

Jun 25 2015

The sinister reality of gentrification in Washington, D.C.

Andrew Small

Pilar Barreyro is an MSc Human Rights student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests explore the intersection of race, gender and national identity formation in the United States. She is a native of Washington, D.C.



Petworth, Washington, D.C. (image: Vann R. Newkirk II)

Washington, D.C. is now one of the most expensive cities to live in America. Ascending the ladder to rank with New York, San Francisco and Honolulu, this new shift in the standing of Washington, D.C. has occurred simultaneously with the sinister social phenomenon of gentrification. Gentrification is no new concept in the discourses of 'progress' and 'urban planning'. It has appeared under terms such as 'urban renewal' and 'development', used to disguise the accompanying harm that it wreaks on the inner city. Meanwhile, people all over the U.S. are challenging displacement as entire communities occupying lower socio-economic positions are being pushed to the peripheries of the city.

Gentrification transforms local urban communities into 'renewed' neighbourhoods, increasing property value and shifting the demographic to wealthier residents along the way. Little by little, old apartment

buildings are converted into high priced flats, bodegas are converted into organic juice bars and suddenly the entire rhythm and pulse of a neighbourhood is drastically changed. However what is especially disturbing about gentrification is the rhetorical propaganda that is employed to defend it. Although it is marketed as a tool intended to benefit and 'restore' existing communities, the racially exclusionary implications of gentrification are undeniable. This 'urban renaissance' is nothing short of a systematic process of re-segregating cities; it is a seizure of space – a process of relocation – and it is an epidemic across the United States.

What is especially troubling is the discourse surrounding gentrification in which language of revitalisation, renewal and restoration are invoked to convey the notion of investment. Initiatives are constantly wrapped in language that disguises its often subversive intentions. Lower socio-economic communities are not removed from their neighbourhoods as an anomaly of gentrification. Their displacement is at the very centre of urban 'revitalisation' initiatives and this is a truth that must be acknowledged in order for radical change to occur. The implications of urban renewal are not only detrimental to those who suffer displacement and ostracisation at the hands of a discriminatory system, but also to the acknowledgement of memory and historical legacy in the urban American space. The changing landscape of D.C. is slowly eradicating its rich black histories in lieu of promoting a homogenised, culturally desolate, bourgeois wasteland.

As a native of Washington, D.C., I grew up proudly endorsing my city's infamous nickname: 'Chocolate City'. However, Washington, D.C. has undergone such a drastic transformation at the hands of discriminatory urban planning initiatives that its current landscape is almost unrecognisable as the historic 'Chocolate City'. Affectionately nicknamed for its majority African American population, Washington, D.C.'s black population [dropped below 50 per cent](#) for the first time in over 50 years in 2011. This statistic is a by-product of devastating 'urban revitalisation' programs. What was once a city of great triumph following the civil rights movement has become an epicentre of segregation and oppression.

Corner stores, 'mom and pop' soul food restaurants, and other local, black-owned businesses are becoming relics of the past and in the process, the historical legacy of Washington, D.C. is being compromised. Claims are made that urban renewal programs are implemented to help 'renew' historically black neighbourhoods. However, so many of these programmes fail to provide measures for re-allocating resources to empower locals. There is a deficit of citywide opportunities to help community members open their own businesses, and an absence of funding for community centres and afterschool programs to empower youth. This dark reality illuminates the ever-present need to keep a critical outlook. What message is being sent when subsidised housing projects are torn down to make room for 'trendy' condos? How are the racialised 20th century Federal Housing Association (F.H.A.) initiatives addressed in the modern urban planning discourse?

The current geography and demography of the U.S. is the direct result of the hyper-racialised social engineering initiatives of the F.H.A. in the last century. The history of housing policy in the U.S. is that of a deeply racialised institution that systemically disempowered African-American communities through oppressive policies. The Federal Housing Association, established by the National Housing Act of 1934, used 'redlining' to deny African-Americans F.H.A.-backed mortgage loans. Redlining is the

often racially-based practice of denying or charging more for access to services such as insurance, healthcare and jobs, and has become a tool used to implement widespread discrimination in the housing market as well.

Redlining removed the possibility for African-Americans to invest in secure housing and thereby contributed directly to the process of urban decay in the U.S. Up until 1968, the apportionment of housing was made [according to oppressive racial quotas](#), which systemically disempowered ethnic minority populations. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed in an attempt to combat the horrors of redlining. Nine years later, the Community Reinvestment Act was passed to address those same horrors. While some progress has been made to counteract these racist housing policies, oppression remains rampant as urban planning initiatives continue to both displace and disempower ethnic 'minorities' throughout the country.

The United States of America is in dire need of a nationwide process of *real* revitalisation. Communities must receive the economic support needed to empower their residents, especially the large populations that have historically been discriminated against. Initiatives need to be produced that seek to reinvest in the urban spaces of the U.S. without demolishing them and displacing their residents. In Washington D.C., gentrification – any other name notwithstanding – is nothing more than a re-segregation process that is paralysing black communities as it does nationwide.

In the case of Washington, D.C., how can we examine urban renewal as a policy aimed to benefit the city when it has single-handedly reshaped its population and cultural landscape? The effect of this policy has not only made it one of the most expensive cities in the U.S. to live in, but has also produced an entirely new Washington, D.C. The history of D.C. is a culturally rich one. 'Chocolate City' once danced to [the soundtrack of Go-Go](#), and had the sweet smell of [mumbo sauce](#). The contemporary reality is that Washington, D.C. is gradually being transformed into an upper-middle class mecca with nefarious historical, social and racial implications. Social policy has the capacity to be radically transformative and empowering, and with greater financial support, countless grassroots initiatives could impact tangible change. Black history is U.S. history and it cannot and must not be destroyed by gentrification.

This entry was posted in [Activism](#), [Discrimination](#), [Editorial](#) and tagged [Gentrification](#), [Housing rights](#), [segregation](#), [Washington DC](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).