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New York City Gentrification, Policing, and Real Estate Developers

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Local power in New York City has long been concentrated in the hands of Wall Street, the real estate industry, and the powerful alliance of their interests. The political clout of the super-rich at this moment in time is almost unparalleled in history, rivaling the massive control exerted by the very rich in the 19th century Gilded Age. Whether changing the amount of sunlight in Central Park or casting a looming shadow on Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, the power of the super-rich can be measured by the vertical distance of its buildings from the ground.



As real estate prices in Manhattan have put housing out of reach even for the middle class, there is an outflow of people to other boroughs and New Jersey. Staten Island, where I teach, is the southernmost tip of New York State. Physically closer to New Jersey than New York City, it is connected to Manhattan by a ferry and to Brooklyn by a bridge (and to New Jersey by three bridges). Staten Island has a reputation as a residential enclave for “white” police officers, firefighters, and a base for a smattering of organized crime. But the north shore has long been home to a significant African American, West Indian, Muslim, and pan-Latino/a population. Working-class as well as affluent European Americans (largely of Irish and Italian descent with newer Eastern European arrivals including Russian, Polish, and Albanians) populate the middle and southern portions of the island in suburban-style neighborhoods. Real estate developers, since the collapse of the housing bubble in 2008, have been building luxury and upscale rental units in areas attractive for efficient commuting into Manhattan.

In his book *The Assassination of New York* (1993), Robert Fitch noted that real estate developers have long been re-engineering Manhattan to become a playground for the super-rich and their taste for glass and steel luxury apartments and office towers. The first stage involved profiting from the disappearance of blue-collar jobs in textiles, meatpacking, and shipping. In the 1970s, when the city faced bankruptcy and white middle-class residents fled to the suburbs, real estate prices dropped and people like Donald

Trump were able to take advantage of this downturn and acquire land and buildings at fire-sale prices. They then built luxury hotels and apartments that served Wall Street and finance-related industries accumulating fortunes in the 1980s. This began the transformation of Manhattan.

In the post-2008 world, Staten Island neighborhoods like St. George and Tompkinsville are being targeted by real estate developers for gentrification. As in places like the south sides of Chicago and San Francisco, the idea is to displace the low-income populations who reside in a mix of private and publicly subsidized or Section 8 housing and redevelop the area into “luxury” rentals for upper and mid-level income people who work in Manhattan but can no longer afford to live there. This process involves replacing Pathmark and C-Town supermarkets with Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s grocery stores; fewer Dunkin’ Donuts and more Starbucks coffee shops; yoga studios and tennis courts instead of basketball courts; dog parks instead of community spaces. Public schools are changing their curriculum to correspond to the demands of affluent European- American parents.

Landlords have various means of “evicting” people. The first step is escalating rents and requiring unrealistic lease terms. Another technique is intentional neglect—failing to repair heating/air conditioning, windows, or controlling rodent or insect infestations. But these methods may not work as efficiently as desired. As part of the attempt to lure Manhattan white-collar workers and develop the luxury commuter hub, in the past several years, the city has improved the iconic orange-colored Staten Island ferry with more frequent trips and newer boats. Real estate developers have circulated renderings of what new developments will look like and how these mini-enclaves will not require residents to cross Bay Street into the “darker” areas of the neighborhood and instead safely shop at the envisioned “high-end outlet retail complex.” As the City of New York states: “The neighborhood can be a vibrant center for businesses, residents, and tourists but currently falls short of its potential.” (on.nyc.gov/2Vah1bG) This is a call for gentrification.

This all ties into the death of Eric Garner. His death by choking by the NY Police Department on Staten Island came to exemplify racist policing, and his last gasping words, “I can’t breathe” memorialized on a cell phone video, became a slogan for Black Lives Matter and other activists. Garner was an African American father engaged in the untaxed cigarette trade as a means of supporting his family (a trade created, ironically, by Mayor Bloomberg’s massive consumption tax on cigarettes). And it was part of a pattern.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) has used “broken windows”-style policing to intimidate working-class residents of color in Staten Island’s Tompkinsville, Stapleton, and St. George neighborhoods. First used under the Giuliani administration, broken-windows policing serves as a pre-gentrification technique above and beyond what landlords can accomplish to make life unbearable for existing residents. In pre-gentrifying sections of New York City, this stepped-up law enforcement involves stop and frisk techniques, arrests for minor crimes (riding a bicycle on the sidewalk, jumping a turnstile, graffiti, playing music too loud) or officers “tossing” people who appear “suspicious.” (Fayyad, 2017) Although stop-and-frisk was ruled unconstitutional as applied in New York in 2013, and the Bloomberg and DiBlasio administrations have changed the way the policy is implemented, it is still a tool for intimidation of ordinary citizens, often people of color, in Staten Island and elsewhere (Bellafante, 2018).

And the police have other methods. The NYPD often shines bright floodlights into public housing projects from dawn until dusk disrupting people's sleep with bright lights, but the NYPD claims that this is simply targeting crime. The ultimate goal appears to be driving the working-class residents of color out of the north shore so that the area (including city housing) can be redeveloped into condominiums and rentals for relatively affluent city workers. In a pitch to real estate developers, the City of New York seeks to "market the neighborhood as attractive option for young professionals seeking an urban yet affordable lifestyle." While neighborhood improvement in and of itself and investment by the city would be welcome, that is not the case if it is explicitly designed to displace people as a means of increasing land and housing values and establishing high net-operating-revenue rentals.

Staten Island is not a unique community in facing the twin forces of aggressive policing and forced gentrification. In the northern part of Manhattan, Harlem has long been a cultural enclave for African Americans (and Latinos). But the influx of "urban pioneers," young stroller-pushing "white" families and singles who can't afford downtown or Brooklyn rents, the appearance of Whole Foods, yoga studios, coffee shops, and other markers of affluence threatens the neighborhood's historical populations. What has disappeared? Many small African American businesses have had to close their doors due to higher rents. In Central Harlem, the African American percentage of the population declined from 77.3 percent in 2000 to 52.8 percent in 2016. The "white" percentage went from 2.1 percent in 2000 to 13.3 percent in 2006. In Central Harlem (adjusted for inflation) the median price of a one-family house increased from \$469k in 2000 to \$2.15 million in 2017. Some residents and observers are concerned about threats to such iconic venues as Harlem's historic Apollo Theatre.

Gentrification is not just an issue in New York. The question of whether city police collude with real estate developers and others who profit from the forced expulsion of poor people of color deserves a closer look, in the goal of protecting the civil rights of every urban resident.

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