

The Struggle over Gentrification in Urban America

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Gentrification is “the displacement of the working-class residents of ... neighborhoods by middle-class newcomers” (Richardson, 2022). The economic vitality of communities that attract investment, businesses, and new residents typically also makes them too expensive for long-established residents, who may find themselves priced out of their own homes. In the United States, where income inequality correlates strongly with race, the populations displaced by gentrification are often black or brown; the beneficiaries are largely white. Particularly in cities, social groups that resist gentrification compete with others who defend the practices that contribute to gentrification. While developers may see urban areas as opportunities to invest in infrastructure and businesses that attract higher income residents, existing residents are forced to fight for affordable housing, services and goods. Since landowners and developers have become financially incentivized to employ practices that contribute to gentrification, it is up to community members to resist these practices through organizing tenant unions, educating residents and outsiders, and reclaiming community properties.

Review of Research

Studying New York City data from the early 1990s, Freeman and Braconi (2004) found no more residential displacement in gentrified areas than in control neighborhoods. Newman and Wyly (2006) supplemented the same data with interviews of residents, finding higher displacement rates than in surrounding areas. They attributed the difference to Freeman and Braconi’s use of some of the lowest income areas in New York, where displacement rates are chronically high, as their control. The interviews indicated that Freeman and Braconi had also missed many displacements because some tenants moved away from New York, moved in with

family in the city or became homeless. The data they used relied on surveys of new tenants in New York who provided reasons for their moves, but would have excluded these other movers. The authors concluded that the true displacement rates would be higher than measured, and likely could not be measured. This study also gives a voice to the residents of areas undergoing gentrification, showing how people in a neighborhood can be hurt, even if the area is improving.

Betancur (2009) examines how minority groups in Chicago are affected by gentrification. Their research found that Latino groups could not form the community bonds needed to withstand gentrification and revitalization due to constant displacement. Betancur holds that in earlier American history European immigrant groups were able to set roots after coming to America. This allowed immigrants and later generations to have support systems due to what Betancur calls the “fabrics” of communities. While earlier groups were able to combat poverty and improve their neighborhoods, the constant displacement of Latinos in Chicago has limited their options for upwards mobility. Davila (2004) comments on this situation, stating “Although racial minorities continue relying on neighborhoods for purposes of incorporation and advancement, the forces of commodification have found ways to fragment them or turn community building into ethnicity for sale.”

Carpenter and Ross (2008) found that the use of eminent domain disproportionately affects minorities and lower income communities, contributing to what they call “third wave” gentrification. This involves more direct government action in the hopes to build “consumptive pursuits such tourism, culture and entertainment in the form of upscale shops, restaurants and housing.” Carpenter and Ross also note the psychological effects of displacement, as it “often elicits negative emotional and health reactions due to the loss of neighborhoods where residents

held strong attachments to friends, neighbors, churches and local small businesses.”

Organization Against Gentrification

In Crown Heights, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York City, rising costs of rent have pushed residents to stand up to landlords and management properties. The Crown Heights Tenants Union (CHTU) was formed in 2013 to protect tenants’ rights. It is made up of renters in over 60 buildings in the Crown Heights area and unites tenants with the same landlords, allowing them to demand repairs, rent control and equity for renters. CHTU member Joel Feingold explains that the union’s “core strategy is to target our landlords directly.” Landlords have historically divided renters in this area to dissuade opposition to their policies. Feingold explains that landlords “pit old tenants versus new tenants, Black tenants versus non-Black tenants. They try to use the class dynamics of gentrification and displacement against [tenants]” (qtd. in Davis-Cohen, 2016). Through CHTU, members are able to stand up against unfair treatments.

CHTU has also taken the fight to local government, lobbying for rent protection and public funding that helps the existing community get the resources they need. In 2017, the union protested the proposed development of the vacant Bedford-Union Armory plot in Crown Heights. The city council planned to build a new recreation center along with new apartments and office spaces. For added context, most new real estate is priced to be “market-rate,” which is a value determined off of market demand and values, a price that is unsustainable for most residents of lower income areas (CommonBond, 2022). While 60% of the new apartments in Bedford-Union Armory would be under the market rate, CHTU still believed that the new infrastructure would attract new wealthier residents while encouraging landlords to force out existing tenants. When the proposal was announced, a group of CHTU members wrote to city

council member Laurie Cumbo, who had opposed evictions and the building of market rent apartments in her electoral campaign. CHTU's letter affirmed that the community opposed this construction and asked Cumbo to vote against the Armory development, writing "We do not consent to seeing our public land, which our neighbors have made so valuable, pimped out to the private market, by those we have elected to serve and protect us" (letter written by Crown Heights Tenant Union, 2017).

Despite CHTU's efforts, the redevelopment plan was passed by the city council and construction is currently underway. The developers of this site, which was named the Major R. Owens Health and Wellness Community Center, are BFC Partners. They believe that the center will "provide much-needed opportunities for youth sports leagues, after-school programming and senior programs that will serve a growing community" (New York City, 2021). Local government members also assert that this development invests in the wellbeing and growth of the community. Some community members agree as well, such as the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council executive director Rabbi Eli Cohen, who says that the "The community's needs and aspirations have been heard, and the result is amazing."

Other groups defend practices that can contribute to gentrification. In Chicago, Alderman Danny Solis represents the 25th Ward, including the neighborhood of Pilsen. Solis argues that the opponents of gentrification oppose the changes that can bring new opportunities. "When you say that we want to keep a neighborhood the way it was, what do you mean? You want to keep it all working class and take the understanding that our community is not going to evolve, not going to grow? Not reach the American Dream?" (qtd. in Pupovac, 2019). In Inglewood, California, mayor James T. Butts jr. believes that new buildings will attract people and business to the area. Butts credits the construction of the Sofi football stadium for revitalizing the once struggling

neighborhood. The new stadium has been blamed for rising local housing costs despite rent control, but Butts defends it. “The only thing that has changed in Inglewood is everything,” he says, “and it’s the new Inglewood but with the same people” (qtd. in Streeter, 2022).

While the local government in Inglewood unanimously voted to construct the new stadium, not all local residents support the project. 20,000 community members signed a petition demanding a public vote on the project, but the county refused (Coleman, 2020). The Lennox Inglewood Tenants Union (LITU) is a grassroots organization advocating for renters in their community. LITU members have opposed the construction of stadiums in Inglewood with signs stating: “Homes are essential, stadiums are not.” Beyond Sofi, Mayor Butts also favors a new stadium for the LA Clippers, the Intuit Dome, and Inglewood is also a potential venue for the 2028 Olympic games. LITU leader Alexis Aceves is outspoken against all of these venues, calling the city’s actions “like fraud” (qtd. in Mahoney, 2021). Los Angeles has pledged a “no build” plan for the Olympics to avoid the criticism that other host cities have received for their expensive stadiums with little reuse. The LA games will, however, use recently built stadiums like Sofi that have come under heavy criticism, so to many the city’s pledge seems disingenuous. LITU has joined the NOlympicsLA coalition arguing that the funds going to the games could be better used to support economic and environmental justice in America. LITU and Inglewood community members have been vocal in their protests, holding rallies and protests to raise awareness of the forced evictions (Robertson, 2020).

Many residents of gentrifying neighborhoods have organized to resist gentrification. Vicky Romero was a leader in the anti-gentrification group Pilsen Alliance in Chicago. She led an effort that forced Alderman Solis to hold public meetings about changes in the neighborhood. Thanks to local efforts of this kind, Pilsen developers must now commit 21 percent of their

projects to affordable housing. Rather than work with local authorities, other groups use litigation. To stop an infrastructure project called Memphis 3.0, Dr. Carnita Atwater sued the city of Memphis for \$10 billion as reparations for decades of gentrification. Carnitas hopes to make the city's failure to serve its community members visible, and "to show the violence the city of Memphis is perpetrating against us" (qtd. in Sandifer, 2020).

Using Technology to Criticize and Educate

In Chinatown, Los Angeles, community members have taken to social media to protest policies and businesses that contribute to gentrification. The Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) has been vocal on their Instagram page, blaming developers and landlords for gentrifying their neighborhood. This strategy is not unique to CCED; CHTU also has an active social media presence which asserts their beliefs related to housing and rent solutions (CHTenantUnion, 2023). One of CCED's biggest targets has been George Yu, the leader of the Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID), who they mark as responsible for driving out long time businesses with new developments. Yu is a part owner of the Far East Plaza, which has seen an increase in trendy new stores and market rate apartments, while becoming unsustainable for older residents to continue business. CCED has vilified Yu, calling him the "gentrifier of Far East Plaza," saying that his connections to other landlords and developers ,along with his position on BID, have caused this shift in businesses and residents (ccedla, 2022). Yu gives CCED little credit, saying "It's very easy to sit there and criticize and tell a community what's best for it. But what [CCED is] doing is the very definition of bullying and an elitist perspective" (Chaplin 2021). Others in the community see Yu as a leader for bringing in new businesses to Chinatown. One restaurant owner says that "George is a leader

who genuinely cares about Chinatown... He believes that the future of Chinatown is young people coming in and making a stand” (qtd. in Kim 2016).

New storeowners in Chinatown have also received criticism from CCED, who criticize them for not providing services that support Chinatown's existing population. One Instagram post from 2020 displays new business owners Natalie MacAdams and Lindsay Cummins and states “we need a full-service grocery store. We don’t need white girl wine & colonial Aesthetics” (ccedla, 2020). Other new businesses have been accused of “virtue signaling” for joining social media movements like #StopAAPI hate while failing to help Asian Americans in their own community. In response to these criticisms some new storeowners have formed a collective that aims to examine their impact on the community and make efforts to serve the population (Chaplin 2021). The median yearly income of Chinatown residents is around \$20,000, and many of these new stores, which include coffee shops and breakfast stores, do not provide the services that tenants desperately need. Some shops have responded by offering more affordable deals for Chinatown residents and have worked to understand the culture of Chinatown so that their stores do not harm or alienate community members. While many storeowners have acknowledged their effect on the community, others still believe that the blame for gentrification should be shifted to the developers who bought and sold the land. One common reasoning is that storeowners bought a storefront that was in disarray and gave it a better use. While this seemingly is a big help to the community, CCED members believes that it ignores the reasons behind why no one was buying the land: a lack of investment in existing properties.

Social Media is not the only way groups have used technology to protest gentrification. The Anti Eviction Mapping project (AEMP) is a volunteer run group which uses public data and community reports to create mappings of practices and technologies which promote

gentrification. They have also created tools to educate and empower renters such as Evictorbook, which shows tenants the connections between landlords and management companies throughout the San Francisco area (Guaglianone, 2022). Some investment firms in San Francisco have adopted the practice of buying properties under the name of shell companies listed under the firms' CEOs. Evictorbook aims to reveal to tenants who their real landlords are and provide their past eviction and rent increase practices. AEMP also collaborated with other advocacy groups to create the Tenant Power Toolkit, which gives tenants legal advice to fight unjust evictions in California (Tobias, 2022). Court hearings for evictions do not guarantee legal counsel for defendants in California, forcing many tenants to hire lawyers out of pocket to ensure they do not make a legal mistake in responding to the eviction notices. While many groups advocate for a right to attorney in these cases, the Tenant Power Toolkit provides advice for those who cannot afford legal help, helping tenants who have a legitimate protest to an eviction.

Community Ownership of Properties

State and city governments have been criticized for their use of eminent domain and its role in advancing gentrification. Eminent Domain allows a city or state to claim land and property for public. A city can claim public necessity as a reason to claim land, using public safety, water issues, or even high crime rates as reasons. These issues naturally target poorer communities that are susceptible to gentrification, and allow new infrastructure that is not always beneficial to existing residents to be built. In Peoplestown, Georgia, the city has claimed properties due to high flooding in the area. It plans on building a park and pond that will help manage stormwater and flooding, but residents fear that the land will end up being used towards private development of the area. Renters have already been pushed out of their homes due to rent

increases and some landlords have prevented them from resign their leases, so they have little faith that they can keep their properties (Albright 2017).

Some communities have taken control of their land by using eminent domain themselves. In the 1980s, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), based in in Boston, was granted power to choose how land bought with eminent domain should be repurposed (Loh 2015). This partnership between the collective and the government is known as a Community Land Trust (CLT), and ensures that the bought by the city is not sold to outside developers or other bidders. While many derelict properties have been converted to luxury condos that attract wealthier renters through eminent domain, the Dudley Street collective has built a community greenhouse, affordable housings and community facilities (DSNI). The use of CLTs has spread to Durham, North Carolina; Madison, Wisconsin; and other cities across the country. Many CLTs invest in affordable housing for communities, but the concept of urban farming has also seen a rise. Beyond DSNI's accomplishments, other vacant plots in Boston are being sold to farmers and nonprofits, some of which train Bostonians farming skills.

In the San Francisco area, the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative (ER PREC) has used a different strategy to let community members take ownership of their properties. ER PREC is a community run co-op that purchases properties from the housing market and preserves them for community members in need. The group is made up of community residents and investor-owners who help fund the purchase of properties (Bell 2021). ER PREC began buying residencies in 2017 and now houses residents in 4 properties throughout the East Bay area. These residents also become Co-owners of their homes as well as the co-op. Ojan Mobedshahi is a leader in ER PREC who states that "Our move is to de-commodify land and we never consider putting it back on the market to profit from it." ER PREC also attracts investors

who are placing their money outside of Wall Street for smaller returns on the basis that their investments are making long lasting positive impacts on these communities (Price, 2021). As opposed to DSNI's use of eminent domain, ER PREC seeks to gain ownership of their land without the relying on partnerships with city governments, hoping to solve housing struggles through their own community efforts.

Conclusion

Gentrification persists due to policies that aim towards progress and revitalization for communities. While community members, developers and local governments all seek to improve neighborhoods, their different strategies shed light on their priorities and what progress means for them. While new businesses, infrastructure and housing come into gentrified neighborhoods, the residents who already live there increasingly feel that they are being forgotten or even forced out. Whether it is through standing together against landlords and realtors, criticizing those making changes to the neighborhood, or taking control of the land they live in, social groups have found ways to make stands against gentrification. With more discussion every day on the ramifications of gentrification, it remains to be seen if the actions of these groups will change the strategies of city governments who are tasked with improving these areas. In their book *How to Kill a City*, P.E. Mosokowitz writes "A real solution to the economics of American cities would require more work — more taxes, more laws, more intervention from the federal government. Those things are hard. Gentrification is easy" (2018). Until governments and developers make long term investments in this country's cities and the people who inhabit them, it will remain up to the residents to fight and protest short term solutions like gentrification that displace and fracture communities.

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