

1. Title of the submission:

Community and environment in a desert metropolis

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6. Abstract

This paper is an initial report on research undertaken by an interdisciplinary research group at Arizona State University. During 2001, the team developed and administered a lengthy questionnaire throughout Phoenix (aka The Valley), whose purpose is to examine how residents in representative neighborhoods view key aspects of the metropolitan environment. The initial results of the research can be summarized as follows:

- A significant majority of Phoenix residents enjoy a sense of community in the Valley, even if they are relative newcomers;
- Low income residents in minority neighborhoods displayed the highest rates of community attachment, but even in affluent Anglo neighborhoods, sometimes criticized as elite fortresses, a majority reported such attachment;
- The social structure of the Valley is still under construction—barely one third of the respondents had lived in their neighborhood for more than five years;
- Mobility is determined by the attractions of certain neighborhoods (pull factors) rather than negative aspects of the Valley and its environment (push factors);
- Residents have fairly consistent concerns for the physical environment, especially for air quality and the quality of water supplies; low income neighborhoods are much more sensitive to environmental degradation than wealthy neighborhoods, despite the common belief that only affluent residents possess an environmental ethic; however, higher income residents are more likely to favor low environmental impacts (such as desert landscaping) than are lower-income neighborhoods; conversely, low-income residents are often very active in energy conservation efforts;
- Residents have a clear sense of what threatens the quality of life in their neighborhood; in low income areas, vandalism and traffic noise are seen as

crucial, whereas in affluent areas aircraft noise and the loss of desert habitat is emphasized;

- While a small majority of residents believes that more pristine desert should be preserved, a larger majority also believes that most housing is too closely packed, thus indicating that perceptions of sprawl and growth are much more complex than are commonly presented.

This paper examines these results, and, in particular, confronts fallacies concerning rapid growth in the southwest and the development of cities such as Phoenix and Las Vegas. Two things are particularly relevant to this critique. The first deals with social segregation. Despite common claims that rapid, low-density growth--often characterized as sprawl—is both elitist and racist, due to the construction of exclusive master-planned communities, it is noteworthy that levels of social segregation, as measured by traditional methods applied to 2000 census data, are slightly lower than in many other cities, and are slowly declining for those racial and ethnic groups typically identified in such analyses (e.g. Glaeser, and Vigdor, 2001). One reason for this is the aggressive building that has occurred and the very affordable housing that has ensued. Although there are clear differentials between different municipalities, there are some jurisdictions in Phoenix that have deliberately sought blue-collar families by encouraging large residential developments with low unit housing costs.

The second thing that is important here is the way in which this housing is brought to market via the master-planned community structure. While there is a widespread dislike for the rigidity of Home Owner Association developments (HOAs), one thing that they do offer is a code of conduct, that serves to diminish the anxiety that is felt by households when confronted by otherness of any type—be it ethnicity, religion or sexuality (an anxiety that frequently extends in both directions, of course; Kirby, 2003). This is still a matter being resolved by our research, but it is asserted here that these developments have the potential to turn segregation based upon racial constructions into segregation based upon class. This would, in the long term, contribute to changing social relations in the US, not least in terms of dismantling the racial constructions that stand at the core of many analyses of, and policy proposals for, the contemporary city (e.g. Orfield, 2002). More rigid forms of neighborhood governance, coupled with affordable, sprawl-driven housing, have the potential to allow relatively low-income households from all social groups into newer housing with acceptable services. This has clear implications for a range of social issues, from attempts to overcome poverty concentrated in specific neighborhoods, through to efforts to improve governance and on to enhancing the quality of life.

Literature cited

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