Gentrification and Its Impacts on Communities and Libraries

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IS 21 Values and Communities

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June 12, 2019

Introduction

Master builder Robert Moses oversaw the building of bridges, parks, and roads in New York in the early 1900's. The effects of some of his design decisions still impact the region today. Many of the overpasses he designed in Long Island have significantly low clearance (as little as nine feet), too low for buses to get through. In those days, mostly poor people and people of color took public transportation, while upper and middle-class white people were the only ones that could afford cars. By designing his overpasses so low, Moses effectively kept minorities and lower income people away from certain neighborhoods. He also kept particular roads open and freely available for affluent white people to commute and drive recreationally (Winner Langdon, 1986). In Los Angeles in the 1940's, there was a city-wide initiative known as the Master Plan which involved building freeways throughout the city to ease the traffic problem and boost economic growth. Committees were formed to determine where the freeways were going to be built and what routes they should take to "serve the greater good." The routes chosen for the freeways were through predominantly Hispanic and African American neighborhoods, displacing the residents. It was "often believed that these freeway construction projects would help eliminate them from the city landscape and simultaneously improve commerce and travel (Perez, 2017)." Historically, community developers and city governments have used construction, architecture, and design to influence communities and decide where people are going to live. This tradition continues today with gentrification: the "process of replacement of a poorer population in an urban neighborhood with a richer one and the change of the looks of this respective neighborhood (Blumer & Schuldt, 2014)." This process is often disguised as an urban renewal project or a neighborhood revitalization. Some have argued that gentrification has positive effects as well as negative ones. Unfortunately, the negative effects are often targeted

towards lower income residents and people of color. Gentrification is detrimental to marginalized populations and does more harm than good, adversely affecting neighborhood culture, displacing minorities and the economically challenged, and impacting communities and its libraries.

Urban Renewal Projects

Urban renewal projects financially assisted by the Federal Government in the 1950's and 1960's resulted in the destruction of 20 percent of the housing units where black people resided. In contrast, the projects only destroyed 10 percent of housing units occupied by whites. During this time, "pro-growth" coalitions justified these projects with the belief that they were creating more housing opportunities for lower income individuals. In reality, urban renewal projects drastically diminished the amount of housing than it created. Ninety percent of the lower income residences that were knocked down were never replaced. Instead, 80 percent of the land that was cleared by these projects was rebuilt for industrial and commercial purposes. These new developments resulted in higher property taxes for the residents that remained, increasing poverty in already disenfranchised communities. When housing prices doubled in the 1970's, only white people were able to get home loans due to discriminatory practices by the Federal Housing Authority: approving white applicants much more frequently than applications submitted by people of color. This resulted in a segregation of neighborhoods: middle to upper class white neighborhoods, and lower income minority neighborhoods. Urban renewal projects succeeded in revitalizing cities with industry, shopping centers, and bringing commercial and corporate investment to help communities thrive. Unfortunately, it was at the cost of racial minorities (Lipsitz, 1995).

Gentrification in the United States

According to the Holms model, gentrification begins with the interests of building owners to increase rent on their housing properties to the point where they get the most profit out of their assets. The potential rent value is in correlation with the quality of housing, the surrounding infrastructure and culture, and the financial capabilities of possible renters. In order to achieve the most profitable outcome, low income housing is often renovated into luxury apartments and condominiums. Wealthier residents increase rent and property values which attract higher end businesses, driving out lower and middle class residents (usually people of color) who cannot afford to live there anymore (Holm & Schulz, 2018).

In the year 2000, the population of Baldwin Hills, California (a neighborhood in South Los Angeles) was 48% black and 18% white. Between the years 2013 and 2017 those numbers drastically changed to the population being 39% white, and 33% black ("Online GIS Maps," n.d.). The median cost of a house in the area rose 47.3% between the years 2014 to 2017. Unfortunately, the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall project could potentially make things worse. This 700-million-dollar plan involves 961 luxury apartments and condominiums, a 400-room hotel, a 10-story office building, restaurants, and retail stores. This is a key example of Holms's model of gentrification at work. In an interview with Greg Akili, director of the Fannie Lou Hamer Institute of Advocacy & Social Action, he states that the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall project is going to "drive up the rents in surrounding communities, and those rents will not be afforded by the people who currently live there (Muhammad, 2018)."

Los Angeles as a whole is experiencing this trend in the displacement of minority communities. Since 1990, L.A.'s black population has decreased by over 150,000 people.

Between the years 2000 and 2010 Hollywood has seen a drop in its Hispanic population by 13,000. Since the year 2000, the average rent has increased by 32% in the city. In 2017, Los Angeles had 58 billionaires and 58,000 residents experiencing homelessness. City developers and real estate investors are to blame for these rising rents, the lack of affordable housing, and the relocation of these minority communities (Woocher, 2017).

Gentrification is not exclusive to Los Angeles and its many neighborhoods. In a study done by *Governing* (magazine), the country's 50 largest cities were surveyed to quantify the amount of gentrification that was occurring within their boundaries. It was found that almost 20% of lower income and lower home value areas were being gentrified. In Portland, 58.1% of the areas were being gentrified, the highest rate out of all the cities in the study. The study has also shown that since 2000, neighborhoods that have been gentrified have become 4.3% whiter in population. During that period, lower income neighborhoods that haven't experienced gentrification have seen a population increase in minorities and the poverty rate in those areas has risen by nearly 7% (Maciag, 2015). This trend has clearly impacted poorer people and people of color.

Gentrification and Libraries

While gentrification has negative consequences for minorities and other marginalized communities, public institutions (like libraries) often benefit. This is the case for a public library in Switzerland. Place de la Riponne is a market square in the city of Lausanne, Switzerland. In the early 2000's, it was known mostly for its copious amounts of drug users and prevalent open drug scene. In 2011, the Minister of Culture in Lausanne proposed a plan to culturally revitalize the Riponne. The plan involved a new cultural center that included a public library. In the summer of 2014, mobile snack bars were installed in the southern part of the square which was

known as a major meeting area for drug users. The developers purposefully put in these installations to drive out the drug culture, and it worked. Soon after that, a cafe was constructed in the northern end of the square which hosted lectures, concerts, and activities for children. Next to the cafe, was a mobile branch of the Lausanne Public Library. The branch was tailored to children and their parents and contained a collection of picture books, early reader books, and comics. This renewal project did not solve the drug problem in the area, it simply relocated it. The library would not have been possible without gentrification. Libraries often face the ethical dilemma of being a part of this process. While it may help one part of the population, it often hurts the other (Blumer & Schuldt, 2014).

In 2006, there was a proposed plan to sell a branch of the Brooklyn Public Library to a nonprofit developer. The plan was to build a library that is twice the size of the original branch (the Sunset Park Public Library) and build 49 affordable housing units on top of it. The population of Sunset Park is gentrifying and growing at a very rapid rate. Between 1990 and 2014, the population has grown 34% and with that, the median rent has gone up by 63%. As of 2016, no affordable family housing had been built in the area for the last 15 years. In the Brooklyn Public Library system, public funding has been stretched extremely thin. In 2016, it was estimated that the Brooklyn Public Library branches had approximately 300 million dollars in unfunded needs which included much needed repairs to roofs and elevators. The Sunset Park branch accounts for 5 million dollars of this amount. The branch also has trouble dealing with the massive increase of residents in the area and the library has become too crowded resulting in long lines of people waiting to use computers. Also, modern libraries require new technology and creative spaces to adjust to the ways people exchange information these days. All these factors contribute to the appeal of selling the library to developers. In the plan, the developers

would own the housing units and the city would buy back the space where the library is as if it was a condo. This is so if the developers sell the building to a different company, the city would still own the library. In the deal, the new housing would be permanently affordable for households that made between 30% and 80% of the area's median income. Also, half of the units would be reserved specifically for members of the community. The developers would be able to acquire public funds and tax credits because they are building affordable housing, and it would only cost the Baltimore Public Library 10 million dollars to get the new library. This is in contrast to the 20 million dollars it would cost to knock down the old library and build another one. Opposers of the plan such as the such as the activist group Citizens Defending Libraries, feel that the library would be hidden from the public eye by being built underneath residential housing. Also, the location of the library prevents it from ever expanding and getting bigger. The Executive Vice President of External Affairs for the Baltimore Public Library, David Woloch, in an interview exclaims that he understands the concerns of the activists and protestors not wanting the public library to be sold to a private firm but he states: "If we just wait for public funding to solve all our problems, that's not necessarily going to happen (Kinney, 2016)." This is a case where gentrification has the potential to help lower income people. However, new libraries often attract other developers and commercial interests. Although the housing units above the library will be rent controlled, adjacent residential areas may not be.

Since its announcement in 2015, the Barack Obama Presidential Center (OPC) has been a source of controversy in Chicago's south side. The location of the center will be Jackson Park and will be built in partnership with the University of Chicago ("Barack Obama Presidential Center," 2019). Traditionally, a presidential library has been a both a library containing presidential records and a museum with exhibits about the president and their history. The

libraries have been owned by the federal government and openly accessible to researchers, scholars, and public supporters (Clark, 2019). However, the OPC is being accused of not being a presidential library. The complex will be run by the Obama Foundation, not the National Archives and Records Administration which has been running presidential libraries going back to Herbert Hoover. It will be a four-building, 19-acre complex with an athletic center, two-story event space, winter garden, and recording studio. There will be no presidential research library onsite and no available hard copies of Obama's of official presidential records for scholars and researchers. Instead, approximately 30 million pages of records will be digitized and made available online (Schuessler, 2019). However, in June of 2019, the MacArthur Foundation announced that they will be providing a 5-million-dollar grant to install a new branch of the Chicago Public Library in the OPC. The library will host community programming, contain multimedia collections, and provide public spaces for studying and reading. In an interview, MacArthur President Julia Stasch states: "Embedding a public library branch in the Obama Presidential Center will connect Chicago residents and visitors, especially youth, to each other and to a world of imagination and information (MacArthur Foundation Press Release, 2019)."

The potential economic benefits of the OPC have many Chicagoans in support of the project, however there are fears in other parts of the community that this will gentrify Chicago's South Side. The construction process of the OPC alone is projected to create 4,500 jobs. Once the center is up and running, another estimated 2,500 jobs will be generated. Cook County, the county where the OPC will be located, will reap projected economic benefits to the sums of 675 million dollars during construction, and 246 million dollars annually during the center's first ten years of operation (Henderson, 2019). A coalition of community organizations has asked the Obama Foundation to sign a Community Benefits Agreement, and unfortunately the foundation

has refused. Provisions in the agreement include requiring that jobs be set aside for people in communities around the OPC, supporting and creating black businesses, protecting low-income housing and home owners, and strengthening neighborhood schools ("Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) for the Obama Library," n.d.). Deborah Taylor (coalition member and housing organizer with the Southside Together Organizing for Power community group), in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* when asked about the OPC said: "Typically, when something major comes into a community, taxes go up, low-income residents are displaced, there is an influx of new residents who want to be in the area--it's sexy--prices go up. We want to be sure when it floats, we float with it (Bergen, 2016)." On April 2, 2019, voters in four precincts in South Side voted on a non-binding measure in support of the Community Benefits agreement. Just under 90% of the people believe that developers of the OPC need to put on paper how they are going to affect the community. As of June 2019, the Obama Foundation still opposes the pact (Hinton, 2019).

Another obstacle the OPC is facing is a lawsuit filed by the advocacy group Protect Our Parks. The lawsuit was filed May 14, 2018 in response to hundred-year-old trees in Jackson Park to make space for the center. The federal lawsuit charges that the city and Park District illegally transferred public park land over to the privately-owned Obama Foundation. It argues that the transfer is a violation of state law, Park District Code, due process requirements, and the public trust doctrine. Also, since President Obama plans to continue political activities within the OPC, using public funds to support the center is a violation of citizen's First Amendment rights, should they not agree with his politics (Isaacs, 2018). This lawsuit and the refusal of the Obama Foundation to sign the Community Benefits Agreement both have been sites of controversy regarding the installation of the Obama Presidential Center. The center can provide much desired

economic growth in a part of Chicago that has been historically impoverished. It also brings a branch of the Chicago Public Library to the South Side of which the area currently does not have (Coalter, 2018). However, this has the potential to increase property values and raise rents, which may displace residents that have been living there for years.

Fighting Gentrification

Damien Goodmon, director of Housing Is a Human Right (a community advocacy group based in Los Angeles), hosted the Resist Gentrification Action Summit in December of 2017, in response to the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall project and the inevitable impacts on the communities. The summit was held at a middle school in Leimart Park and was attended by over 800 local activists representing nearly 50 organizations. The summit included a variety of workshops related to topics such as expanding the rights of renters through rent-stabilization ordinances and empowering tenants to fight eviction (Muhammad, 2018).

Other cities and states have attempted to fight the displacement factor of gentrification by starting initiatives aimed at preserving housing affordability. In Fairfax County Virginia, the Penny for Affordable Housing Fund was created in 2006 and provides financial assistance to builders and non-profit agencies that create affordable housing for lower-income families in the county. In Missouri, there is a statewide initiative to provide a tax credit of up to 55% to non-profit organizations that generate affordable housing options for those in need. The Longtime Owner Occupants Program in Philadelphia offers a 10-year reduction in property taxes to homeowners that have experienced an increase in their property taxes due to gentrification causing a rise in property values. One stipulation of the program is that the owners must have lived and owned their home for at least ten years: a program specifically made to help longtime residents. Finally, the Chicago Community Loan Fund is a non-profit organization that provides

low-cost financing to developers that build small residential buildings (one to four units) in areas of Chicago that have been ravaged by foreclosures (Smith, 2014).

Conclusion

Jodi Coalter's piece brings up the paradoxical fact that "the tension between libraries and gentrification is a tragic twist" and that libraries can be part of a "force that pushes people out of their home (Coalter, 2018)." The Blumer/Schuldt article reiterates this by stating: "Public libraries can't escape the development of the cities they are in (Blumer & Schuldt, 2014)." Gentrification presents a conundrum: the possible cultural reinvigoration and new start for a former impoverished community, but at the cost of the displacement of lower-income and marginalized groups. Libraries as democratic institutions can provide spaces to meet, as well as information regarding gentrification to communities and their organizations. Libraries are often a concept of urban development and revitalization because they are public cultural spaces that are open to all (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2007). While they have many positive impacts on a community, these impacts often come with a cost. Libraries need to be mindful of this and help those that may have been displaced by its presence by supporting local advocacy groups and organizations. Through continued community collaboration and affordable housing initiatives by city and state governments, the damage done by gentrification to marginalized and minority communities can be lessened. Even though in some cases libraries have been a part of the problem of gentrification, they also possess the resources to be the solution.

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