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You don't have to go far to find gentrification in Pittsburgh

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By **DONOVAN HARRELL**

Gentrification displaces more than just people — it displaces culture and a sense of community.

It's also been going on since the birth of the United States.

"The original public subsidy was the theft of land from the First Nations folks who lived in this United States because it was a settler colony," said Carl Redwood, a community organizer in the Hill District. There were people who stole the land from Native Americans, and benefited and generated wealth from that stolen land, as well as from the stolen labor of Africans."

This was the original process, Redwood said, that set the stage for the modern-day housing issues impacting marginalized communities across the country.

Redwood was among several other panelists who discussed the complexities and history surrounding gentrification at "Gentrification in Pittsburgh: A Panel Discussion on the History, Effects, and What We Can Do About It" on March 12. Pitt Law Professor Gerald Dickinson moderated the virtual discussion, co-sponsored by the Pitt Law Real Estate Association and the Office of Equity and Inclusive Excellence.

Redwood said at the heart of the problem of gentrification — the process of how people in historically marginalized communities are displaced following an influx of wealthier people and businesses moving in — lies questions the country hasn't come to terms with:

"What is land for? Is land for community and for housing or is land for wealth-building and exchange value?" he said.

This, in turn, creates systemic issues, "because it sets up the fact that there's no way that the majority of people can have land and use it (for) wealth-building."

When a community faces an influx of wealth, the land values also rise, said Michael Kostiew, a partner for law firm Reed Smith. Developers who are driving the increases are receiving “lopsided” public subsidies and develop market-rate housing, he added.

The market rates are often too expensive for the people who already live in the community, and the property values increase faster than the community can stabilize, said Felicity Williams, the programs policy manager and special assistant to the president at Hill Community Development Corporation.

When these homes are too expensive for the people inhabiting the community, “you’re not building for that community, you’re building for new people to come into that community. And that is going to result in gentrification,” Williams said.

Gentrification in Pittsburgh

Before the Great Depression in the 1930s, people didn’t need to use mortgages to purchase homes, Redwood said, but when it ended, the federal government implemented policies to lighten the financial burden for families looking for homes in a newer, more expensive, market.

By the end of the Depression, the federal government guaranteed banks that “they wouldn’t go broke if they gave mortgages to homeowners,” Redwood said.

However, in cities like Pittsburgh, mortgages weren’t given to everyone. In a process often called “redlining,” banks didn’t loan money to families in Black communities and encouraged white families to buy houses away from those communities. Federal segregation policies further solidified the division.

“The federal government had a racist housing policy from the beginning, but coming out of the Depression, the policy was homeownership for white families and rental for black families, essentially,” Redwood said. Poor white people also were adversely affected by this, he added.

Gentrification and displacement are “intimately intertwined with capitalism and with white supremacy,” Williams said.

Eminent domain, which gives the government the ability to seize property for public use as long as it pays market value, also has contributed to gentrification, Dickinson said.

You don’t have to go far to see some of the outcomes of gentrification. You can see it in several Pittsburgh neighborhoods, including the Hill District, an historically Black neighborhood next door to the University’s Oakland campus, that has slowly eroded over the decades. The Lower Hill District in particular has faced this issue, Dickinson added.

In the 1950s, the city of Pittsburgh used eminent domain for “urban renewal” in the area, forcibly displacing an estimated 8,000 residents and tearing down 400 businesses, according to community activists and historians.

The land became the Civic Arena, where the Pittsburgh Penguins played, and parking spaces.

The University of Pittsburgh also has “slowly eaten up the Hill District,” Redwood said. Athletic fields in the Petersen Sports Complex sit where Robinson Court public housing once was. Redwood said he still remembers the people who used to live there.

“The people up in Robinson Court, I can still feel them,” he said.

How gentrification stops

At the end of the discussion, panelists suggested several approaches to combat gentrification.

Williams said people in areas being gentrified should get involved in community groups and submit public comments at agency meetings at the city council level. It's also important to keep elected officials accountable by voting in elections.

Another way to address the issue is through policy, said Waverly Duck, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology.

“I also think we need to look at institutional structural policies that are also pushing and pulling people in these various communities, whether it is housing policy, whether it's economic policy, whether there's healthcare policy. I think these things are interconnected; that it's not just one issue that's driving why someone is in a place,” Duck said

Redwood suggested that people advocate for a large-scale social housing development program that could build large-scale public housing.

This would loosen the grip banks and land developers have on communities and give the community members themselves more autonomy in their neighborhoods.

“The gentrifier is the banks and the big developers,” Redwood said. “That's who's making the money in this whole scheme. It's not the new white person that moved in next to you. Sometimes we fall into that, and we miss the point of looking at the banks and the large developers.”

In the end, “we can't end gentrification until we end racial capitalism,” Redwood said.

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