

We Live Here Too: Incorporating Residents' Voices in Mitigating the Negative Impacts of Gentrification

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GENTRIFICATION AND RISK OF DISPLACEMENT

Residents living in neighborhoods within strong-market cities such as Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, are experiencing significant neighborhood change commonly known as gentrification.¹ Neighborhood change is so rapid and intense in some historically middle-class neighborhoods that some label it “super-gentrification.”² To mitigate the potentially negative effects of such changes, longstanding community residents must organize and make their voices heard; in turn, governments and developers should work to include such residents in the planning of urban revitalization project from the outset: such inclusion will ensure the best outcomes for both longstanding residents and the community as a whole.

Research suggests that many factors contribute to the current levels of gentrification, including inadequate housing supply, global capital investment, bifurcation of the labor market, and an ever shrinking middle class in strong-market cities.³ After a more detailed look at these key factors, this paper will discuss ways in which residents, governments, and developers can work together to include residents' voices in shaping the projects and policies that create and control gentrification.

Inadequate Housing Supply

First, the housing supply in many strong-market cities has not kept up with the increasing demand, especially for middle-class households with children seeking quality housing. San Francisco, for example, has some of the highest housing costs in the United States. Low supply and high demand contribute significantly to San Francisco's affordable housing crisis. Statewide construction of market-rate and affordable housing has not kept up with housing demand since the 1970s. Currently

the state is in the process of building roughly 100,000 to 140,000 units of housing per year, but in order to begin to address the high demand for housing, it is estimated that housing developers would need to build upwards of 230,000 units of housing annually.⁴ Increasing the supply of market-rate and affordable housing is especially challenging in cities like San Francisco where land values are high, resistance to large-scale housing developments is fierce, environmental policies are stringent, and the cost of construction is higher compared to other places.⁵ The California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) concluded that a major factor preventing the increase of dense housing supply in coastal cities is communities' resistance to new housing; this resistance can be strong, and residents often use local land use authorities to slow or stop housing from being built. This especially burdens less affluent individuals and households.

A second factor contributing to housing costs within many strong-market cities has been the level of global capital investment into the housing market, by investors from Canada, China, Russia, South Korea, and elsewhere. New York City, for example, attracts billions of dollars of global capital into its real estate market. Most of this investment is for "market-rate" luxury housing that is beyond the reach of everyday New Yorkers. Annually, roughly \$8 billion is spent on luxury housing units (defined as costing more than \$5 million) in New York City, more than triple the amount of a decade ago, and over half of those sales in 2014 were to shell companies hiding the identity of the buyer. Perhaps one of the best examples of this phenomenon is the Time Warner Center in Manhattan, where recent sale prices for condominiums have averaged over \$15 million, and 64 percent of the condominiums are owned by shell companies.⁶

In 2014, Canadian investors put \$3.4 billion into New York City real estate; they were followed by Chinese investors at \$3.35 billion, a 43 percent increase over 2013.⁷ Recently, Chinese-owned companies have spent billions purchasing New York City commercial and residential properties, even the historic Waldorf-Astoria Hotel for nearly \$2 billion.⁸ This investment appears to elevate real estate prices and attracts additional institutional investors (such as banks and private equity firms). The foreclosure crisis has also transferred ownership and wealth from working- and middle-class homeowners to large institutional investors.

Bifurcation of the Job Market and Shrinking of the Middle Class

Many strong-market cities experiencing neighborhood change also have local economies fueled by high-skilled labor, investment capital, and entrepreneurial activity.⁹ These cities have witnessed significant job growth in information- and knowledge-based jobs in sectors such as biotechnology, engineering, medical research and services, software development, and pharmaceuticals, which require formal education and/or advanced skills.¹⁰ As a result, high-skilled labor has migrated to these cities in search of economic and entrepreneurial opportunities. These same spaces are seeing

a bifurcation in the labor market, with high paying, high-skilled jobs on one end and low-wage, lower-skilled jobs on the other end, leaving fewer of the jobs that have traditionally supported the middle class.

A shrinking middle-class contributes to neighborhood change. Nationally, middle-class wages have remained stagnant, making it hard for families and the less affluent to afford rising housing costs. In New York, for example, the income gap has widened and real wages have remained stagnant. Real wages have skyrocketed for those at the top of the income ladder (top 1 percent) and remained relatively flat for those at the bottom (lower 20 percent). According to a study from the City University of New York's (CUNY's) Graduate Center, between 1990 and 2010, median income for the top 1 percent of earners went from \$452,415 to \$716,625, an increase of nearly 34 percent; this group controlled roughly 54 percent of total household income.¹¹ For those with incomes in the lower 20 percent, however, the increase was slight (\$13,140 to \$14,168); this group's share of total household income fell from 3.3 percent to 3 percent. The CUNY study also found that a pronounced income gap by race and ethnicity. New York City's non-Hispanic white population was the wealthiest out of all major race/ethnic groups in the City, and "had the largest share of their households in high income-earning categories."¹² Forty-two percent of non-Hispanic white households earned more than \$100,000 yearly, whereas only 30 percent of Asian, 23 percent of non-Hispanic black, and 19 percent of Latino households earned more than \$100,000 in 2010.

Stagnant wages impact affordability for less affluent residents. Even though recent analysis suggests real wages for New Yorkers have inched up a bit,¹³ 42 percent of New York City families (or 2.7 million people) still cannot afford basic family needs.¹⁴ It is unlikely that the financial situations of New York City's most vulnerable populations will improve unless some aggressive policy changes are made.

Many of San Francisco's families are similarly situated. San Francisco has experienced a significant loss of middle-class, middle-skill, or middle-wage jobs. Manufacturing and blue-collar logistics jobs (i.e. shipping and receiving clerks; stock clerks; packagers and packers; industrial truck and tractor operators, etc.) do not pay a living wage or are disappearing. Firms in these lines of business once hired large numbers of employees and provided middle-class wages. For the small number of such firms who have remained in the city or within the region, wages have been stagnant or spiraled downward. Sectors which need technical-level (often community college) credentials are not paying middle-class wages as reliably as they once might have. Two good salaries are typically needed for a family to reach even the self-sufficiency wage for living in the city.¹⁵

Risk of Environmental Gentrification

More Americans are demanding sustainable development,¹⁶ a widely accepted strategy considered critical to combating climate change.¹⁷ Sustainable development includes transit-oriented development — the creation of compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented communities located around public transit stations.¹⁸ Transit-oriented development appeals to people who want to live, work, and play in the same urban area.

Sometimes, however, a local government's efforts to promote environmentally sustainable urban revitalization can lead to what scholars have called environmental gentrification.¹⁹ The idea of environmental gentrification is not that all environmental activism causes gentrification, but rather that, in the absence of an explicit social justice framework, it can do so: state-sponsored sustainable urban development sometimes “appears as politically neutral planning that is consensual as well as ecologically and socially sensitive, [but] in practice it subordinates equity to profit-minded development.”²⁰ Put another way, such sustainability initiatives fail to meet their goals of promoting the principles of sustainability while also providing adequate community benefits to residents across the socioeconomic strata.²¹

For example, planning to revitalize transit-rich, historically low-income neighborhoods to accommodate and attract high-density, market-rate, mixed-use development can indeed address blight, climate change, and improve the tax base; however, if the government fails to engage the community already living in the neighborhood early on in the process, or does so in a superficial or perfunctory way, outcomes for residents can be damaging and unjust. In such cases, without any conscious planning about how to keep pre-existing residents in place, large-scale developments and revitalization efforts can result in substantial demographic shifts.²² Any planning approach without a social justice framework can contribute to reproducing inequalities, burdening low-wage earners and the least educated, especially immigrants and marginalized people of color.²³

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE: ENSURING THAT LOCAL RESIDENTS' AND ADVOCATES' VOICES ARE REPRESENTED AND REFLECTED IN DECISIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF GENTRIFYING NEIGHBORHOODS

In the face of the affordable housing crisis, economic restructuring, increased cost of living, and growing income inequality, residents can feel powerless and voiceless in planning and land use decisions. Especially in less-affluent racially and ethnically diverse communities, community organizing and coalition building at the grassroots level are therefore more important than ever. Such organizing can help diverse resident populations better articulate their needs and vision around economic, social, and environmental justice, and it can help increase the financial, social, and political capital necessary to bring about positive change.

Community organizing and coalition building can also help increase community engagement, resulting in greater community capacity and political power for those affected by government decisions. Such organizing is necessary to give communities proper influence over elected officials' decision-making processes around housing, economic development, and the environment, especially in the face of financial and other private interests that also influence the democratic process. Community organizing can correct the unequal balance of power that often exists between historically marginalized residents and elected officials and government staff.

Finally, community organizing and coalition building enables local residents to forge important partnerships within and across the public and private sectors, connecting government, nonprofits, and firms. Such partnerships can more effectively highlight points of agreement and contention, resulting in more realistic strategies and policies that have a greater chance of being implemented at the city level. Multi-sector coalition building can also help avoid costly and time-consuming litigation that can be harmful for all parties involved, especially the most vulnerable city residents.

Community Organizing and Coalition Building to Mitigate the Negative Effects of Gentrification

To ensure that their voices are represented in decisions about the future of gentrifying neighborhoods, it is important for local residents and their advocates to organize their own communities and to form broad-based multi-sector coalitions. Nationally, communities experiencing high housing costs, intense gentrification, and displacement have formed or are forming community coalitions focused on protecting their interests and transforming their communities into sustainable healthy communities (defined as economically strong, environmentally clean, and socially just communities).²⁴ These community coalitions are deploying new strategies, different from those used in the past, to fight against urban revitalization. They are not fighting to stop economic development and growth; rather, they are struggling to be a part of the new economic and social transformation taking place in their neighborhoods.²⁵ They want to be “at the table” as equal and valued partners during the planning and development process. As a result, these community coalitions are pushing for the implementation of creative, place-based community development strategies to require private developers to construct affordable housing, create quality jobs, and invest in community programs and public education.²⁶ In short, these community coalitions have focused on organizing their base, listening to community priorities, and building strong support from the ground up.

In Boston, for example, as development pressures and housing costs began to rise around the Longwood Medical and Academic Area, the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation and their partners were set on helping local residents

gain access to affordable housing, but initially lacked a comprehensive strategy. After community meetings and outreach, the JPNDC-led coalition realized that quality jobs were also a high priority. The coalition then built a strong base of 28 organizations comprised of community residents and nonprofit organizations (educational and social service), enabling it to forge relationships with the major hospitals, the government, and the private sector to help provide low-income individuals (mostly women of color with children) access to better-quality jobs.²⁷

It is critical for community coalitions to act locally because so many of the key land use decisions that shape housing and environmental policies are made at the state and local levels. It is also critical that community coalitions articulate their needs and demands using an explicit environmental and social justice framework. Such a framework is not necessarily anti-development, but instead promotes development that fosters healthy communities; based on principles of sustainability and the circular economy, it supports local economic and community development, as well as the creation of inclusive affordable housing that fosters racially/ethnically and socioeconomically integrated neighborhoods. For example, in Washington, DC, Organizing Neighborhood Equity DC (ONE DC) used an equitable development framework to create their “People’s Plan,” which emphasized the importance of a community’s control over land use and of not displacing local residents, especially those with low to moderate incomes.²⁸ Similarly, in San Francisco, a community coalition, dissatisfied with the lack of community input into the city’s planning process, developed and presented to the city *The People’s Plan for Housing, Jobs, and Community*.²⁹ These similar efforts are examples of an effective way to clearly present community priorities that led to positive changes. In San Francisco, coalition building and community participation in the planning process has resulted in the city constructing or preserving 30,000 units of housing, passing a \$310 million bond for affordable housing, and recently establishing the Housing Accelerator Fund of at least \$100 million for affordable housing. This Housing Accelerator Fund will attract money from several sources, including gifts from foundations, loans from financial institutions, and donations from private philanthropy.

In addition to clearly articulating a vision and principles, using sophisticated communication strategies to get demands out to the media and into the public increases political influence. For example, several community coalitions are engaged in a number of actions such as writing letters to government officials describing their needs and demands, holding public protests to attract the media to their causes, and utilizing social media to garner national and international attention. In San Francisco, Calle 24 SE, the community coalition fighting for affordable housing and other important issues within the Mission District neighborhood, have held town hall meetings

and staged public protests, including a “town hall” meeting at City Hall that successfully shut down City Hall.

Once a coalition has increased its political voice and influence, building relationships across sectors and institutions and around issues can also move an agenda forward. Take for instance Calle 24 SF’s ability to build relationships with the mayor and other government officials and agencies: this community coalition’s relationship with government has enabled them to attract financial support for their cause as well as enhance their social and political capital within City Hall. Ultimately, the mayor and other city agencies helped support Calle 24 SF’s efforts to develop a Latino Cultural District and moved them closer to being designated a special use district. This designation increases residents’ control over the land development process. Calle 24 SF’s relationships with public institutional actors, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector will likely result in bigger wins down the road for neighborhood residents, the city, and even the region, so long as these relationships are built on trust, transparency, and respect.

Compromise When Appropriate

Community organizations must clearly articulate their needs and demands, but be willing to compromise and collaborate to achieve their goals when appropriate. Compromising has become more difficult in our current hyper-polarized political and social environment, but it is often necessary for a community’s goals to be realized. In Brooklyn, some people have been critical of BrooklynSpeaks’ settlement agreement with the State, City, and private developers around the Atlantic Yards development project (now known as the Pacific Park development), initially a 22-acre development with the Barclays Center at its heart. Founded in 2006, BrooklynSpeaks is an initiative sponsored by civic associations, community-based organizations, and advocacy groups. The initiative’s primary mission is to advocate for transparency by state and city government officials and to involve the public in the decision-making process.³⁰ After years of litigation, disputes around eminent domain, and the Great Recession, BrooklynSpeaks was successful in reaching a settlement agreement that prioritized and sped up the construction of 2,250 affordable housing units promised to residents along with several other key community benefits. More importantly, by reaching a compromise, the community can help monitor the community benefit process and evaluate the outcomes of the Atlantic Yards/Pacific Park development via a community development corporation that was created to monitor the development and construction process.

The Role of Community Benefits Agreements in the Fight for Equitable Development

Another strategy local residents and their advocates are utilizing to preserve affordable housing and mitigate displacement is the community benefits agreement (CBA). Following Gross (2008), I define a CBA as *a legally binding contract (or set of related contracts), setting forth a range of community benefits regarding a development project or projects, and resulting from substantial community involvement.*³¹ CBAs were initially developed in the late 1990s to measure local benefits such as jobs and affordable housing provided by development projects and to understand the exposure and risk to neighboring communities³²; now, they represent a community's effort "to change policy and bring some of the benefits of development to residents directly affected by large projects."³³ As the familiarity and use of CBAs increases, some argue that an effective CBA must (1) be structured around a single development project; (2) be a legally enforceable contract; (3) be broad-based and address a range of community interests; and (4) result from significant community involvement and engagement.³⁴

For a CBA to meet these criteria, the process of negotiating it must be inclusive and accountable.³⁵ For a CBA to be inclusive, the process leading up to its development should include broad outreach to, and inclusion of, as many community residents as possible before any contract is approved. The main challenges with ensuring that a CBA meets a community's needs lie in defining clearly who the "community" is and in developing comprehensive mechanisms to ensure that all members have been included in the CBA process. Just as accountability in process is important, it is also critical that a CBA be legally binding and have adequate enforcement mechanisms.³⁶ Although CBAs are defined as private agreements between a community coalition and a developer, cities often play a role. A city may not be a party to the agreement but may still be involved in the CBA negotiations — either by sitting at the bargaining table or by withholding its discretionary zoning approval on a project unless a developer has entered into a CBA with the community coalition.³⁷

The Staples Center development in Los Angeles provides an illustrative example of an effective CBA. The LA Live CBA for the Staples Center involved 21 community groups and five labor unions agreeing to support the development of the Staples Center, which was funded in part by public subsidies.³⁸ In exchange, the developers agreed to make reasonable efforts to provide affordable housing, to make 70 percent of the 5,500 permanent jobs generated by the development living wage jobs, and to implement a first-source hiring program that targeted groups whose homes or jobs were displaced by the development, low-income individuals living within a three mile radius, and low-income individuals from the city's poorest census tracts.³⁹

The LA Live CBA is considered to be the model of a comprehensive CBA. Ten years later, researchers found that the developer had met its affordable housing development obligations and worked closely with community partners “to establish an effective local hiring program, and helped fund a newly created land trust.”⁴⁰ The researchers attributed the developer’s compliance in part to the developer’s need for continued support from the community coalition — the strong community organizing infrastructure that benefited negotiations, monitoring, and implementation.⁴¹

Many community coalitions and their leaders are also advocating for better ways to monitor and evaluate outcomes negotiated through CBAs. For example, community coalitions are advocating for the creation of independent third-party monitors, consisting of individuals from multiple sectors who evaluate and report on the progress of developers’ efforts to honor the promises made in CBAs. Monitoring and coordinating job and housing programs can take substantial staff resources, over and above what may be available to a community organization; therefore, “studies of the implementation of CBAs suggest that funding for staff should be part of such agreements.”⁴²

Efforts to promote CBAs have required community coalitions to organize and educate local residents about the city planning process, specifically around issues related to housing, land use, economic development, and public contracting. The goal of these coalitions is to require public entities to incorporate many of the same ideas enumerated in CBAs into public policies and regulations that impact large contracts and projects funded by public subsidies.⁴³ Ultimately, this strategy has enabled communities to incorporate land use tools as a strategy to monitor and, if needed, to slow down development and mitigate the negative effects of gentrification and displacement.

CONCLUSION

To mitigate the negative effects of gentrification and displacement, less affluent urban residents will have to continue building their base from the ground up, strengthening their community coalitions, and lending their voices and political support to policies that benefit them. True, income inequality and other large external forces shaping the current development patterns within cities will not be solved simply through community organizing efforts. It is important that private philanthropy and foundations also support efforts to build community capacity and multi-sector coalitions. Such efforts will increase community engagement and community participation in the planning process. They will also encourage local governments to more meaningfully incorporate residents into the planning process, as they have in cities such as Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and thus to prioritize equitable economic, environmental, and social justice outcomes. For the most vulnerable residents of our cities, it is crucial to be heard early and often in the planning of major development project. For governments and developers, too, it is much better to hear residents’ voices early in

the planning process rather than belatedly in protests and litigation, which at the end of the day hurt the city as a whole.

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Endnotes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper I define gentrification as the process in which more affluent populations move into an area of less affluence, resulting in higher prices for goods, services, and housing. This process of neighborhood change may lead to involuntary or voluntary displacement. I use "neighborhood change" and "gentrification" interchangeably throughout the paper.
- 2 Lees (2003) defines super-gentrification as "the transformation of already gentrified, prosperous and solidly upper-middle-class neighborhoods into much more exclusive and expensive enclaves."

- 3 Hutson (2016); Moretti (2012).
- 4 Taylor (2015).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Story and Saul (2015).
- 7 Solomont (2015).
- 8 Dulaney (2015).
- 9 Moretti (2012).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Bergad (2014).
- 12 Bergad (2014), 16. The median income for non-Hispanic white households was \$80,500, compared with \$61,200 for Asians, \$55,386 for non-Hispanic Blacks, and \$42,840 for Latinos; see Bergad (2013), 10, table 2.
- 13 Fiscal Policy Institute (2015).
- 14 Pearce (2014).
- 15 Rubin, Hutson et al. (2015).
- 16 Dowling (2000); Owen (2010); Nolon (2013).
- 17 Negron (2013).
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- 20 Checker (2011), 212.
- 21 Dooling (2009); Pearsall (2012).
- 22 Glass (1964); Smith (1996); Newman and Wyly (2006); Hammel and Wyly (2006).
- 23 Smith (2002); Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003); Pearsall (2012).
- 24 Hutson (2016).
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 ONE DC (2015); Hutson (2016).
- 29 Beitel (2013).
- 30 BrooklynSpeaks (2015).
- 31 Gross (2008).
- 32 Wolf-Powers (2010); Moore and Nettles (2010); Salkin and Lavine (2008).
- 33 Saito and Truong (2014).
- 34 Gross (2008).
- 35 Gross (2008); Gross, LeRoy, and Janis-Aparicio (2005).
- 36 Moore and Nettles (2010); Gross (2008); Marcello (2007).
- 37 In California, some local governments enter directly with the developer into master development agreements, in which the developer agrees to provide a series of community benefits that may look similar to those found in a CBA.
- 38 Salkin and Lavine (2008).
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Saito and Truong (2014).
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.