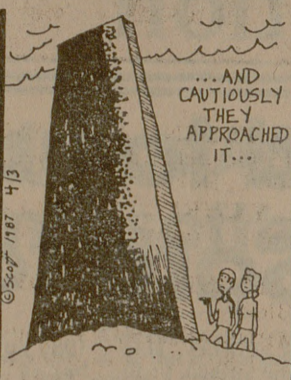
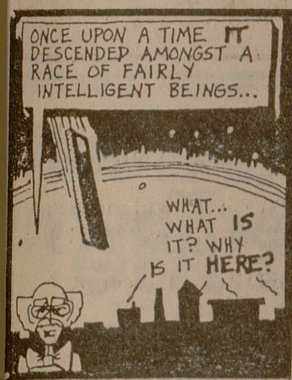
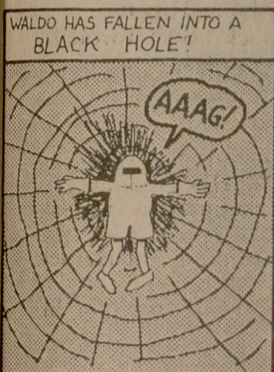


Warped



by Scott McCullar

Waldo



by Kevin Thomas

Researcher trying to stop public housing vandalism

Research: Tenants can curb problem

By RaeAnn Warmann
Reporter

They throw rocks through windows. They break into houses and steal things. They tear apart playgrounds.

"They" are teen-age vandals, and a recently completed Texas A&M study shows that they are the No. 1 cause of slum conditions in public housing.

Dr. Damien Ejigiri, researcher of urban and regional science, said the higher the number of teen-agers in a complex, the higher the rate of vandalism and crime leading to the development of slum housing.

Ejigiri is doing research for A&M, although not in an official capacity. He received his doctorate from A&M in December and worked on the study as part of his graduate research.

"Whenever you have a higher number of teen-agers roaming around in a complex, uncontrolled and with no activity to employ them, obviously they will do a lot of damage," Ejigiri said.

One way to control the damage the teen-agers do is to have a strong tenant organization, he said.

Slum housing has three components: government, management and tenants. The political component of the study was ignored because of the difficulty in controlling it, Ejigiri said. The focus was primarily on the tenants themselves.

"If we can get the tenants to do their own part, then we'll have a moral base to argue, 'Hey, government, we've done our part, now what can you do?'" Ejigiri said.

Bryan apartment residents, including those living in Mockingbird Run Apartments, and Houston apartment residents were surveyed last year from June to August, he said.

Those surveyed were unemployed tenants, tenants perpetually on welfare, tenants with a high percentage of teen-agers, and tenants who don't have any input with management.

"In any public housing where you have a high number of tenants that are unemployed, such public units easily deteriorate into slum housing," Ejigiri said.

Many poor people cannot maintain a clean home, the researcher said. Some don't understand basic house cleaning habits, such as putting trash in a can instead of leaving it on the floor.

"What I discovered was that many of them view the public housing as not having any kind of commitment

that it is their house," Ejigiri said. "In fact, two of them described it as the 'government house.' I never heard anyone of them say, 'This is my house. This is my apartment.'"

The tenants' detachment from their homes was obvious, he said, but those living in apartment complexes

"Whenever you have a higher number of teen-agers roaming around in a complex, uncontrolled and with no activity to employ them, obviously they will do a lot of damage."

—Dr. Damien Ejigiri, researcher of urban and regional science

that had a tenant organization were dramatically different.

"The same number of teen-agers we had in 'Apartment X,' where crime was very high, was very low, almost with the same demographic factors," he said.

The difference was that there was a very effective tenant organization

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—Dr. Damien Ejigiri

formed by the tenants themselves, Ejigiri explained.

"When I spoke with a tenant, he said, 'Listen, this is our home. We have very stiff penalties for any person who vandalizes,'" Ejigiri said.

Each block has a leader who keeps an eye on what is happening on that block, he said. The leaders share a little power with the management, which makes them feel as if they are contributing to their complex.

"If you give them a little bit of power and say, 'Hey, look, this is your apartment, my friend. If it goes down, you go down. If it's up, you're

up,'" Ejigiri said, "they will police themselves far more than the authorities will ever do."

The leaders monitor tenants going in and out. Parents are notified and a stiff fine is slapped on them if their teen-ager is vandalizing. This forces them to discipline their children, Ejigiri said.

Those caught several times are ejected from the complex by the tenants themselves, not the managers. Ejigiri said this gives the tenants some degree of control.

An effective tenant organization reduces the rate of crime being committed within the complex, he said. But other complexes don't have tenant organizations because they lack needed organizational skills.

"It might sound simple to educated people, but it is very confusing to people who aren't well-educated who have never formed a group before," Ejigiri said. "They don't understand the concept of forming a team to fight for their own good."

The tenants need someone to organize them, lecture them, prod them, and involve them, he said. He said tenants need to understand there is something at stake.

"Some managers and housing authorities feel that tenants, if allowed to form, might become very powerful and compete with them," he said.

Managers shouldn't object to projects which would help keep a complex clean and vandal-free, Ejigiri said. Most of the managers don't even live in the complex because the threat of vandalism is too great.

The tenants would only be sharing power at a very limited level, he said.

"This is where most of them live out their lives and, therefore, they should have a say," Ejigiri said. "Give them something to contribute."

Some of the tenants even mentioned home ownership.

"Here is their American dream," Ejigiri said. "It's not called a middle- or upper-class dream."

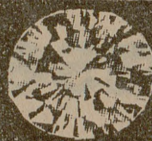
Ejigiri suggests that by having tenants fulfill requirements of behaving, working and cleaning, they could graduate to a level of owning an affordable home, thereby freeing the government from looking after them for the rest of their lives.

"I'm saying, 'Hey, let's draw a line,'" Ejigiri said. "There should be a time when government should no longer be involved. . . . If the cost of giving them an opportunity to share in an American dream is possible, why not go for it?"

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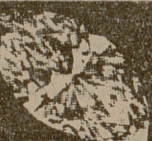
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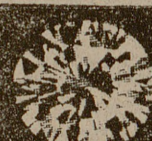
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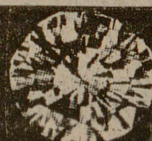
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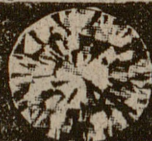
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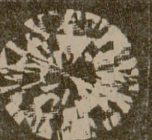
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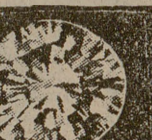
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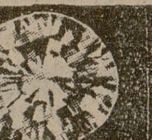
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