Formations of Space: Formal and Informal Claims in Flood Mitigation Buyout Lots

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Abstract

Histories of flooding in Houston Texas and Lexington Kentucky have prompted the creation of disaster mitigation strategies, one of which utilizes federal funds to buyout homes for demolition in flood prone areas. Property buyouts leave empty lots of land in neighborhoods where people may still live, and these lots vary in maintenance and use both by residents and government officials. Residents may interact with the open spaces created by property buyouts in ways that were not intended for the creation of the buyout lots by governmental agencies. Buyout lots are not a neutral entity. In their existence, they are interacted with, maintained, and used differently across neighborhoods. This research aims to understand both social and political factors that influence the use of buyout lots in neighborhoods through an ethnographic analysis, photovoice, and ethnographic data from Houston Texas and Lexington Kentucky. Land use of buyout lots raises further questions about the intersection of governmental policy and land management with inhabitants’ lived experiences and desires across neighborhoods of varying demographics. Open spaces from property acquisition offer a diverse range of experiences as sites of formal interaction where governmental agencies follow legal codes concerning the use of buyout lots, and as informal spaces where residents create meaning and use buyout open spaces according to community desires. The creation of buyout lots requires planning, and the governmental intended use of these lots is not always realized as buyout open spaces become sites of community interactions. In understanding these interactions, future buyout lot design can complement community needs and desires by understanding what communities have independently created and are using in their lot.

Methodology

A mixed-methods case study of post-buyout space in Harris County, Texas and Lexington, Kentucky. Research Methods Included

- Door-to-door surveys in Harris County Texas
- Semi-structured interviews with residents in Harris County Texas
- Mapping out buyout lot locations
- Inductive coding of interview and photo data from Dr. Zavar’s research in Lexington Kentucky, 2010-2012, Harris County photos and interviews.
- Coding of interview data on a broad scale broken down into two themes of formal and informal use of buyout lots. This code reflected the dichotomy of appropriation and participation, as well as state agent and resident, which was a constant theme in interviews.

Introduction

Residents, in flood prone areas may engage with flooding mitigation practices in the form of voluntary property buyouts. These property acquisitions lead to the loss of homes from properties, leaving behind empty plots of land. (Binder, Greer, and Zavar 2020, 497). These buyout lots may remain empty lots or may be designated use such as a detention basin or park by the city municipality. Buyout lots can be understood as both formal spaces in which land use is assigned by a government entity that is restricted by legal codes governing use of buyout lots, and as informal spaces in which residents interact with buyout open spaces in ways their design was not intended for. In the late 1990’s the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) alongside the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG) began property acquisitions of 38 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) alongside with the Lexington-open spaces in ways their design was not intended for. In the late 1990’s the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) alongside with the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG) began property acquisitions of 38 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) alongside with the Lexington.

Formal Sites of Participation

- Parks
- Detention Basin
- Walking Trails
- Other Examples
  - No Trespassing Signage
  - Road Blockades
  - Sports Fields

Informal Sites of Participation

- Picnics
- Mobility Access
- Other Examples
- Residential Marketing Tactics
- Dog Walking
- Managing Landscapes

Results

Interview data reflected that residents with buyout lots in their neighborhoods interacted with these spaces in daily activities. In the neighborhood of WGPL, residents cut a section of the floodway and created paths across the buyout open space, informally shaping the buyout open space by reflecting their mobility needs across their community. WGPL residents also placed no mow signs or road blockades sectioning off empty lots on completely bought out streets. However, residential use of these open spaces creates a socially public space, even when one is not invited. Spatial appropriation by residents within buyout open spaces challenges the notion of city ownership as an indicator of prescribing the activities that occur within lots. This planning usually comes from the top down: municipalities decide the usage of the space and do their best to facilitate that usage, or lack thereof, by limiting or promoting the area’s own forms of architecture.

Conclusion

Buyout lots offer a wide range of interactions that expose tensions between who is allowed in their space, who maintains it, and how often. Buyout lots are understood as both formal spaces in which residential usage of the buyout lot falls in line with the intended design by governmental officials, and as informal spaces where residents use them in ways their design was not intended for. We see neighborhoods with active residents and city and county governments design and produce their desires formally onto buyout open spaces, and see residents in the community informally creating meaning, use and memory in these spaces as well. Buyout lots offer a diverse range of experiences and are perceived and treated differently in many neighborhoods and by city management. We see in practice how ideas that span around “idealizing public space,” legitimate public activities and thus also constrains them to confined understanding among socio-political lines that reflect inequalities (Mitchell 1995, 124). In understanding buyout lots as multifaceted and reflections of social realities, their design and creation can be more reflective of resident desires. By at least recognizing that residents appropriate and create meaning within these spaces, this factor should be addressed within buyout lot design.

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