Cover + Back Image

Photograph of defunct railroad infrastructure within the Brooklyn Army Terminal. The army terminal was built in 1919, and has since been used for a variety of military, industrial, and commercial purposes.

Photo by Rachel Bondra
Contents

1 Editor’s Statement
   Rachel Bondra

3 Our Lives Are Also Our Business
   Influencer Mansions in Southern California
   Kevin Ritter

11 Critical Cartographies
   Students from Prof. Louis Thomas’ Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods
   Spring + Summer 2020

17 The Muddy River
   A History of Heterodox Planning
   Christopher A. Freire

25 Climate Gentrification
   Ebbs and Flows of Capital in Waterfront Cities
   Priya Mulgaonkar

31 Beyond the Market
   A “Public-Commons-Partnership” for Housing
   Arielle Lawson

41 A Homes Guarantee for All
   Tenants Are Once Again Leading the Fight for Housing Justice in New York
   Aly Hassell
**Editor's Statement**

**Rachel Bondra**

Within a few weeks of starting our spring semester, graduate students in the Hunter Urban Policy and Planning department abruptly ended in-person classes due to the outbreak of Covid-19. Our situation as students learning online was not unique - health and safety concerns surrounding the pandemic led to widespread remote learning programs - yet our courses of study remain pertinent in the face of current events. By now, hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost to this novel virus worldwide – tens of thousands right here in our home city; the urgency of public health and safety persists. As students, scholars, and emerging professionals invested in equitable urban planning and policymaking, this pandemic has underscored the long history of sanitation and infrastructure, governance, housing reform, and justice that have aided us in times of crisis. Yet the pandemic has also laid bare the inadequacies and silences of our professions.

Last January, this issue of *Urban Review* was birthed from a desire to examine heterodox approaches to planning and policy, which in the face of failures of both in the past months, feels increasingly relevant with each passing day. As the nation and world reel in protest against police brutality and the recent murder of Black Americans such as George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, we are once again faced with the harsh reality of systemic injustices and their embeddedness in the urban fabric. We cannot ignore the unequal ways in which Covid-19 has afflicted communities of color and impoverished Americans. We cannot stand idly as Black lives are cast aside by police and the carceral system. Nor can we be silent in the face of violent oppression or the re-inscription of systemic injustice as our cities respond to the confluence of these events. As the pandemic progressed and the early spring air was heavy with blaring sirens, we have sickened, recovered, grieved, felt innumerable stresses on our financial and social support networks, and marched forward – sometimes only with a mere shred of hope – yet we turn to the study of planning and policymaking as a balm.

The pieces within this issue capture the creativity which comes naturally to those invested in the urban environment, the history of those ideas, and their futures. The articles came out of our engagement with this critical moment, and could be read as a respite from planning orthodoxy at a time when these truisms should be questioned. Articles respond to the current moment of social and political upheaval through the lens of urban planning and policy. In *Our Lives Are Also Our Business*, Kevin Ritter gives vigorous consideration to influencer mansions, which others may have considered frivolous in the past. Christopher Freire meticulously tracks the history of planning failures and successes through the medium of Boston’s famed Emerald Necklace in *The Muddy River*. In *Beyond the Market*, Arielle Lawson also cites historical movements to build a strong case for a Public-Commons Partnership; a model that, she argues, can address the persistent question of housing on a large scale and with democratic principles. Similarly responding to the ongoing housing crisis - made worse by the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic - Aly

Hassell centers tenants’ rights movements in *A Homes Guarantee for All*. Priya Mulgaonkar’s article on *Climate Gentrification* challenges the dominant framework of neoliberal resiliency planning as a response to the relationship between coastal climate change and gentrification.

I hope that this issue of *Urban Review*, produced under such strenuous conditions by an incredible and dedicated team, opens space for reflection on current and historical events, and the role of planning and policy-making. In a recent departmental meeting, professor Nicholas Bloom announced his conviction that now, more than ever, is the right time to be studying urban policy and planning. This guidance is reassuring, especially as students face the challenges of another semester of remote learning, finding our places in ongoing struggles for equity and justice, and keeping safe from Covid-19.

*Urban Review* wishes a hearty congratulations to contributors and members of the department who graduated in the spring of 2020. •
Our Lives Are Also Our Business

Influencer Mansions in Southern California

Kevin Ritter

Throughout Southern California, a suite of “influencer mansions” or “collab houses,” have sprung up. The “influencer mansion” is generally a large single-family home that has been transformed into live-in production studios for groups of TikTok stars, YouTubers, Instagram models, and other social media influencers. In the influencer mansion, residents collaborate in creating a near endless stream of social media content. Even the most mundane aspects of everyday life are fair game for profit. Parts of daily life that average people find routine and unremarkable, once carried out by influencers, become a commodity. As popular YouTuber Tana Mongeau says in her reality series: “Our lives are also our business.”

Until recently, the most notorious person to live in an influencer mansion was Jake Paul, whose Team 10 House sits inside a sprawling gated sub-division in Calabasas, an affluent suburb of Los Angeles. The eight-bedroom, ten-bathroom mansion is home to a revolving cast of ten content creators. Residents of the Team 10 House sign a contract entitling Jake Paul to twenty percent of their earnings for the next five years and endure a rigorous filming schedule within the house—if a member is not filming by 10am, they are subject to a fine. The house features a range of video production—makeup tutorials, music videos, “story time” videos, etc. Jake Paul and the Team 10 House are perhaps best known for prank videos, in which residents wake each other up with airhorns, wrap toilets in saran wrap, or move sleeping people’s mattresses into the pool.

The influencer mansion is a workplace as much as it is a housing unit. This article explores the influencer mansion as a suburban employment setting in relation to the profoundly changing notion of workplace. As developments in telecommunications technology allow new possibilities for remote work, the suburban home is increasingly functioning as workplace. The shift to remote work is directly linked to the development of surveillance capitalism during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. All human behavior can now be tracked and turned to profit by surveillance capitalist companies such as Facebook and Google, representing a profound shift in values, economics, daily life and how we consume information.

In the absence of scholarly research into the influencer mansion, this article draws upon the content created by the people who live and work inside it. YouTube videos and news articles appearing in teen-oriented tabloids provide a window into life in the influencer mansion, albeit one that is filtered for a certain type of audience. Otherwise, scholarly research on the development of surveillance capitalism is available and this article draws from those sources.

Shifting Suburbs

Throughout the 20th century, suburbs grew outside of American cities because of a range of planning and policy decisions. The suburbs, in many ways, were founded on a logic of exclusion. Suburban planners and residents have enacted various restrictions to prevent industrial development, and to avoid dense housing.

The 1926 Supreme Court case Euclid v. Ambler hinged upon a suburban municipality’s desire to prevent the construction of a factory on Euclid Boulevard in Euclid, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb. The street was known as “Millionaire’s Row,” and homeowners were concerned that the presence of a factory would
harm property values. While the dispute at the heart of the case centered on industrial development, the language in the majority decision also focuses on maintaining the alleged peacefulness of the suburbs. In the majority decision, the Court wrote that apartment buildings would threaten the suburbs by “interfering by their height and bulk with the free circulation of air and monopolizing the rays of the sun which otherwise would fall upon the smaller homes, and bringing...disturbing noises... depriving children of quiet and open spaces for play.” The factory and the apartment building—and, implicitly, the people who inhabited those spaces—were believed to deteriorate the morality of suburban life.

The Euclid v. Ambler case set the precedent that exclusionary zoning by municipalities was permissible—that cities and suburbs could determine what sorts of buildings could be built, and where. If a suburban municipality wanted to permit only single-family homes on lots larger than one acre, it would be legal. As Wayne Batchis notes, this vision is theoretically though improbably, by millions. upload a video to YouTube to be viewed, “democratized” media production. Anyone distribute it directly to their fans and followers. Instagram allow people to upload content and remote work. Platforms such as YouTube and Facebook track the videos we watch on YouTube and which websites we watch. Instagram and Facebook take note of which posts we like and comment on, as well as what advertisements we spend a little longer viewing. Through the creation of large platforms, Facebook and Google track users’ engagement. Algorithms aim to understand the influencers and their content, and millions of social media platforms primarily are in the business of data capture and rendition. Academics have named this new era “surveillance capitalism,” “platform capitalism,” and “vectorialism.”

But collaboration happens not just with on-camera talent. In the influencer mansion, teams of people — on-camera talent, stylists, managers, camera operators, sound technicians, etc. — generate social media content. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this move to remote work. In the wake of the crisis, some companies are electing to permanently switch to remote work in order to cut real estate expenditures.

Exclusionary zoning does not outright ban the poor and racial minorities from living within a municipality. Exclusionary zoning’s power comes from legislating which types of buildings and uses are permitted to take place, and where. The suburb was largely considered a residential area, whereas downtown cores were conceived as centers for work. Highways were built, often through neighborhoods of color, to easily facilitate commuters’ journeys between residential suburbs and downtown centers of business and commerce.

The landscape of work in the United States is changing. The combined effects of highway construction and exclusionary zoning are also responsible, in part, not only for residential demographics but also for the development of office parks and shopping centers. Farther and farther away from the downtown core in search of a suitable site that is zoned to allow an office park; scholar Oliver Guy terms this pattern of decentralized development “leapfrogging.” Further-afield suburbs are increasingly becoming employment centers and economic hubs.

The distinction between home and work, which suburban development tried to delineate, is being blurred. Throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, working from home became more popular, and commercial technologies shifted to digital work. The increased prevalence of the internet enabled a shift to remote work. In the 2000 Census, 134,643 Los Angeles residents reported working from home (3.49% of the working population). By 2018, 256,238 people in Los Angeles (3.54%) worked from home, an increase of 90%. Affluent suburban areas of Los Angeles saw larger segments of the population working from home—Calabasas, home to the Team 10 House, saw an increase from 7.52% of workers working from home to 10.55% over the same period. Work-from-home policies have been promoted in business publications such as the Harvard Business Review as a way to boost productivity. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this transition to remote work. In the wake of the crisis, some companies are electing to permanently switch to remote work in order to cut real estate expenditures.

Influencers, too, are a part of a shift to remote work. Platforms such as YouTube and Instagram allow people to upload content and distribute it directly to their fans and followers. In many ways, these platforms have “democratized” media production. Anyone with a computer or smartphone can create and upload a video to YouTube to be viewed, theoretically though improbably, by millions. Theoretically, it does not matter if one is in an apartment building—and, implicitly, the people who inhabit those spaces—are believed to deteriorate the morality of suburban life.

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No matter what we call it, twenty-first century economics relies on the discovery and commodification of behavioral data. Google and other search engines track the videos we watch on YouTube and which websites we visit. Instagram and Facebook take note of which posts we like and comment on, as well as what advertisements we spend a little longer viewing. Through the creation of large platforms, Facebook and Google track users’ engagement. Algorithms aim to understand the influencers and their content, and millions of social media platforms primarily are in the business of data capture and rendition. Academics have named this new era “surveillance capitalism,” “platform capitalism,” and “vectorialism.”

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to a date. Home devices, such as Nest™ thermostats, internet-connected coffee-makers and refrigerators, and Ring™ doorbells also collect behavioral surplus from their users in order for their corporations to transform human behavior into profit. Products that once were a simple economic exchange — a consumer pays money to receive a thermostat — now generate additional revenue through surveillance of the “smart” product’s users. As Shoshanna Zuboff writes, “Products of every sort are remade by the new economic requirements of connection and rendition.” Mundane everyday behavior, from buying batteries at Target using ApplePay to setting the thermostat two degrees colder in your living room, is rendered into data from which surveillance capitalists profit.

Throughout the twentieth century, American suburbs grew and enacted restrictions to exclude people of color and industrial factories from their residential areas. But now, the factory is in our homes — whether urban, suburban, or rural. The factory is in our refrigerator and in our coffee-maker, sitting on our bedside table and in our pockets. The factory is everywhere. We no longer work at the factory; we are the source of its raw material.

The influencer mansion is doubly a factory where the surveillance capitalist social media stars turn their everyday life into content for social media platforms. We only need to observe the glut of “morning routine” videos, visits to Target captured in vlogs, or fast-food mukbang videos to understand this. While influencers do see some revenue from the content they create, it is ultimately used by corporations like Google and Facebook as a lure to capture viewers’ data. The influencer mansion is, in many ways, an extension of surveillance capitalist logic — in the influencer mansion, we surveil and commodify ourselves, optimizing our behavior to create the most shareable, clickable content, and we are commodified even in the simple act of watching.

Conclusion
What are we to make of the influencer mansion? It is very easy to disdain influencers for their advertising of questionable products to less-than-savvy teen consumers, for their creation of and contribution to a toxic social media culture, for the endless cycle of consumption and self-absorption in their feeds. Perhaps we place too much focus on individual influencers instead of the broader systems of surveillance capitalism that have brought us to this point. However wealthy individual social media celebrities may be, Instagram models do not own the means of production, Mark Zuckerberg does.

Scholar McKenzie Wark suggests that traditional Marxist categories are ill-equipped to understand the present mode of production: YouTube celebrities might exist as part of what she calls the “hacker class.” Wark notes, “The workplace nightmare of the worker is having to make the same thing, over and over, against the pressure of the clock; the workplace nightmare of the hacker is to produce different things, over and over, against the pressure of the clock.” YouTubers, and influencers in general, must work continuously to make content that feels fresh and authentic — it’s no mistake that Jake Paul’s Team 10 House required its residents to stick to a rigorous schedule for generating content. The influencer turns daily life into a commodity that can be consumed, but the social media platform turns the commodity’s consumption into data to be sold.

There are many critiques to be made about the rise of the influencer mansion but focusing too much on individual influencers, and the houses they live in, misses the point. Many concerns about the influencer mansion hinge on noise and nuisance, such as neighborhood complaints about the hordes of fans outside Jake Paul’s previous home in Beverly Grove. Such criticisms are ultimately little more than NIMBYism, concerned with maintaining the same exclusionary practices that kept the suburbs inaccessible to industry and people of color. An understanding of the influencer mansion as simply a house full of rowdy 20-year-olds misses the underlying economic conditions that have created them. The influencer mansion is ultimately a symptom of telecommunications technologies’ and surveillance capitalism’s far-reaching grasp, which turn every place into a workplace and space for data-capture. This expansion has been allowed to grow unchecked, or even has been embraced, by government officials, urban planners, and policymakers.

Image by Gerd Altmann
Notes


5. Many historians rightfully point to the language of the majority decision as an example of the racist and classist logic embedded within exclusionary zoning provisions. Policies like redlining, exclusionary zoning, unequal application of the GI Bill, and many others all contributed to the systematic exclusion of people of color from the suburbs.


7. Batchis, 400.

8. These highways were built at the same time that funding for public transportation was gutted, further entrenching segregation.


Maps and mapmaking techniques establish spatial paradigms. Rooted in resistance, critical cartography subverts the power of normative cartography, and critiques the commodification of land, as well as the norms we employ in transforming place into property. This practice requires new visual vocabularies and conventions. Critical cartography unsettles established visual and spatial hierarchies, the normative understanding of rationality, and the relationship between power and objectivity.

Through the critical cartographic practice, the map, as a medium, unlocks the potential for micro-scales of knowledge rather than as a universalizing tool; “maps are both expressions of power as well as tools for constructing power.” Mapmakers have agency and express politics through aesthetics – choosing to represent or omit information – and stylistic choices. Critical cartography binds visual representation to qualitative and quantitative data in order to construct unconventional narratives about place.
This timemap reflects the changing perceptions of public health and social realities of public space during the Covid-19 pandemic. It tracks engagement with Brooklyn’s Herbert Von King Park, paired with public information over the course of four months - March, April, May, and June. Images are overlaid with institutional guidance from New York City, New York City Parks, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as relevant social media commentary and news headlines which reflect the nature and importance of public space during the pandemic.

Kate Fisher, Carlos Mandeville, Greg Diebold, & Rachel Bondra

This map shows the impacts of public space design on the Bobby Wagner/John Findley Walk on Manhattan’s Upper East Side.
The familiar “Hudson Line Departures” signage represents crucial pieces of data from a study of Covid-19’s effects on commuter rail lines. Set within Westchester County, the image reflects the changing experience of Hudson Line commuters. Representing “the new norm,” the map invites the viewer to experience empty stations and parking lots, along with abundant signage enforcing CDC guidelines, such as mask usage and social distancing. Imagery demonstrates the forlornness of the current commute and reflects a vast difference from overcrowded trains and stations earlier this year. The map depicts changes implemented by Metro-North Railroad, including closed ticket offices and added hand sanitizing stations, which were designed to help limit the spread of the virus among commuters and instill a sense of safety and comfort for commuters using the stations.
The Muddy River
A History of Heterodox Planning

Christopher A. Freire

The history of the Muddy River, located in Massachusetts along the border between the city of Boston and the town of Brookline, is one of heterodox planning. Input from numerous stakeholders throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries transformed the river. Renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted employed multidisciplinary methods to utilize the river as environmental infrastructure to achieve public health, environmental protection, and development goals. His efforts altered our understanding of planning as a tool that could mutually benefit both the built and natural environments. In the twentieth century, a set of plans that emerged both from public health challenges and from the political and technical milieu of the time, gave birth to Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace—a network of parks named the “Emerald Necklace” and transform the Muddy River into a flood management tool. Olmsted’s designs were revolutionary; they synthesized formerly disparate methods to balance environmental protection and urban development by utilizing the river as natural infrastructure.

In an era of rapid population growth and major advancements in manufacturing technology that spanned the nineteenth century, the city of Boston transitioned from a maritime town to an industrial city.1 To accommodate growth, the city created developable land by infilling water bodies with solid material. However, the process of land creation was rife with complications. In the 1870s, population growth, industrialization, and land creation in Boston led to pollution, poor water management practices, and public health challenges. The Back Bay, an emerging neighborhood, was sited upon an infilled tidal marsh, surrounded by mud flats and brackish waters, and polluted by upstream industrial wastes. Located near the intersection of the Muddy and Charles rivers, the Back Bay was especially susceptible to such challenges. Water pollution around the Back Bay became so severe that the city, neighborhood and much of Boston became engulfed in a sickening miasma. City officials described the phenomenon in dire terms, stating that the city was “…enveloped in an atmosphere of stench so strong as to arouse the sleeping, terrify the weak, and nauseate and exasperate nearly everybody.”2 This public health challenge prompted Boston’s officials to solicit remedial plans through a public design contest. Of the many plans that were submitted, Olmsted’s “Proposed Solution for Back Bay” prevailed.

Olmsted’s innovative plan aimed to alter the Muddy River’s morphology and hydrological cycle to prevent the Back Bay’s polluted mud flats from releasing noxious fumes during low tides. Moreover, it called for the creation of a park network that could support recreation, celebrate urban nature, and manage flooding. The park network, Boston’s famed Emerald Necklace, promised to encircle the city; its northern segment would be built directly along the course of the Muddy River, from its origin at Jamaica Pond to its terminus near the Back Bay.

In 1879, Olmsted presented his plan for the Back Bay and detailed its flood mitigation designs. The lower, meandering portion of the Muddy River would be surrounded by wetlands to soak up excess floodwaters. As Olmsted noted, “Water is represented as intended to be maintained under ordinary conditions…[during] extraordinary tide[s], it would rise and spread all over the sedgey ground.”3 Olmsted recognized that the Muddy River required regular maintenance to function effectively. If the river’s course became obstructed, floodwaters could spill its banks. Olmsted thus advised periodic dredging along much of the river, including sections of Leverett Pond and the Fens.4 Boston’s officials quickly heeded the call and dredged both sections in 1880.

Alex H. French, an engineer working for the Town of Brookline, echoed the importance of dredging soon after Leverett Pond and the Fens were cleared. French argued that the Muddy River’s basin required annual cleaning, asserting that the river could not be transformed into flood management infrastructure overnight.5 Regular maintenance would be required to ensure the effectiveness of Olmsted’s plan.

In 1889, Olmsted updated his plan with new recommended improvements along the Muddy River between the Gate House and Jamaica Park. These included “the enlargement of the culverts and waterway[s] for the large increase in storm water which will take place when the town brooks is delivered into Leverett Pond.”6 Olmsted was referring to the Village Brook, which originated in Brookline, west of Boston’s municipal boundaries. In fact, most of the Muddy River’s 4,000-acre drainage area rested in Brookline; the river itself marked the district line between the two municipalities. Olmsted’s updated 1889 plan reflected his awareness of the river’s political, technical, and environmental dimensions. Developing the Emerald Necklace as a multi-jurisdictional coordination, require advanced engineering skill, and result in significant alterations to the river’s existing hydrological systems.

Olmsted also recommended the installation of a large culvert between the Muddy and Charles rivers along Brookline Avenue. The culvert was installed in 1903 to stabilize water levels downstream. Thereafter, floodwaters flowed from Jamaica Pond to Brookline Avenue, then veered beneath the built environment and out into the Charles River, a thousand feet west of the river’s original terminus.7 Olmsted’s vision for the Muddy River was realized after two decades of planning.

Olmsted’s plans were revolutionary; they combined multidisciplinary methods from the fields of engineering, landscape architecture, history, and conservation science to connect the built and natural environment, both physically and conceptually, by using environmental infrastructure to guide urban planning. Through the latter half of the nineteenth century, Olmsted’s designs for localized sanitation improvements evolved into a master plan for the Emerald Necklace park network, and a comprehensive strategy for flood mitigation along the Muddy River. The river was modified to control water levels and direct flooding away from the built environment, while its scenic beauty and natural biodiversity were protected and enhanced.

Unfortunately, Olmsted’s larger vision for the Emerald Necklace was not fully implemented and several of his planned parks remain unbuilt. The transformation of the Muddy River, however, was essentially...
the 1930s made critical infrastructure vulnerable to flooding. Third, a wave of impermeable development along the Emerald Necklace made the Muddy River more susceptible to flash floods. Lastly, the river was not maintained as planned, and obstacles to flood mitigation accumulated. Consequently, during the 1990s the river twice failed to mitigate severe flooding. These failures resulted in major economic damage and prompted the State of Massachusetts to embrace new forms of public participation in planning and management processes, exemplified by the creation of the Muddy River Maintenance and Management Oversight Committee (MMOC) in the early 2000s.

As Olmsted was developing his blueprint for the Emerald Necklace, the City of Boston was planning to dam the Charles River. The damming project, completed in 1908, finished by 1910, yet it would not endure. Through the twentieth century, the river and its surrounding lands were altered by rapid and insensitive urban development, which compromised the river’s ability to mitigate flooding. Consequently, in the late 1990s – a century after Olmsted published his plan for the Back Bay – multiple storms devastated Boston and Brookline, overwhelmed the Muddy River, and exposed its new vulnerabilities.
transformed the Charles River into a freshwater basin in an attempt to provide new recreational opportunities, improve water quality, and stabilize banks. The project accomplished its first two goals but failed to substantially improve water quality and unexpectedly impeded sediment flow throughout the river and its tributaries. Sediments that once flowed freely into Boston Harbor were gradually impounded upstream, decreasing riverbed depths and reducing floodwater storage capacities along the Muddy River. The proliferation of invasive European phragmites and other marine flora with tangled root networks, which trap sediments and reduce water flow, worsened this issue.

Just two years later, in 1998, another unusually severe storm struck Boston and caused the Muddy River to flood again. The combined flood events resulted in an estimated $90 million worth of damage. Recognizing that the river could not be effectively managed through a traditional top-down approach, the project estimated that to secure urban planning processes of the twenty-first century, the state and local agencies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and private development firms to design and implement a coordinated restoration plan for the Muddy River. That plan consists of two phases that aim to restore Olmsted’s vision, mitigate the effects of future floods, and support public authority over the river.

The MMOC completed the first phase of the restoration plan in 2016 in an effort to undo twentieth-century planning failures. The restoration included the removal of the Sears parking lot and the subsequent daylighting of the river’s buried portions, as well as the replacement and enlargement of existing culverts. These efforts have not only restored elements of Olmsted’s original vision for the Emerald Necklace but also enhanced the river’s capacity to mitigate flooding, support sanitary systems, and sustain native aquatic and riparian habitats. Phase two of the restoration plan is underway with completed dredging of the culverts and the MMOC’s restoration plan focuses on further reducing flood vulnerabilities along the river south of Brookline Avenue through dredging, riverbank restoration, and the removal of invasive vegetation.

The restoration project demonstrates a return to innovative and heterodox planning; it acknowledges the strengths of Olmsted’s environmentally cognizant designs, amends past planning failures, and meaningfully considers a plurality of public opinions through MMOC coordination.

The MMOC’s work and the Muddy River’s restoration demonstrate that the principles of pluralistic and participatory planning have succeeded in Boston and Brookline. After the social transformations of the civil rights era, pluralistic and participatory planning have proven effective in Boston. Sherry Arnstein developed new frameworks to address these planning failures were aggravated by an apparent neglect in maintaining the Muddy River. It is unclear if the river was regularly dredged, as engineer Alex H. French presciently recommended in 1894. Since no public records of maintenance exist, it is likely that such maintenance efforts were simply not performed in the twentieth century. Olmsted’s innovative vision for the Muddy River was undermined by a century of insensitive urban planning and poor management. Worse yet, the river itself was no longer able to mitigate flooding as intended and the unfortunate costs would soon be borne.

A series of devastating floods struck Boston in relatively quick succession. On the night of October 20th, 1996, black clouds formed over the city. The following day, nearly ten inches of rainfall pummeled Boston, the equivalent of a month’s worth in just 24 hours. Over 200 cubic feet of water poured through the Muddy River each second, compared to the average of five cubic feet per second and in dry weather conditions. The Brookline Avenue Culvert rapidly funneled floodwater towards the Charles River but soon overflowed. Kenmore Station, constructed over the culvert, was immediately inundated and forced to close, causing major transit service interruptions that lasted weeks. Properties adjacent to Leverett Pond were drowned in several feet of water, enough to engulf Parking Lot parked nearby.

Multiple institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, were flooded as well. Recovery efforts over the following months sought to restore a semblance of normality but it soon became apparent that this flood mitigation failure was not an isolated incident.

The MMOC: New Forms of Pluralism and Participation in Planning

The methods and goals of urban planning in Boston were reoriented through the formation of the MMOC and its avenues for public participation. The centralized decision-making processes of the twentieth century were replaced with more equitable and communal procedures. This transformation is evidence that revolutionary notions of public planning, like those espoused by Paul Davidoff and Sherry Arnstein, have been embraced and proven effective in Boston.

The MMOC was formed in the early 2000s by the Massachusetts State Secretary of Environmental Affairs to serve as “the primary forum and conduit for public participation in Environmental Affairs to serve as “the primary forum and conduit for public participation in the independent review, oversight and decision-making process... [regarding] the maintenance and management of the river’s resources.” The MMOC consists of a dozen voting members who represent diverse public stakeholders including landscape historians, aquatic scientists, energy providers, and community activists, among others. Members serve as subject experts and project coordinators who involve the public on all issues. Since its establishment, in recent years, the MMOC has collaborated with state and local agencies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and private development firms to design and implement a coordinated restoration plan for the Muddy River. That plan consists of two phases that aim to restore Olmsted’s vision, mitigate the effects of future floods, and support public authority over the river.

In response to rapid population growth during the 1930s, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) constructed Kenmore Station directly over the Brookline Avenue Culvert. Existing train lines were relocated below ground to accommodate higher capacity trains and reduce traffic at street level. Olmsted’s plans failed to anticipate such a station upgrade. Similarly, the MBTA failed to recognize the potential dangers of building a subterranean station above the Brookline Avenue Culvert. These oversights had dire consequences; if the culvert were ever overwhelmed, the station would be submerged in floodwaters.

In the following decades, many sections of the Muddy River and its surrounding lands were made impermeable to accommodate new development. Sears, an adjacent commercial tenant, and emerging retail giant proposed the construction of a parking lot which was quickly approved by Boston’s municipal officials to appease the business and retain its taxable revenues. A segment of the river was culverted and capped for use as a parking lot near the Landmark Center, and capped for use as a parking lot near the Landmark Center.
After a century of failures and floods, traditional top-down planning processes have been reoriented to prioritize bottom-up participation methods that empower the public.

Conclusion

The history of the Muddy River is a history of heterodox planning. The river has been a locus of revolutions and reorientations in the methods, goals, and forms of urban planning and public participation. Olmsted’s vision for the river and the Emerald Necklace transformed our understanding of planning as a tool that could mutually support the built and natural environments to improve livelihoods and combat public health challenges. Conversely, the river’s degradation over the twentieth century reflected compounded planning failures precipitated by insensitive design and a lack of public input. Today, the MMOC is remediating those failures and combating modern public health challenges by restoring Olmsted’s vision while supporting pluralistic and participatory planning. By acting on the planning principles set forth by Davidoff, Arnstein, and others, the MMOC has demonstrated the effectiveness of public empowerment in decision-making processes.

Throughout the United States and across the world, we must embrace heterodox methods in planning to amend past failures and secure a more harmonious future. As we grapple with complex public health crises, the history of the Muddy River reminds us that equitable change requires considerate design, public empowerment, and an ongoing commitment to the mutual sustainability of our built and natural environments.

Notes
5. Tom Brady, "The Muddy River: A Century of Change" (Maintenance and Management Oversight Committee: Muddy River Restoration Project, nd).
7. Weiskel, 18.
8. Ibid., 39.
10. Ibid.
15. Fitzgerald, "Future Extreme Weather."
17. Brady, 12.
22. Fran Gershwin (Chair of the Maintenance and Management Oversight Committee: Muddy River Restoration Project, Telephone interview, 22 November 2019.
Climate Gentrification
Ebbs and Flows of Capital in Waterfront Cities
Priya Mulgaonkar

Climate change and gentrification are two of the most significant challenges facing contemporary post-industrial cities. Both phenomena share roots in neoliberalism and impose acute risks – especially the risk of displacement – on low-income people and people of color. Scholars are beginning to explore the emergent dynamics of climate change on gentrification, particularly how coastal cities attempt to reconcile trends of urban development strategies with the reality of sea level rise. Many are calling the recent trend of rising property values on higher ground in coastal cities like Miami as evidence of “climate gentrification.” Yet as extreme weather events, sea level rise, and high-tide flooding put the nation’s coastal communities at risk, waterfront revitalization continues unabated in urban planning. In New York City, for example, areas hit hardest in 2012 by Superstorm Sandy are seeing massive investment, with one in eight new residential units being constructed along the waterfront. Rust Belt cities are undergoing a “river renaissance” in order to attract visitors and high-end development. As waterfront cities invest in strategies to mitigate climate impacts and increase the ability of precariously-sited buildings and infrastructure to recover from extreme weather, some scholars posit that another form of climate gentrification will emerge, where adaptation and resilience practices are used to justify continued real estate speculation in risky areas, potentially intensifying historic racial and class inequities around infrastructure and development.

In light of these contradictory stories – one of capital fleeing risky coastlines and the other of capital flooding them – the relationship between coastal climate change risks and gentrification deserve more attention. Using Keenan, Hill, and Gumber’s (2018) three pathways to climate gentrification as a framework, this paper analyzes the emergent dynamics between coastal climate risks and urban development, and considers how neoliberal resiliency planning may be unintentionally promoting gentrification in a way that increases climate risks for vulnerable people.

Superior Investment Pathway to Climate Gentrification

Though relatively nascent, the academic literature around climate gentrification describes two overarching dynamics between climate change and coastal urban development: 1) coastal risks are causing gentrification in higher-ground neighborhoods, and 2) coastal risks justify investments to waterfronts to make them resilient to climate change. In the first category, climate risks such as sea level rise, storm surge, and severe weather pose a threat to valuable coastal property, which drives up the costs required to build, maintain, and insure that property, thereby lowering its market value. The added risks increase the appeal of higher-ground neighborhoods, which are resilient to sea level rise and become inundated by gentrification. Keenan, Hill, and Gumber label this pattern the “superior investment pathway” to climate gentrification in their popular study of Miami Dade County, predicting that climate change risks will result in higher land values in areas that can sustain a sufficient density of people and infrastructure. Many reporters and activists have used the superior investment pathway theory of climate gentrification to explain the upswing of real estate speculation and development projects in historically underinvested, higher-ground Miami neighborhoods such as Liberty City and Little Haiti. However, these neighborhoods also demonstrate the classic features desirable to developers: low-cost land, proximity to the urban core, and shared borders with other gentrifying neighborhoods. But with increasing instances of (and media attention to) flooding and sea level rise, high elevation has become part of the calculus for strategic, long-term real estate investment.

Cost-Burden Pathway to Climate Gentrification

Climate gentrification cannot be explained simply as the process of capital and people abandoning risky waterfronts for high ground. Americans have long settled in flood zones and dealt with the consequences – taxpayers largely subsidize this process. The U.S. has unwisely accommodated this penchant for coastal development through its National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), which was created in 1968 as a means of subsidizing insurance for flood-prone property whose owners could not afford private insurance. Consequently, the NFIP has essentially incentivized a fifty-year construction boom in the floodplain, paying out $9 billion to repetitive loss properties since 1978 and accruing more than $27 billion in debt. As Ashley Dawson highlights, these subsidies disproportionately benefit the wealthy; nearly 79 percent of subsidized policies are located in counties with the top 30 percent of home values, and fewer than 1 percent of NFIP policies are in counties that rank in the bottom 20 percent of home values.

Recent congressional reforms to the NFIP may unintentionally induce what Keenan, Hill and Gumber call the “cost-burden pathway” to climate gentrification, where the increasing intensity and frequency of coastal climate impacts impose added costs (flood insurance premiums, property taxes, repairs, and resilience upgrades) that only wealthy household can bear, ultimately displacing those who can no longer afford waterfront living.

To deal with mounting NFIP arrears, Congress has moved to reform the debt-saddled NFIP by phasing out subsidies for premiums. Congress has also directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to redraw its notoriously outdated Flood Insurance Rates Maps (FIRMs), which, according to one 2018 study, undercount the...
actual number of people exposed to flood risk by one-third. Though understanding the full scale of flood risks is critical to effective climate change planning, these updated maps will also increase the number of people obligated to pay for flood insurance, a cost that weighs heavily on low-income people and people of color. Consequently, “climate resilience” has emerged as a key urban strategy, spearheaded by programs such as the Rockefeller Foundation-funded 100 Resilient Cities, which encouraged dozens of U.S. cities to hire a Chief Resilience Officer and develop climate adaptation plans for climate resilience funding. The Lower Manhattan Coastal Resilience Project, a series of flood risk management projects covering Wall Street and Battery Park City, has received $500 million in funding as of December 2019, dwarfing the paltry $45 million earmarked for the Hunts Point Resiliency Project, which affects not only the largest food distribution center in the U.S., but also the nation’s poorest congressional district with one of the highest concentrations of people of color. Davison points out that making some waterfronts resilient to climate change may actually decrease resiliency in other communities; building a seawall around lower Manhattan may protect glittering skyscrapers at the center of global finance, but it will also inevitably send stormwaters to communities like Red Hook in Brooklyn, where some public housing residents still suffer from damage and mold five years after Sandy.

Climate resilience investments are an amenity that may drive up the cost of housing for climate adaptation. “Resilience” is often used to describe structural mitigation and adaptation to climate change risks, including zoning and building code changes, investments to make buildings resistant to flooding and sea level rise, and construction of physical barriers such as seawalls.

**Though these resilience improvements may seem like a politically neutral benefit for a city as a whole, these strategies often have uneven outcomes across race, class, and geography.**

Though these resilience improvements may seem like a politically neutral benefit for a city as a whole, these strategies often have uneven outcomes across race, class, and geography. For example, in New York City, waterfront communities impacted by Sandy have received dramatically different amounts of coastal resiliency funding. The Lower Manhattan Coastal Resilience Project, a series of flood risk management projects covering Wall Street and Battery Park City, has received $500 million in funding as of December 2019, dwarfing the paltry $45 million earmarked for the Hunts Point Resiliency Project, which affects not only the largest food distribution center in the U.S., but also the nation’s poorest congressional district with one of the highest concentrations of people of color. Davison points out that making some waterfronts resilient to climate change may actually decrease resiliency in other communities; building a seawall around lower Manhattan may protect glittering skyscrapers at the center of global finance, but it will also inevitably send stormwaters to communities like Red Hook in Brooklyn, where some public housing residents still suffer from damage and mold five years after Sandy. These resilience improvements are often the result of environmental justice advocacy by low-income communities of color to improve conditions after facing years of disproportionate pollution and degradation, but the unfortunate long-term outcome is the displacement of the very people who fought for these amenities. The benefits of publicly-funded urban greening, driven by a “green growth machine,” are financialized and utilized for private speculation and rent capture, and mainly benefit those who can afford the premium of green living.
Resilience gentrification adds another dimension of risk in the age of climate change. When scientists predict that whole swaths of U.S. coastlines will be swallowed up in 30 years, how can housing development in the floodplain ever be considered resilient? It appears that resilience planning decisions for climate-vulnerable neighborhoods may enable unsustainable development by using what Dawson calls “urban greenwashing” in order to “deceit urban life under the reign of capital as sustainable, to continue attracting speculative real estate development.”

Planners must confront the forces of real estate speculation and neoliberal approaches to community development. Climate change demands that we reimagine our urban coastlines as a critical resource in the fight for climate resiliency, not as areas for potential luxury development but as sites of ecologically-sound climate solutions that protect our society’s most vulnerable. Addressing coastal climate risks and gentrification both require confronting the reality of sea level rise, shifting away from neoliberal governance and investing in affordable, resilient, and just neighborhoods.

Conclusion

The dynamics between climate change and gentrification are undoubtedly still unfolding, and their full scope may be impossible to predict. If left unchecked, the uneven patterns of development associated with gentrification will likely intensify, as surely as extreme climate-vulnerable neighborhoods may enable unsustainable development.

Notes

13. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
19. Dawson, 156.
27. Ibid.
28. Checker, 211.
29. Dawson, 18.
Beyond the Market

A “Public-Commons-Partnership” for Housing

Arielle Lawson

The commodification of housing has led to new levels of unaffordability for tenants all over the country. With skyrocketing rents and an explosion of homelessness, we are faced with the glaring failures of our capitalist housing system to meet people’s most basic human needs. Recognizing the inherent limitations of “affordable housing” within a profit-driven system, we need a paradigm shift around housing that can change the terms of the debate, and advance a real alternative to the speculative market. A growing housing justice movement — combined with a renewed politicization of tenants — is leading the way.

From new rent control fights and surging interests in community land trusts, to proposals for a Green New Deal for Public Housing and a Homes Guarantee (even supported by recent legislation such as the Homes for All act), there have been reinvigorated calls for larger, transformative action to reclaim our homes. This is an important moment to reimagine what housing means and how it is organized in our society — with a broader reckoning of our relationship to the state, and ultimately, our democracy.

Taking on the neoliberal status quo and the deep-seated conditions of our housing system will also require new institutional forms and strategic partnerships, particularly to meet the true scope of the crisis and advance de commodified alternatives. More pointedly, this article asks: what would a model of truly affordable social housing look like that combines the scale, funding and control that the “top-down” public provision of housing seeks to provide, while still ensuring the equitable, resident control objectives of “bottom-up” grassroots participation?

One proposal to address these structural conditions is the “public-commons partnership” (PCP). As a “new institutional framework” set explicitly in contrast to the “public-private partnerships” that have dominated cities in the last few decades, the authors of a recent report write that: “PCPs offer an alternative institutional design that moves us beyond the overly simplistic binary of market/state. Instead, they involve co-ownership between appropriate state authorities and a Commoners Association, alongside co-combined governance with a third association of project specific relevant parties such as trade unions and relevant experts.” In the context of neoliberalism and the domination of market logics, this framework represents a structural alternative in rethinking the relationships between the state and civil society, specifically how to leverage them together. Applied to housing, these new ideas present an opportunity to revisit central questions of ownership, governance, and the organization of housing in society, as well as the nature of the systemic and transformative changes necessary to address the roots of the crisis. Most importantly, it could help center a broad conception of democracy — across scale, impact, and participation — to any “solution” of the housing crisis.
The institutional structure and vocabulary of the PCP, with its explicit focus on democratizing public ownership and participation, models a way of situating the large scale demands and necessary transformations with an on-the-ground implementation. A democratic shift in housing provision will not happen automatically — it will require relentless organizing and mobilizing — but the PCP provides a framework for new forms of coalition-building, alliances, and participation to reclaim “the public” within public housing. By re-situating this institutional relationship, the PCP leverages the intersections of the public and social housing movements with those of community land trusts, cooperatives, and tenant organizing.

Beyond the Neoliberal Limits of Housing

The current housing crisis is systemic; it reflects the core contradictions of an economic system that increasingly depends on housing, a fundamental human need, as an engine of speculative profit and wealth creation. Housing represents an estimated 45% of all global assets, with critical implication in the growth of most countries’ GDPs. At the same time, housing has become increasingly expensive and unsustainable, especially for those who rent. As yet, there has not been a response that matches the true scale or depth of this crisis. Instead, there has been an increasing abdication of responsibility by the state and a growth in the market to “solve” this problem.

Many current affordable housing strategies rely on market solutions and incentives for private developers or landlords that do little, if anything, to address the contradictions inherent in the commodification of housing. In fact, subsidies for homeownership as part of the Labor Housing Conference to lobby for a national housing policy. Bauer believed that there would “never be any realistic housing movement until the workers and the unemployed themselves take a hand in the solution.” The involvement of organized labor was not just seen as a way to pressure government, but as critical in creating an effective program overall. The goal was to democratize public housing: “there can be only one reliable means of insuring that public utility housing be carried out in the real interests of workers and consumers. Namely, that bona fide workers’ and consumers’ representatives must be delegated real power and responsibility in every department of the housing operation, from surveys and policies right through to administration.”

“Revisiting Public Housing

Public housing today is often associated with repressive (racist) top-down control and as housing of last resort, yet this is a far cry from the original vision of its early advocates. In the early twentieth century, these social reformers — known as the housers — believed that government provision of housing was the only way to address what they saw as the inherent “inefficiencies” of the market. The housers identified a failure of the market to provide quality, affordable housing to working class and even middle class - people who desperately needed it. Catherine Bauer, one of the most influential housers, called for housing to act as a “planned, public utility” that would be a part of a democratic right of citizenship.

“It means that a decent dwelling is not a reward withheld for the successful, but a fundamental right to which every citizen is entitled, the provision of which becomes a responsibility of government.”

During the New Deal era, Bauer organized with unions as part of the Labor Housing Conference to lobby for a national housing policy. Bauer believed that there would “never be any realistic housing movement until the workers and the unemployed themselves take a hand in the solution.” The involvement of organized labor was not just seen as a way to pressure government, but as critical in creating an effective program overall. The goal was to democratize public housing: “there can be only one reliable means of insuring that public utility housing be carried out in the real interests of workers and consumers. Namely, that bona fide workers’ and consumers’ representatives must be delegated real power and responsibility in every department of the housing operation, from surveys and policies right through to administration.”

Recognizing the dire conditions of the era — which is useful for considering the “novel” proposed framework of the Public-Commons Partnership for housing.

Neoliberal Developments

The period of the nineteen sixties and ’70s illustrates a changing dynamic within housing activism — reflective of the broader economic conditions of the era — which is useful for assessing the housing crisis today. With both grassroots demands for greater community control and the economic conditions following the fiscal crisis, there was a more visible “split” between public versus community-based housing efforts, and an increasing focus on small-scale, neighborhood projects. While this period is often considered a watershed moment for tenant activism, it is also important
to recognize how much of these efforts were defensive; housing activism responded to growing austerity measures, and the retreat of state welfare programs and policies such as public housing and rent control. Civil society took on the responsibilities of the state, in many cases providing more flexibility and community control, but carried its own set of weaknesses. The development of housing cooperatives through sweat equity programs (where residents could “earn” their homes), for example, are often idealized today as a model of autonomy and direct “democratic” participation. In retrospect, however, these programs came at a price; the responsibility of repairs and housing itself were effectively privatized, and primarily shifted to residents as the new “homeowners.” In many cases, these efforts were slow and tiring, and dependent on hard-to-access physical or social resources. Of those that continue today, many are no longer affordable (though the work of the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board has ensured the success of a significant number). Even at the time, the Met Council on Housing, one of the most active tenant organizations in the city, rejected the idea of co-ops and the deepening delineations of government and civil society. Instead, the Council proposed the concept of “housing in the public domain,” which would replace the private landlord, housing-for-profit system with “a system that coupled public ownership and responsibility with tenant control” and thus overcome the limitations of each separately. The Met Council on Housing first published the idea as a book, Housing in the Public Domain: The Only Solution, in 1978 but the text is now out-of-print and rarely discussed in the literature about housing. Yet it provides an important counter-narrative and alternative historical path to the growing split between the state and civil society efforts to resolve the housing issue.

Similarly, the focus on the growing role of civil society’s “grassroots” activism overshadows the tenant activism taking place within public housing, and the active role public housing residents themselves played in the fight against government austerity. Nick Juravich researches and highlights the often overlooked tenant organizing that took place at NYCHA in the 1960s and ’70s connected to broader freedom struggles. Facing rapid demographic transition — as white residents left the city, replaced by Black and Latino residents, as well as increasing poverty rates — NYCHA faced a corresponding political and popular (racial) hostility and budget cuts. Yet, with pressure from tenants, NYCHA found an alignment of mutually beneficial interests and both worked together to connect and amplify advocacy for public housing. Juravich summarizes, “the resident organizing in the 1970s created partnerships between NYCHA and its tenants that improved and sustained public housing, helped New York City’s working-class neighborhoods weather urban crises, and provided a model for collaboration to residents and housing Authorities across the country.” Though short-lived, this history provides an important context to re-evaluate the endurance of NYCHA over time, elevating the important role that the residents themselves have played and illustrating the possibilities for alternative models of resistance to neoliberalism. Juravich cites an important claim by Fritz Umbach that “The survival of New York’s public housing system...is arguably one of the more enduring legacies of black and Latino activism in New York City.”

Overall, the neoliberal conditions of the city brought increasing fragmentation in modes of governance, shifting away from government to an expanded role of civil society with a widening split — and seemingly, a trade-off — between grassroots community-based models and top-down public models. The significance of scale and bureaucracy were juxtaposed with that of depth and community control, often to the detriment of both. This binary is reflected, perhaps even unconsciously, in idealizing “community” (civil society) participation as inherently representative of an ideal form of democracy, rather than taking a more critical perspective of its impacts and values. For example, a “top-down” mandate is not inherently bad: when Chicago’s Housing Authority tried to integrate public housing, “grassroots” organizing from racist white communities effectively stopped it. The legacy of racial covenants and the Home Owners’ Association used to exclude people of color similarly underscores the importance of centering real issues of justice, impact, and
scale — as well as forms of participation — in conceptions of democracy. Current political constraints illustrate the necessity of new models that confront these tensions and the binaries of top-down versus bottom-up, scale versus participation, and the state versus civil society. Addressing the conundrum of market logics — taking into account the historical development of these neoliberal conditions and simultaneous forms of resistance - provides a richer context to confront these pathologies, especially when envisioning what a Public-Commons Partnership for housing could look like today.

A Public-Commons Partnership for Housing: “Communal and Self-Managed.”

One of the best demonstrations of Public-Commons Partnership for housing is the Berlin based project “City from Below.” As part of a growing network, this group has worked to lay out a position and principles for the democratization of municipal housing that is both “communal (i.e. public) and self-managed.” This plan includes the democratization of municipal housing companies and the right to self-management, thus combining key elements of cooperative housing with public ownership. Central to their organizing principles and foundational concept is the premise that creating large-scale and long-term, or even permanent affordability, requires the re-municipalization of private housing and its withdrawal from the real estate market.

Recognizing the democratic value of self-managed cooperative housing projects, the broader “Communal and Self-Managed” network also acknowledges that these projects tend to operate on a smaller scale and have a more limited impact than the reach of more traditional public or social housing. Building on a decades long history of housing activism in Berlin, which famously includes squatting and cooperative housing, this network of housing activists is calling for “a long-term secured municipal housing sector in which the participation of tenants plays a central role.”

This call is in direct response to activists’ experiences organizing within neoliberal housing conditions that set up “public” vs. the community, and scale vs. participation. As written about the City from Below, “This model project aims to come up with new institutional arrangements that combine the democratic structure of self-management with the wider reach of public housing. We want the better parts of both worlds: Affordable (public) housing, but also self-governance and participation in decision-making for tenants.”

In this way, the work of the City from Below project and the broader Communal and Self-Managed network center the core contradictions and tensions of housing efforts within the larger context of negotiating neoliberal relationships to the state. It takes an important step in explicitly and intentionally aligning these dimensions of the scale and depth of the housing crisis to open up new possibilities and horizons. These activists in Berlin recognize both the level of intervention required to address current housing needs, and the deeper re-organization and re-distribution of power and participation necessary to create real systemic transformation.

Towards a Housing Democracy

The last few decades have seen a tremendous reworking of public infrastructures, institutions, and urban governance, including the expansion of new forms of relationships between the state and market. Perhaps the most symbolic and representative example of this framework has been the explosion of the Public-Private Partnership model, which centers and consolidates power in private hands and interests of “the market.” In contrast, a Public-Commons Partnership provides a theoretical and practical institutional structure to reconfigure these relationships, representing an important opportunity for re-embedding democracy in everyday life and across scales.

PCPs provide a valuable framework and vocabulary for codifying the structure of self-management and participation within “the public” to overcome the limitations and binaries often created or assumed of bottom-up and top-down strategies, and between civil society and the state. Investing in, and democratizing, (public) housing to meet the fundamental needs of residents provides a material and participatory basis for embodying the right to the city and deepening of democracy in our everyday lives. PCPs center the right to housing in a renewed claim to the state; in doing so, PCPs offer a way to reframe our social contract to place the value of home and people above that of property and real estate. Fundamentally, this position recognizes that “Our housing crisis is a manifestation of a crisis of democracy, one where profit is prioritised over people and our representatives cannot think beyond neo-liberal dogmatism, beyond privatization, de-regulation and free market fundamentalism.” In response, it points to the importance of democracy — specifically, the democratization of power, resources and decision-making — as central to any “solution” of the housing crisis. The PCP could be a model for how to situate these large scale demands with on-the-ground implementation, providing a way to bridge and leverage this intersection of state and civil society to overcome their own limitations of Tenant activists are leading the way by reclaiming the right to housing as a transformative demand. Initiatives connecting tenant organizing, cooperative housing and community land trust efforts, such as in Rochester, NY and Inquilinxs Unidxs Por Justicia in Minneapolis, suggest intersectional, multi-pronged approaches that break down and connect across typical silos.

Now is the time to expand and connect coalitions and strategic alliances and adapt the institutional infrastructure needed to reimage and fight for new horizons of democratic housing possibilities.

The idea of “Communal and Self-Managed” captures democratic principles across both participation and scale.

Like the model of the PCP, this project sets up a new type of institutional arrangements that brings together the state and grassroots, civil society groups (in this case tenants). They propose a co-governance model that takes advantage of their strengths — having the wide accessibility of public, or social, housing and democratic participation in self-managed housing projects — as part of a broader goal to democratize both housing and society. The idea of “Communal and Self-Managed” captures democratic principles across both participation and scale. It makes “self-governance and meaningful participation in decision-making available to broader segments of tenants, beyond a middle-class-dominated, social-capital-centred self-governed housing scene” while at the same time “re)claiming public housing institutions that to this day resist calls for democratisation and, in times of neoliberalism and profit-maximising, supply mostly unaffordable municipal housing.”

Similar to the stated intention of the PCPs, the participants see the network as a way to “provide opportunities to (finally) develop models in which planning, management, occupancy, and collective ownership are designed in cooperation with tenants.” This mission of democratization is grounded in the tenant and Right to the City’s position in Berlin but also “a global movement against neoliberal and austerity-driven urbanism.”
Notes

A Homes Guarantee for All
Tenants Are Once Again Leading the Fight for Housing Justice in New York

From the rise of tenant building takeovers in the 1970s to the mass mobilizations advocating for expanded tenant protections in recent years, tenants have historically led the fight for housing justice in New York. Today, one year after the monumental victory represented by the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019, the convergent crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and the attendant economic fallout threaten the housing security of New York’s renters. Despite short-term emergency eviction moratoria, tens of thousands of tenants are bracing for a tidal wave of mass evictions once restrictions are lifted.1 Under this looming threat, tenants are once again mobilizing to save their homes, demanding that landlords not only halt evictions but also #cancelrent.2 Today’s acute crises have rendered the private market’s inability to adequately meet housing needs blatantly clear: In this moment of shared clarity, it is imperative that we embrace the tenant movement’s most controversial demand: guaranteed homes for all.

The United States has a catastrophic housing affordability problem. According to a recent report by the National low-income Housing Coalition, there are just 35 units of affordable housing available for every 100 very low-income families nationwide.3 Beyond very low-income residents, nearly half of all renters in the United States are considered rent burdened, meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs.4 A 2020 report from the National low-income Housing Coalition confirms that for another consecutive year, there is no place in the United States in which a 2-bedroom apartment is affordable to those working a full-time job at minimum wage.5 While there are myriad reasons for this current crisis (stagnant wages amidst increasing housing costs, racist housing policies, and general public disdain for low-income people to name just a few), it can largely be attributed to the neoliberal logic of the speculative housing market. Under this logic, housing is primarily produced in hopes of exacting economic rent, or profit, for its owner, rather than for the express purpose of providing shelter.

Often as a matter of personal economic survival, tenants have consistently led the fight for housing justice for those who have either been shut out or who have opted out of homeownership. In the 1970s, in response to white flight, economic crisis, and the widespread abandonment of property by landlords, tenants stepped up to rebuild their communities and reclaim their right to housing in their neighborhoods. Following the rise of the urban homesteading movement in the 1970s, New York City entered a new chapter in which the national adoption of neoliberal policies led to a period of accelerated gentrification and a renewed hostility towards tenant protections. By the 2000s, tenants aligned to fight against a vision for the city that excluded them. In 2019, tenants and advocates from across New York State united to lead the fight for expanded tenant protections and achieved a stunning victory against the formidable real estate lobby. As a result of these key moments in the tenant-led struggle for housing justice, the Overton Window6 has shifted dramatically to allow public discourse on housing to include earnest consideration of wide scale development of true public housing for the first time in over 50 years.

Tenant Takeovers in the 1970s
The years leading up to and following World War II in the United States set the stage for much of the housing struggle we continue to face today. Racist housing policies including redlining, mass suburbanization, and urban renewal projects had the combined effect of deeply destabilizing city centers, leading to lasting legacies of deep racial segregation and entrenched poverty. By the 1970s, neighborhoods in New York City like the South Bronx were all but abandoned by the city and state.7 Starved of resources, and block after block of apartment buildings abandoned by landlords, tenants stepped up to rebuild their own neighborhoods when no one else would. In 1978, residents of Kelly Street fought back against the city’s plan to demolish buildings on their block. Calling themselves “Banana Kelly,”8 so named for the u-like shape of Kelly Street, the residents reclaimed three buildings slated to be torn down and began the process of rehabilitation through “sweat equity.”9 This was a critical moment in the tenants’ struggle as it directly challenged the dominant logic of housing’s perceived value. By taking over property without legal process, tenants made the use value (i.e. the real-world value) of housing more important than its exchange value (i.e. its ability to produce a profit). In this way, tenant organizers and urban homesteaders began to materialize a vision of housing as right.

Anti-Gentrification Movements in the 2000s
In the early 2000s, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg approved a series of large-scale rezoning plans that significantly altered many of the city’s historically Black, brown, and immigrant communities. The rezoning of 125th Street in Harlem, Greenpoint, and Williamsburg among numerous others are now seen as key catalysts for accelerated gentrification and displacement. According to a 2019 study by Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH), the Bloomberg era rezoning of Williamsburg and Greenpoint resulted in the displacement of 15,000 Latinx residents between 2000 and 2015, despite the total population of the neighborhood growing by 20,000 residents.10

Taking the risky approach of rejecting plans that included some levels of affordable housing in order to advocate for deeper affordability reinforced the key role of tenants and their advocacy groups in shifting housing discourse to the left.

Mayor Bill de Blasio also initiated several neighborhood rezonings as part of his Housing New York plan. By introducing the concept of mandatory inclusionary housing (MIH) in 2016, de Blasio somewhat differentiated his approach from Bloomberg’s. MIH requires up to 30% of the new units in any market-rate building to be set aside as affordable housing within newly rezoned areas.11 Unfortunately, this approach to affordable housing development has largely fallen short. Bafflingly, the apartments typically produced through MIH tend to be unaffordable to most existing low-income residents of a rezoned neighborhood.12 Looking back to lessons learned from Bloomberg’s Williamsburg rezoning and the ensuing hyper-gentrification of the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood known as Los Sures, tenants in neighborhoods like East New York pushed back against rezoning plans which did not include deeply affordable units.13 Taking the risky approach of rejecting plans that included some levels of affordable housing in order to advocate for deeper affordability reinforced the key role of tenants and their advocacy groups in shifting housing discourse to the left. Rather than accepting city government’s terms which ultimately favored developers and landlords, low-income tenants asserted their right to continue to reside in the city.

Aly Hassell

Urban Review Spring | Summer 2020
was perceived to be one of the most powerful and influential forces in the state. While the new rent laws do not meet all of tenants’ demands—universal rent control and so-called “good cause eviction” were left out of the package—the political momentum gained by the tenant movement after the passage of HSTPA carved out additional space for serious debate regarding housing as a human right.

Housing Justice for All: The Homes Guarantee

The Housing Justice for All campaign is a grassroots effort led by tenants, residents of public housing, and homeless people that advocates for the end of evictions and homelessness in New York State. Their platform for achieving this goal is the New York Homes Guarantee, a comprehensive plan to ensure every New York resident has a decent public or privately-owned home. The plan is built around 5 key demands: build 12 million social housing units and eradicate homelessness; reinvest in existing public housing; protect renters and bank tenants; pay reparations for centuries of racist housing policies; and, end land/real estate speculation and de-commodify housing. Taken together, these demands envision a housing landscape as yet unseen in this country. The overt, unequivocal demand for immediate investment in public housing, a housing program that has been publicly maligned for decades, is remarkable and speaks to public appetite to disrupt the current status quo. Indeed, a growing number of political candidates for both local and national elections have adopted some version of the Homes Guarantee platform, including 2020 Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The success of these elected officials and of Democratic Socialist candidates like Jamaal Bowman—who also ran on the Homes Guarantee platform—is a strong indicator of shifting public sentiment on housing policy.

Conclusion

As tenants impacted by current crises continue to grapple with a number of devastating unknowns—whether or not they will be evicted from their homes in the midst of a pandemic, whether they will be able to make ends meet, and whether they will be able to keep a roof over their head—hopes are pinned on the passage of stronger rent laws and the ultimate goal of a right to housing.
People's Tribunal on Evictions | Photo by Michael Nicholas

ends meet, whether their families will stay healthy—the underlying housing crisis can no longer be ignored. Now more than ever, the failures of the private market to meet the people’s need for safe and affordable housing in the United States have been laid bare for public consumption. The momentum of the tenant movement today is borne of decades of organizing work, pushing and shoving public policy towards a vision of true housing justice for all. Today, the demand for investment in public housing is no longer a fringe political position to be easily dismissed. Rather, it is a politically viable solution that must be reckoned with in earnest. •

Notes


6. This article offers a brief overview of key moments in the tenant struggle towards housing justice. This is by no means an exhaustive account. For a fuller picture of the history of the tenants’ movement, visit https://www.righttocounselnyc.org/nyc_tenant_movement_history.

7. The Overton Window is a concept from political science named for Joseph P. Overton. It refers to the range of public or political policies generally accepted by a mainstream audience at any given time.


9. Banana Kelly still exists today as a community improvement association in the South Bronx.


13. Ibid.


Contributors

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Rachel Bondra is pursuing a master’s degree in urban planning. She has a background in Art and Architectural History. Her work explores expressions of power and politics in the urban landscape, built environment, and the planning process, as well as public memory and urban history.

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Arielle Lawson is a recent graduate of the Hunter MUP program with a focus on housing and community development. She's increasingly interested in feminist spatial practices, housing history and film archives, which she explores through an eclectic assortment of twitter accounts (@feminiscity, @housing_display, etc). Originally from Chicago, she's lived in Brooklyn for the last four and half years.

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Kevin Ritter is a master's candidate in urban planning at Hunter College. His academic work is concerned primarily with digital capitalism's reshaping of urban space. As an artist, he has presented his performative lectures about planning- and policy-related topics at venues like The Tank and The Bad Theater Festival. He lives in Brooklyn.

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