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Here Comes the Neighborhood

By DAVID L. KIRP

SUBURBIA beckons many poor and working-class families with the promise of better schools, access to non-dead-end jobs and sanctuary from the looming threat of urban violence. But many suburbanites balk at the prospect of affordable housing in their midst.

They fear that when poor people move next door crime, drugs, blight, bad public schools and higher taxes inevitably follow. They worry that the value of their homes will fall and the image of their town will suffer. It does not help that the poor are disproportionately black and Latino. The added racial element adds to the opposition that often emerges in response to initiatives designed to help poor families move to suburbs from inner cities.

Are the fears supported by facts? A comprehensive new analysis of what has transpired in Mount Laurel, N.J., since 140 units of affordable housing were built in that verdant suburb in 2000, answers with a resounding "no."

Families with incomes as low as $8,150 — one-third of the poverty level — have been living in a town where the median income is 10 times higher for a family of four. "Climbing Mount Laurel," co-written by the Princeton sociologist Douglas S. Massey and several colleagues, concludes that this affordable housing has had zero impact on the affluent residents of that community — crime rates, property values and taxes have moved in step with nearby suburbs — while the lives of the poor and working-class families who moved there have been transformed.

In suburbs across America, the houses, schools, swimming pools and golf courses look just like those in Mount Laurel. The socioeconomic backgrounds of their residents are similar as well. Even the names of the subdivisions in Mount Laurel — the Lakes, Laurel Knoll, Tricia Meadows — are familiar in suburbia. So there is reason to believe that what's happening in Mount Laurel can be readily repeated.

THE Mount Laurel story begins on a Sunday morning in October 1970, when 60 black residents gathered in Jacob's Chapel, a Methodist church. The parishioners were deeply troubled by the fact that their sleepy farm town was being quickly transformed into a wealthy suburb in which many parishioners could no longer afford to live. They gathered in the chapel to await word on a proposal from a community group to build 36 affordable garden

apartments in the center of town.

According to those present, the news was not good. "If you people can't afford to live in our town," a township official told the congregation, "then you'll just have to leave." The blunt announcement turned a modest request into a movement that spanned several decades.

For 30 years, local officials waged a battle against affordable housing, as "Mount Laurel" came to symbolize the struggle over the socioeconomic integration of suburbia. In "Our Town: Race, Housing, and the Soul of Suburbia," which my Berkeley colleagues John P. Dwyer and Larry A. Rosenthal and I published in 1995, we chronicled the controversy. It wasn't pretty.

Jose A. Alvarez, who was mayor in 1975 when the New Jersey Supreme Court sided with the parishioners in one of the most important civil rights decisions since Brown v. Board of Education, regarded the proposed housing units as a deathly threat. "It's like grafting a good healthy skin so you can graft in cancer skin and blend it in," he told me. As Judge Edward V. Martino, who presided over the first trial in the case in 1971, said to me, township officials "were treating these people like cattle, even calling them the scum of the earth."

With the town finding one excuse after another to keep out affordable housing, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued a second landmark ruling in 1983. In the decision, known as Mount Laurel II, the justices ordered all New Jersey suburbs to rewrite their zoning laws and allow a "fair share" of affordable housing. But that was hardly the end of it. Not until 1997, after endless planning board hearings, council meetings, and multiple attempts to reach a legislative solution, was the housing development finally approved.

In 1999, construction started on the affordable housing complex. A year later, the first tenants moved into the Ethel R. Lawrence Homes, town houses whose clean, contemporary exteriors and manicured lawns blended in with nearby market-rate developments. Many came from disadvantaged communities like Camden, just 15 miles away, which has the nation's highest crime rate.

"A ghetto in the field" was how some townspeople envisioned the new housing. "Everyone was scared, apprehensive of the unknown," recalls Mount Laurel's former mayor, Peter McCaffrey, who had been booed by his constituents for supporting the venture. No one could predict whether life in and around the Mount Laurel complex would affirm or mock the ideals of faith, hope, tolerance and equality, names given to streets in the complex.

Thirteen years later the answer is at hand, and it is unambiguously positive. "Climbing Mount Laurel" shows that the well-off residents of the town have been unaffected by the new

housing. There have been changes in life in Mount Laurel. But the changes are entirely consistent with those in demographically similar suburbs that surround the township. In all these communities, crime rates fell. Property values rose during the housing boom and dipped during the recession. Tax rates declined. Even in the Mount Laurel neighborhoods closest to the affordable housing, property values were unaffected. To most residents, the fact that poor families now live in Mount Laurel has proved entirely irrelevant. Today, many well-to-do Mount Laurel residents don't even know that affordable housing exists there.

Where you live profoundly shapes who you are. "I would go as far as to argue that what is truly American is not so much the individual but neighborhood inequality," concludes the Harvard sociologist Robert J. Sampson in his landmark 2012 book, "Great American City." The families that migrated to Mount Laurel — earning from 10 to 60 percent of median income — obtained more than a nicer house. They secured a new lease on life, a pathway out of poverty for the adults and a solid education for the children.

"CLIMBING Mount Laurel" makes good use of what social scientists call a natural experiment — since there weren't enough units to accommodate everyone who wanted to live there, the researchers could compare the experiences of the successful and unsuccessful applicants. At the outset the two groups led similar lives, but much has changed since then.

Those who didn't secure housing report that their neighborhoods remain pockmarked by violence. But the families who came to Mount Laurel have settled into a tranquil world — so quiet, one resident tells me, that for the first year she had to keep the TV on to fall asleep. Deer are a familiar sight, and frogs sometimes land on their doorstep. "I used to be afraid of gunshots," another tenant says. "Now I'm afraid of skunks."

With less stress and better job opportunities, these families have done much better economically than the nonresidents. Two-thirds are working, compared with just over half of the nonresidents, and a third as many, 4 percent, are on welfare. The sizable earnings gap, $19,687 versus $12,912 from wages, helps push the tenants living in the new housing out of poverty. The longer they stay in Mount Laurel, the better jobs they get and the more economically independent they become.

Their youngsters have also fared better. They study twice as many hours and spend more time reading. That extra effort is paying off — even though their schools are more academically rigorous, they earn slightly better grades.

On a sweltering day in August 2002, a thousand people came to the formal dedication ceremony in Mount Laurel. The civil rights icon Julian Bond described the moment as "bittersweet." To those who fought so long to open up this suburb, he said, the new homes

were a proud achievement. But what about the poor people "locked into inner-city blight"?

The woes of the inner cities cannot be solved by opening up the suburbs. Many urban dwellers, embedded in networks of kith and kin, wouldn't dream of swapping the spiciness of the city for the white-bread pleasures of suburbia. And as "Climbing Mount Laurel" points out, "those mired in substance abuse, criminality, family violence and household instability" need more support than simply "a decent home in a peaceful neighborhood with good schools." Still, millions of families, trapped in terrible neighborhoods, would jump at the chance to move to a place like Mount Laurel.

"I wish other places could learn from our example," says Mr. McCaffrey, the former mayor, but that hasn't happened. Affordable housing is still too rare in suburbia, as zoning laws continue to segregate poor and working-class families. Despite the track record in Mount Laurel and the promise it holds for neighborhoods around the country, it's hard to imagine that the suburban drawbridge will be lowered anytime soon. It is a truism that fear and prejudice are not readily ousted by facts.

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