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The Gentrification of Detroit

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Abstract

The City of Detroit is undergoing an intense amount of change in its downtown and midtown areas, part of what is being called “urban revitalization” or “urban renewal.” Some consider this to be nothing more than gentrification, and it is displacing low income residents, most of whom are African-American. The gentrification of downtown and midtown also negatively impacts residents outside of these areas, with much of the city being grossly neglected and left to ruin. This essay will explore and elaborate on some of the negative impacts gentrification – usually referred to as “urban renewal” or “urban revitalization” – is having on low income African-American Detroiters. Research is derived from an interview with a local activist with more than 40 years of experience in the Detroit community, the author’s own experience as a life long resident, and secondary sources covering the issue.

The Gentrification of Detroit

The City of Detroit is experiencing much change – a renaissance of sorts, depending on who you ask. If you ask one of the residents that live within the Greater Downtown Detroit area (primarily downtown and midtown), the city has become a mecca for artists, start-up business ventures, urban housing redevelopment and more. But, if you ask a Detroiter residing outside of the downtown and midtown areas (or formerly residing in one of those areas), the answer will very likely be completely different from what you will hear from someone working and/or residing within the 7.2 square miles of the city's core. The renaissance of sorts is great for the typically young, white, and college educated Detroiters that are new to the city, finding their way to the midtown and downtown areas. But for longtime residents residing outside of, or being displaced from the acutely gentrified downtown and midtown areas, what's happening in Detroit is a much different story. Low income African-Americans are particularly affected by gentrification in Detroit, and many changes must be made to address the issue and ensure the city will have a viable future.

A very large portion of the approximately 140 square miles of Detroit is abandoned; filled with vacant lots and derelict buildings. There are pockets of densely populated areas scattered about the city, all experiencing varying levels of prosperity or lack thereof. Detroit is home to the most heavily concentrated population of African-Americans in any major American city. According to the 2010 United States Census (USC), 82.7% of Detroit's population is African-American (USC, 2015). Similar to other so-called "rust belt" cities in the midwest, Detroit is plagued by a high rate of unemployment, crime, and poverty.

Since the uprising (or so-called riots) of 1967, Detroit has experienced a severe decline in population. During the 1950s, Detroit's population hovered around two million. Today,

Detroit's population is less than 35% of what it was six decades ago (USC, 2015). The current population is mostly African-American and living at or near the poverty line. However, that stark reality applies primarily to Detroiters that live outside of the city's downtown and midtown areas.

Since the 1990s, midtown has been in a steady process of gentrification, and the downtown area has witnessed similar change with, among other notable projects, the relocation of the world headquarters of the General Motors Corporation to the Renaissance Center. Three casinos have also been added to the greater downtown area. The rest of the city has mostly languished - large areas literally falling to ruin.

In some areas of the city, entire residential blocks are completely empty; often littered with burned out derelict homes and vacant lots. It is not uncommon to find one or two occupied homes isolated on otherwise completely abandoned residential streets or blocks. In other more densely populated areas, blight is a serious problem. There are a few relatively affluent neighborhoods in the city such as Indian Village, Rosedale Park, and Palmer Park, but even these areas have not been immune to blight, and a recent history of problems with city services such as trash collection and public infrastructure (i.e. water & sewage, roads, etc.). Comparatively speaking, there is great contrast in the amount of socio-economic focus and investment observed in the Greater Detroit area with very little development, or even regular maintenance, occurring in the rest of the city. Markedly whiter and more affluent Midtown and Downtown Detroit benefit from favorable socio-economic policies and development, largely at the expense of the rest of the city.

One of the most egregious effects of gentrification in Midtown Detroit has been the displacement of low income residents from homes and apartments that are being torn down or

redeveloped in an effort to attract more affluent residents to the area, or to clear space for public works projects such as new sports arenas. As Levy (2014) illustrates in her video, one example of displacement is the redevelopment of the Griswold House (rebranded “The Albert”), which was formerly a low income senior citizens home. The Griswold House was acquired by a private developer, and renovated to become a luxury apartment building. Over 100 low income senior citizens that lived in the building were evicted. Even before the eviction process was complete, building renovations began, and residents were exposed to dust, debris, and noise associated with construction (Levy, 2014).

One of the effects or costs of displacement is “the fraying of community connections.” According to Dr. S. Howell, a professor of communication at Oakland University, the fraying of community connections has a much greater impact on senior citizens than younger people, and when older people are displaced from a community, they take with them knowledge of the history and culture of the community. She believes that the effect of displacing senior citizens, and consequently their knowledge of the history and culture of a community, is counterintuitive to what attracts younger people to Detroit in the first place. Younger people are attracted to Detroit because of its culture, and are not interested in the re-creation of sterile suburban environments (personal communication, June 12, 2015).

Sanfransky (2014) observes that in the neighborhoods of Detroit outside of greater downtown, many areas are considered to be “empty” or to have “no market value,” and are being repurposed for so-called green and blue infrastructure projects (i.e. ponds, forests, urban farms, greenways, etc.). She points out that the problem is most of the areas that are being labeled empty or deemed as having no market value, are inhabited by about 90,000 people who happen to be mostly low income African-Americans. It is argued in her essay that Western European

colonial ideas and thinking are heavily influencing the redevelopment and gentrification of Detroit. Vast swaths of depopulated areas in Detroit are perceived as “new frontiers,” waiting to be settled by “urban pioneers,” according to the author. She finds that the people that presently inhabit these areas are largely ignored and, in most cases, are considered “surplus population” – people that are looked at as expendable, and targeted for relocation. She concludes that urban greening is being used as a means of expropriating land for private ownership, rendering it useless or nearly useless to the people that currently inhabit the area (Sanfransky, 2014).

Proponents of urban renewal or urban redevelopment in Detroit see the greater downtown area as a focal point for initiating the revival of the entire city - the idea of “trickle-down economics” applied on the municipal level. Tabb (2015) observed that the revival story of Detroit celebrates people like Dan Gilbert and Peter Karmanos who have built and acquired millions of square feet of office space, and have moved their companies to Downtown Detroit (Tabb, 2015, p. 4). Projects like the Woodward Corridor Rail System, and entrepreneurial incubators like Wayne State University’s Tech Town, are touted as planting the seeds for the city’s rebirth. However, as Moskowitz (2015) points out, it is well documented that similar socio-economic strategies employed in other major American cities have not resulted in conditions favorable to people outside of the economic focal points. For instance, in New York City it is noted “even as average rents rise beyond \$3,800 in Manhattan, nearly half the city’s residents live near the poverty line” (Moskowitz, 2015, para. 11).

Montgomery (2015) points out that the word “gentrification” itself has been criticized as a divisive term, with negative connotative meanings. It is argued that gentrification is not the problem in Detroit and other American cities; rather it is the acceptance of inequity as the norm (Montgomery, 2015). Indeed, there is an increasingly widening gap between the rich and the

poor in America, and the so-called “middle class” is quickly evaporating. The phenomenon of gentrification in Detroit and across the nation has manifested itself as a function and accentuation of socio-economic disparity. Racial disparity is particularly clamant in cities like Detroit, and hastened by processes of gentrification disguised as urban revitalization.

There is an atmosphere of exclusion in Detroit (and South East Michigan), with people refusing to accept or even acknowledge the right of low income African-Americans and their children to freely inhabit and move about the city (i.e. exercise liberty). The exclusion is especially conspicuous in the downtown area, particularly during downtown events. Recently the Detroit police chief made an emergency request to city council to amend a youth curfew (17 and under) ordinance to cover four days, including the day of the 2015 Detroit Fireworks. He also requested that the curfew apply to the entire city, not just downtown. The African-American community resolutely rejected the proposal, and some made their feelings lucidly clear at a city council hearing on the matter, held June 16, 2015. City council members expressed great concern over the emergency nature of the request, when such a request could have been made part of event planning many months ago. Community members suspected a concerted effort being made to grant local law enforcement (including agencies other than the Detroit Police Department) far reaching power to stop and harass people for no other reason than a curfew. The fears of the African-American community are based upon a history of institutionally sanctioned abuse of curfew policies and laws during and post Jim Crow Era America.

The emergency request to institute a curfew on youth throughout the city during an extended period of time encourages an atmosphere of exclusion of low income African-Americans in general. Instead of working to find solutions that ensure that all Detroiters are

included in festivities such as the fireworks, while at the same time maintaining public safety, some political leaders (ostensibly in cahoots with business leaders) have resorted to promoting draconian laws and policies that are clearly designed to gentrify spaces such as downtown (which has traditionally been a welcoming space for African-Americans since the Mayor Coleman Young administration), and make them unofficial or de facto safe zones for white people and visitors/tourists. The fireworks curfew is a microcosm of broader issues of gentrification in Detroit.

The way in which gentrification is occurring in Detroit is unsustainable. The process is being carried out by political and institutional actors that, according to Dr. S. Howell, “operate on a paradigm of institutional racism” (personal communication, June 12, 2015). As stated earlier, most people that are relocating to Detroit are attracted to the city for its culture, not the re-creation of sterile suburban environments. The primary and inextricable element of Detroit’s culture is its African-American community. For Detroit to have a viable future, very radical changes must occur with regard to how public policies and planning are implemented to include low income and African-American residents. Inequity cannot be allowed to continue to be thought of as the norm. Expropriation of land under the guise of urban greening and other projects cannot be allowed to continue. The needs of residents outside of the 7.2 square miles of Greater Downtown Detroit must be taken seriously and adequately addressed.

The future of Detroit depends on the ability of current and future political and business leadership to engage the community in constructive ways, and encourage an atmosphere of inclusion that respects the diverse culture of the city – particularly that of African-Americans. Leaders must work to make sure Downtown and Midtown retain cultural identity, and do not displace low income African-Americans, nor any other vulnerable citizens. Leaders must also

work to discourage the image or perception of depopulated areas of Detroit as an urban frontier waiting to be settled by so-called urban pioneers. These are spaces that are occupied by United States citizens that have as much right to be there as any other citizen of this nation.

Redevelopment in both the inhabited and depopulated areas of Detroit must be done with great respect and consideration for the dignity and humanity of the people that inhabit these spaces.

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