws from my fieldwork conducted in the City of Zhengzhou over the summer of 2019.

This fieldwork indicates that although households of different social groups live near each other in inclusionary housing neighborhoods, such proximity has led to little social or otherwise meaningful integration across socioeconomic class. This paper concludes with a discussion on how policy and practice might best address the goals that inclusionary housing has yet to achieve and maximize the impacts of inclusionary housing. Local governments and designers should work together and take advantage of well-designed inclusionary neighborhoods to generate significant social and economic benefits.

## INCLUSIONARY NEIGHBORHOODS, NEW URBANISM, AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Before 2007, public housing in China was developed in concentrated, large-scale projects of units exclusively for low- to middle-income households. Such projects may be built by private developers at the request of local governments but are managed by government agencies.<sup>10</sup> Since local governments provide urban land at no charge for public housing, these concentrated public housing projects tend to be located at urban fringes, with poor access to public services and economic opportunities.<sup>11, 12</sup> This has contributed to the social and spatial marginalization and aggregation of the poor in cities across China. As the demand for public housing continues to grow with rising housing prices, questions regarding how to address rapidly rising housing inequality and class-based residential segregation arise. In 2007, facing skyrocketing housing prices in the midst of massive real estate developments, the State Council of China reexamined its public housing developments and introduced inclusionary housing (*peitao jianshe* in Chinese), which required public housing to be produced mainly through inclusionary

housing development (i.e., where developers provide a certain percentage of public housing within new market-rate developments). This approach is considered a promising method to produce public housing by relying more heavily on private developers instead of burdening local governments. Since 2007, a growing number of cities in China have adopted inclusionary housing policies, which could be an important step in reducing residential segregation and promoting social inclusion while meeting the country's massive need for public housing

China is pursuing inclusionary housing as a means of promoting mixed-income, mixed-tenure housing developments to increase the supply of public housing and construct economically and socially diverse and integrated communities. The success of this approach is based on the premise that the spatial desegregation among residents of different income and social groups leads to positive social interactions, exposure to a wider diversity of people and lifestyles, and a higher tolerance for difference.<sup>13</sup> However, the outcomes of similar inclusionary housing practices with aligned goals in Western countries are mixed. While some studies indicate that inclusionary housing is one of the very few successful housing strategies in integrating lower-income families into high-opportunity neighborhoods, others suggest that such mixed-income, mixed-tenure communities cannot generate the expected significant social mixing and inclusion.<sup>14, 15</sup>

### New Urbanism and the Power of Design

In order to contribute to a more equal, inclusive, and cohesive society, the built environment must be designed to promote social interaction. New Urbanism, which embraces socioeconomic diversity and a sense of inclusiveness, engages with this philosophy and pinpoints the concept of inclusionary neighborhoods. New Urbanist design centers on the human scale, prioritizes placemaking, and advocates

for a publicly oriented and walkable neighborhood that generates social interactions, promotes community stability, and reinforces community identity.<sup>16</sup> It strives to encourage residents' use of public spaces and investments in their physical surroundings and community, which would lead them to develop relationships with their neighbors and thus create a sense of community.<sup>17</sup> New Urbanism is generally a pragmatic approach that believes in the power of design to foster economic and social benefits.

### **Concept of 'Sense of Community'**

New Urbanism is often related to the notion of sense of community, which refers to an individual's feeling of belonging to a community with a shared connection and attachment to place.<sup>18, 19</sup> Therefore, this study also uses sense of community as the theoretical base to decode inclusionary neighborhoods. The existing literature on sense of community has explored the following four domains: community (or place) attachment defines the ways in which residents may feel a sense of belonging to their community; community identity describes residents' personal and group interactions "with a specific physically bounded community with its own character"; social interactions are the formal or informal social occasions in which residents build their relationships with each other and with their community; and pedestrianism is the physical design of a community that makes it a walkable neighborhood and fosters street-side activities.<sup>20</sup>

Sense of community is often characterized as a major asset of the New Urbanist approach to urban design. However, it is often explored in the realm of phenomenology, with little connection to New Urbanism. Joongsub Kim and Rachel Kaplan, in their study on the New Urbanist communities Kentlands and Orchard Village in Gaithersburg, Maryland, investigate the role the physical environment plays in fostering a sense of

community in New Urbanist projects.<sup>21</sup> Their study demonstrates that New Urbanist developments in fact can promote a sense of community. The results show that residents of a New Urbanist neighborhood strongly identify with their community, have a high level of social interactions, and feel more attached to their community. Their study also identifies some physical features of a New Urbanist neighborhood that are highly related to enhancing sense of community, including natural features, open spaces, the overall layout of the community, and architectural style of the community, and architectural style.<sup>22</sup>

While New Urbanism design can guarantee physical space for social interactions, the community-wide activities of a neighborhood, such as neighborhood festivals, performances, parties, etc., can provide time for social interactions and contribute to a sense of community. Community activities or events that are geared toward a broad cross-section of residents offer opportunities for residents across social groups to meet and interact. This may allow commonalities of interests and values to develop among residents of different backgrounds.<sup>23, 24</sup> In practice, these community activities or events are often framed to be more attractive to children and youth, who can potentially play a bridging role and pull various members of the neighborhood together.<sup>25</sup>

### **Create Inclusionary Neighborhoods**

Aimed at fostering economic and social inclusion on a neighborhood scale, an inclusionary neighborhood can appropriate theoretical principles of New Urbanism and sense of community. Therefore, an inclusionary neighborhood is one that can provide its residents with 1) a high level of positive social interactions across different income or social groups that build social capital; 2) interactions with their community with respect to its unique social or physical characteristics; and 3) a sense of belonging and attachment to their community across

racial and ethnic groups. Among these three dimensions, a high level of social interaction is the most fundamental and provides support to the other two.

Critics have argued that although New Urbanist developments usually incorporate different types of housing (i.e., a mix of single-family houses, rowhouses, duplexes, apartments, etc.), they do not guarantee a socioeconomically diverse neighborhood; they only attract relatively affluent homeowners and affluent renters who are in need of different types of housing based on their current stage in life.<sup>26</sup> However, inclusionary housing, which is usually implemented through local ordinances, requires the integration of lower-income families into market-rate developments in low-poverty neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the discussion of New Urbanism and sense of community sheds light on how best to promote social interactions and foster community identity and attachment to achieve social and economic inclusion. This paper identifies two elements that play vital functions in creating inclusionary neighborhoods: the physical environment of the neighborhood and diverse community-building activities

As mentioned above, some physical features of a neighborhood play an important role in both New Urbanist development and fostering a sense of community. Those physical features include but are not limited to housing types, architectural styles, public places (e.g., streets, parks, etc.), public buildings, and facilities. In the same vein, some physical features in an inclusionary housing project, such as the boundary of the neighborhood, overall layout, public spaces, and public facilities, can greatly affect – by either enhancing or prohibiting – residents’ social interactions across different income or social groups. Moreover, physical features, such as landscaping and public buildings, can contribute to unique physical character and allow residents to identify with the community.

Besides the physical environment, diverse community-building activities can also influence the inclusiveness of a neighborhood. Holding community-wide activities or events regularly provides opportunities for increased social interaction and could eventually become a part of the social character of the neighborhood, reinforcing community identity and encouraging residents to get more involved in the community’s design.

## **INCLUSIONARY HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN ZHENGZHOU, CHINA**

In China, research on inclusionary neighborhoods and housing policies is quite absent. It is understandable simply because the national effort to provide affordable housing in China (which does not include welfare housing allocated by work units before the 1980s) was initiated 50 years later than it was in the United States. Furthermore, inclusionary housing in China is more of a government-led campaign designed to fulfill the ambitious public housing provision goals set up by the central government. Hence, little attention has been paid to the inclusiveness of neighborhoods to date.

In the summer of 2019, I visited the city of Zhengzhou, China to conduct preliminary research on its public housing developments. Zhengzhou is the capital city of Henan Province, which has experienced explosive urbanization especially since the millennium.<sup>27</sup> By the end of 2018, Zhengzhou reached a population of 10.14 million and become one of China’s megacities. This rapid rise created severe challenges for the City, and housing affordability is one of the most pressing concerns.<sup>28</sup> The spiraling housing prices make housing unaffordable for most working-class households, especially migration workers, who account for more than one-tenth of Zhengzhou’s population.

With the increasing population and the sky-high housing prices, the Zhengzhou municipal government took an active role in, and committed to the implementation of, public housing programs, including both homeownership-oriented housing programs and rental housing programs. Since 2001, about 130,000 public rental housing units have been built in Zhengzhou, benefitting more than 230,000 people.<sup>29</sup> According to data obtained from Zhengzhou Housing Security and Management Bureau in June 2019, the total number of public housing units allocated in Zhengzhou since 2013 has reached 400,000. Based on the numbers, Zhengzhou has made great achievements in public housing development

To ensure the provision of public housing units while relieving governmental budgetary pressures, the Zhengzhou municipal government required new housing developments to include at least 10 percent of the floor area for public housing beginning in 2011. Any local household in Zhengzhou without homeownership is eligible to apply for public housing within an inclusionary housing development if its monthly income per capita does not exceed six times the urban minimum living standard (3300 RMB or 472 USD per month); migrant households need to meet the income and asset thresholds and provide a proof of social insurance and employment contract (for at least one year) in order to qualify. This policy – which is similar to Western inclusionary housing policy – has changed the spatial distribution pattern of public housing on a city-wide scale. Before 2011, public housing units were mostly concentrated within a few giant neighborhoods in urban fringes. After 2011, public housing units have been distributed more evenly across the city, since they are integrated in every new market-rate housing development. Therefore, on a city-wide scale, inclusionary housing policy in Zhengzhou has effectively reduced spatial segregation.

For my fieldwork, I examined and compared nine neighborhoods in Zhengzhou: three with high concentrations of public housing (public housing neighborhoods), and six commodity housing neighborhoods containing the mandated amount of public housing units (inclusionary housing neighborhoods). In each neighborhood, I interviewed staff who worked for the property management enterprise, and four to five residents (40 in total). Investigating the built environment of these neighborhoods and conducting in-depth interviews revealed that inclusionary housing in Zhengzhou has not yet succeeded in creating social and spatial inclusion on a neighborhood scale. The research also revealed that, although most expressed a basic level of satisfaction, many residents articulated some form of disappointment with the evident social and spatial division amongst middle-class market-rate residents and low-income public housing residents. Social and spatial isolation increased as public housing residents expressed feeling stigmatized by their higher-income neighbors within the neighborhood. Both market-rate homeowners or renters and public housing residents mentioned negative social interactions and feelings of detachment. Market-rate residents complained about the behavior of public housing residents, who in turn said they felt disrespected by market-rate residents or by management staff. “We are treated differently,” one of the public housing residents complained. “It’s suffocating.”<sup>30</sup>

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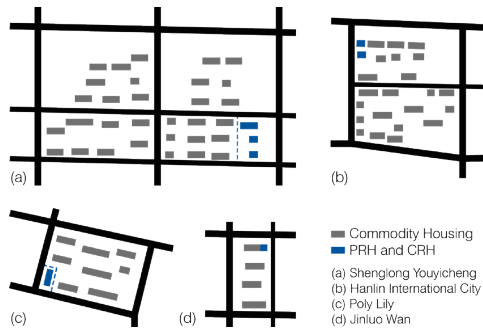


Figure 1. Location of different types of housing in four inclusionary housing neighborhoods (diagram by author).

This phenomenon can be dissected from two perspectives – the neighborhoods’ physical environment and the lack of community-building activities. In terms of the neighborhood’s physical environment, I observed that public housing units are often located at the corners of project sites or are poorly oriented (i.e., facing noisy thruways). Developers generally have control over neighborhood planning and tend to place public housing units in the least desirable locations to save the best locations for more profitable market-rate units (Figure 1). In some cases, public housing units are even separated from market-rate units by physical barriers. For example, in the Poly Lily neighborhood, the only building designated for public housing has been encircled by an iron fence with an independent entrance (Figure 2). Public housing residents do not have access to the beautiful courtyards or public facilities in the market-rate housing section. According to the property manager, the developer built the fence in order to “facilitate better management.”<sup>31</sup> Even though public services and facilities in inclusionary housing projects are generally better than those in concentrated public housing projects, due to the physical barriers, public housing residents in inclusionary housing projects do not have access to them.

This spatial segregation of residents by income within the neighborhood



Figure 2. Iron fence separates public housing from commodity housing in the Poly Lily neighborhood (Zuo, 2019).

reduces opportunities for informal social interactions among residents across different income groups. Laughing, one public housing resident in Poly Lily stated, “we are like sheep being kept in different pens.”<sup>32</sup> Without social interactions, negative stereotypes of public housing residents held by market-rate residents can be reinforced over time, and thus public housing residents feel they are disrespected and gradually become detached from the community. A young couple living in a public housing unit said they were saving money to buy a market-rate apartment. As they explained, “we want to leave this community and have an apartment of our own. This place is not our home.”<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, the lack of community-building activities deepens this divide. None of the inclusionary housing neighborhoods I visited in Zhengzhou had any community-wide activities or events that would engage all of their residents. As mentioned before, community-building activities or events offer opportunities for social interactions among residents. Many residents expressed disappointment, not necessarily with overtly negative behavior, but with the level of unfamiliarity or underlying tension among neighbors. A public housing resident in an inclusionary housing neighborhood complained, “there has been no interaction at all, and we see people all the time and people just kind of walk by and they don’t

make an effort to get to know you.”<sup>34</sup> Other residents stated that community-building efforts are very important and necessary in creating relationships across tenures and incomes.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the lenses of New Urbanism and sense of community, this study offers a definition of inclusionary neighborhoods that incorporates inclusive physical design of a neighborhood and the provision of community-building programming as critical tools to achieve a more cohesive community.

Fostering social interaction across tenure and income groups is the first step in creating inclusionary neighborhoods. Social interactions among residents are more likely with a physical site plan that provides a layout that is conducive to encounters. With adequate social interactions, middle-class market-rate residents can move beyond mainstream media stereotypes and learn firsthand about families living in poverty, while low-income public housing residents can engage with and learn from residents of a different socioeconomic background, which may allow them to tap into new resources to advance their own ambitions.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the design of a neighborhood’s physical environment and community-building activities could become the neighborhood’s unique social or physical character, which can reinforce community identity and community attachment. Consequently, residents would feel a sense of belonging to their community, even with the presence of other class, race, or ethnic groups.

An inclusive neighborhood is one with adequate social interactions among residents across tenure and incomes, where residents have a strong sense of community identity and attachment

to their built environment. To build inclusionary neighborhoods in China, local governments should first put effort into streamlining inclusive design principles by persuading developers to eliminate any forms of physical barrier between housing blocks and mandating fair design in neighborhood planning. It is possible that such requirements will impose more costs or profit loss on developers; therefore, local governments could provide incentives for developers to offset the costs, such as density bonuses (the ability to build with increased density). Second, local governments should better support community-based programming. Local governments could provide financial resources and staff to support inclusionary housing neighborhoods as they organize community-wide activities or events on a regular basis. These two moves can help local governments achieve stronger and broader public support for inclusionary housing development and promote social inclusion citywide.

In addition to local governments, designers should take responsibility in constructing inclusionary neighborhoods. Designers should consider physical features that play an important role in promoting social interactions and community identity in their designs, such as the overall layout, landscape, streets, public spaces, and facilities of a neighborhood. Moreover, given developer’s desire to minimize costs, designers should strive to design public housing units with appropriate standards to ensure quality public housing. Zhengzhou and some other cities in China have insisted that public housing units should be as well-designed in every respect as market-rate units. But in reality, public housing units often get much less attention in architectural design. Therefore, designers should work together with developers and local governments to put effort into constructing inclusionary neighborhoods.

The relationship among inclusionary



neighborhoods, New Urbanism, and sense of community needs to be further studied. More importantly, empirical studies need to be conducted to demonstrate the correlation between the design of neighborhoods' physical environment, community-building activities, and social inclusion. This study is limited in several ways. First, it focuses on several inclusionary housing neighborhoods in the city of Zhengzhou but conducts its literature review mostly from the Western school of thought. The discussion may not be generalizable to China as a whole and may not be suitable in the Chinese context.

Second, inclusionary housing in China is still in its initial development stage and residents are continually learning about it, with public preferences shifting over time. Therefore, more research (both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies) with better data is needed. Nevertheless, on a preliminary level, this research indicates that by broadening the definition of what an inclusive neighborhood looks like in policy, design, and programming, we are able to more succinctly evaluate its success as an effective housing model in China.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Weican Zuo is a second-year doctoral student in Architecture at the University of Michigan. She received her Bachelor of Architecture from Xi'an Jiaotong University in China and Master of Architecture from the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include studying the dynamics related to contemporary models of public and inclusionary housing in both China and the United States, how to develop inclusive neighborhoods, and China's urbanization and sustainable urban development.

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