

Contested Nature:  
Displacement, Exclusion, and Contradiction in Urban  
Parks Policy

by

Mira Klein  
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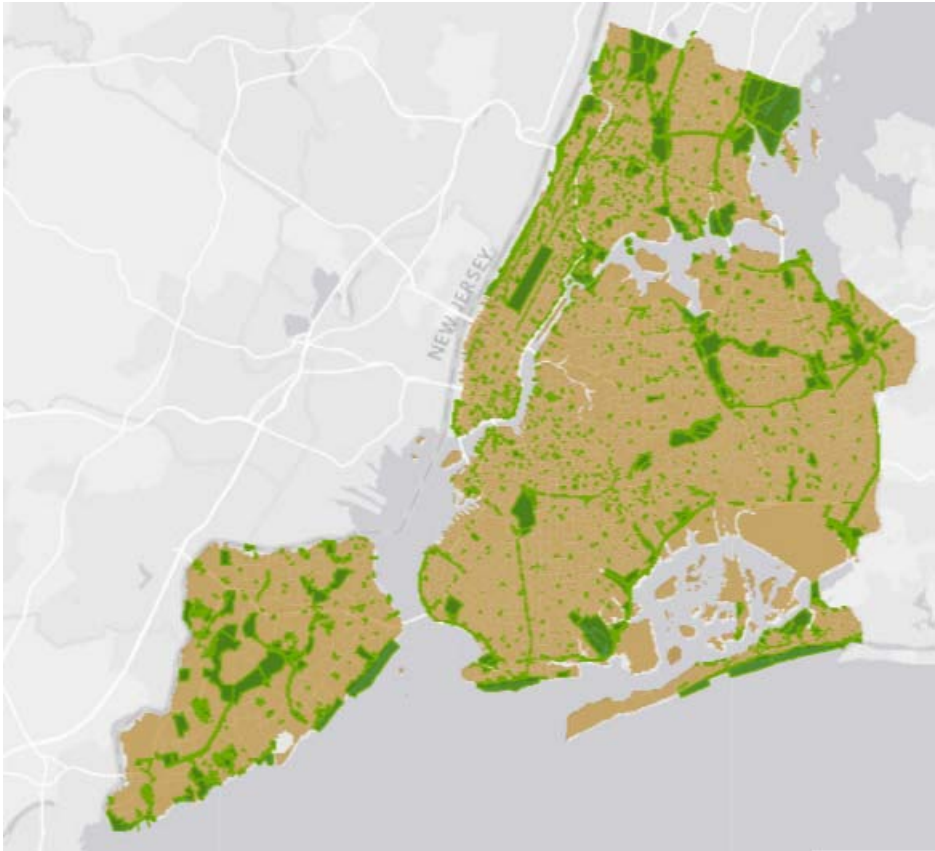
To all of the people who sat with me, talked with me, emailed with me, and pointed me towards questions I didn't know I should ask. To people on the ground doing the work to not only build equitable green space, but an equitable world. To the insurgent participants who challenge what is "natural" and "inevitable" and do something different.

## *PREFACE*

In June 2016 I confidently walked off a plane at John F. Kennedy International Airport. I felt ready for a summer in New York, to start my job at the city's Parks Department, and to dive into my research for this project. My confidence didn't last long; as I left the airport, I was overcome by an urge to leave – immediately. So why was I in New York? Why did I insist on traveling to a city whose workings were almost entirely unknown to me and making it the centerpiece of this thesis?

There is no doubt that my lack of pre-existing knowledge of New York City placed certain limitations upon my research. I mention site choice here, however, more as an ethical conundrum than a methodological one. I conducted research about New York City as an outsider looking in, but more importantly, as a wealthy white individual who chose to write about gentrification. As I read articles about displacement and conducted interviews about privatization, I was subletting an apartment in the swiftly gentrifying neighborhood of Crown Heights in a building that my housemates speculated had been previously cleared of tenants through landlord harassment. My position entails that I will never be one to personally bear the heaviest burdens of gentrification. For that reason, throughout my research I have worked to highlight the voices, personal experiences and first-hand accounts of those who have lived in and through the political systems I am investigating. I acknowledge the blurry ethical implications of my research, even as I attempt to account for them as best I can.

**New York City Parks**



## INTRODUCTION

With much public fanfare, New York City's newly sworn-in mayor Bill de Blasio announced the Community Parks Initiative in the fall of 2014. Under a banner of equity and redistribution, this initiative is the centerpiece of the city's *Framework for an Equitable Future*, a new and unprecedented approach towards managing the city's sprawling park system. In a pivot away from recent historical trends, the Community Parks Initiative (CPI) focuses on small neighborhood parks to address a lengthy history of racial and class inequities in the allocation of resources to green spaces. As described in official city documents, the purpose of CPI is "to invest in under-resourced parks that serve New York City's poorer, more densely populated, and fastest-growing communities."<sup>1</sup> Initiative implementation is still unfolding; forty-five city parks are in the process of being remodeled with an additional twenty-two slated for renovation in the near future. Grand, ambitious, and highly praised, CPI is unlike anything previously attempted by the city's overworked and underfunded Parks Department.

CPI and this thesis are both fundamentally driven by questions of equity: how do we create equitable public green space? CPI is New York City's (NYC) current model to address this question. My goal is not necessarily to assess the relative policy "success" or "failure" of CPI, but to examine the initiative in relation to contextual factors that may mediate the outcomes of its implementation. In concert, I hope to examine how this relationship has been imprinted and embedded within the structure, language, and implementation processes of CPI itself.

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<sup>1</sup> *NYC Parks: Framework for an Equitable Future* (2014).

The possibilities of creating equity in the future are bound up in factors that have established inequity in the past and continue to reinforce it in the present. Specifically, my research examines gentrification as one of these factors. How do park renovations move within the treacherous terrain of land speculation, real estate investment, and displacement of people from their homes? What does this relationship look like with respect to CPI in particular and the small neighborhood parks it renovates?

Environmental gentrification is the driving theoretical framework for my interrogation of equity in CPI. Grounded in gentrification processes in general, environmental gentrification is a re-application and re-interpretation of this broader theory through the environmental realm. It hones in on a particular set of “natural,” “green,” and “sustainable” amenities and how they fit into the matrix of neighborhood change. My research focuses on urban parks as one such amenity.

In NYC’s high density residential setting, public parks are like the city’s “backyards,” housing potlucks, barbeques, exercise classes, and birthday parties. As one city parks employee expressed, “New Yorkers use parks for their vacations.”<sup>2</sup> So important are these spaces in NYC that “to conceive of New York without the park is to imagine the intolerable.”<sup>3</sup> More than simply sites of leisure and relaxation, parks are tied up in the social, political, cultural, and economic processes that continuously make and remake urban life. As a constantly shifting piece of urban infrastructure, it is not a question of whether parks participate in the city, but *how*.

Research across disciplines has sought to assess the way that parks participate in the cityscape. A wealth of literature has been produced demonstrating the relationship

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<sup>2</sup> “Capital Division” (Presentation in the Parks Intern Lecture Series, New York, NY, June 17, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Jaredhew Gandy, *Concrete and clay: reworking nature in New York City*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002): 77.

between parks and positive public health outcomes through physical activity, psychological well-being, and social integration.<sup>4</sup> Further research has found that green space provides health benefits by reducing air pollution and moderating heightened urban temperatures.<sup>5</sup> Although most studies have stopped short of claiming dramatic causal relationships between urban parks and individual health indicators, almost all agree that these green spaces have a beneficial impact.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, parks advocates have pushed to expand research towards economic growth measures. One widely-cited impact study commissioned by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) examines how infusions of capital spending in parks and playgrounds affect the U.S. economy. As the report declares, “America’s local and regional public park agencies generated nearly \$140 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1 million jobs from their operation and capital spending alone in 2013.”<sup>7</sup> In another set of studies, the National Association of Home Buyers and the National Association of Realtors connect proximity to parks as an positive factor in home purchase.<sup>8</sup>

These economic studies are indicative of a shift in the tactics used to justify investment in public space.<sup>9</sup> The NRPA study acknowledges this shift, arguing that its findings support a “growing body of evidence that the benefits of parks extend well beyond their role as a public amenity and an enhancement to quality of life in their

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<sup>4</sup> E. A. Richardson, J. Pearce, R. Mitchell, & S. Kingham, *Role of physical activity in the relationship between urban green space and health*. (PUBLIC HEALTH, 2013)

<sup>5</sup> J.R. Wolch, J. Byrne, & J. P. Newell, *Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities ‘just green enough’* (LANDSCAPE AND URBAN PLANNING, 2014)

<sup>6</sup> A. C. K. Lee & R. Maheswaran, *The health benefits of urban green spaces: a review of the evidence* (Oxford, England, Journal of public health, 2011)

<sup>7</sup> Terry Clower, *The Economic Impact of Local Parks: An Examination of the Economic Impacts of Operations and Capital Spending on the United States Economy* (2015), iv

<sup>8</sup> Clower, *Economic Impact of Local Parks*, 1

<sup>9</sup> Ibid



communities.”<sup>10</sup> Quantitative measures such as property values and capital spending are growing in popularity among parks advocates, mirroring already well-established practice among private sector amenity-providers.<sup>11</sup>

The Physical Activity and Redesigned Community Spaces (PARCS) Study is one exception in this pivot towards the economic realm. The study utilizes empirical measures to examine health outcomes in response to improvements in park sites. Like my own research, the PARCS study draws on CPI renovations as a real-time natural experiment, tracking individual health metrics across a multi-year period among neighborhood residents.<sup>12</sup> This ongoing study, a partnership between the City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and the NYC Parks Department, is premised on the hypothesis that CPI renovations will produce measurable improvements in park usage, physical activity, and related quality-of-life indicators.<sup>13</sup> Gentrification, displacement, and community disruption, however, are not considered. In contrast, my research puts these factors at the center, employing a neighborhood approach rather than tracking individual-level changes.

Parks are sites that host and facilitate a whole range of important functions for urban residents. Equity and urban parks may then be connected by considering the provision and access to these important functions across the cityscape. It is with this understanding that I introduce environmental gentrification as another consideration through which to discuss equity and urban parks.

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<sup>10</sup> Clower, *Economic Impact of Local Parks*, iii

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 1

<sup>12</sup> Terry Huang *The Physical Activity and Redesigned Community Spaces (PARCS) Study: Protocol of a natural experiment to investigate the impact of citywide park redesign and renovation* (BMC Public Health, 2016): 1

<sup>13</sup> Huang, *PARCS*, 2

## Environmental Gentrification and Urban Parks

In the capitalist city, urban amenities are used to generate value. While CPI seeks to remedy the uneven distribution of parks and their corresponding benefits, the drive to produce value may simultaneously exclude historically marginalized residents from these newly beautified park spaces. In the context of this “pernicious paradox,” the creation of parks equity must be more thoroughly examined.<sup>14</sup> The dilemma of environmental gentrification was raised in conversation with NYC Parks Commissioner Mitchell Silver soon after CPI was announced. He responded with the following:

I would not want to sacrifice the ability of providing those critical amenities of green space, open space, and access to recreation to a community for fear that gentrification may follow. I will look at other strategies and work with other departments to address gentrification, but equity in my opinion means fairness. We need to be fair in how we distribute our resources and give people access to quality open space. We have to be fair in how we create healthy neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Commissioner Silver acknowledges that gentrification is a consideration, but one that is tangential to the central project of transforming the physical landscape of NYC’s urban park portfolio in underserved neighborhoods. The possibility of environmental gentrification is swept aside to be taken care of by other city agencies, or perhaps simply deemed inevitable. In response, my research questions whether it is possible to consider gentrification as tangential when it is such a pervasive element of the urban landscape, particularly in NYC.

Is it possible to detect environmental gentrification through CPI? In asking this question, my purpose is not to attack the work of CPI as a whole, for its goals of equity

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<sup>14</sup> Melissa Checker, *Wiped Out by the “Greenwave”: Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability* (City & Society, 2011): 211

<sup>15</sup> Tom Dallessio, *NYC Parks Chief Talks Public Space Trends, Big Data and “Fixing” Central Park’s Monument Inequity*, (Next City, 2015)

across the city's park system are admirable. But what might the Parks Department be missing out on by treating environmental gentrification as an afterthought?

From the outset, this project assumes the presence of environmental gentrification processes in some capacity. Whether or not such processes can be directly linked to CPI is less clear. Thus, the questions I ask have to do with how environmental gentrification manifests in a particular moment, in a particular city, and in response to a particular set of policies. To take this on requires understanding urban parks: their place within municipal bureaucracy, how they are framed rhetorically, how they are built, used, and traversed by private groups and residents, and how they interact with other elements of the built and non-built cityscape. It requires understanding CPI: its stated goals and language, its processes of implementation, the data it uses and the data it leaves out. Inevitably, it requires understanding urban parks and CPI in relation to one another.

Through a thorough understanding of contemporary urban park spaces in New York City and their renovation through the Community Parks Initiative, I can shed light on environmental gentrification in its contextual specificity. In turn, drawing on histories, contexts, and infrastructures that have shaped this process, I will connect my examination of environmental gentrification to much broader systems of capital, ownership, land, nature, and belonging in public urban spaces.

### The Community Parks Initiative

CPI offers a unique opportunity to tackle questions of environmental gentrification for several reasons. First, the impact of small-scale neighborhood green space renovation has so far been under-examined in the literature, which has primarily focused on large flagship park spaces. Second, CPI provides a relatively controlled

experimental setting in which to test the impacts of parks with causal rather than just observational implications.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, that CPI is focused on access and equity makes its renovation sites particularly interesting within the context of environmental gentrification – a process which is distinctly *inequitable*. From the structure and text of the initiative to its implementation and impact, CPI sits at the nexus of green space rhetoric, community-level changes, and infrastructural improvement in a time of housing and displacement crises.

CPI is an ambitious initiative. Its creators acknowledge this explicitly, boldly claiming that its approach will be “transformative.”<sup>17</sup> CPI’s revitalized parks are to be at the frontline of a new era of green space equity in New York City. Through a rigorous selection process considering current conditions and future impacts, these sites are meant to be those with the greatest potential for positive social and community change.

A series of conflicting characteristics prompted my interrogation of CPI’s efficacy in creating equitable park spaces, which I have grouped into three sets of contradictions: equity and displacement, participation and exclusion, and past, present, and future. Amidst these three sites of internal tensions – tensions that I argue inherently undermine the initiative’s stated goals – CPI presents fruitful ground on which to examine environmental gentrification in NYC.

I draw on Hamil Pearsall’s insights to delineate the methods through which I will consider these tensions embedded in CPI. Pearsall employs two categories – distributional and procedural – in his work analyzing environmental justice. According to his definitions, distributional justice “considers how the benefits and burdens of

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<sup>16</sup> Huang, *PARCS*, 1

<sup>17</sup> *Framework*, 12

sustainable development are distributed across populations,”<sup>18</sup> whereas procedural justice “focuses on how various populations are involved in environmental decision making.”<sup>19</sup> I use procedural justice to explore CPI’s structure, questioning its language, implementation strategies, and the actors involved. Second, I use distributional justice to unpack CPI’s impact on development, gentrification, and displacement in NYC alongside its corresponding material, discursive, and political implications. This approach is based on an understanding that urban policy and the city are mutually constituted. Therefore, it is vital in my analysis to examine both how political processes impact CPI and how, in turn, CPI is itself a vector of political processes.

I use CPI to politically and theoretically intervene in current understandings of environmental gentrification. Although this intervention is specific in terms of investigational scope, I argue that it has analytic resonance for the environmental gentrification literature at large.

### Methodology

My research is multi-methodological in approach, drawing on a variety of types of data, including government documents, secondary source analyses, statistical measures, news articles, self-conducted interviews, and personal observations. As these data sources indicate, my approach is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. This duality stands in contrast to most assessments of urban parks. The recent embrace of

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<sup>18</sup> Hamil Pearsall, *From brown to green? Assessing social vulnerability to environmental gentrification in New York City*, (ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING C-GOVERNMENT AND POLICY, 2010): 872

<sup>19</sup> Pearsall, *From brown to green*, 873

empirical methods has tended to sacrifice qualitative depth, while older assessments, on the other hand, have considered the role of parks “immeasurable” in quantitative terms.<sup>20</sup>

As Fainstein points out, this divide is not unique to parks, and in fact is representative of urban studies at large.<sup>21</sup> I do my best to bridge the gap in my own research methodology. The centerpiece of my qualitative analysis is a series of interviews I conducted over two time periods during the course of my research (the names of interviewees have been changed for anonymity). The first set was during summer of 2016, primarily with Parks Department employees. The second was over a four-day span in February 2017, this time mostly with stakeholders in real estate, advocacy, urban planning, and community organizing. These interviews are put into conversation with two forms of quantitative analysis: statistical models analyzing CPI’s impact on environmental gentrification, and geographic methods to visualize this relationship in a spatial format.

Interrogating the research implications of geographic scope is an expanding focus in both the fields of geography and political science, which here I address with respect to “urban” and “city” as spatial units.<sup>22</sup> By focusing on “urban parks” I mean parks that exist in cities. “Urban” and “City” are not synonymous constructions, the former describing a set of socio-economic spatial relations and the latter indicating a politically-bounded entity. My decision to focus on *urban* parks is a theoretical decision, while my focus on *city* parks is a methodological one.

I rely on “urban” because urban land is of central importance to the generation and circulation of wealth and capital. As David Harvey argues, while urbanization is a

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<sup>20</sup> Galen Cranz, *The politics of park design: a history of urban parks in America*. (Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1982): 214

<sup>21</sup> Susan Fainstein, *The just city*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010): 6

<sup>22</sup> Fainstein, *The Just City*, 82

process intrinsically tied to capital growth, this growth is also a fundamentally urban process. This relational perspective is under-explored in theorizations of capitalism; the particular role of urban geographies is often swept aside for the sake of macro-economic analysis.<sup>23</sup> Capital doesn't simply *move*; it moves across differentiated geographies wherein capital and space mutually interact and produce one another.<sup>24</sup> At the center of capital accumulation, urban regions are also at the nexus of spatial stratification.<sup>25</sup> In a contemporary context where competition over space is heightened and land ownership is concentrated, urban sites are where gentrification most visibly plays out.<sup>26</sup>

Utilizing the city as a unit of analysis presents several methodological benefits. The policies I investigate are constructed and implemented within its boundaries, many of the social and political networks I consider are bound through particular municipal factors, and the data I analyze is collected at a city level. Despite this reliance on the city in my work, I acknowledge its limitations as a spatial construct. In its political form, the city exists as an arbitrarily bounded entity, "a physical or cultural motif that can easily become divorced from any wider considerations of the dynamics of urban change."<sup>27</sup> As Fainstein points out, "cities cannot be viewed in isolation; they exist within networks of governmental institutions and capital flows...the city level therefore is one layer in the hierarchy of governance."<sup>28</sup> To rely on the city is to risk getting tangled in an "analytical prison"<sup>29</sup> where one can miss important connections to networks that function at other

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<sup>23</sup> David Harvey, *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. (New York, Verso, 2012): 35

<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 42

<sup>25</sup> Kim Moody, *From welfare state to real estate: regime change in New York City, 1974 to the present*. (New York: New Press, 2007): 74

<sup>26</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 241

<sup>27</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 6

<sup>28</sup> Fainstein, *The Just City*, 17

<sup>29</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 6

scales.<sup>30</sup> Because global capitalism and technological innovation constantly present new mechanisms of cross-boundary fluidity, some have argued that the city is no longer a valid unit at all.

Despite these critiques, I maintain that the city maintains methodological utility. Municipal government, city organizations, and urban neighborhoods retain political agency, even as they are influenced by external factors.<sup>31</sup> It is cities, for example, that are at the forefront of “green” policies facilitating the provision of environmental amenities and remediation.<sup>32</sup> Still, there is no “ideal” spatial unit. As Robert Dahl explains “at the level of the neighborhood, there is the greatest opportunity for democracy but the least amount of power; as we scale up the amount of decision-making power increases, but the potential of people to affect outcomes diminishes.”<sup>33</sup> There are benefits both to scaling up and scaling down.

There are several other parameters that I use to delimit the scale and scope of my research. First, I am primarily considering what I describe as “neighborhood parks,” by which I mean small parks of “regular use” (contrast to larger parks promoted as attractions, often riddled with outside visitors and tourists).<sup>34</sup> As opposed to many studies which tend to focus on parks in Manhattan, my investigation covers all five city boroughs. Furthermore, while historically situated, my research mostly focuses on the

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<sup>30</sup> Margo Huxley & Oren Yiftachel, *New Paradigm or Old Myopia? Unsettling the Communicative Turn in Planning Theory*. (Journal of Planning Education and Research, 2000): 339

<sup>31</sup> Fainstein, *The Just City*, 7

<sup>32</sup> Isabelle Anguelovski, *From Toxic Sites to Parks as (Green) LULUs? New Challenges of Inequity, Privilege, Gentrification, and Exclusion for Urban Environmental Justice*. (Journal of Planning Literature, 2016);

Kenneth Gould & Tammy Lewis, (2017). *Green gentrification: urban sustainability and the struggle for environmental justice*. London;New York, NY, Routledge, 2017): 3

<sup>33</sup> Fainstein, *The Just City*,17

<sup>34</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 82



time period from the Bloomberg administration onward (2001-present), with particular emphasis on changes that have occurred since Mayor de Blasio took office in 2014.

Even with this bounded scope, gentrification can take on many meanings. It is simultaneously a central component of urban studies, a state tactic of revitalization, and colloquial shorthand for urban change; it straddles academia, policy, and daily life. This has prompted highly variable and often contradictory understandings about what gentrification is, why it happens, and how it works. These inconsistencies are, in part, products of its politically contentious nature. Gentrification, as any process or piece of language, doesn't exist in isolation, and thus it carries the possibility of many meanings and implications for different contexts and audiences.

Definitions are points of intervention to contest some meanings while promoting others.<sup>35</sup> Considering definitions must include acknowledgement that “the act of definition, of defining and describing has a power dimension.”<sup>36</sup> The word “gentrification” reveals elements of broader political structures; as D. W. Gibson argues, “Gentrification is our word of choice because we have settled into the choice to let money frame our relationship to land.”<sup>37</sup> Here, he highlights how single words can serve as an entryway to making important connections between terms and the context in which they are formulated. Definitions of environmental gentrification require the same critical examination, merging a politically contentious term like “gentrification” with a politically-manipulated term like “environment.” I will work through the challenges of

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<sup>35</sup> Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, & Elvin Wyly, *The gentrification reader*. (New York; London, Routledge, 2010): 5

<sup>36</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 3

<sup>37</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The edge becomes the center: an oral history of gentrification in the twenty-first century* (1st ed.). (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2015): 312

defining such weighty terms in the body of this thesis, doing so with the understanding that the meanings I ascribe have deep implications for the rest of my work.

Because innumerable understandings of gentrification have emerged over time, Lees, Slater, and Wyly highlight the importance of “keeping the definition...open so as to allow it to include new types/forms of gentrification that may yet emerge.”<sup>38</sup> Some credit broad definitions to the nature of gentrification itself, a “chaotic concept connoting many diverse if interrelated events and processes.”<sup>39</sup> Definitions of gentrification too often strive to incorporate rigid causal explanations, which provide simplistic and aggregated descriptions of a highly dynamic process.<sup>40</sup> In response, scholars have moved towards embracing what Lees, Slater, and Wyly call as an “elastic yet targeted definition of gentrification.”<sup>41</sup> Such a definition (or set of definitions) embraces multiple processes, maintaining “both structural tendencies and historical specificities, but without extracting it theoretically from the social formation of which it is a part.”<sup>42</sup> I draw on these lessons from gentrification to apply an “elastic yet targeted” definition of environmental gentrification in my research.

### Why New York City?

At the center of urbanization, development, real estate, and capital flows, NYC offers a unique case to examine urban parks through a series of extremes. As Leon Trotsky observed of the city, “New York impressed me tremendously because, more

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<sup>38</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 5

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 14

than any other city, it is the fullest expression of our modern age.”<sup>43</sup> NYC often sets trends, and urban parks are no exception. As Cranz explains in his history of American urban parks, through Central Park and public funding NYC was vital to the rise of the urban park movement.<sup>44</sup> Today, NYC continues to be at the forefront of urban greening trends.<sup>45</sup> This is notable because NYC lacks any easy routes to expand its parkland. It is a city “unlike anywhere else because of the sheer lack of open space,” which places intensified pressures on public open space.<sup>46</sup> Through a focus on NYC, its extremes illuminate a process like environmental gentrification with greater clarity.

Despite the city’s unique qualities, the implications of NYC-based research extend beyond its municipal boundaries. While what happens in NYC cannot wholly explain urban events and systems in other locations, it is a city with outside influence, exporting ideas, systems, and policies nation-wide. Stefan Bradley, author of *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* was himself an outsider to NYC when he wrote his book. As he explains, he was drawn to his work because “what happened in New York City, which many considered the capital of the world, had an impact on the rest of the nation and the world. What was to New Yorkers a local controversy over a park became a national news item.”<sup>47</sup> In essence, the local in NYC does not necessarily stay local. Fainstein too speaks to the ways in which this city has a widespread influence. With respect to urban redevelopment, she explains that “although New York, as a consequence of both its size and global importance, is not typical of

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<sup>43</sup> Leon Trotsky, *My life*. (Gloucester, Mass: P. Smith, 1970)

<sup>44</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, xi-xii

<sup>45</sup> Gould & Lewis, *Green gentrification*, 3

<sup>46</sup> Karla (former urban planner), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>47</sup> Stefan M. Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black student power in the late 1960s*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009): vii

American cities, the particular policies it has adopted have been widely replicated.”<sup>48</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, NYC’s distinctiveness is also something that makes it a good case study to highlight broader systems and events.

Perhaps most significantly, however, NYC boasts some of the most rampant frontlines of gentrification in the United States. This has led to a wealth of NYC-based research which I am fortunate to draw on in my own endeavors. Thus, it is unsurprising that a high proportion of the environmental gentrification literature focuses on New York as well, laying stable foundations for me to build upon.

### Ranauka Park Case Study



“Work In Progress” at Ranauka Park, Personal photograph, February 2017

Ranauka Park was one of the first sites announced to participate in CPI. I paid a visit to the park in early February of 2017. It was closed for renovation, although the snow had brought construction to a standstill. The large open plot of land was strewn

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<sup>48</sup> Fainstein, *The Just City*, 87

with tarps partially covering construction equipment, all surrounded by a tall fence. A Parks Department posting indicated “Work In Progress.” Through CPI, just over \$3 million in city funds have been allocated to the Ranaqua Park renovation which will bring a new playground and turf field to this historically underserved park. The CPI process began with community outreach and scoping meetings back in November, 2014. After contracts and procurement were settled the following year, construction began in December 2016. As of now, the projected completion date for the project is December 2017.<sup>49</sup>

Ranaqua Park is situated in the residential Mott Haven neighborhood. Its block includes subsidized drug-recovery housing, several small apartment buildings, and a public school. The roaring Cross-Bronx Expressway, the result of Moses-era transit policy, carries passengers just to the south while obstructing access to the Harlem River on its far side. From the fenced off park entrance, the Manhattan skyline is in full view.

I was drawn to Ranaqua after I overheard mention of a private apartment building under renovation next door one day at work. Looking at the Ranaqua renovation plans, the building in question sits right up against the park site. Ranaqua bends around it so that the building almost looks like it is in the park. Could this be a case to demonstrate the relationship between small park renovations gentrification?

Immediately, one can identify many characteristics of interest at the Ranaqua site: a renovation in an “up and coming” neighborhood, a district slated for increased height and density limits or “up-zoning” under Mayor de Blasio’s housing plans, and a neighboring building under renovation at the same time as the publically-financed remodel of Ranaqua Park. I jumped at the possibility that these apartment renovations

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<sup>49</sup> "Ranaqua Park Reconstruction."

could be in direct response to the CPI upgrades, so I set my sights on Ranaqua to find out more.

I further cemented my hypothesis after I visited Ranaqua Park myself. From the recently-renovated apartment next door hung a large banner, easily viewable from the nearby expressway. In all caps it read: “LUXURY APARTMENTS FOR RENT.” Among the features cited, the banner declared “all units fully renovated” and “bike parking” among other amenities. I could get more info, I observed, by visiting [motthavenliving.com](http://motthavenliving.com).



Banner hanging from Mott Haven Apartments, Personal photograph, February 2017

The history of the Mott Haven neighborhood tells a starkly different story than one of luxury apartment development. The Cross-Bronx Expressway was built during the peak of NYC’s first wave of urban renewal. Its construction bisected the neighborhood, separating communities and disrupting local networks all while the city

participated in a system of community disinvestment and political neglect.<sup>50</sup> Still today, Ranaqua sits in a hot spot of public housing, symbolic of the neighborhood's historic socio-economic characteristics.

The city's systemic underinvestment in Mott Haven has not only manifested in a lack of open space access, but actively produced detrimental characteristics that have impacted the health and well-being of neighborhood residents. Through industrial waste and highway emissions, the neighborhood features disproportionate rates of road injuries and asthma,<sup>51</sup> meticulously catalogued by The South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study.<sup>52</sup> The convergence of industrial plants and highways form what local residents have dubbed "asthma alley."<sup>53</sup>

Today, Ranaqua Park is situated in a much different context. The renovated Mott Haven apartments are part of a larger trend sweeping through the South Bronx landscape, now considered "up and coming" by the real estate industry. As one heading indicates, *Mott Haven Sees More Development as Young Professionals Move In*.<sup>54</sup> The article states that, "Mott Haven isn't typically associated with new developments and trendy eateries, but locals say the South Bronx neighborhood is in the process of getting a new image." Citing an interview with a local broker who works in the neighborhood, he explains the recent draw to Mott Haven by pointing out that the new residents feel it is "authentic, as opposed to a neighborhood that is completely gentrified." Further changes are hotly anticipated, as a large chunk of the South Bronx has been slated for higher

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<sup>50</sup> "Activist New York."

<sup>51</sup> "See the South Bronx Waterfront's Green, Park-Filled Future."

<sup>52</sup> Carlos Restrepo, & Rae Zimmerman, *Dissemination Materials and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Tutorial Materials* (South Bronx Health and Policy Study, 2009): 10

<sup>53</sup> Caroline Spivack, C. "Bronx's Asthma Alley Protests Plans to Extend Power Plant Permits," *City Limits*, 2015

<sup>54</sup> Jason Shaltiel & Paul Liotta, "Mott Haven sees more development as young professionals move in," *AM New York*, 2016

density and taller building under the mayor's far-reaching re-zoning plans. Ranaqua Park was Ann ounced as a CPI site amidst this surging focus on the Mott Haven neighborhood from real estate investors, trend-scoping news columns, and the city itself.

The push for green amenities in Mott Haven is built on historical neglect that has concentrated industry and pollution in one of the New York's lower-income neighborhoods, its depressed land values now primed for investment. For this reason, Ranaqua Park isn't the only open space in the area receiving new attention. Private interest (and private money) is being funneled into the neighborhood to promote green space and outdoor access. One of the biggest pushes is coming from the New York Restoration Project, a citywide nonprofit which two years ago Ann ounced plans for green revitalization through what they call The Haven Project.<sup>55</sup> The prospect of additional green space was further increased upon Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.'s expressed desire to develop a large park along the Harlem River. Drawing on established public-private park models in NYC, this park would be accompanied by significant residential development, potentially using real estate taxes to offset park maintenance costs. Diaz presents a vision of "transformative development" that dually rests on new parks and business activity, one that is conveyed through a distinctly green lens.<sup>56</sup>

Diaz's vision is spurring an influx of major capital into the South Bronx; development prospects near the proposed park have left real estate investors scrambling to buy up nearby properties.<sup>57</sup> Developer Chetrit Group, for example, purchased a 1.5

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<sup>55</sup> "See the South Bronx Waterfront's Green, Park-Filled Future."

<sup>56</sup> Bronx Borough Office, *The Special Harlem Waterfront District: An Overview of the Opportunity on the Bronx Waterfront between East 138th Street and East 149th Street*. (2014).

<sup>57</sup> Zoe Rosenberg, "Mapping the Crucial Developments That Will Reshape the Bronx," *Curbed*, 2015



acre piece of land in Port Morris – a neighborhood which borders Mott Haven – with a plan to construct six large residential towers in a multi-billion dollar real estate investment.<sup>58</sup> Chetrit’s plan suggests a few things that are important to highlight here. First, even though Diaz’s proposal is just that – a proposal – current green space trends in New York are such that the developer felt confident enough to move ahead with this major land acquisition. Second, it demonstrates just how profitable green space is in NYC today. As the director of special projects for the South Bronx Overall Development Corporation attested, Chetrit’s project could spur a change “akin to Williamsburg meets Dumbo,” referencing two trendy and highly-gentrified Brooklyn neighborhoods.<sup>59</sup> Developers and real estate experts are already treating this transformation as inevitable.

With this swiftly changing context in mind, I return to Ranaqua Park and the Mott Haven Apartments. Are the simultaneous renovations of these two facilities connected? When I brought this question to the manager of the apartment renovation the picture got more complex. Did the decision to renovate the building have anything to do with the park renovation next door? I prodded. “Nothing,” the manager responded. As he relayed to me, it certainly had to do with the building’s location, but because of access to transit more than anything else.<sup>60</sup> Amenities like waterfront proximity also played a role. But what about a small park like Ranaqua? I pressed. He interjected, “Very rarely would you hear of an investor saying, ‘Oh, they’re going to renovate a park so let’s do this [renovation].’ The value of my property is not going to go up because the park down the street is being renovated.” Something big like a mall, on

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<sup>58</sup> Zoe Rosenberg, “Developer Wants To Rename South Bronx the 'Piano District,’” *Curbed*, 2015

<sup>59</sup> Rosenberg, “Piano District.”

<sup>60</sup> Mott Haven Apartment building manager, interview with the author, March 2017

the other hand, might be enough of a driving factor, he speculated. But “a park doesn’t make people say ‘Hey I want to live here.’” The manager did not dismiss Ranaqua completely; “Being next to a park is definitely a plus” he told me.<sup>61</sup> But, to the manager, the “plus” of Ranaqua was more of an afterthought than an instigator.

Soon after my conversation with the building manager, I got in touch with Michael, a Parks employee familiar with the Ranaqua Park project and the apartment renovation next door. He confirmed the building manager’s take on the relationship between these simultaneous projects: “They already had plans to renovate the building – they were upgrading it to market rate apartments to rent it at a pretty hefty price,” he told me. While renting units at such a “hefty price” is certainly a response to changing conditions in the South Bronx, Ranaqua Park wasn’t *the* factor that set it off. “The building manager did tell us that renovating the park would help him,” Michael continued, before reiterating the building manager’s overall assessment: that the Ranaqua Park and Mott Haven apartment renovations were decidedly disconnected.<sup>62</sup>

This wasn’t what I was expecting to hear, or, more accurately, it wasn’t the answer I had been hoping for. My knee-jerk reaction was one of disappointment – after all I am investigating parks as a causal force not as an afterthought. My analysis shifted upon further reflection, however. Park-driven gentrification, if it is identifiable through my analysis, will be done with add-ons, caveats, and contradictions, reflecting the complex interactions of housing, green space, real estate, politics, and displacement in urban life. I don’t doubt the building manager or Michael when they tell me the renovations are not directly linked. Rather, I will consider these conversations in the context of what I have already shared about Ranaqua Park: its proximity to the Bronx

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Michael (NYC Parks Department employee), interview with the author, March, 2017

Expressway, legacy of displacement, location in an “up-and-coming” neighborhood, juxtaposition to apartments with steadily rising rents, and renovated park space that provides a “plus” to building managers. These things together tell a bigger story about parks and gentrification, and that is the story I am interested in exploring in my research.

Environmental gentrification, cutting across disciplines and methodologies, is a process of contradictions. It is a question of history, from disparities in parks funding and the midcentury redlining of neighborhoods, to white flight and “return” to the city. It is a question of economics, from the rise of neoliberalism and privatization of public space, to the consolidation of capital in urban centers and rising value of real estate. It is a question of politics, from the power of real estate interests in City Hall to the zoning laws which can change a neighborhood seemingly overnight. And finally, it is a question of ecology, resting in conceptions of our urban natural landscapes and how these landscapes in turn impact human quality of life. Cutting deep channels throughout are persistent issues of race, class, health, access, citizenship, and language – issues which have withstood political upheavals, globalized economics, and ecological crises.

It is with acknowledgement of all these complexities that I seek to develop a framework of environmental gentrification attuned to its context, contradictions, and temporal specificity. I rely on an understanding of “environment” – in physical form, cultural and aesthetic imagery, and rhetorical description – as a form of value-generation. Reflecting my research scope, I formulate my framework with attention to three contextual elements: gentrification in its contemporary urban iteration, New York City as a primary site of focus, and, the renovation of small urban parks amidst rhetoric of equity and community participation. While acknowledging this context – one that speaks

to how environmental gentrification manifests in spatially and temporally variable ways – I will continuously connect it back to larger systems.

Environmental gentrification processes that are so evident in the case of well-funded flagship parks also appear in smaller and less-flashy urban spaces – albeit in a slightly altered form. The revitalization of small urban parks is a new iteration of tried-and-true urban tactics, utilizing public investment and de-politicized rhetoric to mask larger processes at play; CPI renovations cannot be divorced from broader, politically-charged trends in privatization, development, and displacement that reproduce historic inequities in spatially-specific ways. That CPI, which purportedly promotes park equity through both procedural and distributional structures, has failed to address these contextual processes further masks environmental gentrification from public view, clearing a path for its perpetuation. Drawing out the ideological contradictions in CPI – between equity/displacement, participation/exclusion, and past/present/future – is thus a project of unmasking.

### Structural frameworks

There are two frameworks which, while they don't speak directly to the content of this thesis, are useful for explaining the structures that guided my research. The first is *Infrastructures*, denoting a theoretical framework. The second is *Points/Lines/Polygons*, a framework for spatial visualization and interconnectivity.

Infrastructure is a useful framing tool because of its broad interpretive capacity and linguistic flexibility. The term has can be applied across physical and social systems to describe multilayered and changing processes. Infrastructure can mean material pathways, economic systems, social connections, and political networks. In simple terms,

“infrastructure” alludes to immensely complex and layered processes. Infrastructure is useful for my purposes because of its discursive grounding in the physical, allowing us to imagine how material layers build on top of one another in related forms. Furthermore, infrastructure calls to mind history and temporality; it implies interlocking and interrelated layers across time, existing in different states of newness or decay, usage or abandonment, in relative states of illuminating the past or calling on the future.

Infrastructure is conceptually analogous to how I understand the role of urban parks and related systems in the cityscape. “Infrastructures can be conceptualized as a vast life support system” because they establish pathways and channels to enable the movement, passage, or building of other things.<sup>63</sup> Thus, it is necessary to understand infrastructure in order to understand existing movement, passage, and building. People, too, are enmeshed in a socio-spatial web of infrastructures past and present. As one New Yorker put it, “Other people who are long dead – their efforts, we’re walking on them.”<sup>64</sup> With compounding use over time, wear and tear necessitates that infrastructure must be fixed, replaced, or left to wear away. In the process of change, new infrastructure is built on the old. Infrastructure responds to the past while adjusting to conditions of the present in anticipation of the future. In this way, Infrastructure becomes Infrastructures.

This infrastructures framework speaks to how I intend to interpret urban parks throughout my research. In a testimony to the New York City Council, a representative from *New Yorkers for Parks* stated that “Parks is critical infrastructure.” The city would never deny a neighborhood a sewer system, “So don’t deny the park” she argued.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and clay: reworking nature in New York City*, 9

<sup>64</sup> “New York City at its Core: Future City Lab.”

<sup>65</sup> “New York City Council: Meeting Minutes”

Urban parks are physical infrastructure; they can be sat in and walked through with the “capacity to form and modulate space.”<sup>66</sup> Urban parks are social infrastructure, “form[ing] the necessary conditions for stable thriving communities.” Urban parks are all types of infrastructures at once. They are built by and through neighborhoods, on top of remnants of the physical and social past. Material flexibility and conceptual mobility together make urban parks an especially interesting medium to examine through the lens of infrastructures I have so far laid out.

The relationships between geographies reflect shifting infrastructures, whether they are of a political, economic, social, or ideological type. Using infrastructural geographies, I am interested in the spatiality of layers, boundaries, and sites, and how they mutually intersect and interact. Moments of overlap and intersection are spatial and reveal the unevenness of how infrastructures are built and how they evolve in site-specific ways. I understand these layers as more than simply geographic XY coordinates, but conceptualizing sites as a collection of latitudes and longitudes is nevertheless a helpful tool.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is like digital cartography. It is software where one can visualize spatial relationships on a coordinate plane. GIS uses three types of “layers” to create digital map displays: points, lines, and polygons. Points represent particular sites, located in space using XY coordinates in accordance with standard cartographic methodology. Lines are drawn between points, used to measure distance across space or separate one type of space from another. Polygons, lastly, are used to represent particular areas of space within a defined boundary. Each of these layers can be embedded with data. Stacked on top of one another, GIS is not only a way to

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<sup>66</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 37

understand the spatial relationship between layers, but to analyze the relationship between the data attached to these layers.

I have structured my work using points, lines, and polygons as my guide because of its decidedly spatial orientation. Points, lines, and polygons have the ability to convey different types of spatial structures with a visual clarity that lends itself towards untangling the complexity of the processes in question. In grounding these relationships in geography, I hope to emphasize the nuance and spatial specificity of how a multi-layered force like environmental gentrification can move throughout a city.

### Overview of Chapters

As previously mentioned, my work follows three sets of ideological contradictions which I have identified within CPI and its implementation in the NYC Parks system: equity/displacement, participation/exclusion, and past/present/future. I am using these contradictions not as a policy referendum, but rather as a mechanism to highlight how environmental gentrification works through an initiative uniquely positioned to tackle problems of park (in)equity in the largest city parks system in the United States. Each of the chapters that follow are structured around CPI, yet they also cast a wide contextual net, toggling between the broad and the specific.

I begin with equity and displacement in chapter 1. Here, I highlight the fundamental challenges of spatial equity when space is so deeply tied to exclusive systems of private property and ownership. Grounding property in colonial logics of conquest, I tie contemporary real estate to the same colonial ideologies which have long facilitated displacement from space and land. This nexus of land-property-displacement

sets up my examination of environmental gentrification as it applies to specific types of land and specific forms of property commodification.

Chapter 2 centers on tensions between participation and exclusion. Noting CPI's intentionally participatory nature, in this chapter I set out to identify the successes and pitfalls of the Parks Department's community engagement model. I contextualize this examination through an analysis of exclusion through privatization and commodification. I use urban parks as a site in which to study how spaces can be made public, private, or move from one to the other, and how in turn this sheds light on how participatory planning processes are made exclusive as well.

Lastly, in Chapter 3 I examine how CPI reaches between past, present and future in a temporally contradictory way. Elements of the past (historic inequities), present (community needs), and future (planning for growth) are held together in CPI's structure, but here I question whether and how these elements can work in concert. In doing so, I put the tensions between equity/displacement and participation/exclusion into conversation with broader issues of belonging and the right to the city.

Through these three chapters, I build a basis for presenting two interventions. I challenge the notion that increased participation through institutional models can fix problems of access, equity, and belonging that are embedded in issues of environmental gentrification. At the same time, I challenge the supposed inevitability of environmental gentrification. These challenges are based in *democracy* on the one hand and *agency* on the other. From here, I move towards my own theory of environmental gentrification, one that accounts for the complex and seemingly paradoxical nature of environmental gentrification, but builds in room for disrupting existing relationships between park renovation and urban displacement.



## CHAPTER 1: EQUITY / DISPLACEMENT

“All along the way money is made and people are displaced. At first it is the Native Americans and farmers, then the African American community that occupied part of what became Central Park; eventually it would be the working class, poor and not so poor, in the path of Robert Moses’s bulldozer...The struggle over space has a zero-sum character.”<sup>1</sup>

### Historic Inequities

Urban land is inherently variable: it rests alongside other plots of land with other forms of ownership, it abuts certain natural features, and it has particular infrastructural topographies. On top of this variability, land values modulate via decisions regarding investment and disinvestment, access and exclusion from space. New variabilities are built from the physical and highly localized ways in which capital is targeted in space. Real estate is the focal point of making and unmaking value.

One can trace the conditions of public space through political power. Agnew argues that politics is inherently spatial; it doesn’t simply produce geographic outcomes, but instead can be understood as a “spatialized process of political influence.”<sup>2</sup> Through patterns of political power, historic inequities have a way of reproducing themselves over time; “pools of inequality” come to carry “their own gravitational pull.”<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that regions with the greatest potential “return on investment” are spatially aligned with historically redlined and neglected places.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary investments are a strategic appropriation of legacies of disinvestment, trapping marginalized residents in a cycle of continued disenfranchisement over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 75

<sup>2</sup> John Agnew, *Mapping politics: how context counts in electoral geography*. (Political Geography, 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Ron Shiffman, *Beyond Zuccotti Park: freedom of assembly and the occupation of public space* (1st ed.). (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 157-158

<sup>4</sup> Timothy A. Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City: The Politics of Revitalization and Homelessness in Downtown Seattle*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004): 85

Spatial differentiation through urban infrastructure was particularly visible in American cities during the height of urban renewal in the 1970s and 80s. This renewal was experienced in starkly different ways across the cityscape however.<sup>5</sup> In a systemic process of “planned shrinkage,” cities participated in “the withdrawal of capital and services from [certain] neighborhoods in hopes the devastation would drive the poor from the city.”<sup>6</sup> Planned shrinkage policies took harsh forms, as one city resident recounts:

And they decided the best way to deal with this is to deconcentrate these spaces. Now how do you do that? How do you get thousands of people to move out of their homes and neighborhoods? Well, you cut off services. You cut back on police, cut back on fire departments, you close schools, you stop funding housing...<sup>7</sup>

Planned shrinkage links the process of profit-generation to the removal of urban “blight.” Urban renewal was never about ameliorating this blight altogether; rather, it was “merely shifted elsewhere.”<sup>8</sup>

Parks embody the realization of uneven investment and spatial distribution of public resources in public space. Over time, the NYC parks system has produced park sites of highly variable quality in terms of maintenance, safety, and amenities. New Yorkers for Parks, a nonprofit advocacy organization, has meticulously documented these disparities in a series of “report cards” cataloguing city park conditions.<sup>9</sup> My own observations confirmed this variability, as I encountered parks ranging from weedy handball courts to meticulously-maintained rolling fields. The Community Parks

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<sup>5</sup> "New York City at its Core: Future City Lab."

<sup>6</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 76

<sup>7</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 278

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 155

<sup>9</sup> "Report Cards."

Initiative has set out to tackle these persistent conditions and narrow this chasm in quality across the parks system.

Because of the spatial alignment of historic neglect and renewed investment, many of the parks that have been selected for CPI renovation are also situated in neighborhoods embroiled in gentrification. “Gentrification” is a term with countless interpretations. Many lament changing neighborhood “character” or the disruption of community ties. Some focus on certain visual indicators of artist or hipster culture: a new coffee shop or pilates studio. Many simply understand gentrification through “a certain nebulous but know-it-when-you-see-it perspective.”<sup>10</sup> As one New Yorker described it, gentrification is a “perversity of being on the edge.”<sup>11</sup> There are common themes that emerge, however. One is a frustration about a lack of respect that gentrifiers show for the space they are moving into and “no desire to learn about the community.”<sup>12</sup> This disregard for longtime residents “sends a message of inferiority to their brown neighbors that have been here for generations.<sup>13</sup> Despite diverse understandings, it is important to develop a working definition of gentrification, however broad, through which to interpret my research.

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Kirkland, “What’s Race Got to Do With it? Looking for the Racial Dimensions of Gentrification,” *Western Journal of Black Studies*, (2008): 19

<sup>11</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 208

<sup>12</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

## Literature Review

Gentrification has produced a “voluminous, diverse, and often contradictory” body of work across many disciplines.<sup>14</sup> In this review, I sift through the published work in order to pull out those components most pertinent to my research.

For decades after the term “gentrification” entered the academic lexicon, debate about causality dominated the literature. Framed in opposing terms of supply and demand, this debate was born out of Neil Smith’s 1979 article entitled *Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People*, and raged until slowing around the turn of the century out of scholarly exhaustion. While the literature has arrived at a (sometimes uneasy) point of resolution on the matter, it is worth exploring this debate briefly here.<sup>15</sup>

In Smith’s *Toward a Theory of Gentrification*, he proposes the idea of a “rent gap” which “has become one of the most influential – and controversial – foundations of gentrification as a field of study.”<sup>16</sup> As Lees, Slater, and Wyly describe, the rent gap theory “connects local transformations and tensions in gentrifying neighborhoods to the broader structures of uneven urban development and the inequalities of capitalism.”<sup>17</sup> It offers a Marxist-structuralist critique of demand-side gentrification theory, which relies on cultural desires as the driving force. As Lees, Slater, and Wyly further state:

The power and provocation of the rent-gap explanation is its challenge to common thinking: gentrification is not a natural outcome of changes in consumer practices, but instead the result of structural features of capitalism that produce the array of things we’re allowed to choose from in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Larry Bourne, “The Demise of Gentrification? A Commentary and Prospective View” in *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly (New York; London, Routledge, 2010): 55

<sup>15</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 82

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 82-83

This perspective “privileges economics over culture and structure over agency.”<sup>19</sup> It presents a challenge to other scholars whose focus on the “culture industry,” conceptualizing gentrification as derived from pre-existing cultural desires.<sup>20</sup>

Acknowledging the importance of both supply-side and demand-side features in gentrification processes, many scholars moved to bridge structural and cultural features. Caulfield, for example, acknowledges that consumer preferences are grounded in structural factors and simultaneously pushes back against the tendency to reduce analysis to “only economic or ‘practical’ factors” while ignoring that cultural forces, too, play an active role.<sup>21</sup> Or more succinctly, Rose says “‘gentrifiers’ are not the mere bearers of a process determined independently of them.”<sup>22</sup> It wasn’t until the twenty-first century, however, that the literature found significant new direction, moving towards drawing out gentrification’s contextual and political specificities.

Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith tackle context in *The Changing State of Gentrification* in which they write that under shifting political conditions, the state is taking on an increasingly assertive part in promoting gentrification.<sup>23</sup> They argue that much of this shift has been subtle and informal, in the form of “increased local government assistance to gentrifiers, relaxed zoning, and reduced protection of affordable housing”

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<sup>19</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 83

<sup>20</sup> Jon Caulfield, “Gentrification and desire.” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010): 166

<sup>21</sup> Caulfield, “Gentrification and desire,” 167

<sup>22</sup> D. Rose, “Rethinking gentrification: beyond the uneven development of Marxist urban theory.” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010): 202

<sup>23</sup> Jason Hackworth & Neil Smith, “The changing state of gentrification,” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010): 64

rather than sweeping changes to urban policy.<sup>24</sup> This latest “wave” of gentrification is one that is more linked to large-scale capital than ever before.<sup>25</sup>

Hackworth and Smith’s temporally-minded analysis does not address many of the other homogenizing assumptions prevalent in the gentrification literature, however. Scholars have long rooted gentrification in a class based analysis,<sup>26</sup> yet there is substantial reason to broaden the approach beyond a macro, class-oriented characterization. This broader approach can maintain structural economic frameworks while demonstrating how other systems may be interconnected in more localized ways that better account for gentrification’s dynamic and multifaceted features.

Taking into account geographic complexity is one way the study of gentrification has become better attuned to context.<sup>27</sup> Geography matters beyond “a casual acknowledgement of contingency.”<sup>28</sup> Employing the phrase “spatiality of gentrification,” Ley’s work looks beyond cartographically bound understandings of space.<sup>29</sup> In a related framework of “spatial epistemologies,” Soja introduces three spatial epistemologies – a “trialectics of space” – to distinguish between “material spatial practices, representations of space, and spatial representations.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, our conceptual frameworks for understanding gentrification are themselves spatially-grounded; we create “geographical biographies” as we interpret ideas and themes through the places we know.<sup>31</sup> Spatial

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<sup>24</sup> Hackworth & Smith, “The changing state of gentrification,” 64

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 67

<sup>26</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, xi ;

Elvin Wyly & Daniel J. Hammel, “Islands of decay in seas of renewal: Housing policy and the resurgence of gentrification,” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010): 457

<sup>27</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 339

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 379

<sup>29</sup> Martin Phillips, “Other geographies of gentrification,” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010): 425

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, “Other geographies of gentrification,” 428

<sup>31</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 379

diversity, as it manifests in both material and representative form, not only suggest a need to better account for spatial contexts, but other contextual features as well.

Environmental gentrification functions both as a broadening and a narrowing of gentrification theory. It is an example of one arena in which gentrification has come into more integrated conversation with other social infrastructures. At the same time, it is firmly within the lineage of gentrification literature. The term “environmental gentrification” (and related terms such as “eco-gentrification” and “green gentrification”) came into use less than a decade ago, evolving in response to heightened sustainability awareness and a rise in urban gentrification pressures. Its timely nature makes it both compelling and limiting for research purposes; while the literature is at a moment of exciting new ideas, it has yet to lend its specifically environmental lens to a wide range of analyses.

There have been significant changes in the scope, subject, and critical analysis of environmental gentrification research over this short period of time. Thus, it is worth reviewing the published literature on the topic, something that has yet to be undertaken in any other systematic capacity. With the goal of establishing a robust review of this literature and how it connects to the theory already discussed, I can better intervene to craft my own understanding of environmental gentrification processes in relation to CPI.

Over the last decade, several definitions of environmental gentrification have been put forth, primarily differentiated by variable understandings of what counts as “environment” or “gentrification.”<sup>32</sup> Sociologist Melissa Checker offers a definition that utilizes expansive interpretations of both of these terms.

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<sup>32</sup> Winifred Curran & Trina Hamilton, “Just green enough: contesting environmental gentrification in Greenpoint, Brooklyn,” *Local Environment* (2012): 1039

Environmental gentrification is the convergence of urban redevelopment, ecologically minded initiatives and environmental activism in an era of advanced capitalism. Operating under the seemingly a-political rubric of sustainability, environmental gentrification builds on the material and discursive successes of the urban environmental justice movement and appropriates them to serve high-end redevelopment and displace low-income residents.<sup>33</sup>

Through reference to environmental policy and eco-activism, political rhetoric and material changes, Checker's definition exemplifies an "elastic yet targeted" approach. For this reason, I use her work on environmental gentrification as foundational to my own.

As with the gentrification literature at large, environmental gentrification theory has grappled with the tensions between structural and cultural processes. Eckert, for example, uses a demand-driven approach to understand the impact of environmental amenities through consumer preferences. Borrowing the concept of "sorting" from political and economic theory, Eckert argues that "in determining where to live, residents look for communities where the public goods provided match their preferences and ability to pay and sort themselves (or 'vote with their feet') accordingly."<sup>34</sup> This self-sorting approach acknowledges the structural provision of environmental infrastructures, but relies on the market to understand environmental gentrification outcomes.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Pearsall examines environmental gentrification through a structural lens by investigating how it can drive people towards engaging with the state. Pearsall identifies that in order to avoid environmental gentrification-induced displacement some residents turn towards the state for support.<sup>36</sup> Despite grounding in the gentrification literature at large, the particularity of environmental factors necessitates new frameworks of knowledge rather than simply tweaking existing gentrification theory.

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<sup>33</sup> Checker, *Greenwave*, 212

<sup>34</sup> Eckerd, "Cleaning Up Without Clearing Out," 33

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Pearsall, *From brown to green*, 881



Environmental gentrification is a means of critically analyzing the relationship between environmental change and neighborhood change and the conflicts it can produce. This conflict is captured in what Checker terms a “pernicious paradox,”<sup>37</sup> one that asks “must [low-income residents] reject environmental amenities in their neighborhood in order to resist gentrification that tends to follow from such amenities?”<sup>38</sup> This paradox constructs an impossible situation in which at-risk residents are forced to choose between important local amenities and neighborhood stability. Suddenly, all green infrastructural improvements and beautification come to look like signs of gentrification.

The bulk of existing writing on environmental gentrification is concerned with sites of severe environmental pollution and subsequent remediation.<sup>39</sup> These studies analyze cases in which environmental *dis*-amenities are highly visible, often involving ecological contamination, and health risks. Despite a focus on deeply polluted sites, Eckerd points out that “moderate improvements in environmental quality or even the perception of environmental improvement may be sufficient” to spur neighborhood responses.<sup>40</sup> In more recent years, the literature has broadened to include an analysis of environmental amenities beyond a strictly ecological frame. Anguelovski, for example, proposes “supermarket greenlining” as a form of environmental gentrification perpetuated by health food stores.<sup>41</sup> She highlights the historical roots of this process,

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<sup>37</sup> Checker, *Greenwave*, 211

<sup>38</sup> Curran & Hamilton, “Just Green Enough,” 1031

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Adam Eckerd, “Cleaning Up Without Clearing Out? A Spatial Assessment of Environmental Gentrification,” *Urban Affairs Review* (2011): 34

<sup>41</sup> Isabelle Anguelovski, “Healthy Food Stores, Greenlining and Food Gentrification: Contesting New Forms of Privilege, Displacement and Locally Unwanted Land Uses in Racially Mixed Neighborhoods,” HEALTH FOOD STORES, GREENLINING AND FOOD GENTRIFICATION. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2015)

characterizing it as “the reverse manifestation of supermarket redlining.<sup>42</sup> Supermarket redlining has a new green form, but in the end both produce the same exclusionary effect.

In conversation with the environmental justice literature, we can understand how these cross-historical processes are part of the same system. The study of environmental gentrification is one that “flips” environmental justice “on its head” to examine the allocation of environmental “goods” rather than environmental harm,<sup>43</sup> connected through what Park and Pellow term “environmental privilege.”<sup>44</sup> As sustainability policy has mainstreamed, the distributional analysis of environmental justice continues to be left out.<sup>45</sup> In the absence of considering equity, not only do these sustainability plans fall short of environmental justice, but they risk promoting environmental gentrification as well. As Pearsall notes, “sustainability initiatives, particularly when accompanied by economic growth initiatives, have the potential to displace lower-income and disadvantaged populations.”<sup>46</sup> In considering sustainability in isolation, such initiatives can have unintended effects.

Interestingly, the unanticipated impact of environmental remediation initiatives vis-à-vis environmental gentrification has been framed in some literature as a conflict between environmental gentrification and environmental justice itself. The argument credits environmental improvements to the work of environmental justice activists, thus triggering gentrification and displacement.<sup>47</sup> This analysis in many ways sets up a false

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<sup>42</sup> Anguelovski, “Greenlining and Food Gentrification,” 1210

<sup>43</sup> Gould & Lewis, *Green gentrification*, 5

<sup>44</sup> Lisa Park & David Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America's Eden*, (New York University Press, New York, 2011)

<sup>45</sup> Curran & Hamilton, “Just Green Enough”

<sup>46</sup> Pearsall, *From brown to green*, 874

<sup>47</sup> Anguelovski, “Greenlining and Food Gentrification,” 1209

conflict, masking the overlapping origins of both these processes. Rather than a conflict between environmental gentrification and environmental justice, both can be seen as existing within the same broader context of economic, social, and political systems.

In reviewing the literature on gentrification, Kirkland critiques the absence of race from the bulk of academic analyses. According to her review, despite the central role of race in popular conceptions of gentrification, academia largely understands this analysis as a facet of “urban lore” and restricts gentrification within a class-based framework.<sup>48</sup> Thus, she demonstrates a disconnect between academia and gentrification as it is perceived and lived.<sup>49</sup> The inadequate consideration of racial factors is also deeply present in the environmental gentrification literature. In my review I found that race is hardly mentioned beyond its corollary status, and even then it is coded in vague terms like “high status” and “low status” – phrases which merely allude to the relationship between race and class.<sup>50</sup> Gould and Lewis’ *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology* is one exception. They explicitly draw connections between “market-forces in urban real estate, institutional and cultural racism, and urban environmental policy” through which the ‘greening’ of urban areas becoming code for the whitening of urban areas.”<sup>51</sup> As Kirkland argues, “there is a need for an explicit examination of the racially differential impact of gentrification processes,” a need that I argue must necessarily be incorporated into the environmental gentrification literature as well.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Kirkland, “What’s Race Got to Do With it,” 18

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>50</sup> Eckerd, “Cleaning Up Without Clearing Out?”

<sup>51</sup> Checker, “Wiped Out by the Greenwave,” 225

<sup>52</sup> Kirkland, “What’s Race Got to Do With it,” 19

### Parks and Displacement

Gentrification is built on historically-rooted systems of private land ownership, hierarchical claims to space, and uneven concentrations of wealth. It is one of many descendants of in this genealogical lineage, from discriminatory redlining to urban renewal. Settlement patterns, capital, and real estate alone cannot account for how this lineage is perpetuated across time. The logics of colonialism provide the necessary explanatory power to connect contemporary gentrification to its historical predecessors.

Gentrification is rooted in layers, histories, and ongoing processes of colonialism. This connection exists through both the physical removal from land and ideological modes used to justify such removal. Conquest and racism are these ideological linkages. Understanding commodification as spatial conquest mediated by racist cultural logics, we can view gentrification as “colonialism at the neighborhood scale.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, as Atkinson and Bridge argue, the aesthetics of gentrification serve to enact “a white Anglo appropriation of urban spaces and urban history.”<sup>54</sup> Colonial ideologies set a precedent for asserting social, cultural, and racial hierarchies, used to justify the claiming of land by some over others.

The creation, tightening, and enforcement of private property are central both to systems of colonialism and gentrification. John Locke considered property as a pre-political entity, one that gave birth to the state as mechanism of self-preservation.<sup>55</sup> Through his eyes, the privatization of property “was not simply inevitable; as a

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<sup>53</sup> Eric Clark, “The Order and Simplicity of Gentrification - A Political Challenge,” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>54</sup> Rowland Atkinson, Gary & Bridge, “Gentrification in a global context: the new urban colonialism,” In *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly, (New York, London: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Blomley, “Remember Property?” *Progress in Human Geography* (2005): 126

realization of divine will...it was also normatively *good*.”<sup>56</sup> Despite this “normative good,” private property did not always hold precedence, and violations to its sanctity were conditionally accepted “when they were necessary to lay the foundations of capitalism.”<sup>57</sup> Somehow, the possession and dispossession of private property were hypocritically held simultaneously. Recognizing some claims to space over others reconciled these contradictory considerations. In other words, colonial logic enabled this “reconciliation.”

The centrality given to private ownership means that other claims to land (other forms of property), if they are acknowledged at all, are viewed with suspicion, derision or indifference. The most striking case is that of indigenous claims to land, which continue to be treated either as some imperfect expression of the dominant model, or as so radically different as to be not really property at all. This creates a deep and enduring injustice within settler colonies.<sup>58</sup>

Those who control land also “control the space where we think and talk about land” itself.<sup>59</sup> Property, framed as a naturally-ordained relationship between owner and object, is in fact a human-constructed relationship between owner and non-owner, one that is fundamentally based on exclusion.<sup>60</sup>

Manhattan’s famous grid neatly exemplifies how private land ownership goes hand in hand with accumulating private wealth. In the words of surveyor John Randel, the grid had merit through the “ease it allows in buying, selling, and making a profit.”<sup>61</sup> It is important to additionally consider, however, that the process of dividing and assigning property ownership – an essential building block of the American economic system – is premised upon a colonial system of deciding which land was segment-able and which

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<sup>56</sup> Blomley, “Remember Property,” 125

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 127

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 127

<sup>59</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 311

<sup>60</sup> Blomley, “Remember Property,” 126

<sup>61</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 75

was indigenous “park land.” Colonialism lent its hand to shape and sharpen systems of privatization through the systematic seizure and re-packaging of indigenous lands.<sup>62</sup>

Parks are particularly potent sites through which to view linkages between colonialism and gentrification because of how each employ and assert notions of nature. As Altamirano-Jimenez contends, park space has been a necessary tool of the state to facilitate displacement of indigenous peoples by designating some space as natural and therefore separate.<sup>63</sup> Parks are used to exceptionalize natural space and the “natural” people who live there. By default, non-park spaces are given over to the development of “modern” (non-indigenous) civilization.

Using parks, the State has turned a colonial understanding of indigenous people as part of the natural world into a specific economic effort to liberalize and commodify those “pre-modern” park spaces that have been “saved” for indigenous groups. This economic strategy initiates a “special and social reconfiguration of place and indigeneity.”<sup>64</sup> Here, one can observe how value ascribed to land and nature – deployed together by capitalism and the state – perpetuates an oppressive *colonial* relationship towards native peoples. The separation of physical park space as natural space and the subsequent commodification of said space have gone hand in hand as tactics of American colonial infrastructure.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the commodification of park space is a widely used mechanism of gentrification, “revitalizing” urban environments in order to bring in new residents. Here too, commodifying the natural serves to enforce a particular

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<sup>62</sup> Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez, *Indigenous encounters with neoliberalism: place, women, and the environment in Canada and Mexico*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013)

<sup>63</sup> Altamirano-Jimenez, *Indigenous Encounters*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 68

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*

economic relationship between people and land that honors some land claims while dismissing others.

Gentrification, as it has been codified and hardened into public policy, asserts a kind of “neo-colonialism in the US context.”<sup>66</sup> How do we grapple with gentrification with an undercurrent of colonialism and indigenous dispossession ever-present? It signals a need for an expanded approach to anti-gentrification work, as Altamirano-Jimenez argues; “Decolonization must be an integral part of addressing privatization of our public resources.”<sup>67</sup> By placing colonial displacement at the beginning of my theoretical discussion I hope to frame my analysis in a means best suited to addressing the difficult question of *decolonization*.

Parks are one site where colonialism and gentrification converge. While my focus is on the contemporary forms of this convergence, it is also evident historically. During the mid-late twentieth century, in an era of mass state-initiated urban renewal, slum clearance was used to create new park lands.<sup>68</sup> Despite its historical frequency, slum clearance is an often unnoted aspect in park histories.<sup>69</sup> For example, despite an otherwise robust historical analysis, Cranz states that park sites were historically chosen if the land was “unusable for other purposes.”<sup>70</sup> The history of Central Park, however, is a glaring demonstration otherwise. The park was built on ground unceremoniously seized from existing residents, the erasure of whom Gandy describes as a “significant motivating factor behind the political momentum for the park’s creation;”<sup>71</sup> this displacement, Fisher agrees, was “arguably the first intentional act of landscape

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<sup>66</sup> Atkinson & Bridge, “Gentrification in a Global Context”

<sup>67</sup> Altamirano-Jimenez, *Indigenous Encounters*

<sup>68</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 177

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 120

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 29

<sup>71</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 88

architecture.”<sup>72</sup> These “squatters” as Cranz refers to them,<sup>73</sup> included residents of Seneca Village, a free black community whose erasure was necessary for promoting a “particular conception of a unified urban society” in order to justify Central Park as something in the “public interest.”<sup>74</sup>

Although this history of Central Park is so often hidden from view, strategically submerged amidst fantastic greenery and tourist spectacle, it is actually one of the more well-documented analyses of the intersections of urban parks and displacement. I use Inwood Hill Park as a brief case study to explore these intersections in greater specificity, honing in on how they manifest within New York’s contemporary gentrification context.

### Inwood Hill Park

The land of Inwood Hill Park is the historic territory of the Wiechquaesgecks, a branch of the Lenape tribe whose lands stretched over all of present-day NYC. Over the last several centuries, the indigenous populations in Inwood shifted through inter-tribal disputes and violence wrought by colonizing Europeans. Nevertheless, Inwood Hill Park maintained important indigenous significance as a summer harvest camp along the Harlem and Hudson Rivers, home to the so-called “Indian Caves” utilized in traditional harvesting practices.<sup>75</sup>

Inwood Hill Park is a physical testament to the historical layering of urban parks and indigenous histories of displacement. It was on this land that the Dutch first “purchased” the island of Manhattan from the Lenape people in 1626. The City of New

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<sup>72</sup> Colin Fisher, “Nature in the City: Urban Environmental History and Central Park,” *OAH Magazine of History* (2011): 27

<sup>73</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 28

<sup>74</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 91

<sup>75</sup> “Indian Caves at Inwood Hill Park.”



York began acquiring the land for Inwood Hill Park in 1915, with the park officially opening in 1926. The park was also home to a Native American store and Museum perhaps as late as the 1930s, run by Princess Naomi, a member of the Algonquin nation. Records exist of native-led tours of the Indian Caves, a native-run library, and indigenous arts and craft demonstrations. During this time, Inwood Hill Park was a gathering site for a Lenape coalition organized for Lenape people who had not yet been pushed off their lands to reservations.<sup>76</sup> Today, however, the only acknowledgement of the park's indigenous history is a small plaque just a short distance from the Indian Caves. The plaque reads: "According to legend, on this site of the principal Manhattan Indian Village, Peter Minuit purchased Manhattan Islands for trinkets and beads then worth about 60 guilders."<sup>77</sup> This meager acknowledgement considers property ownership more than indigenous dispossession.

Inwood's recent history is one of immigrants and working class residents. Today it is home to the largest Dominican diasporic population in the world outside of the Dominican Republic. Through rising rents and fierce land speculation, Inwood is a neighborhood whose immigrant and working class character is under threat. The recent wave of gentrification in Inwood has much deeper roots through the history of indigenous displacement.

Lorenzo, a local community activist who does organizing work with *Northern Manhattan Is Not for Sale*, is working to connect anti-gentrification struggles to their colonial roots. He plans to lead Spanish language tours of Inwood to talk about the local indigenous history. Lorenzo hopes that his Inwood history tours will help cultivate a

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<sup>76</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>77</sup> "Indian Caves at Inwood Hill Park."

stronger sense of place among the Dominican community by showing “that their struggles are part of the same struggle that this land has always been going through – that gentrification and displacement are not something new.” Amidst current fights against displacement, he explained, “It’s important to know that this is a process of taking land from the very beginning.”<sup>78</sup> The displacement of Dominican and other immigrant communities in Inwood is built on a history of Lenape displacement; they are two iterations of the same process. As Lorenzo crystallizes, “Displacement is that unifying thread between colonization and gentrification.”<sup>79</sup>

### Urban Parks History

This history is specific to Inwood Hill Park, yet it embodies several elements of a broader urban parks genealogy that lends insight into how park spaces have interacted with shifting social, political and economic forces. In order to understand these broader historical structures, first I present a chronological examination of urban parks history in the United States, primarily drawing on the work of historian Galen Cranz. Cranz offers one of the few comprehensive surveys of urban parks as part of the American cityscape, connecting their changing physical manifestations to social, political, and economic changes over time. He breaks down of this history into four eras: The Pleasure Ground (1850-1900), The Reform Park (1900-1930), The Recreation Facility (1930-1965), and The Open-Space System (1965-1980) (which marks the time of publication). The following will explore the evolution of the American urban park system across time

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<sup>78</sup> "Indian Caves at Inwood Hill Park."

<sup>79</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

through these eras. This history is foundational to my exploration of urban park systems from the 1980s onward, which take on differentiated yet historically cognizant forms.

*The Pleasure Ground (1850-1900)*

Early American urban parks weren't very urban at all. These parks were at the urban edges in the middling gray space between urban and rural, an intentional distance from dirty city centers. Their limited accessibility ensured that these parks could serve as an escape from the urban.<sup>80</sup> They were an imitation of pastoral landscapes, a re-creation of rural romanticism and nostalgia for a lost nature.

The urbanization of the park into Cranz's Pleasure Ground traced the trajectory of urbanization in the city itself. As industry grew, distant pastoral escapes were no longer enough of an antidote to the "meanness" of urbanization. A new approach was necessary, which city officials addressed by sectioning off green enclaves in the city proper.<sup>81</sup> Gandy offers a far more dramatic assessment of this transition, stating that "the rapidly growing settlement of New York City faced the prospect of social and economic collapse. Only a new kind of mediation between nature and the city could avert this looming catastrophe."<sup>82</sup> Despite their urban location, however, these park spaces were still meant to be experienced *as if* one were in the country (or at least, not in the city).

Alongside the relief they provided, urban parks were also places which tried to keep ever-growing industrial and capitalist economic forces at bay. They were a physical green blockade against the seemingly unstoppable tide of urban industrial growth. The Pleasure Grounds were constantly battling the tension of seeking a non-urban

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<sup>80</sup> Helene Littke, et al. "Taking the High Line: elevated parks, transforming neighbourhoods, and the ever-changing relationship between the urban and nature," *Journal of Urbanism* (2015)

<sup>81</sup> Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University*, 5

<sup>82</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 2

experience in an urban context, “as if it were a check on the encroachment of the city rather than a feature of the city itself.”<sup>83</sup> In form and conception, The Pleasure Grounds were meant to their own kind of urban space, where “rules applied in the park differed from those applied outside.”<sup>84</sup>

Design of The Pleasure Grounds was meant to simultaneously do the work of recalling a pastoral ideal while pushing back against the material rigidity of industrial development. What Cranz describes as “the informal picturesque approach to organizing the landscape” was characterized as the perfect “antidote to the highly artificial American city.”<sup>85</sup> Parks were an “antidote” in more than just physical ways; they were also a moral project to foster one’s emotional capacities which were so often suppressed under the logic of industrial growth.<sup>86</sup>

#### *The Reform Park (1900-1930)*

Indicative of an ideological transition from transcendentalism to progressivism at the turn of the century, The Reform Park was an era in which public welfare superseded city beautification. No longer just an escape from the city or relief from its rigidity, the Reform Park was in direct conversation with its urban context.<sup>87</sup> With a focus on welfare, the park became a place that would explicitly address urban problems, rather than using trees and vegetation to hide them.

To achieve their reform goals, officials changed where parks were located to increase access. Unlike the sprawling pleasure grounds at the edges of town, new park

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<sup>83</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 5

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 8

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 24

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 69

areas were often placed in the densest city neighborhoods.<sup>88</sup> As parks grew more accessible, changes in labor and compensation practices facilitated an increased focus on parks as sites of leisure in the newfound free time of the urban worker.<sup>89</sup> With urban elites threatened by these labor victories, the Reform Park quelled fears that free time among the urban masses would upend social stability. Whereas The Pleasure Ground sought to counteract the urban ills of industry, The Reform Park was “a moral defense against the potential for chaos that [city officials] perceived in this new abundance of free time.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, The Reform Park continued to serve the interests of urban elites even as accessibility to park space noticeably increased.

Parks officials responded to the new abundance of “less refined” clientele by introducing organized activity. Parks’ newly structured form was deemed necessary “since urban park planners now considered the masses incapable of undertaking their own recreation.”<sup>91</sup> As Cranz observes, this experience of leisure replicated the rigidity of industrial organization, segregating park space by clientele and specializing by function.<sup>92</sup> This manifested in the creation of “playgrounds” which aimed to channel natural play instincts away from potentially deviant outcomes.<sup>93</sup> The Reform Park playground was distinctly utilitarian; “[it] provided not just an outlet for the instinct of play but a setting for the teaching and learning of social content through games,” all while staffed with play-leaders who emphasized activities geared towards good citizenship that “encouraged

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<sup>88</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 81

<sup>89</sup> Robert A. Caro, *The power broker: Robert Moses and the fall of New York* (Vol. 1st). New York: Knopf, 1974): 144

<sup>90</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 62

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 61

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 98-99

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 66

self-reliance and initiative.”<sup>94</sup> This era explicitly acknowledged the capacity of parks to shape the city’s social fabric; these parks were incubators in which to carefully mold potentially-deviant urban residents before release back to the harsh city.

*The Recreation Facility (1930-1965)*

The Reform Park was replaced upon an acceptance of urban parks into both the city’s social fabric and its municipal budget. In its place rose The Recreation Facility, a new approach keen on increasing physical capacity and efficiency throughout the parks system. Administrators abandoned the idealistic tenor of previous parks rhetoric in favor of an increasingly functional and activity-oriented approach, reflecting the wholesale acceptance of parks as a fact of urban life.<sup>95</sup> Recreation and playgrounds were accepted as “universal needs, and simply fulfilling the mandate to provide more of them was all that was required of park promoters.”<sup>96</sup> The abandonment of reform for recreation was enabled because the allocation of resources to parks no longer required a justification.

The new relationship between parks and the city was one mediated by municipal bureaucracy, not moralistic idealism. This paved the way for “the real design innovation of the era” – the standardization and homogenization of park spaces across cities.<sup>97</sup> As Landscape architect Garrett Eckbo stated in 1962, “American park design is more limited, conventional, stereotypical, repetitive, and resistant to innovation in form than any other areas of design.”<sup>98</sup> Urban parks were to be reduced, measured, and quantified in order to maximize their recreational potential. In this managerial era, parks were

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<sup>94</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 66

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 101

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 119

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 122

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 122

increasingly considered within economic terms, driven by supply and demand. As Cranz argues, this shift shaped new power relations between parks officials and public users; “By acknowledging that their function was to meet the public demand for leisure activities, they made themselves subject to demand rather than to a norm of public service not necessarily reflected in demand.”<sup>99</sup>

*The Open-Space System (1965-1980)*

By the mid-1960s, urban parks had come to embody those “urban ills” that The Pleasure Ground of a century earlier had been designed in opposition to. As white people scattered to the suburbs in the post-war boom, many city services were abandoned to those who had no means of escaping them.<sup>100</sup> As a result, the middle class residents who remained “conspicuously avoided parks, now considered so unsafe that they were part of the urban crisis rather than its cure.”<sup>101</sup> Parks had “developed a reputation as barren no-man’s-lands, unsafe for use day or night, and now hippies, radicals, and war resisters were using them as rallying grounds.”<sup>102</sup> The future of urban parks – previously shielded from the political chopping block – became embroiled in political debates over continued maintenance and public ownership. Some suggested that they be repurposed for other, more pressing uses, such as housing and schools, or sold to generate revenue for ailing municipal budgets; others suggested leasing the land to developers.<sup>103</sup> As Cranz argues, “crime in parks is particularly troublesome because of the legacy of parks being solutions to and havens from urban problems,” and so The Open-

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<sup>99</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 106-107

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 137

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 137

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, vii

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, vii-viii

Space System forced parks officials to come up with new ways of framing park space in order to save it.<sup>104</sup>

The Open-Space System represents an understanding of park-scape that is tightly interwoven with cityscape. This spatial relationship is reflected in Cranz's choice of "open-space" to characterize this era; it indicates "fluidity at the[] perimeters, so that park flowed into city and city into park."<sup>105</sup> In this framework renewal of the city and renewal of the park went hand in hand.<sup>106</sup> Parks as a site of urban renewal provided a new justification to keep municipal park systems funded in a time when demand for park usage was low. Under these conditions, "The city needed more from the parks" than they had ever needed before.<sup>107</sup> Parks were to be the space in which to recreate a lost "cosmopolitan ideal," harmoniously mending and merging the urban masses. As Cranz explains, "The city needed parks, but it needed them chiefly for imagery and inspiration."<sup>108</sup> During the Open-Space System parks were again characterized as unique places – unique in their ability to conjure idealized natural escapes, mental relief, and moral reform that city officials believed would calm the masses and to restore urban stability. In a strategy reliant on urban nostalgia, this era also hosted the rise of park preservation.<sup>109</sup> Rather than nostalgia for a "lost" nature as reflected in The Pleasure Grounds, The Open Space era perpetuated "nostalgia for the city that never was."<sup>110</sup> This shift reflects an understanding of park space as *of* the city in both its physical and cultural roles.

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<sup>104</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 222

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 138

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 233

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 137

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 137

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 234

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 235



In his historical analysis, Cranz lays out a trajectory of urban park evolution wherein pastoral imitations in the suburbs became public commons in city centers, later transforming into sites of organized recreation, and finally citizen spaces used to quiet urban unrest. But this is just one history – one that is chronological, relatively neat, and largely uncontroversial. It is a useful backdrop, but one that must be complicated for a more robust understanding of the contemporary urban park. For example, Cranz’s historical analysis can be reframed and re-categorized in terms of American political transformation: the fantasies of the urban elite became green products of welfare schemes promoting urban uplift, which in turn morphed into standardized spaces of municipal bureaucracy and later targets of urban renewal. Gandy, too, offers a more politically critical historical take, arguing that this history demonstrates how the “‘public interest’ was skillfully manipulated in order to impose a particular conception of urban order amid rapid and seemingly chaotic patterns of urban change.”<sup>111</sup> It is the latter trajectory, one attuned to the deeply political, social, and economic relationships that urban parks have held and continue to hold with the city, that I aim to center throughout the rest of my research.

Urban parks have taken on new forms and new meanings since Cranz published his account of urban parks history in the 1980s. Conveniently, Cranz ends at a natural point of transition, one that witnessed the rise of neoliberal economies, increasingly concentrated urban wealth, and a new wave of gentrification striking at urban centers. It was a time of change in land use and management, privatization, and real estate that signaled an important shift for the role of urban parks. Cranz describes this rise in his analysis, albeit in its early forms, but he could not have predicted the ways that massive

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<sup>111</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 87

accumulations of capital and upheavals in public policy would shape open spaces. Against this backdrop, Cranz sets the stage for unpacking the ideologies that continue to impact the contemporary park system in ever more deep and intricate ways. Below, I offer a short overview of neoliberalism and urban renewal doctrines through which the contemporary urban park was built.

### The Rise of Neoliberalism in New York City

Since its rise to the fore of the American ideological, political, and economic system, neoliberalism has been one of the primary structures that have framed the conditions of urban parks. Moody characterizes neoliberalism by “restraint on social spending, privatization, deregulation, and, most importantly, the reassertion of class power.”<sup>112</sup> The ascension of neoliberalism is often attributed to the recession of the early 1980s and subsequent economic stagnation which discredited dominant economic principles.”<sup>113</sup> From this downturn emerged a new philosophy of urban policy that abandoned social reform and embraced targeted spending in order to spur investment. According to Harvey, neoliberal urban policy holds that “redistributing wealth to less advantaged neighborhoods, cities, and regions [is] futile, and that resources should instead be channeled to dynamic ‘entrepreneurial’ growth poles.”<sup>114</sup> This urban policy is a “spatial version” of trickle-down economic theory. As these neoliberal economists suggest, investment in the entrepreneurs will eventually “take care of all those pesky regional, spatial, and urban inequalities.”<sup>115</sup> Neoliberalism measures the success of urban

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<sup>112</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 18

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>114</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 29

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 29

policy by capital accumulation alone, while related process of inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation are deemed secondary.

Perhaps nowhere in the world are these ideas put into practice more so than NYC. While the neoliberal turn has spread widely with global ramifications, NYC has been at the forefront of neoliberal political economy.<sup>116</sup> New York served as a “sort of rehearsal,” as David Harvey puts it, for “neoliberal reorganization of national priorities.”<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, it is a city where neoliberalism may exist in its most extreme, developed form. As Manuel Castells explains, it is because “Manhattan is the Central Business District of New York, and New York is the corporate center of the largest economy in the world, holding what is still the most important international currency.”<sup>118</sup> Through an incomparably dense concentration of wealth and finance, tightly networked and globally connected, NYC is able to drive its economic agenda on a massive scale.

The rise of this agenda was marked by a steady dismantling of The Welfare State, broken down piecemeal in favor of privatized means. Investment in growing industries such as finance and technology was accompanied by austerity measures directed towards social spending. Moody encapsulates this shift in the title of her book, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*. This transition was particularly extreme in NYC because of how robust the city’s welfare system had previously been. Neoliberal social policy left the city with staggering poverty rates among the highest in the country.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, this shift took on extreme forms because of the pace and degree to which New York embraced the neoliberal ideal. This “striking” transition, Moody argues, was a function of “elite pressure, city politics, and an incredibly wealthy capitalist class able to direct the

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<sup>116</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 284

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 18

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 228

development of the city's built environment."<sup>120</sup> More than a mere budgetary rearrangement, neoliberal spending policy had direct impacts on the built environment and the spatial allocation of resources.

Parks were not immune from this neoliberal wave. With urban parks embroiled in imagery of violence and decay, and pitted against the development agendas of city business districts, they "gradually received a smaller and smaller share of urban revenues and had to turn more and more to federal assistance and internally generated revenue to survive."<sup>121</sup> The Parks Department faced repeated budget cuts, including a 28% employee reduction in 1991 alone.<sup>122</sup> Amidst this push to dismantle the welfare state, parks increasingly looked towards private funding. And with that, parks funding had come full circle: like The Pleasure Grounds, the monetary (and political) power over public park spaces returned (in part) to the hands of wealthy, well-to-do philanthropists and entrepreneurs who saw parks as a morality-inducing tool for the urban masses.

The logics of neoliberalism and urban renewal go hand in hand, both built through a context of racism and urban fear, and stoked by an unparalleled emphasis on capitalist growth and development. Urban renewal is the infrastructural manifestation of neoliberal models produced through spatially-differentiated investments and disinvestments. Facing the aftermath of massive suburbanization, officials up and down the bureaucratic ladder took it upon themselves to "renew" and "revitalize" city centers.

Urban renewal was a racialized response to what was seen as a racialized problem. It called on white nostalgia for a gloried urban past corrupted by changing urban demographics. Corresponding initiatives sought to physically recreate an urban

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<sup>120</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 285

<sup>121</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 157-159

<sup>122</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 122

setting attractive for middle and upper-class whites to “return” to. Things had to be torn down before being rebuilt, and they were often torn down at massive scales; as Robert Moses once said, “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.”<sup>123</sup> Elected officials, bound by the prospects of reelection, were under constant pressure to produce the economic growth they promised, often pouring energy into large development projects.<sup>124</sup> The demand for swift development prompted significant governmental intervention. As Caro describes, the forceful role played by government entities in (re)shaping the city landscape represented a significant philosophical turn: “For the first time, government was given the right to seize an individual’s private property not for its own use but for reassignment to another individual for *his* use and profit.”<sup>125</sup> Defending these aggressive tactics, Moses argued “if the end doesn’t justify the means, what does?”<sup>126</sup>

Through budget cuts and changes in monetary allocation, government entities had greater discretion when working with the private sector. Public money was more easily directed towards market-based economic development, often with the help of private partners.<sup>127</sup> Private means were not only an attractive option; they were often considered the *only* option. As Susan Christopherson describes, “the developer’s imagination had been utterly colonized by the only successful model of urban vitality available to him – ‘the city of privatized commercial space.’”<sup>128</sup> In this environment, the private sector held the upper hand.

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<sup>123</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, 218

<sup>124</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 91

<sup>125</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, 12

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 218

<sup>127</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 90

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 272

With inconsistent public funding and implementation left to the whims of the private sector, the promise of shiny new buildings did not always come to fruition, “more specifically, the city often never made it past the slum clearance stage.”<sup>129</sup> As one New Yorker put it, “capitalism just didn’t do what it was supposed to do next.”<sup>130</sup> These unfinished projects, vacant lots, and partially dismantled structures present evidence of the destruction and displacement wrought by urban renewal and its adjoining policies.

The city is once again in a period of resurgence. The concentration of capital, expansion of finance, real estate, and tech industries, privatization, and deregulation all follow patterns that have played out before. Investments in downtowns, cultural centers, and city spectacle ring loudly of traditional urban renewal tactics. This contemporary iteration of urban renewal – the new urban renewal – is, however, quite different from its trailblazing predecessor of the late twentieth century. Still driven by neoliberal ideology, today’s urban renewal has been seized by the private sector in ways which starkly contrast state-driven policies of the late-twentieth century. With the private realm in control, this new urban renewal is less overt. As Tom Wolfe writes in *Block by Block*, a collection of essays in the Jane Jacobs tradition, “Over the past forty years, the rebirth of Lower Manhattan from Chelsea to Tribeca, of northern Brooklyn, of Astoria and Long Island City in Queens, has taken place without razing a single building in the name of ‘urban renewal.’”<sup>131</sup> Wolfe demonstrates how the new urban renewal has successfully appropriated the aesthetic features heralded by Jacobs and her followers, replacing

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<sup>129</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 59

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>131</sup> Timothy Mennel, Jo Steffens & Christopher Klemek, *Block by block: Jane Jacobs and the future of New York* (1st ed.). (New York, NY: Municipal Art Society of New York, 2007)

demolition and massive slum clearance with mixed-use development and the preservation of historic buildings.<sup>132</sup>

While this new form of urban renewal may suggest a less aggressive approach, what it really indicates is a transition of power from top-down city planning to private real estate development. The traditional tactics of demolition, eviction, and displacement remain – they have simply changed hands, appearing decentralized, uncoordinated, and therefore less drastic. It is this new iteration of urban renewal that has set the stage for the particular forms of gentrification playing out in the contemporary American city.

### Environmental Gentrification and Displacement

Ever a trendsetter, NYC contains some of the most blatant examples of environmental gentrification. The High Line – New York’s famed elevated park space – is perhaps *the* most thoroughly-documented and well-studied example of this process. It is what we can consider the “quintessential” case of environmental gentrification, and thus it is useful for analysis.

Situated atop repurposed railroad lines in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood, the High Line is a product of industrial abandonment. Friends of the High Line, a community-based nonprofit, formed in 1999 to fight against plans to demolish the old railroad. Led by two local residents, the cause soon gained traction among many of NYC’s elite, raking in contributions from wealthy donors. Through rhetorical appeals to sustainability and green space scarcity, Friends of the High Line launched a strategically

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<sup>132</sup> Anthony Paletta, “Jane Jacobs v Robert Moses, battle of New York's urban titans,” *The Guardian*, 2016

successful effort to repurpose their local freight rail into a widely celebrated park space.<sup>133</sup>

Appeals to real estate interests were used as a primary tactic to garner support. The park's board of directors included major NYC finance and real estate actors who leveraged their influence to throw weight behind nearby development projects.<sup>134</sup> The park's founders themselves have attested to this strategy: From the beginning, the major argument for saving the High Line was that a new park would increase the value of the surrounding real estate, which would in turn raise property taxes and be economically beneficial to the city."<sup>135</sup> In this respect, the High Line worked exactly as planned; "nearby property values have risen as intended."<sup>136</sup> They have risen so much, in fact, that many of those same community members who envisioned green spaces for Chelsea can no longer afford to live near the High Line. Squarely at the intersection of real estate, renewal, and green space, this is environmental gentrification in a hyper-visible form.

At the same time that Friends of the High Line appealed to development interests, its negative impacts were masked in green space imagery and sustainability rhetoric. As Patrick argues, "No doubt, the ecological argument for preserving the High Line as a green space was a tactic to quell potential opposition to its impact on affordable housing."<sup>137</sup> In other words, the High Line engaged in a project of "greenwashing." The design and ongoing management of the High Line are further mechanisms to see the park's intersections with gentrification. An elite piece of landscape urbanism, Cataldi et al. argue that the park's design is curates as "luxurious,

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<sup>133</sup> Littke, et al. "Taking the High Line," 354-355

<sup>134</sup> Alex Ulam, "Our Parks Are Not for Sale: From the Gold Coast of New York to the Venice Biennale," *Dissent*

<sup>135</sup> Littke, et al. "Taking the High Line," 363

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 358

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 365



exclusive, and high regulated public space.”<sup>138</sup> From design to regulation, the High Line conveys ideas about class, exclusivity, and access to visitors.

The role of trendy park spaces in driving up investment and land values has not gone unnoticed. The High Line’s success has directly influenced many related projects in other cities around the globe, driving what Littke et al. describe as “a worldwide trend of elevated parks.”<sup>139</sup> Making an elevated park, however haphazardly, has become shorthand for a “quick fix” in struggling urban neighborhoods.

Critical analysis of the High Line and its role in environmental gentrification emerged before construction was even finished. Some of the most publicized negative attention to the park’s neighborhood impacts came through a widely read op-ed in the New York Times, entitled *Disney World on the Hudson*, in which the project’s contradictions are brought to the fore.<sup>140</sup> The planning process for the park was also criticized for poor handling of community input. As one neighborhood resident attested: “You don’t see local residents there because it’s not really a place for us. It’s an iconic structure for people to point at and look at and walk through.”<sup>141</sup> Another resident concurred: “It wasn’t made for the community. It was made for the investment opportunities adjoining the High Line...City Planning wanted to put that area on steroids and really capitalize on rapid large-scale development and that’s what they’ve done.”<sup>142</sup> This account draws out themes of co-optation, ownership, and artificiality. It invokes “the usage of ‘green’ as a political tactic.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> M. Cataldi, D. Kelley, H. Kuzmich, J. Maier-Rothe & J. Tang, “Residues of a Dream World: The High Line, 2011,” *Theory, Culture & Society* (2011)

<sup>139</sup> Littke, et al. “Taking the High Line,” 353

<sup>140</sup> Jeremiah Moss, “Disney World on the Hudson,” *The New York Times*, 2012

<sup>141</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 147

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>143</sup> Littke, et al. “Taking the High Line,” 357

If, in the current urban moment, gentrification is about harnessing the profit potential of urban amenities, then the High Line may serve as a central example.<sup>144</sup> It stands testament to “the city’s no-real-estate-deal-left-behind policy.”<sup>145</sup> The High Line embodies “an urban greening strategy,” one that is “intertwined with gentrification and with changing housing and retail landscapes.”<sup>146</sup> As Littke, Locke, and Haas argue:

The High Line as gentrifier becomes a physical manifestation of the ongoing processes of contemporary urban strategy, and the popularity and spread of the concept makes the High Line itself a global urban strategy, connected to redevelopment, branding, sustainability and urban green space provision.<sup>147</sup>

Characterizing the High Line as “a strategy” speaks to its inherently political nature; the connection between the High Line and environmental gentrification cannot be reduced to “market forces.”

Although the High Line is in many ways an exceptional case, it has informative capacity for flashy parks. I return to Inwood and Lorenzo in order to begin more thoroughly examining the implications of environmental gentrification among smaller and less flashy sites. Inwood is home to the last big chunk of affordable housing in Manhattan as well as a luxurious supply of park space.<sup>148</sup> Green space is “the gold” in Inwood, Lorenzo explained, both for residents and speculative developers. And these parks are bringing in a gold rush. From Lorenzo’s perspective, the city is using Inwood’s park assets as “a greenway for development, for higher towers, for luxury condos... [for] a certain idea of what they want Inwood to look like.”<sup>149</sup> With parks as a catalyst, Inwood’s relative affordability and cheaper lands are marking the neighborhood as a

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<sup>144</sup> Littke, et al. “Taking the High Line,” 360

<sup>145</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 228

<sup>146</sup> Littke, et al. “Taking the High Line,” 361

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 360; 364

<sup>148</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

prime target for development. Not neighborhood development that would benefit everyone, Lorenzo clarified; “it would be built for outsiders.”<sup>150</sup>

Lorenzo was quick to insist that this process is not endemic to Inwood, however. He explained the city’s process as the following: “There will be a park that hasn’t been renovated for a while so the city will renovate it and from that point on, expand on to it – and unfortunately the parks become a center for potential gentrification in specific neighborhoods.”<sup>151</sup> So pervasive is the appropriation of Inwood’s park land that Lorenzo immediately identifies even the smallest “green” changes as warning signs. “When we get things like that,” he explained, “it always comes at a price.”<sup>152</sup> Changes in Inwood are met with constant skepticism about who those changes are meant for, with parks at the center.

#### Environmental Gentrification and the Community Parks Initiative

With the High Line and Inwood as a backdrop, it is hard to ignore that CPI renovations could be part of the same gentrifying processes. In order to investigate the relationship between this initiative and environmental gentrification, I use a series of statistical analyses to compare CPI sites and their changing contexts. To do so, I am using three measures of gentrification: median income, median rent, and the percent of white residents. Can we observe environmental gentrification, vis-à-vis changes in median income, median rent, or white residents, among CPI sites?

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<sup>150</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>151</sup> Ibid

<sup>152</sup> Ibid

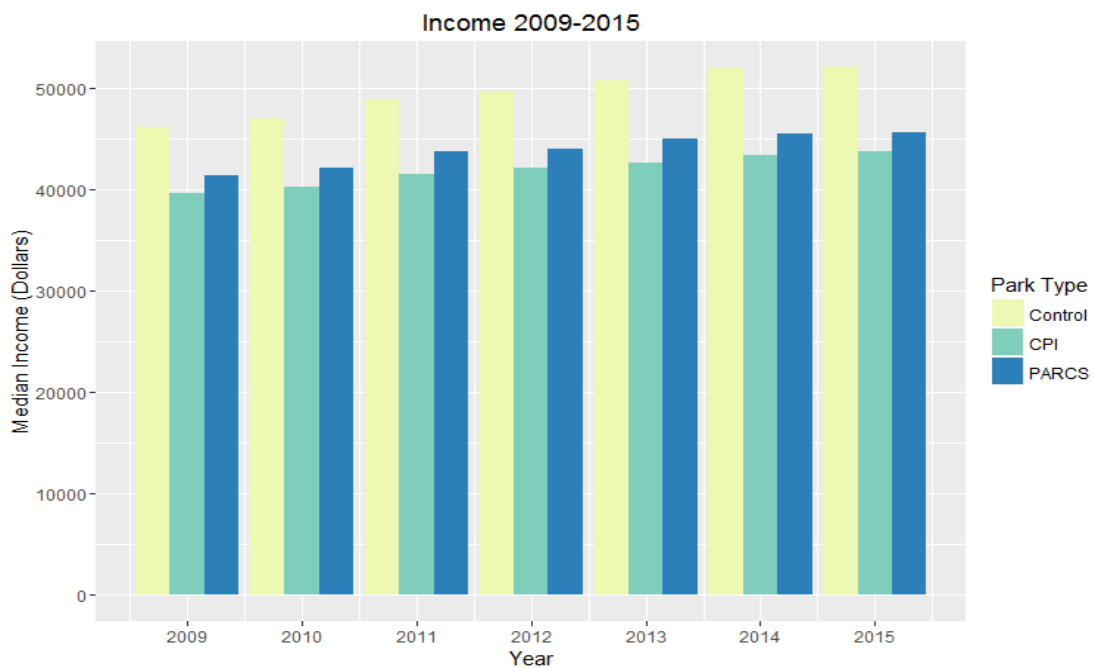
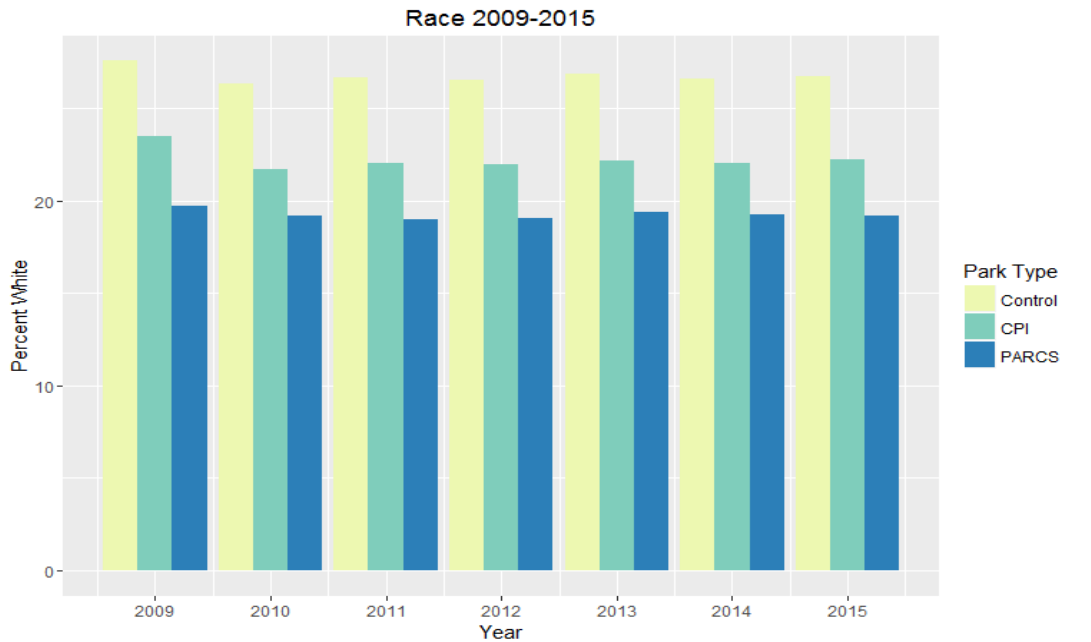
*Methods*

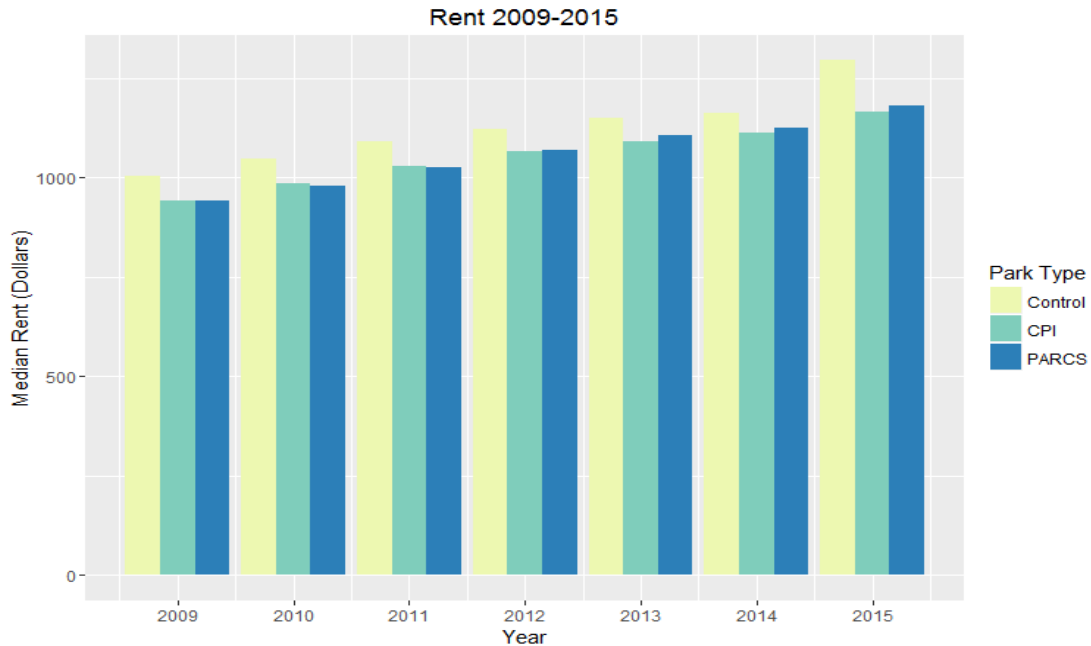
In order to gauge the impact of CPI sites on my three chosen indicators, I am using two groups of control sites. The first, which I will call “control,” is a set of parks that were considered by the Parks Department for participation in CPI, but not chosen. I constructed this control set starting with a list of approximately 145 parks that had been tagged by the Department as a) receiving less than \$20,000 in capital funding over the last 20 years, and b) meeting thresholds for at least one of three selection criteria: poverty, density, and population growth. I then created a subset group including only those parks that met at least two of the three criteria, mimicking the process that was also used in CPI site selection. Lastly, I eliminated any park properties titled “plaza,” “circle,” or “triangle” which are not the type of site targeted by CPI. This left me with a control set of 75 parks – those parks considered for CPI with similar basic characteristics, but for some reason passed over.

The second control group, which I will call “PARCS,” is a control set made by the CUNY School of Public Health PARCS Study for their research examining the impacts of CPI site renovation on community health indicators. These sites were carefully matched 1:1 with a subset of CPI sites based on neighborhood demographics, proximity, and physical park characteristics. There are 20 PARCS sites. I used both control sets because they reveal different qualities about CPI. The “control” set speaks more to the site selection process itself while the “PARCS” set may be better indicative of the renovation process.

I measured changes in median income, median rent, and white residents using annual data published by the American Community Survey (ACS), which I collected at the census tract level for each year from 2009-2015 across the entire city. I then used R

to bind the ACS data into master data sets, one for each of my three indicators, which I will now call “income,” “rent,” and “race.” From these master sets, I calculated the yearly percent change (“delta”), producing six years’ worth of data spanning 2010-2015. These results are displayed in the three graphs below.





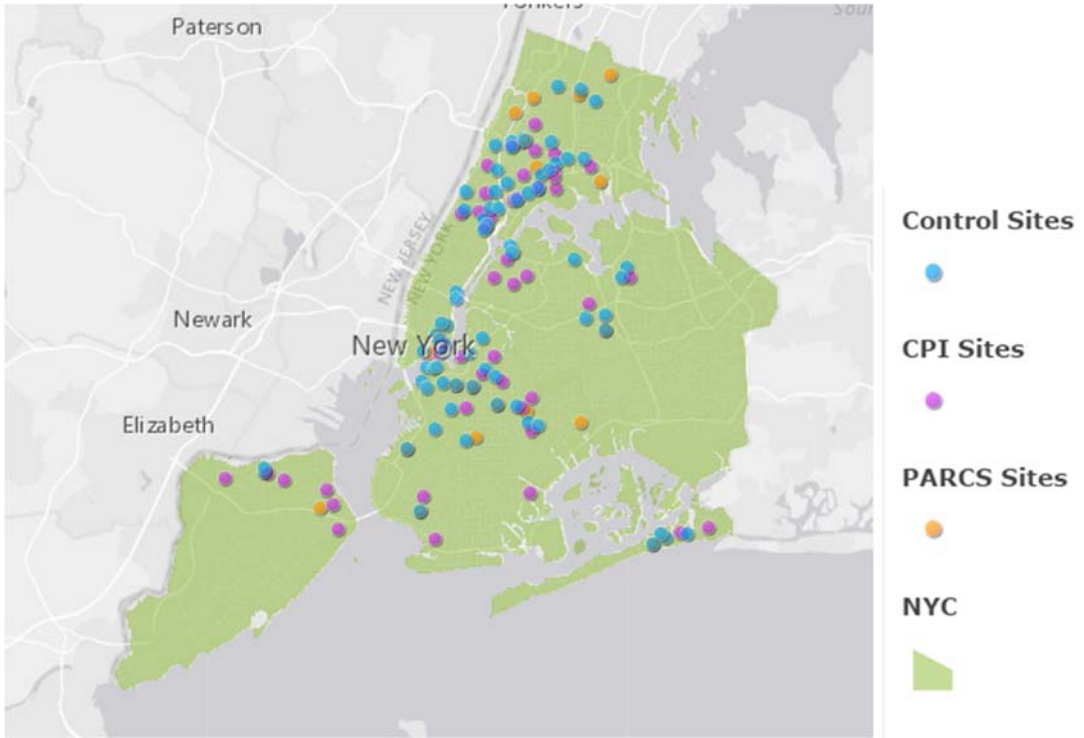
### *Geospatial Analysis*

I plotted the three park sets (CPI, control, and PARCS) onto a map of New York City using the “geocoding” tool in ArcGIS (see: next page). I determine park context as a half-mile radius around each site. This distance was determined based on former mayor Michael Bloomberg’s PlaNYC initiative which proposed that every New Yorker live within a half mile distance of a park.<sup>153</sup> Within these parameters I utilized GIS selection tools to highlight only those census tracts within (or partially within) a half mile radius of each park site. Based on these highlighted census tracts, I pared down the ACS data to include only those tracts surrounding relevant park sites.

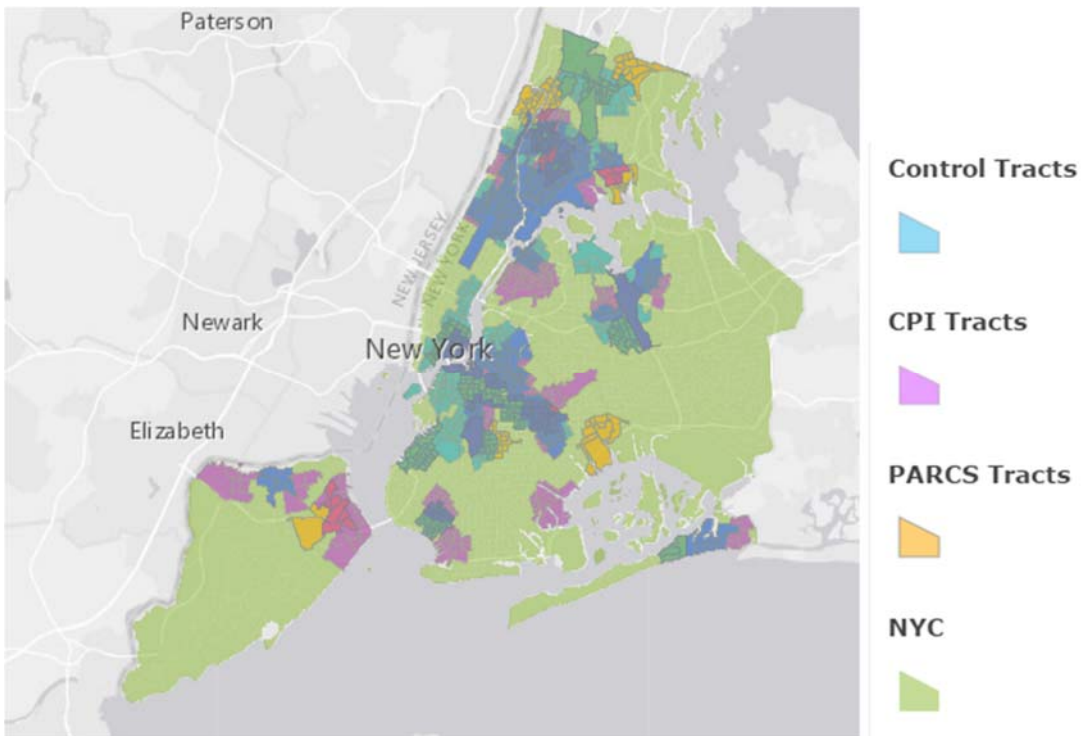
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<sup>153</sup> “PlaNYC: Parks and Public Space.”

### Park Sites by Type



### Park Tracts by Type



As shown above, there is significant overlap in those census tracts that are “attached” to each of my three site types. This is unsurprising, given the close proximity of individual parks to one another and the nature of selecting control sites. In order to better compare CPI, control, and PARCS groups, I used spatial analysis tools to eliminate all census tract overlaps. I used this analysis to further pare-down the ACS data. This smaller sample I will call “subset.”

### *Statistical Analysis*

I conducted all of my analyses in R, an open source coding language. Using merging techniques, I attached data on income, rent, and race to my three sets of census tracts. Following accepted statistics practice, I began my analysis with a set of preliminary Anovas to gauge initial statistical significance across park type for each of my three indicators. I repeated these tests using only my subset data. Each of these tests returned only statistical significance for race, measuring the change in the yearly different of percent white residents per census tract. Given these results, from here I turn my focus towards race. I decided to focus on comparing delta values from 2014 to those from 2015 (before and after CPI was announced) in order to better tease out the role of CPI in relation to changes in racial demographics. I ran a linear regression model using the percent change values between 2014 and 2015 for white residents in the tract groups of interest (full and subset). This linear model did not show significant differences across the different site types.



<b>Percent Change White across Site Type</b>			<b>Percent Change White across Site Type Subset</b>		
=====			=====		
Dependent variable:			Dependent variable:		
-----			-----		
	Percent Change White			Percent Change White	
	(1)	(2)		(1)	(2)
-----			-----		
CPI	0.003 (0.052)	0.029 (0.059)	CPI	-0.104 (0.064)	-0.046 (0.071)
PARCS	0.052 (0.062)	0.070 (0.070)	PARCS	-0.015 (0.109)	0.005 (0.120)
Dummy	0.027 (0.046)	-0.037 (0.052)	Dummy	-0.002 (0.052)	-0.009 (0.058)
Constant	0.144*** (0.042)	0.168*** (0.048)	Constant	0.158*** 0.154*** (0.040)	(0.045)
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Observations	3,051	3,017	Observations	1,829	1,812
R2	0.0004	0.001	R2	0.001	0.0003
Adjusted R2	-0.001	-0.0005	Adjusted R2	-0.0002	-0.001
Residual Std. Error	1.274 (df = 3047)		Residual Std. Error	1.115 (df = 1825) 1.230 (df = 1808)	
F Statistic	0.376 (df = 3; 3047) 0.509 (df = 3; 3013)		F Statistic	0.876 (df = 3; 1825) 0.155 (df = 3; 1808)	
=====			=====		
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05;		Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05;	
***p<0.01			***p<0.01		

These results are difficult to apply to the rest of my research. The Anova tests indicate that race is a factor that should be examined more closely, perhaps with a more nuanced set of tests. This type of regression, for example, did not account for year to year changes in addition to cross-site comparison. There are further limitations embedded in the available data and spatial units themselves which are discussed further in the conclusion. In the absence of better data and better models, interview-based and individual-level research can complement a picture of gentrification that is still foggy.

The tension between equity and displacement is one that, as the above analysis demonstrates, is difficult to measure. It will take more work to figure out how the data can keep up with what Lorenzo knows to be true about his experience in Inwood. Even if CPI doesn't (yet) have a measurable causal link to changes in neighborhood rent, race, or income, these changes are certainly being *felt*. These feelings should not be swept aside as merely immaterial emotions; they affect the way residents participate in their neighborhood in ways that contest or re-inscribe the looming presence of displacement. Intertwined with the forces of displacement, I turn to the question of participation in my next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: PARTICIPATION / EXCLUSION

“It’s all about what people can actually do, right? And giving people the ability to build their own neighborhood. This is a very nerdy and direct way to take people’s right to the city seriously and enforce them as rights. In a truly legal sense. People have the right to create their city. Especially in these spaces that are public spaces.”<sup>1</sup>

Famed urban theorist and New York-based activist Jane Jacobs asserted that “cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”<sup>2</sup> Participation matters because public space is an act of *making* and not simply one of *existing*; public spaces are “constantly being created...If that’s not the way it works the space stagnates.”<sup>3</sup> The public nature of public space must be assessed not only by what public it serves, but also by what public is involved in its creation. In other words, true public space can only be achieved through the public itself.

This process has been instrumentalized through “participatory planning.” Participatory planning is a theory and practice “based on the premise that people should express or be served in terms of their own needs rather than be given what experts had determined they needed.”<sup>4</sup> Gathering knowledge from more than just sanctioned “experts,” it pays tribute to “the lived experience of people and what they want in their neighborhoods, and their right not to be displaced.”<sup>5</sup> Participatory planning started gaining steam in the 1960s, part of a “notable upsurge of citizen interest in reclaiming

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 59

<sup>2</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The death and life of great American cities* (Modern Library ed.), (New York: Modern Library, 1993): 238

<sup>3</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 60

<sup>4</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 238

<sup>5</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 262

governance from elected and appointed leaders by participating directly.”<sup>6</sup> But it is an especially hot topic right now.<sup>7</sup>

The popularity of participatory planning extends to the academic realm, where participation has frequently been cited as a tactic to address the paradox of environmental gentrification.<sup>8</sup> “Just green enough,” for example, is a community-oriented approach to environmental improvements which uses participatory methods to craft environmental improvements that stay true to neighborhood character.<sup>9</sup> This approach envisions that democratically-enacted space can spur new ways of approaching development attuned to social justice, and in doing so challenge the assumed inevitability of environmental gentrification.<sup>10</sup> In the vein of Pearsall’s “procedural” approach to environmental justice, participatory planning is a procedural democratization of urban greening.

While city residents, municipal officials, and academics may agree that participation is a good thing, it is easier said than done. In both theory and practice, there are many different perspectives on who should participate and to what extent. Even in ostensibly inclusionary processes, patterns of exclusion quickly emerge. This is especially the case among populations who are underrepresented in traditional usual urban planning spheres. As Maya Wiley argues,

If people of color are not formally included in the process of thinking about what space we need and what kinds of relationships they drive, then we will ultimately have not only racially identifiable and segregated space, we will have a fragmented social and political community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 238

<sup>7</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>8</sup> Pearsall, *From brown to green*, 873

<sup>9</sup> Curran & Hamilton, “Just Green Enough,” 1027

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 1028

<sup>11</sup> Maya Wiley and Ron Shiffman, “Racialized Public Space,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 144

The type of participation that makes public space *public* is not easy, yet it is an essential undertaking for any type of project that lays claims to urban equity.

### Community Visioning

Community engagement is a crucial component of the Community Parks Initiative, undertaken with a greater degree of intent and rigor than Parks Department approaches in the past. The incorporation of participatory measures has been a central talking point of CPI proponents, matched by the dedication of significant time and resources towards implementation. Participation is embedded into the initiative's structure both before and after park renovation: beforehand through scoping and planning and afterwards through maintenance and community stewardship. Scoping and planning entails a full year of community design and public feedback sessions, while maintenance and community stewardship are facilitated through relationships with local parks volunteer groups.

The Partnerships for Parks program is the arm of the Parks Department which primarily facilitates community engagement. I sat down with two members of this engagement team with one main question in mind: How does public outreach respond to environmental gentrification and the community tensions it stirs? Referencing CPI, both acknowledged that concerns over environmental gentrification can foster conflict during the community visioning process. In their words, "There are issues coming up all the time about peoples' concerns about the changing use of the park, even not wanting to clean up the park too much because they're worried that it'll bring on something, that

it's then helping the gentrification process and all that.”<sup>12</sup> In a context of neighborhood tension, where the community includes new members and old, participatory planning will necessarily result in concessions and prioritizations. This calls into question how and whether such processes can truly incorporate the fullest extent of community participation to enact public space.

### Theorizing Public Space

To analyze of what makes something “participatory” calls for further exploration of what makes something “public.” Theorizing public space demands an investigation into “who is initiating the provision of public space [and] who public space is intended for.”<sup>13</sup> I rely on an understanding of public space that is an active creation rather than a static designation. As Gregory Smithsimon writes, public space itself is a fundamentally social process, “[it] is the space where social conflicts are negotiated.”<sup>14</sup> Amidst a constant process of making and remaking, public space is enmeshed in a web of political, social, and economic forces. From this broad theorization, I can better interrogate public green space in New York City.

“Public” takes on different forms and shifting meanings. I argue that to use “public” in its singular form is not only inadequate, but inaccurate for describing how this space engages with the people it claims to serve. Publics and public spaces are not only multiplicitous, they are also hierarchical. In order to view these hierarchies, one

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<sup>12</sup> Partnerships for Parks (NYC Parks Department), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>13</sup> Littke, et al. “Taking the High Line,” 354

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Smithsimon, “A Stiff Clarifying Test is in Order,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 34

must ask the same questions that Lorenzo posed to me: “Its public land, but public for who? Who shares a relationship to that public space?”<sup>15</sup>

Hierarchies of publics and hierarchies of power mutually reinforce one another through the design and usage of public space. It is through processes which challenge or re-inscribe these hierarchies that public spaces modulate between participation and exclusion. Participatory planning must explicitly address the multiplicitous and hierarchical nature of publics if it retains any hope of enacting truly participatory measures. Without such intent, “Ambivalence about which public is being served” simply reinforces “the reproduction of social structures that perpetuate exclusion and inequality.”<sup>16</sup>

The realization of public claims to public space is highly differentiated. These hierarchical conditions can be seen through some publics more than others. Homeless publics are often the first example that comes to mind. As Gibson explains, “the homeless are inextricably linked with deviance and disorder” and so the ideal of a universal public is abandoned in order “to protect the public’s investment.<sup>17</sup> In city parks, this hierarchy of publics is socially accepted and strictly enforced. Different visions of public usage clash in park space through “socially deviant” practices like homeless encampments. One of these clashes erupted in New York’s Tompkins Square Park in the 1990s. A large homeless presence in the park presented an obstacle to the city, which had imagined Tompkins Square Park to be at the center of its plan to upscale

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<sup>15</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>16</sup> Michael Rios, “Emplacing Democratic Design,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 135

<sup>17</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 234

the neighborhood.<sup>18</sup> In response, the mayor declared that “the park had been ‘stolen’ from the community by the homeless,”<sup>19</sup> and acted with full-on militarized force. Dozens of police officers were sent to guard the park while over 200 people were evicted from the encampment. Later, the city infused \$2.3 million dollars into reconstructing the park, re-inscribing hierarchies in newly physical forms.<sup>20</sup>

As the Tompkins Square Park clashes demonstrate, urban elites “maintain the illusion of public space while making invisible certain segments of the public.”<sup>21</sup> Universalizing a singular, all-encompassing “public” stems from the same rhetorical and strategic roots as the universalizing Good of park space. Universalization is a tactic of de-politicization; it renders park space politically neutral. Whereas during urban renewal downtown was portrayed as “everybody’s neighborhood,” the same tactics claim public green space as “everybody’s park.”<sup>22</sup> As Cataldi et al argue, for example, “Elite parks like the High Line are used as populist rhetoric of public space and community organizers, but in reality city leaders fear the conflict that arises from true publicness.”<sup>23</sup> Galen Cranz suggests that the terminology of “urban park” and “public green space” has been vaguely-defined over time. <sup>24</sup> This has allowed the manipulation of park space for a variety of ends, hidden by the fact that parks are “an innocuous symbol that everybody favors except bad people.”<sup>25</sup>

This universal emphasis can be observed through a systematic (if unwritten) policy of erasing and ignoring racial and class conflict. During the Recreation Era, for

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<sup>18</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 160

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Rios, “Emplacing Democratic Design,” 135

<sup>22</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 4

<sup>23</sup> Cataldi et al, “Residues of a Dream World: The High Line, 2011”

<sup>24</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, ix

<sup>25</sup> Ibid



example, leisure was employed as a homogenizing device “calculated to weaken any impetus towards radical social economic change.”<sup>26</sup> As a site of leisure *only*, park users were made into a universal class of people – a leisure class. Not only did this homogenize the park experience, but it did so to the effect of presenting a universal ascendancy to the American Dream. Parks engaged in a practice of eliminating class hierarchies, asserting an image of park users as occupied chiefly with combatting boredom or, more generally, remaining happy.”<sup>27</sup> That parks have been sites which have typified rather than defied racism and class tension is hidden under many layers of apolitical rhetoric.

Despite these de-politicizing measures, the struggle over and between hierarchical publics and public spaces serves to produce and define parks as distinctly political spaces. It is through this struggle, Don Mitchell argues, that “‘the public’ and democracy are defined.”<sup>28</sup> Early urban parks, for example, were understood to nurture a more democratically rigorous form of urban life. Parks were seen as “an important arena for the preservation of democracy, [where] people from different walks of life could rub shoulders and dissipate class hostilities and rivalries.”<sup>29</sup> Through the co-constructive relationship between publics and public spaces, these spaces help reproduce participatory democracy.

Gibson argues that a truly “vital” urban experience “depends fundamentally upon preserving the kinds of civic spaces that nurture a sense of citizenship and political

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<sup>26</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 106

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Hou, “Making Public Beyond Public Space,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 94

<sup>29</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 183

participation.”<sup>30</sup> People can *feel* it when “public” spaces lack this element of urban vitality. New York’s high-end parks “don’t feel like real civic spaces” Ari lamented to me in one conversation.<sup>31</sup> The hierarchies of publics, reinforced through differentiated regulation of space and socially-selective invisibilizing forces, interrupt the ability for the public, public space, and democracy to reinforce one another.

Public spaces are governed through a regimen of regulatory tactics, from municipal enforcement and social stigma, to architectural design and spatial access. In these spaces “good citizenship, social consciousness, and the sentiment of democracy” are moral lessons fostered through particular ideals of a universal American urban community.<sup>32</sup> Park design, for example, reflects dominant norms with respect to “proper” activity and usage.<sup>33</sup> Early amenities such as the drinking fountain and the swimming pool were used to dissuade alcohol consumption<sup>34</sup> and promote standards of cleanliness.<sup>35</sup> Later, park benches became a tactic of social control, wherein parks officials shortened bench length to prevent sleeping.<sup>36</sup> The rules which shape contemporary negotiations of public space are built on and reflect previous iterations of regulation and social conflict. As Smithsimon writes, these regulations are “the battle scars” of past conflict.”<sup>37</sup> Mary Douglas’ anthropological analysis of dirt offers insight into how the regulation of public space reflects patterns of belonging and hierarchy. As she states, “Dirt is matter out of place...No single item is dirty apart from a particular

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<sup>30</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 127

<sup>31</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>32</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 212

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 93

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 10

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 70

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 125

<sup>37</sup> Smithsimon, “A Stiff Clarifying Test is in Order,” 35

system of classification in which it does not fit.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, exclusion from The Public or Public Space is employed to enforce a sort of social ordering, pointing out which publics belong in the space, and which are not where they should be.

In addition to enforcing social hierarchy, urban environments are tightly controlled to produce profit. Retailers, for example, “have long viewed the careful control of urban space and the meticulous arrangement of elements within this space, as crucial to their commercial success.”<sup>39</sup> In the regulation of park space, rhetoric of unbridled nature and urban vitality is in practice supplanted with policies of strict cultivation and standardized conditions. Regulated urban space embodies what Gibson calls “a limited and administered diversity,” built around repetitive and restrictive visions of the best “consumer environments.”<sup>40</sup> Public parks often pose a threat to the careful curation of space, potentially disrupting goals of maximum profit generation. Maintaining air-tight consumer environments necessitates that private interests assert control over public space. “The practice of conceiving space as something to be planned, controlled, and tethered to commercial priorities” hinders urban vitality by undermining access to the participatory making of urban space.<sup>41</sup>

Additional cracks in the universal façade of public space appear through the ambiguous way that regulation is unevenly and unequally enforced. Through selective ambiguity, public space is simultaneously “overspecified” through regulatory measures, and “underspecified” because of decision making power is left “to the whims of

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970)

<sup>39</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 136

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 137

politicians and policymakers.<sup>42</sup> Regulation “can be invoked in morally ambiguous situations to sanction an individual or group when it might otherwise be difficult to do so.”<sup>43</sup> Governance, insofar as it reflects specific moral and ideological commitments, is thus created through a process that is inextricably rooted in surrounding and underlying social factors. In this way, regulation enacts struggles between belonging and exclusion, reinforced through systems of power.

When I first attempted to tackle the question of how power works in relation to parks in NYC, I decided to print out a graphic from the city government website. The graphic contained every city agency, department, and committee in a gigantic family tree. Clearly, untangling power in terms of particulars – particular people, particular groups, or even particular institutions – would be too great a task. Instead, my aim here is to demonstrate how different types of power relations, such as those between institutional and extra-institutional, belonging and exclusion, landlord and tenant, can be incorporated into my theoretical understanding of publics and participation.

Like the public, political power flows in and around parks in a hierarchically structured manner. As Fuchs describes, “Power is not evenly distributed in the fiscal policy arena, and even when a city has a high degree of interest group activity, like New York, groups do not have equal access to the process.”<sup>44</sup> Institutions like the kind on the NYC government family tree are just one way to understand power. As Cranz asserts, “American urban park policy has always been a top-down matter, but the group at the top – the powers that be – have changed from era to era.”<sup>45</sup> It is not simply a matter of

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<sup>42</sup> Rios, “Emplacing Democratic Design,” 134-135

<sup>43</sup> Julian Brash, “Politics Out of Place,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 63

<sup>44</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 20

<sup>45</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 157

top and bottom; there are many different groups – many different publics – that struggle over power in the negotiation of public space.

### Making “Catalytic” Parks

Public space often finds itself at odds with the American emphasis on individualism and private property, currents which run strong throughout the country’s political history. “In America’s ‘ownership society,’ there seems to be a fear of the ‘un-owned.’”<sup>46</sup> Privatization serves to tighten the regulation over public spaces, reshaping the realm of conflict and negotiation with respect to public participation. Intervening in the relationship between public space and democracy, “Private control is used to limit access to urban space, to tightly regulate the kinds of activities allowed within urban space, and to exclude democratic participation in decisions that regulate the use of space.”<sup>47</sup> Amidst these forces, the public nature of New York’s public parks is under constant pressure. If public spaces are made through the public, then privatization jeopardizes existence of the space itself as a public one.

The forces of privatization manifest in myriad ways, from physical barricades<sup>48</sup> to the introduction of new unspoken norms. Marching steadily ahead with the help of gentrification, “step-by-step the city’s street life is closed in and the price of land and housing goes up even more.<sup>49</sup> In the blurry and highly conditional existence of public space, it is difficult to define where public space ends and private space begins. This is highlighted by Shiffman’s assessment that “the provision of public space [is] a market-

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<sup>46</sup> Shiffman, *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, 273

<sup>47</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 276

<sup>48</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 96

<sup>49</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 205

driven amenity...that caters to the consumption of private goods.”<sup>50</sup> Existing on a spectrum from public to private, Gibson argues that “what is important, then, is *not* the classification of urban spaces as ‘public’ and ‘private,’ but rather an assessment of how particular spaces are used and signified in the process of daily life.”<sup>51</sup> Behind these processes is a trail of money, crafting monetary influence through a blend of private wealth and publically beneficial conditions.

The confluence of private money and public space is explicit in through New York’s Privately Operated Public Space (POPS) program. Introduced in 1961 under New York’s 1961 zoning code, POPS offered real estate developers loosened zoning restrictions in exchange for constructing public plazas on their property. This incentive package quickly became popular, particularly among large-scale Manhattan developers. By 1971, just a decade after the new zoning ordinance took effect, developers who participated in the POPS program had built some one million square feet of plaza space – more than all other U.S. cities combined.<sup>52</sup> The program has sustained its popularity, to dramatic effect on the cityscape. In exchange for more than 500 POPS plazas in NYC, private development projects have been gifted an additional twenty million square feet of space.<sup>53</sup>

While developers have clearly benefited from this exchange, public benefits have been mixed. POPS plazas are “public spaces” in name, but they are not always designed in ways conducive to public usage. One study conducted in 2000 concluded that approximately 40% of these spaces were not actually publically usable, made virtually private through a complete absence of amenities, little sunlight, or even lack of physical

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<sup>50</sup> Shiffman, *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, 135

<sup>51</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 275

<sup>52</sup> "Mastering the Metropolis."

<sup>53</sup> Ulam, "Our Parks Are Not for Sale"

accessibility. Some of these plazas have been remedied to be more welcoming to the public – at the cost of additional zoning bonuses. For example, in 1984 AT&T used the POPS program to construct an arcade through their corporate headquarters in exchange for a size bonus. Like many POPS, the AT&T arcade was unwelcoming to the public it was serving, with an “often dark and windswept” atmosphere. As *Mastering the Metropolis* documented, “when the Sony Corporation purchased the building in 1994, they improved the corridor in exchange for privatizing some of the space.”<sup>54</sup> The public space was improved only because *additional* space was privatized – space that should have been more public in the first place.

Unlike public parks, POPS lend developers significant discretion in how they control their public spaces. Often developers seize upon this wiggle room to privatize spaces in the service of upholding desirable business climates.<sup>55</sup> Even when public usage is encouraged, POPS are designed for some publics and not others. One assessment of a 1975 POPS design puts these hierarchies of publics on full display, describing the atmosphere as one “that conveniently seemed private enough to welcome well-healed shoppers, but suggested to others that the space was private and there were not allowed.”<sup>56</sup> Not only are POPS plazas questionably beneficial to the public they are meant to serve, but they only questionably benefit the city. Through zoning exemptions and tax incentives, POPS participants can taking advantage of hefty property tax cuts. Effectively, the creation of pseudo-public spaces (in Manhattan primarily) are being used to deplete city tax revenue that would otherwise boost the coffers of city government.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> "Mastering the Metropolis."

<sup>55</sup> Smithsimon, “A Stiff Clarifying Test is in Order,” 36

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 38

<sup>57</sup> Ulam, “Our Parks Are Not for Sale”

The POPS program demonstrates how the unmaking of public spaces in terms of planning, financing, and ownership is highly correlated with the unmaking of public spaces as intended for public use. Through privatized design and tight regulation, the negotiation and conflict that enact a space as a public one can be firmly quashed. When the public is so restricted that it can no longer actively create the space, then these places can only be considered “public” in name only.

Even as cities are enmeshed in processes of privatization, they are simultaneously in the business of making the landscape appear public. Through commodification, cities engage in a project of turning what they see as unorganized sites of urban disarray into locations which evoke a sense of the exciting, fast-paced urban life: confusion is turned into vibrancy, decay is turned into culture. Seizing upon images of urban vibrancy, “the presence of cultural markets both validates and valorizes business investment in major corporate cities.”<sup>58</sup> In the capitalist model, such spaces become *commodified* through what David Harvey terms “the mobilization of spectacle.”<sup>59</sup>

Cultural hotspots are mobilized and nurtured through branding, advertisement, and investment in order to augment local land values, as this account demonstrates:

There’s a story about a parking lot in Downtown Brooklyn, in the middle of an area that no one would go to. The developers who owned it didn’t have the financing to build, and they wanted to sort of accelerate the progress of that neighborhood. So they created a flea market and it became really cool and artsy. For a whole year, you had a bunch of people coming to a community that they normally wouldn’t see because of this artificially created destination. After a year, the developers started building a hundred rental units.<sup>60</sup>

Renaming, too, has long been a tactic of the commodification process. Osman notes that early Brooklyn gentrifiers renamed revitalized blocks of Brownstones as they swept

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<sup>58</sup> Sharon Zukin, “Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core,” in *The Gentrification Reader*, ed. Lees, Slater & Wyly Lees (New York; London, Routledge, 2010): 277

<sup>59</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*

<sup>60</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 148-149



through the borough.<sup>61</sup> In today's hot Brooklyn real estate market, neighborhoods continue to be subdivided and renamed at the will of real estate agents and property investors.<sup>62</sup> It is not the developers alone who participate in the profit-driven cultivation of an urban "aesthetic." As Harvey declares, "cultural values flourish remarkably well when promoted and subsidized by state policies."<sup>63</sup> But this cultural meaning is not inherent or natural. Commodification both relies on and produces cultural norms and aesthetic appeal.

Commodified urban spectacle can be visual and aesthetic, or social and cultural. Just as individuals accumulate different forms of capital, "so can cities and regions trade on their "image" and "cultural capital" to rise in the international urban hierarchy."<sup>64</sup> The commodification of urban culture is increasingly fraught as gentrification is taken into account. Gentrification is a process which displaces the same people among whom this urban "aesthetic" originated. As Lorenzo conveyed, "the city makes money off of that image – dirty, inner city, dark, poor" at the same time the city is gentrifying so fast that these images exist more on TV than in reality.<sup>65</sup> As commodification takes root, cultural spaces are stripped of the meaning of the people who made them.<sup>66</sup> As one New Yorker reflected in exasperation, "What I don't understand is what it is that makes people think that we'll still be an interesting place if everything is only affordable to a certain small group of people. Who is the audience for the city as it continues to grow these

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<sup>61</sup> Suleiman Osman, *Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, (Oxford University Press, USA, 211): 5

<sup>62</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>63</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 50

<sup>64</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 90

<sup>65</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Turner, "Mother Courage," *The Guardian*, 2009

towers?”<sup>67</sup> More specific to my project, what happens when urban parks are commodified? Who is their audience?



Advertisement for the Hudson Yards Development;  
Personal photograph, July 2016

Parks are a site of capital accumulation accrued through a set of commodified cultural, physical, and aesthetic amenities. As Lees, Slater, and Wyly explain, “in a capitalist economy, land and the improvements built onto it become commodities...land and improvements are fixed in space but their value is anything but fixed.”<sup>68</sup> According to Gandy, urban parks can be characterized as increasingly sophisticated sites of real estate speculation “linked with newly emerging conceptions of the aesthetics of nature and urban design.”<sup>69</sup> The logic of commodification here is simple:

“Beautiful parks make a city more attractive, which is to say, they make a city more of an attraction. When what is attracted to the city is money, in one form

<sup>67</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 112

<sup>68</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 88

<sup>69</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 87

or another, then the beauty of the parks can be argued to be of particular social benefit, and anyone to whom this money trickles down is likely to agree.”<sup>70</sup>

This logic has produced a longstanding coalition between parks and private real estate to use urban green space as a mechanism to drive investment.

The alignment of urban parks with real estate interests has a long history. When NYC officials were scouting locations for Central Park, they settled on the current site because it has “taxable property on all four sides.”<sup>71</sup> Although the proposal to set aside Central Park at first received pushback, commercial benefits soon outweighed the loss of potentially profitable land, stoking favorability among the city’s business community.<sup>72</sup> The realization of Central Park was dependent on this business alliance. Thus, while setting aside some land from development, Central Park “was never an anticapitalist oasis but from its inception a sophisticated dimension to the commodification of nature.”<sup>73</sup> This system of mutual support was so successful that business philosophies often infiltrated parks literature, “embrac[ing] economic rationales in order to legitimate many of its goals.”<sup>74</sup> And so, when parks faced dwindling government support, they already had the infrastructure in place to transition towards an increasingly privatized funding model, relying on pre-established ties to the business community and a familiarity with the language of economics and return-on-investment.<sup>75</sup> The malleable role of park spaces within the social realm has uniquely positioned them to move between different tactics of commodification.

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<sup>70</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 208

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 31

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 161

<sup>73</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 233

<sup>74</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 163

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 177

There is something distinct about the commodification of land, because “land is not a commodity in the ordinary sense.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, however, there is something distinct about the commodification of *park* land in the way it relates to the imagery, aesthetics, and cultural connotations of nature. According to Altamirano-Jimenez, the commodification of nature is embodied in the project of neoliberalism. While ‘wild’ and ‘unbounded’ nature is often structured in opposition to private property, these ideas work hand and hand to build urban parks. Through the commodification of these bounded natural spaces, “neoliberalism involves not only deregulation but also the re-regulation of nature.”<sup>77</sup> Through processes of neoliberalism, commodification of nature further breaks down the oppositional position of nature to its propertied, industrial “other.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, organic rhetoric of “decay” and “rebirth” is a central tool enabling development in concert with these natural park spaces.<sup>79</sup> Urban parks are one of the primary means of invoking nature as a site of commodifiable urban capital.

Privatization and commodification can be most easily traced through money. Frederick Law Olmsted, Central Park’s original landscape architect, saw public financing as one of the key tenants of the growing American park system, and was “particularly proud of the fact that American parks were a product of public spending rather than a gift from a beneficent aristocracy.”<sup>80</sup> The emphasis on public-private partnerships and parks conservancies in today’s public park system, however, points an increasing reliance on parks funding from the private realm. In considering some of New York’s newest parks, Ulam notes that all heavily, if not entirely, rely on private entities for their

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<sup>76</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 28

<sup>77</sup> Altamirano-Jimenez, *Indigenous Encounters*, 70

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*, 86

<sup>80</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 175

maintenance and operations budgets. “Private sector support comes at a price” he declares. The dependence, and therefore influence, of private money evident in these public parks is another mechanism to contest – or at least question - the “public” nature of these spaces.<sup>81</sup>

Systems of funding have an influential role in producing disparate physical outcomes across different park spaces. Well-patroned parks barely resemble the typical city park site. New York’s massive network of park conservancies has grown in power in concert with the resurgence of parks funding under the Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations. The Central Park Conservancy (CPC) is by far the largest and wealthiest of these conservancies, boasting an endowment of over \$200 million which covers eighty five percent of the park’s maintenance budget and employs ninety percent of the staff. To put CPC into perspective, the president of the conservancy has a salary almost twice as large as the Parks Commissioner’s.<sup>82</sup>

Private money churns through the New York park system more than any other system in the country. One report classifies NYC as “one of the most avid users of public-private partnerships to restore and maintain green space.”<sup>83</sup> By municipal record, “Half of the city’s 1,800 parks and playgrounds now depend on some type of private group for maintenance.”<sup>84</sup> For most parks, this “private dependence” means small non-profits or coordinated volunteer maintenance. What is clear is that private wealth is heavily concentrated and manifests in a few extremely well-funded sites.

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<sup>81</sup> Ulam, “Our Parks Are Not for Sale”

<sup>82</sup> Ulam, “Our Parks Are Not for Sale”

<sup>83</sup> Public-Private Partnerships for Green Space in NYC, *Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs*, 1

<sup>84</sup> Patrick Arden, “The High Cost of Free Parks: Do Public-Private Partnerships Save Parks or Exploit Them?” *Next City* (2010), 43

Recently the scale of this private wealth has increased dramatically. A growing cohort of mega-donors giving mega-donations has emerged, changing the landscape of money in public green space. This is particularly visible in the wake of a whopping \$100 million gift from billionaire Paulson to CPC. Paulson's gift signaled a shift in the world of big philanthropy where "historically, the urban parks have been low on the philanthropy chain."<sup>85</sup> Paulson's donation prompted a wave of public scrutiny towards public park financing.<sup>86</sup> After his contribution was announced, many noted the benefits he stands to reap from his own generosity. He owns a 28,500 square foot townhouse just across from the park and will get a pretty hefty tax deduction from his contribution.<sup>87</sup>

Of CPC's donations, the vast majority come from wealthy New Yorkers who own the exorbitantly expensive property near this famed green space. Even as the conservancy brings in millions of dollars in donations from wealthy neighbors, the parks system as a whole continues to struggle under lack of funding. As one New York Times article noted, "When officials in New York's more distant parks plead for a little bit more, city officials suggest selling off naming rights and letting corporations slap names on basketball and dog runs."<sup>88</sup> Conservancy advocates argue that private institutions are necessary when the city is so strapped for cash: Why not allow the city's many wealthy residents cover some of the costs? And in the meantime, proponents suggest, the money that would have gone to Central Park can be shifted to the upkeep of other city parks.

This isn't the whole picture, however. Through tax deductions, donations concentrate wealth in already well-funded parks while the city brings in less revenue to

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine Nagel, "A New Opportunity for City Parks as Private Donors Eye Public Space," N2012

<sup>86</sup> Ulam, "Our Parks Are Not for Sale"

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ulam, "Our Parks Are Not for Sale"

redistribute to other sites. In an era where the Parks Department has still not recovered from the slashed budgets and employee rolls of neoliberal policy, Paulson's donation – relatively inconsequential to the operations of already well-funded Central Park – could have made up for five years-worth of city Parks Department budget cuts with millions to spare.<sup>89</sup>

New York City Councilmember Treyger, who serves on the city's Parks and Recreation Committee, describes conservancies as a mechanism of multiple inequities. As he expressed angrily, through CPI the city is allocating millions in city dollars towards making more equitable parks, *and yet* he can't procure the funds to add a single bathroom stall in a Brooklyn park. Treyger expressed skepticism that a system of parks management imbued with dependence on private money can ever work towards equitable parks for all. The amount of funding itself isn't the problem; the issue is that the departmental capital process is so expensive that improvements (such as a new bathroom) are inherently limited, *while at the same time* private entities can implement the same improvements for a much lower cost. In this double-inequity, not only do conservancy parks have access to more money, but they are also able implement projects for half the cost. When the richest playgrounds can spend a third of the money on a bathroom, the funding gap grows even wider.<sup>90</sup>

Still, many city parks that are smaller and less well-financed also utilize private entities as a mechanism of upkeep and fundraising. Where conservancies aren't possible, "Friends of" groups are formed as volunteer maintenance organizations. The volunteer dependence of public parks has led to what Dissent Magazine has identified as "some of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> "New York City Council: Meeting Minutes."

the most glaring inequities in the United States.”<sup>91</sup> Whether through wealthy neighbors, naming rights, or volunteer labor, the city’s public spaces have been fully folded into the same systems of power and concentrated real estate which characterize New York’s private spaces.

The private funding of public space is usually packaged and dressed up in “public-private partnerships.” NYC has been a pioneering force when it comes to this model. The proliferation of public-private partnerships has been heralded by the city as a means to divert public resources to parks with the greatest need. Adrian Benepe, former parks commissioner under Mayor Bloomberg, hailed this transformation in the city’s parks management system as a “Golden Age for Parks.” The legacy of the public-private era in NYC Parks is a mixed one, however. Unlike Benepe’s glowing assessment, many identify this “Golden Age” as one of growing disparities “between lavish, showplace parks for the haves and cast-off parcels for the have-nots.”<sup>92</sup> As Geoffrey Croft, president of NYC Park Advocates, laments: “New York has created a two-tier parks system, one for the rich and the other for the poor.”<sup>93</sup> It’s a system he plainly describes as “racist.”<sup>94</sup>

Moody takes a similarly disparaging perspective on public-private models: “It is a neoliberal agenda in which public money...combined with provide funds, is used to foster private profit on a grand scale.”<sup>95</sup> Assessments like this have led to some legislative pushback. In 2010 the New York City Council passed a resolution which mandated greater financial transparency and that at least one community member sit on each

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<sup>91</sup> Ulam, “Our Parks Are Not for Sale”

<sup>92</sup> Arden, “The High Cost of Free Parks,” 43

<sup>93</sup> Ibid

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 185



conservancy board.<sup>96</sup> As councilwomen Mark-Viverito said at the time “overreliance on private money tips the scale. It’s almost like the community loses control of its park and it’s not because they want to – its forced upon them.”<sup>97</sup> While this legislation passed, it wasn’t without concerted opposition from conservancies, the Bloomberg administration, and the Parks Department itself who argued, among other things, that it would “squelch[] the entrepreneurial spirit.”<sup>98</sup>

### Brooklyn Bridge Park



Brooklyn Bridge Park residential development underway;  
Personal photograph, June 2016

Brooklyn Bridge Park is nothing if not entrepreneurial. The park is an expansive open space coating a series of old industrial piers along the Brooklyn waterfront with unobstructed and unparalleled views of Manhattan, but its entrepreneurial nature lies in its one-of-a-kind (and controversial) funding structure.

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<sup>96</sup> Arden, “The High Cost of Free Parks,” 46

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 47

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

Calls for a repurposed park at the Brooklyn piers began as soon as the piers closed in the 1980s. In 1984, a formal plan was proposed by a group of Brooklyn Heights residents, who envisioned sports fields, a recreation center, and skateboarding facilities atop the dilapidated site. In fits and starts the plan wound its way through New York bureaucracy until 2002, when Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg together allocated \$150 million in capital funds to build the project, telling the Brooklyn Heights advocates that they would have to find a way to finance its maintenance.<sup>99</sup>

Two years later, the city released its own plan for the soon-to-be Brooklyn Bridge Park. Drastically different than the plan local residents had put forth, this one included amenities such as docking for 180 yachts and a kayaking area, replacing more accessible recreation. The plans looked “like an Eddie Bauer catalogue” Ari told me.<sup>100</sup> The public-private project was to be managed by a state-appointed board of directors who would oversee and manage property tax revenue from developing some of the park land. While proponents argued that this tactic was necessary fund park maintenance, the price-tag had also ballooned to \$350 million with operating costs of an additional \$15.2 million.<sup>101</sup> As one resident at the forefront of the original park plan argued, “They ginned up the cost to justify the housing.”<sup>102</sup> A report at the time claimed that “politically connected developers stood to see \$700 million from the project.”<sup>103</sup> At the park’s opening, Bloomberg praised the financing model, calling it indicative of the way things will move in the future. It is a self-sustaining form of park maintenance that many in the economic development community are eager to replicate.

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<sup>99</sup> Arden, “The High Cost of Free Parks,” 45

<sup>100</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>101</sup> Arden, “The High Cost of Free Parks,” 45

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> Ibid

Even as some housing has been built and the park's piers are near completion, the "Battle of Brooklyn Bridge Park" continues as one headline declared.<sup>104</sup> Many residents and of the well-to-do neighborhood have complained about ensuing changes since the park's opening. In particular, neighbors have cited youth disturbances, who view the "flood of kids" as a "menacing" aspect of the new park.<sup>105</sup> As Tessa bluntly relayed to me, despite the park's success "all these white people [are] worried that all these brown people [are] going to come into their parks."<sup>106</sup> The park basketball courts on Pier Two are the focal point of this collision between Black youth and older white neighbors. The courts are the recreational center of the park, attracting large crowds – a "menacing flood of kids." As *The Gothamist* reported in May 2016, Pier Two had been closed down by the New York Police Department (NYPD) five times that month alone because of fighting or merely the "anticipation of a large group fight" as one NYPD spokesperson reported. As one police officer NYPD put it, these kids who are "coming from all over the city" with naturally induce these violent scenarios.<sup>107</sup> This sentiment led to a call for the park to shutter its newly built basketball courts all together, with neighbors offering suggestions for replacement facilities that will attract "more laid-back crowds."<sup>108</sup> In the meantime, it's because of these kids that this officer justifies increasing police surveillance and strict regulation over Brooklyn Bridge Park: "If you're going to come down and cause problems...then we're going to make that park difficult for you to go to."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Liz, Robbins "The Battle of Brooklyn Bridge Park," *The New York Times*, 2014

<sup>105</sup> Emma Whitford, "Neighbors Blame Basketball Courts & Teenagers For "Trauma" At Brooklyn Bridge Park," *The Gothamist*, 2016

<sup>106</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>107</sup> Whitford, "Neighbors Blame Basketball Courts."

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Whitford, "Neighbors Blame Basketball Courts."

Brooklyn Bridge Park was a project of the Bloomberg administration, a gleaming new jewel in the city's green portfolio. Amidst ongoing controversy over the park, members of the administration have stepped in to defend Bloomberg's lengthy legacy of public-private partnerships. Benepe calls public-private partnerships a "bogeyman" perpetuating a myth "that the parks are being privatized by some evil corporate entities."<sup>110</sup> He described the city's partnership model as a nation-leading system, part of a long tradition of generous New Yorkers taking accountability for their public spaces. In a sly linguistic shift, the government is made Benepe's new "bogeyman," holding an antiquated "virtual monopoly on how to care for parks and how to program them."<sup>111</sup> Using this rhetorical approach, he reframes public-private partnerships as an issue of participation; these partnerships are conceived as carving out a space for public access to the parks system. Unlike participatory planning models which feature the interaction of municipal bodies with loosely organized members of the public, here participation is presented as a relationship between government regulation and private sector interests. According to Benepe's logic, public-private partnerships are a better point of public intervention because their institutional structures live beyond election cycles and across political administrations. "The reality," Benepe asserts, "is that the parks are being made more public by the active participation of public citizens in the lives of parks."<sup>112</sup> It is a perspective on public space wherein privatization and participation work with and not against one another.

The New York Economic Development Corporation (NYEDC) is another public-private partnership which is dedicating increasing energy to the potential for parks

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<sup>110</sup> Julia R. Serazio, "An Interview with New York City Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe," *Next City*, 2010

<sup>111</sup> Serazio, "An Interview with Adrian Benepe."

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*

to act as hubs of capital investment. I spoke with Katie, a NYEDC employee who helped develop an internal report on this sort of urban park potential. The report classified two types of parks: “amenity” and “catalytic.” The latter – these “catalytic” parks – are the places of interest to NYEDC.<sup>113</sup> Brooklyn Bridge Park is a catalytic park. Despite public controversy there is a consensus among development interests that this park is a model to be replicated. Describing the park’s financing model as “genius,” Katie pointed to how the park harnessed its distinct qualities to make itself into a destination.<sup>114</sup>

The idea of a catalytic park is a fairly new one in the world of economic development. Where there has been effort placed into understanding parks for their catalytic functionality, it has been primarily centered on a few well-known examples: Central Park, the High Line, and Brooklyn Bridge Park to name a few. Katie is looking for ways that parks can embody “smaller economic activations” in order to catalyze nearby economic activity. She framed her investigation thusly: “Are there other [park] models that are less expensive that are still so interesting that they would bring visitors from outside the neighborhood, spur investment in the neighborhood, or bring people to the neighborhood that wouldn’t otherwise move there?”<sup>115</sup> Katie asserts that catalytic potential has to do with cultivating something “distinctive” about a particular park site. In this way, a park comes to be significant as more than just a local amenity – it becomes an attraction.<sup>116</sup>

Unfortunately, she conceded, the Brooklyn Bridge Park model was only successful given the already high property values in the surrounding Brooklyn Heights

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<sup>113</sup> Katie (NY Economic Development Corporation), interview with the author, January 2017

<sup>114</sup> Ibid

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Katie (NY Economic Development Corporation), interview with the author, January 2017

neighborhood. In lower-income neighborhoods, the property taxes of a comparably sized plot of land would not be great enough to subsidize the park maintenance in the same way. “Maybe in lower income neighborhoods, you need more private space to subsidize the public space” Katie suggested.<sup>117</sup> In other words, to make this model replicable citywide, low-income neighborhoods must sacrifice a greater share of public space to generate funds. NYEDC’s answer for creating catalytic parks disproportionately burdens low-income neighborhoods.

### Actors and Stakeholders

In June 2015, the size of New York City government reached a record high. By June of that year there were 282,767 individuals employed by the city under the de Blasio administration, an increase of 11,000 from just one year prior.<sup>118</sup> This behemoth of an organization manages a budget that is bigger than the budgets of most states. The preliminary budget proposal for fiscal year 2018 released by the mayor’s office totaled \$84.67 billion.<sup>119</sup> The complexity of agencies and offices and departments and boards and committees is a constantly shifting, dynamic mess; I have become convinced that all efforts to understand this web in its totality are futile.

Knowing that I asked an impossible question, I pressed Ari to tell me what he knew about the power dynamics in New York City government. Who is pulling the strings? What agency *really* has the power? Ari paused. Perhaps I need to reconfigure my thought process, he suggested, and so he countered my question with one of his own: “How do you establish policies without having to go through the normal power

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> Aaron Short, “NYC government balloons to record size under de Blasio,” *New York Post*, 2015

<sup>119</sup> “Fact Sheet: Mayor de Blasio Releases Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2018.”

structure?”<sup>120</sup> In other words, rather than trying to understand bureaucratic relationships in their official domains, the informal and undocumented forms of communication might better illuminate broader dynamics within official entities.<sup>121</sup> There are many actors and interests that cut, follow, and deepen these unofficial pathways. These pathways are just as much interpersonal as they are institutional. As Ari explained, “there are organizations in place that have relationships with city government agencies on more particular initiatives... all these organizations have their back alley situations with city officials.” And this, he stated matter-of-factly, is just how governments work.

In interview with *The Gothamist*, Robert Caro declared: “if you’re really interested in political power, everything you do is bullshit.”<sup>122</sup> So how do we understand political power in New York? Does Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker* have anything to do with the contemporary organization of political power in New York? *The Power Broker* is a biography of one man and how that man came to hold immense power over shaping New York’s urban landscape. As Caro admits: “political scientists are always saying I’m too believing in the Great Man Theory” – the oversubscribing of political capability to individuals even though they are embedded in complex sociopolitical systems.<sup>123</sup> But as he explains, his book isn’t really a biography. It centers around the life of an individual, yes, but it is meant to be illustrative of the means and modes of political power in an urban context.

Despite its pitfalls, the Great Man Theory certainly tells a good story. Whether with respect to urban renewal or gentrification – two large-scale and complex processes

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<sup>120</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

<sup>122</sup> Christopher Robbins, “Robert Caro Wonders What New York is Going to Become,” *The Gothamist*, 2016

<sup>123</sup> Robbins, “Robert Caro Wonders What New York is Going to Become.”

– the identification of actors in positions of power is helpful for a public struggling with a loss of control. To reject the existence of these positions to begin with, “that’s when the story turns on its head. But that’s not a good storyline. That’s not a good angle. Because then you don’t have a bad guy in the story. There’s no one to hang out to dry.”<sup>124</sup> Caro hung Robert Moses out to dry.

At the climax of his accumulation of power, Moses controlled twelve city and state offices. Today, untangling the political web that entraps the urban park system seems like an impossible task to approach. Formal titles are spread out and the informal powers that leverage hierarchy and power among them complex, spread among many individuals, and even if or when they are concentrated in certain offices, difficult to trace from an outsider’s eye.<sup>125</sup> Contemporary power structures are different than those in Moses’ time; “There is no single force like a Robert Moses behind this transformation of the skyline. Indeed, there is no central urban planning behind all this development.”<sup>126</sup> While political actors are of course still heavily involved, the spread and concentration of power is obfuscated through the labyrinth of municipal bureaucracy.

The huge, labyrinthian nature of city government has left a vacuum for the concentration of power into other types of hands. Moody argues that the traditional powers of government have often been “hijacked by the state in the service of private development.”<sup>127</sup> In New York City especially, the business elite are highly integrated into the city’s policy-making process.<sup>128</sup> “Politicians come and go, but the development

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<sup>124</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 36

<sup>125</sup> Paletta, “Jane Jacobs v Robert Moses, battle of New York's urban titans.”

<sup>126</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 218

<sup>127</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 218

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 27



agenda and the grander global ambitions of New York’s business elite continue.”<sup>129</sup> Wealth doesn’t simply drive policy; it is “the permanent government of New York.”<sup>130</sup> There is political leverage to be gained by working with this elite business class. Bloomberg was often lauded for his mayoral ability to communicate with the business community,<sup>131</sup> a skill he gained as a member of the business elite himself.<sup>132</sup> The relationship between business interests and elected officials has shaped a landscape of power that diverges from how public governance is flatly conceptualized.

Other organizations intervene in this matrix of power, poking holes in the thick wall of municipal institutions and business interests. These “subsidiary interests,” as Ari calls them, represent smaller organizations, non-profits, and community groups who find subtle pressure points to quietly redirect flows of power. These subsidiaries work as “loophole organizations” – asserting influence through “the right back alley deals.”<sup>133</sup> The role played by these subsidiary organizations is often noted in a formal capacity, including in official CPI documentation.<sup>134</sup> In arenas where the official capacity of government is less robust and private institutions are lacking, advocacy interests are relied upon to pick up the slack.<sup>135</sup>

There are many groups, however, whose labor goes unnoticed and unnoted, unmarked in official and informal settings. These are subsidiary interests without the right back alley deals, in positions from which it is difficult to intervene in the matrix of power. These groups must make interventions that are less subtle, to say the least. I

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 155

<sup>130</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 264

<sup>131</sup> "New York City at its Core: Future City Lab."

<sup>132</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 158

<sup>133</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>134</sup> *Framework*

<sup>135</sup> Partnerships for Parks (NYC Parks Department), interview with the author, February 2017

witnessed one of these interventions in June 2016, on 5<sup>th</sup> avenue, across from The Plaza Hotel and in the shadow of the glass-encased Apple elevator shaft (standing in a plaza built through the POPS program). On that afternoon a crowd of protesters gathered on the sidewalk, their neon t-shirts standing out amidst the throngs of suits rushing to and from work, Starbucks, the subway. A giant grim-reaper, held by as many as six of the protesters, circled the protest standing tall above the throngs. Its movable arms held claw-like hands, moving up and down to beckon curious onlookers. Adjacent to Bergdorf Goodman – a luxury goods department store – stood two blow-up rats, themselves towering above the still-circling grim reaper, present as an indication of union protest.

This particular protest was targeting the Gilbane Building Company. Hundreds of construction workers, plumbers, and electricians arrived to oppose the company’s use of non-union subcontractors whose work sites are more likely to be unsafe work conditions with lower pay on non-union sites. After having *literally* built the infrastructure that keeps New York City functioning daily, low wages and occupation hazards are denying these workers an opportunity to participate in the fruits of their labor. This exclusion echoes similar systems of denial through ownership and history and memory that are being abruptly disrupted in gentrifying neighborhoods.

Like the disregarded labor of these protestors, gentrification similarly dismisses the work that residents have put into their own neighborhoods and the infrastructure they have built. As longtime residents protest, “We lived through it being shitty, we want to stay and enjoy what’s coming;”<sup>136</sup> gentrifiers “don’t want to do the heavy lifting.”<sup>137</sup> What these union protestors and anti-gentrification activists both express is a desire to

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<sup>136</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 215

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 18

maintain a sense of ownership in the places that they have poured their labor into. Or, when it comes to CPI, “They want to still make sure it’s *their* park.”<sup>138</sup> The question of whether new infrastructures are good or bad is one thing, but what the Gilbane protest highlights here is a question of whether these can be spaces of belonging as new people arrive and prices go up.

Public space provides a platform for physical connection, the power of which is often underestimated in the political realm.<sup>139</sup> People invest parts of themselves in the process of creating this space, which in turn helps shape identities. As explained by Wiley, “so much of how we identify who we are – who we should be in relationship with, and what their value is to the larger community, city, region, nation – is so often expressed in space.”<sup>140</sup> Race is one factor that can be drawn upon to illuminate the co-constructive relationship between space and identity. In an interview with Ron Schiffman, Maya Wiley describes how the racialization of space is deeply connected to how people understand human relationships in a racialized fashion. Psychological space, physical space, and political space she asserts, “are highly racialized, even when we’re not clear how they’re racialized... We’ve racialized physical space through housing policies, land use planning, and many other public and private actions<sup>141</sup>

Public space and identity are bridged through the ways that material infrastructures store memory and meaning. As Wiley explains, “In the interaction between physical space and social/political space, who we are and who we think we are is shaped by space: how we organize it, who we are in it, and how we include or exclude

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<sup>138</sup> Partnerships for Parks (NYC Parks Department), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>139</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “Preface,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Schiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): xiii

<sup>140</sup> Wiley & Schiffman, “Racialized Public Space,” 114

<sup>141</sup> Wiley & Schiffman, “Racialized Public Space,” 114

people from it.”<sup>142</sup> DW Gibson asks, “If the neighborhood changes will the space still mean the same thing?”<sup>143</sup> And if the space has new meanings, how does that impact the people and communities that use it? The relationship between space and identity ground urban parks as key locales for constructing community networks. Thus, gentrification, which imposes a disruption between people and place, thus also imposes a disruption between people and community. As DW Gibson argues: “Each of us defines gentrification in accordance with our own relationship to a piece of land, a neighborhood...We have hopes for what the land may bring us – profits, security, community – and we have fears about what it can do, what it might become.”<sup>144</sup> When spaces become privatized, exclusive, or restricted, the displacement that occurs is not only physical, but from these community networks as well. It can be characterized as “another kind of displacement – one unrelated to physical space. [This] displacement is figurative, more subtle, escaping the statistician’s graph.”<sup>145</sup>

### Critiquing Community Visioning

CPI is publically presented as a referendum on Bloomberg’s park legacy, one painted as exclusionary and geared toward New York’s elite.<sup>146</sup> Through community visioning, CPI pushes back against the hierarchies of publics and power that facilitate exclusion from public spaces. Drawing on an understanding of these hierarchies as laid out thus far, community visioning poses participation as a means to create institutional entranceways for subsidiary interests who don’t have the right connections of backdoor

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 113-114

<sup>143</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 294

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 311-312

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 160

<sup>146</sup> Ross Barkan, “Bloomberg Defends Legacy as de Blasio Touts New Parks Initiative,” *The Observer*, 2014

deals. This form of participatory planning is presented as the antidote to exclusionary ills. Or, in the language of New York City government, “Successful, sustainable parks are often the result of transformative and creative partnerships between communities, the City, and other stakeholders.”<sup>147</sup> In typical fashion, this language is politically optimistic and politically vague. The question of who should be included in these “transformative and creative partnerships” is one left to the discretion of implementation.

It is impossible for community visioning doesn’t reach everyone in the community, but CPI has taken several concerted steps to make the process more accessible. This includes shortening meeting times, reducing governmental jargon, and offering documents in locally-used languages. Some “scoping” meetings even go so far as to providing childcare services. In the end, however, “You can’t get everybody, you can’t get all the stakeholders” parks officials acknowledge.<sup>148</sup> There are some groups that are easier to loop into the process than others - for example, Partnerships for Parks can quickly communicate with affiliate volunteer groups – and therefore it’s easier for these voices to be heard. And when there are people who enter the process late, “It can be a little bit tricky.” As Partnerships for Parks reflected, “There’ve definitely been cases where perhaps certain stakeholder groups come to the table a little later, they hear about things a little bit later than would have been ideal.”<sup>149</sup> Lorenzo uses slightly stronger language to characterize this problem: without access to the city-sanctioned participation process, “How can you organize or resist or create alternatives when you don’t even know that this is happening from the beginning?”<sup>150</sup> These obstacles “say a lot about

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<sup>147</sup> *Framework*, 19

<sup>148</sup> Partnerships for Parks (NYC Parks Department), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>149</sup> Partnerships for Parks (NYC Parks Department), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>150</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

where [the city's] intentions are, where their loyalties lie.”<sup>151</sup> Once the process is underway and plans are set, making changes is difficult. For a member of the community have an impact on the design, timing is vital.

New York City has a standard methodology for public engagement used to structure community visioning sessions. The process, as Ari described, generally proceeds as follows:

- 1) Organize a community meeting
- 2) Bring in city officials to present on a given issue or project
- 3) Catalogue and survey community desires on sticky notes
- 4) Consolidate all responses into a pie chart
- 5) Based on this data, make a preliminary design that reflects “the will of the community”

“It becomes this very prescribed method of transferring input,” Ari complained. “It turns sticky notes into a plan, considered ‘tried and true’ methods of community design.”<sup>152</sup> Ari observed the drawbacks of these methods at a visioning session he recently attended:

The presenters were simply addressing the people as “The Community”. They were saying “The Community wants this. They’re not saying ‘you’. You’ve got to understand that these people are just going all through the city all the time...they can’t even humanize when they’re in a group of people. It’s just a sea of faces for them all the time...And the fact is that they kind of just stood up there, talking *at* people.”<sup>153</sup>

From his perspective, the prescriptive and repetitive nature of these community visioning sessions actually undermines their ability to obtain authentic feedback from local residents. The sessions become static, another checkbox to fill in the “democratic” process. According to Karla, another urban planner, community visioning sessions are more than just ineffective – they are misleading and hypocritical. She lodged this harsh

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid

<sup>152</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>153</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

assessment: “The way Parks does community engagement is really a better-than-nothing scenario. It’s like saying you’re hungry and somebody offers you McDonalds. It’s not healthy, it’s not good for you, but it’s something.” In essence, the Parks Department does community engagement like low-quality fast food.<sup>154</sup>

In sum, community visioning offers a limited participatory process on two accounts. First, because of an implementation structure in meetings themselves that is less than optimal for facilitating input. Second, because participants are naturally curated through pre-established channels, which in themselves reflect existing power structures. When participation is limited, the burden always falls on the most excluded community members. “You have to work through race and class and gender and colonization” Lorenzo told me, and all while working by the city’s deadlines.<sup>155</sup> Still, participatory planning is presented as a common remedy to issues of access and equity.<sup>156</sup> Given my criticisms of how participatory planning is carried out, to what extent is this idealized mode of participation possible?

Community visioning participates in boundary-making between belonging and exclusion. Like the universality of public space, we should dismiss the notion that participatory planning – as it is conceived in community visioning – can be truly participatory in a pure sense. This is not to say that participation should be abandoned all together, just that a guise of universality does us a disservice if we hope to construct better practices.

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<sup>154</sup> Karla (former urban planner), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>155</sup> Lorenzo (community organizer with Northern Manhattan is Not for Sale), interview with the author, March 2017

<sup>156</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 236

### CHAPTER 3: PAST / PRESENT / FUTURE

“Housing’s good, in theory”<sup>1</sup>

#### Temporal Contradictions

The Community Parks Initiative is simultaneously rooted in historical considerations, current needs, and future anticipations. As Commissioner Silver argues, all three of these factors are necessary for a “visioning” process. He describes visioning through three components:

“Hindsight – to know what a community has gone through to truly understand its context; insight – to understand exactly what is happening today, the pulse of that community; and foresight – to understand based on emerging trends and patterns, where is this community heading in the future.”<sup>2</sup>

CPI embodies all of these elements in one form or another. It acknowledges historic disparities that have replicated themselves throughout urban green space infrastructures over time. It measures how these disparities manifest in today’s park conditions in order to serve the needs of current community members. Lastly, it anticipates future green space needs based on population shifts and urban development.

CPI is an initiative with temporal breadth; it aims to address past, present, and future in its structure and scope. Participation and exclusion are a useful way to highlight how these temporal contradictions materialize. For example, a former urban planner named Karla launched a critique of community visioning which describes how a temporal elements are baked into the exclusionary nature of community visioning: “It’s significant that on the one hand the Parks are measuring projected growth, and on the other, people who have been using the park for 30 years don’t know that it’s going to be

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<sup>1</sup> Michael H. Adams, “The End of Black Harlem,” *The New York Times*, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Dallessio, *Parks Chief Talks Public Space Trends*



renovated.”<sup>3</sup> As she spoke, Karla stretched one arm up above her head and the other down by her side to emphasize the disparities as play. These disparities signal an ideological gap, whereby on the one hand the Parks Department presents a commitment to current community members and on the other, the agency ascribes to a form of “participatory” planning based on some publics and not others. In other words, the problems of hierarchy and exclusion faced in in participatory planning are simultaneously problems of time, pitting visions of the future against the present and the past.

While interrelated with tensions I have already discussed, between equity/displacement and participation/exclusion, structuring this section in terms of past/present/future offers new revelatory mechanisms. I approach this set of temporal tensions with an eye on rhetoric, audience, and intent as a means to understand how CPI builds park space with temporally-differentiated publics in mind. I ground my examination of these elusive characteristics by establishing linkages between CPI and elements of past, present, and future in related city policy. My goal is to use these policies to demonstrate the material implications of temporal conditions that are themselves difficult to ground in the material.

### Planning Park Spaces

Here I examine how planning policies, primarily related to zoning, housing and incentives, reveal temporally contradictory elements that can then be applied to CPI. On the surface it is easiest to understanding planning though a forward looking lens; *planning*, after all, is a practice to shape things that haven’t happened yet. For example, while CPI is attuned to issues in the past and present, its primary stated goal is to “lay the

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<sup>3</sup> Karla (former urban planner), interview with the author, February 2017

foundations of sustainable park development [to] plan and build a brighter, greener, more equitable future for every New Yorker.”<sup>4</sup> Locating planning as cause rather than effect is echoed by M. Paul Friedberg, who states that “the designer creates the situation, one that facilitates opportunities and not insistent on specific use. The designer is a facilitator accomplished in adjusting the physical to create opportunities.”<sup>5</sup> Here, planning is about opening certain possibilities while foreclosing others.

Not only is planning framed as forward-oriented, but it is also a process of ordering and categorization. For example, a member of New York’s 1918 Zoning Commission wrote that “the whole purpose of zoning is to encourage the right building in the right place” – and to dissuade the wrong building in the wrong place.<sup>6</sup> To apply Friedberg’s framework, zoning facilitates opportunities for development and preservation in spatially differentiated ways. Zoning and planning are policy tools wielded in spatially disparate ways to variably reshape certain neighborhoods for the future. The use of planning in ways that generate spatially targeted outcomes is rooted in historical practice<sup>7</sup> – with potentially billions of dollars in development on the line.

Almost one hundred years after the 1918 Zoning Commission, zoning still rests on this same principles of putting the right building in the right place. As Ann , a New York real estate developer, explained, zoning is a tool that should be used “where it makes sense.”<sup>8</sup> Where zoning “makes sense” and where it doesn’t, however, reflect histories of inequities and their perpetuation into the present. In fact, supposedly forward looking zoning visions might actually be much more reflective of present

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<sup>4</sup> *Framework*, 22

<sup>5</sup> Brown, “Public Space Then and in the Future,” 247

<sup>6</sup> “Mastering the Metropolis.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>8</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

realities than they are often deemed. Thus, planning creates pathways and opportunities for the future in reference to value-laden assessments of the city as it has and currently exists.

At the intersection of past, present, and future, planning does not follow a linear chronology. As Tessa pointed out, cities will often follow in the footsteps of lived practice, even if it is technically disallowed under zoning regulations. In these cases “the city does not crack down almost ever;” Tessa continued informed me. Take the loft squatting movement of the 1980s, for example. The artist ‘loft culture’ that blossomed in SoHo in the 1960s was actually illegal under the 1961 zoning code.<sup>9</sup> Despite its illegality, the city did little to address the squatter lifestyles of these SoHo artists until many years later when the neighborhood was officially rezoned to residential, legalizing these previously illegal practices.<sup>10</sup>

Zoning is reactionary, but only selectively so. With this selectivity, the city can pick and choose which illegal activity is in fact beneficial to long term policy interests, using persistent violations as an excuse to change the law accordingly. As Tessa notes, “The city’s policy is to wait until there’s so much illegal residential that they rezone the neighborhood.”<sup>11</sup> The legalization process itself paves the way for further neighborhood change, and eventually the “pioneering” artists are themselves displaced.

Re-zoning can generally be characterized as acting in one of two directions: up-zoning and down-zoning. The former increases bulk, residency, and occupancy of a given area, while the latter limits future growth in order to “protect [the] existing scale

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<sup>9</sup> Jim Stratton, *Pioneering in the Urban Wilderness: All About Lofts*, (New York: Urizen Books Inc, 1977)

<sup>10</sup> "Mastering the Metropolis."

<sup>11</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

and character” of a neighborhood.<sup>12</sup> Zoning is one of the primary tools through which the city exerts influence over the built environment, which means it is often a highly charged issue in the political realm. Political hierarchies emerge through the ways zoning is disparately enacted across space. A study through the New York University Furman Center on city re-zonings between 2002 and 2007, for example, found that up-zonings tend to skew towards neighborhoods with a higher proportion of residents of color, while down-zonings trended towards areas with more white residents.<sup>13</sup> As Tessa added flatly, “The city is not typically doing land use policy in poor neighborhoods.”<sup>14</sup> Or at least, the city is not doing a type of land policy that cares to preserve neighborhood character when that neighborhood involves poor people.

Despite its often controversial implementation, planning remains an essential tool in growing cities. In the context of NYC’s high-pressure real estate market, conflict over access to space, and a rampant crisis of affordable housing, the contemporary moment is one where city planning has dramatic implications for the city’s evolving cityscape. Responding to these urban pressures, NYC government is currently in the midst of unveiling and implementing several planning polices addressing issues of housing, zoning, and parks. Unlike urban parks, there is no pretense that housing and zoning policy are apolitical. The policies in question are driving impassioned responses, from support to outcry. Through a divisive issue like planning, the diverse and often conflicting interests of New York residents are on full display.

The difficulty of dealing with competing interests is heightened in NYC, where space is limited, demand is high, and population is growing. As a longtime New Yorker,

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<sup>12</sup> "Mastering the Metropolis."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

Tessa is all too familiar with the physical limitations of space. “Sidewalks are the last open space in New York” she told to me – that’s why she hates street canvassers.<sup>15</sup> High demand and population growth are characteristics of many urban centers right now, but NYC exhibits these conditions at a heightened, intensified rate. The city’s pricey land market and high construction costs are driving development out towards further neighborhoods that have only recently come under these pressures. Tessa turned towards East New York as an example. “East New York is the shittiest hole in New York City,” she commented crassly, “and yet, property values tripled.”<sup>16</sup>

As neighborhoods undergo rapid change, parks act as stabilizers in the urban fabric, a vital tool for designing cities.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, landscape architect Charles Eliot once argued that parks should be the very basis of city planning.<sup>18</sup> In this high-intensity moment, however, parks are establishing an increasingly important role in city planning. Adding new green space is important to help lift the burden on already highly utilized city infrastructure; “there is a real need to face the lack of such spaces directly and to plan for their use as part of the essential city planning process and governmental regulation of land uses” as Marcuse argues.<sup>19</sup> This becomes especially evident in areas of high growth, where parks must be expanded or new parks created to cope with the pressures of increasing demand.

While experts can easily agree that parks are a vital marker for city planning efforts, expanding the capacity of green space is a different story. Planning for these open spaces is particularly difficult in NYC where density is high and available space low.

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<sup>15</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 246

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Peter Marcuse, “Occupy and the Provision of Public Space,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 266

This is precisely the problem that city planners are facing in neighborhoods with impending zoning changes, soon to be flooded with additional development, higher density, and residents. Creating new parks in these neighborhoods is an area of such concern that City Planning recently established a division entirely devoted to infrastructural expansions and improvements in areas to be re-zoned, including park spaces.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to a lack of space, the sheer cost of real estate is also a prohibitive factor obstructing planning for new urban parks. It is so expensive, Tessa explained, that in order for the city to establish these new spaces unilaterally they have to already own it or buy it outright at exorbitant prices. The other option is to incentivize developers to create new open space under a private market model. With city-owned land quickly disappearing and the process of purchasing of new land an increasingly expensive endeavor, many view the private market as the most hospitable option. From Ann's perspective, this is certainly the case. She emphasized the use of two regulatory tools which the city can use to spur the creation of desperately needed open space through public-private means: changes in the zoning code and incentives for private developers.<sup>21</sup> Both of these tactics are currently in full force in NYC.

I will begin with zoning, speaking specifically to Mayor de Blasio's recently unveiled zoning and housing agenda. Then I will transition to a discussion of how incentive structures are incorporated into these policies. Finally, I will examine how these planning strategies themselves exhibit temporal contradictions, and how these tensions can then be applied to CPI.

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<sup>20</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

*Zoning and Housing*

East New York, deep in Brooklyn and far away from gentrification along the borough's Manhattan-facing waterfront, was the first of 15 major re-zoning plans to be announced under Mayor de Blasio. Affordable housing guarantees have done little to ease local fears that East New York will merely become a new playground for the city's wealthy developers. These fears are not baseless; even before the rezoning plan has taken effect, land prices in East New York have tripled. In addition, of the 6,000 new residential units planned, half will be below market rate and only a quarter will be set aside for families making less than \$31,000 a year. For many East New Yorkers, even these guarantees are out of reach, as more than a third of neighborhood families make less than \$23,350 a year. The plan's "Deep Affordability Option" is based on an income of \$39,843 or less for a family of three, still significantly above the incomes of many neighborhood families.<sup>22</sup> As a result, De Blasio has faced a hostile coalition of tenants' advocates and anti-displacement activists who see these up-zoning plans as perpetuating gentrification and bending to the will of developers. Months of resistance culminated in the arrest of ten East New York residents in protest.<sup>23</sup> The mayor's plans were easily approved by the city council in April 2016.

The East New York up-zoning plan is just one element in a suite of proposals which will reshape the physical landscape citywide. New zoning plans are accompanied by affordable housing policies designed to help offset the impacts of increasing density on housing costs. The centerpiece of this affordable housing reform is New York's newly minted Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH) provision. MIH emerged in the

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<sup>22</sup> Gloria Pazmino & Sally Goldenberg, "Council overwhelmingly approves de Blasio's plan to rezone the city," *Politico*, 2016

<sup>23</sup> Emma Whitford, "10 Arrested Protesting East New York Rezoning Outside Councilman's Office," *The Gothamist*, 2016

wake the city's inability to incentivize developers to build affordable housing in singularly market-driven models. It works by offering zoning incentives in exchange for increasing the percent of affordable units in new developments.

When the NYC Council overwhelmingly approved MIH, proponents described it as a moment of historic importance. Council speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito described it as creating “one of the strongest affordable housing plans in the nation...The scope and magnitude of these proposals cannot be understated.”<sup>24</sup> For all the hype and fanfare around this recently approved policy, *Politico* reported that “in reality, it is unlikely to have the sweeping impact [city council] rhetoric would suggest.” In fact, out of the 80,000 new below-market rate apartments that de Blasio has outlined in his sweeping housing plan, the Department of City Planning estimates that MIH and its partner policy, Zoning for Quality and Affordability (ZQA), will spur the creation of only 12,000 new units. Most of the new affordable units are projected to be built through up-zoning rather than affordable housing policy itself.<sup>25</sup> That the majority of affordable units are being added through growth measures (up-zoning) rather than regulatory measures (MIH, ZQA) simply generates a new source of worry for already concerned housing advocates.

### *Incentives*

Zoning and planning are wielded as powerful incentives in the interaction between city government and private development.<sup>26</sup> Although immediate economic benefits are felt in the private realm, public investments are rationalized through the

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<sup>24</sup> Pazmino & Goldenberg, “Council overwhelmingly approves.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 78



prospect of higher tax revenues. In turn, the premise is that these new city funds can be used to reinvest in neighborhood improvements.<sup>27</sup> As Tessa put simply, “By investing in infrastructure, a healthier city is a better tax base.”<sup>28</sup> According to this system of logic, city investments work in a crisp, cyclical fashion.

Incentives are heavily relied upon to create new park spaces in NYC. When you are doing policy in New York, Tessa explained, “You’re competing [against] one of the most rigorous economic engines in the world...you can’t compete.”<sup>29</sup> And when you can’t compete, you have to change the playing field; incentives are one of the primary ways to do just that.<sup>30</sup> When it comes to parks, they don’t just “happen” through the market; city policy has to intervene.

From Ann’s perspective, the city should always utilize re-zoning in concert with new regulations to extract these sorts of exchanges from private developers. “The city does way better when it mandates open space as parts of development,” she argued. This is called “incentive zoning.” The typical incentive zoning package is one wherein the city will grant higher height or density in exchange for allocating some public good.

Parks, Tessa argued, should use tax incentives in a way that mimics the POPS program. She pushed aside the program’s flaws, discussed in the previous chapter, countering that private management has changed its ways since then: “Developers are realizing that these plazas are not places to be patrolled anymore, but that they are real assets to their real estate.” Tessa paused before adding a caveat, “That’s true in white neighborhoods. In poor and working class neighborhoods there is still a fear that these spaces invite loitering and crime.” These benevolent developers have enacted their

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<sup>27</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 209

<sup>28</sup> Tessa (real estate developer), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Adams, “The End of Black Harlem.”

“enlightened” perspective on public space in highly racialized ways. As Manhattan has gotten whiter, wealthier, and “safer,” developers have conceded to “public” spaces only because rising rents and gentrification have already done the exclusionary work for them. As privately managed spaces, “Are they going to be policed?” Tessa asked rhetorically. “Yeah. Are they going to be more hospitable for some people than others? Yeah.” While she insisted that incentivizing large private developers is the only way to create new green space, Tessa also implicitly concluded that doing so can only occur in wealthy or gentrifying neighborhoods. “What’s the alternative?” Tessa asked. “Nothing.”

#### Temporal Contradictions in the Community Parks Initiative

CPI is an element of city planning. Not only was it created alongside complementary housing and zoning initiatives, but CPI itself is helping to direct the future of the city’s built environment. Just like planning, CPI includes reflections of the past and present even as it designs park spaces of the future. What is distinct here, however, is the way in which the language and structures of CPI attempt to straddle all three time considerations. I am interested in the ways that these different temporal provisions may contradict one another. What I find more telling, however, is what this process of glossing over glaring temporal contradictions reveals about the intentionality and implications of CPI as a whole.

As they are embedded in CPI, these contradictions are most evident through the ways parks were chosen for renovation, a process which I explain here in brief. According to official parks documentation and supplemented with personal interviews I conducted with Parks employees who worked closely in the initiative’s creation, CPI sites were chosen through the following methodology:

1. Identify historic funding thresholds<sup>31</sup>
2. Identify parks most in need<sup>32</sup>
3. Define neighborhoods most in need<sup>33</sup>
4. Assess suitability for program participation<sup>34</sup>

Considering those parks in greatest need of improvement (as determined by parts 1 and 2) in tandem with community need (as determined by part 3), the Parks Department narrowed its list of potential CPI sites to 134 park locations around the city. By assessing participation suitability through a range of factors (see: footnotes), this list was further narrowed from 134 sites to just 35 for its initial phase.<sup>35</sup> One year later, an additional 12 sites were added as part of phase 2, and the initiative budget was more than doubled. A

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<sup>31</sup> *Framework*, 12

The Parks Department identified those parks which had received less than \$250,000 in capital investment in the two preceding decades (1992-2013). One Parks employee acknowledged the difficulty in accurately summing these totals due to a lack of coordinated and consolidated budget data across years and types of projects.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, estimates produced a list of over 215 park sites which fell below the 250K threshold over 20 years.

<sup>32</sup> *Framework*, 13

This process was undertaken through a combination of on-the-ground and database-driven information gathering. On the ground, the Parks Department conducted surveys targeting neighborhood park users alongside personal observations of park conditions. This was paired with an analysis of catalogued parks inspection, maintenance, and operations data.

<sup>33</sup> *Framework* 13

Promoting parks equity considered not only the parks themselves, but also their neighborhood context. The measurement and identification of ‘need’ was driven by three demographic factors: poverty, population density, and population growth. Using statistics collected through the U.S. census, CPI set the need threshold as those communities with a) above average poverty levels (as defined by the federal poverty line), b) above average density, and c) evidence of recent population growth

<sup>34</sup> *Framework* 14

In order to minimize the potential impact of CPI improvements, site selection incorporated an analysis of those sites best suited to participate based on a range of physical and community factors. Characteristics such as neighborhood accessibility, flexibility of the space for multiple programmatic features and amenities, and proximity to highways and major thoroughfares were all taken into account. In addition, the Parks Department considered the existence of local parks volunteer groups. Such groups could both rally neighborhood engagement around the renovation, but also facilitate a greater use and stewardship of the space after the CPI process is complete.

<sup>35</sup> *Framework* 14

third phase is anticipated, although the timeline and participating park sites have yet to be announced.

For my purposes here, I am most interested in step 3: define neighborhoods most in need, which will be the focus of the rest of this section. The Parks Department chose three measures to calculate neighborhood need: poverty, density, and growth. Many CPI sites fulfilled two, or even all three of these measures. The breakdown of measures/park is visualized on the map below. Despite the Park Department’s “data-driven” approach to site selection, note that in some of these cases parks were chosen that met only one – or even none – of the criteria. As a source close to the initiative explained, there were many contextual factors that complicated the selection process – factors that are reduced and quantified in official documentation.

### Number of Criteria Fulfilled per CPI Site



I am using the criteria for site selection as an indicator of internal contradictions between past, present, and future. CPI's *Framework for an Equitable Future* rests on an assumption that “future” and “equity” together are associated with economic growth. It is odd, then, to use both poverty and growth indicators simultaneously. I already discussed the contradictory nature of these terms earlier in this project, but here they are juxtaposed in a startlingly immediate manner. If poverty is a measure accounting for historic disparities in parks resources, growth is an indicator of future disparities in accessing the city at all. CPI is not only attempting to address the present and the future in a single spatial location, but also within the same sentence.

The vision of equity in CPI is premised on the idea that addressing equity using population patterns of the present will similarly induce more equity in the future. Furthermore, it rests on an assumption that its vision of equity need not address divergent green space desires of these current and future populations. In other words, present and future populations are treated homogenously. Given population turnovers, and the changing needs of these shifting populations, it seems like an untenable assumption that the needs of both population groups can be addressed simultaneously or even congruously.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Parks Commissioner Mitchell Silver describes his approach to park planning: “the first thing I do is look at the context: how many young people, how many seniors, how many families? I need to understand, is this a neighborhood park, is it a destination park – who am I planning for?”<sup>36</sup> He asks the same question that I do, but his understanding and scope of “context” is slightly different. As Silver earlier expressed, this context has to do with hindsight, insight, and foresight –

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<sup>36</sup> Emma Brockes, “Michael Silver: a man possessed by making New York's parks havens of happiness for all,” *The Guardian*, 2014

past, present, and future. But even in dividing attention between these three contextual considerations, there are several places where CPI falls short. Whereas in the past, inequities are acknowledged, the way such inequities have been reproduced outside of the park spaces themselves is unaccounted for. Whereas community engagement efforts acknowledge needs of the present, questions about park amenities ignore the pressures of development, tenant harassment, and threats of community displacement currently being experienced. And in a framework for an equitable future, this future vision leaves out the impending context of augmented displacement and disparities in accessibility to these newly renovated spaces. The initiative's structure offers mixed-messages: *who* are these new park spaces designed for? Multiple and hierarchically stratified public translate into alternative notions of what the future should look like in relation to the past and present; these “alternative modernities...vie for representation in the urban landscape, as different conceptions of meaning and identity are etched into the fabric of the city.”<sup>37</sup>

### Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards

Luther Gulick Playground is just one CPI site among dozens, but it is significant because of its long history of organizing and advocacy, primarily through the Friends of Luther Gulick community group. For years, they have been lobbying the city for improvements for their park to make it safer, more family friendly, and with updated equipment. Finally, with construction breaking ground this past summer, their hard work is coming to fruition.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 5

<sup>38</sup> “Partnerships for Parks” (Presentation in the Parks Intern Lecture Series, New York, NY, July 22, 2016)

While the story of Friends of Luther Gulick seems to pay testament to the power of long-term community based advocacy (in the face of often stagnant city bureaucracy), one Parks employee put a slightly different spin on these community efforts. Referencing the “up and coming” nature of the neighborhood, this employee proceeded to credit the new (and improved!) residents of the area for the strength of the group and its commitment to making change in their community. Successful community organizing, it was insinuated, was the result of the younger, whiter, and more affluent residents moving into the Luther Gulick area. In the process, it was implied that the previous residents had failed to adequately advocate for their community park.

Rhetorically the contradictions remain. The Parks Department employs Luther Gulick as a case to demonstrate a harmonious confluence of past, present, and future neighborhood residents to remake their park; language of “up and coming” (a not-so-subtle reference to gentrification) is uttered in the same breath as tributary references to the historical roots of these community efforts. In the context of hypocrisy highlighted by NYCHA infill, I wonder, is this simply a rhetorical strategy? Perhaps the tensions in CPI are not temporal contradictions, but rather a strategic appropriation of temporal pasts and presents to serve temporal futures.

This strategy emerges among the persistent desire to blame a community like Luther Gulick for its own problems, for its lack of “effort” to remake its green space until a group of driven, young white residents arrive. And with that, I have arrived back at the same paradox at which I began: the paradox of environmental gentrification. Is park renovation really responding to decades of neglect in a poor and historically non-white neighborhood? Or is it in anticipation of demographic trends bringing a new wave of whiter and wealthier residents? More broadly and incisively, is the project of urban

green space renovation merely a tool further facilitating the rampant gentrification rapidly pushing its way through New York City? The contradictions of Luther Gulick may be ones of past, present, and future, but they are also contradictions of rhetoric and practice.

That NYC Parks claims loyalty to all three temporal spheres is akin to what Krueger and Buckingham term “consensual urban politics.” This political formation presupposes that participatory planning (what the authors term “creative city planning”), urban sustainability, and conventional economic development can be held together in urban planning practice. Is this consensual urban politic possible, they question? Or do creative city planning and urban sustainability “merely provide additional cover for business as usual?”<sup>39</sup> Krueger and Buckingham conclude that these rhetorical appeals to social and environmental justice serve simply as “new ways of obfuscating” the inherent contradictions with capital accumulation. The “politics of consensus” – formed by bridging social, environmental, and economic interests – “works only to obscure deep problems with urban development policy” they argue.<sup>40</sup> Past, present, and future rely on the same rhetorical strategy; to suppose that CPI can be responsive to residential needs across these time frames (each with their own “alternative modernities”) simply hides the reasons that these alternative modernities are in such stark conflict.

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<sup>39</sup> Rob Krueger & Susan Buckingham, “Towards a ‘Consensual’ Urban Politics? Creative Planning, Urban Sustainability and Regional Development,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (2012): 486

<sup>40</sup> Krueger & Buckingham, “Towards a ‘Consensual’ Urban Politics,” 501



## CONCLUSION

“I still remember my first sight of New York. It was really another city when I was born – where I was born. We looked down over the Park Avenue streetcar tracks. It was Park Avenue, but didn’t know what Park Avenue meant downtown. The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing, is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening up a Tiffany’s on that Park Avenue, and when you go downtown you discover that you are literally in the white world. It is rich – or at least it looks rich. It is clean – because they collect garbage downtown. There are doormen. People walk about as though they owned where they are – and indeed they do... You know – you know instinctively – that none of this is for you. You know this before you are told. And who is it for and who is paying for it? And why isn’t it for you?”<sup>41</sup>

- James Baldwin

“You see, I told you they didn’t plant those trees for us.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The power of place: urban landscapes as public history*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995): 2

<sup>42</sup> Adams, “The End of Black Harlem.”

### Why Here, Why Now, for Whom?

All of my research tightly orbits around one central question: for whom? In new buildings, fixed-up infrastructure, and “indeed in every tree and every flower in every park improvement,” the “for whom” question exerts a strong gravitational pull.<sup>43</sup> Potential community benefits are overshadowed by a larger sense that changes are meant for certain residents and not for others.

In neighborhoods that have been underserved, under-resourced, and underinvested, these are questions with deep historical foundations. The contemporary city continues to enact a legacy of spatially-targeted underinvestment in particular city infrastructures. It is unsurprising, therefore, that municipal policies purporting to deviate from this legacy are often met with skepticism. “Where was this money before?” Karla questions.<sup>44</sup> She has witnessed this skepticism first hand: “In previous years in these neighborhoods if you tried to spend money on parks, people would say why not on schools or hospitals? So parks always got pushed to the bottom of the totem pole.” In neighborhoods that have “stabilized” however, all of the sudden it’s OK to spend money on parks. This hypocrisy doesn’t go unnoticed, Karla told me; “The way it is in these neighborhoods is that people are really attuned to investments and attuned to what those investments might bring.”<sup>45</sup> Neighborhood changes force residents to ask – consciously or sub-consciously – Why here? Why now? For whom?

Unsurprisingly, these are questions that policy makers and parks advocates work hard to skirt. “Gentrification” is a risky word with “too many implications [and] too

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<sup>43</sup> Adams, “The End of Black Harlem.”

<sup>44</sup> Karla (former urban planner), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

many donors who might not like what they hear.”<sup>46</sup> In order to avoid impeding the growing popularity of their greening work, these groups intentionally ignore the racialized and classed mechanisms of park renovations that play out in surrounding neighborhoods. Doing so presents a sanitized assessment of park improvements, reduced to saying “look how many people are using the park, look how many more people we have.”<sup>47</sup> It is an attempt to preserve the idea of parks as universally Good in the face of an incongruous reality.

### Findings

Through the course of my research, I have demonstrated how the Community Parks Initiative and environmental gentrification are tightly linked, particularly if we broaden the scope of analysis to include a wide array of related social and political factors. Through an examination of environmental gentrification in theory and practice, it is clear that even this equity-oriented policy is not isolated from the inequitable urban changes sweeping New York City. Interrogation of the initiative itself, through textual evidence, municipal rhetoric, personal accounts, and statistical analyses reinforces this linkage. Through three contradictions – equity/displacement, participation/exclusion, and past/present/future – the evidence comes into full force.

I use these contradictions to criticize CPI within the context of environmental gentrification, but additionally I harness these critiques as a foundation to make two broader challenges that go beyond this specific policy. The first has to do with participatory models that I primarily investigated in Chapter 2. Building off my critique of CPI’s community visioning process, I use my findings about the relationship between

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<sup>46</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 240

<sup>47</sup> Jared (community organizer, Right to the City), interview with the author, February 2017

CPI renovations and neighborhood impact to further develop an understanding of the inherent flaws in participatory planning. The second has to do with the inherent contradictions embedded in the planning and enacting of green space improvements in the context of an urban capitalist economy, as I discussed with respect to CPI in Chapters 1 and 3. Despite these contradictions, I use this final portion of my thesis to draw on alternative models of place-making to challenge the supposed inevitability of environmental gentrification processes.

#### Addressing Limitations

Statistically, my research would have benefitted from a more spatially nuanced, temporally extensive, and technically robust approach. My usage of census tracts as a unit of measure proved to be too big for comparing sites within NYC, especially since many of my park sites are located quite close to one another. Furthermore, it is difficult to conclusively deduce the impacts of CPI because of its recent implementation; although gentrification in NYC is a fast-paced process, it is too early to detect many of CPI's impacts on rent, income, and race. This limitation was augmented because census data has not yet been released for 2016, so my analysis only includes in one year's worth of data after CPI was announced. Lastly, someone more experienced with computer modeling may have better revealed relationships between my data sets across time and site type.

Other research presents alternative mechanisms to examine urban parks and environmental gentrification. One that I find most exciting is the work being done by the Displacement Alert Project (DAP), which uses rent regulation, tenant turnover, and

speculative purchases to measure building-level gentrification risk.<sup>48</sup> Future research can also build off existing gentrification models with respect to other urban infrastructures, such as transportation systems.<sup>49</sup> While there have been few studies which statistically analyze the connection between urban park renovation and environmental gentrification specifically, a report from *The Center for Community Innovation* in the Bay Area<sup>50</sup> and a study done in South Korea entitled *Mapping the Distribution Pattern of Gentrification near Urban Parks*,<sup>51</sup> are two pieces of work to draw from.

### Race and Environmental Gentrification

As I have already discussed, race has been largely dismissed as a causal factor in the bulk of gentrification literature, instead set aside as a consequence of a process ultimately rooted in class conflict – an assertion which Kirkland challenges.<sup>52</sup> This challenge reinforces what on-the-ground experience already reveals: that the racial element of gentrification is more than subtext or side-effect. As one Harlem resident expressed bitingly, “There is something about black neighborhoods, or at least poor

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<sup>48</sup> "Displacement Alert Project."

The DAP Map was released in 2016 as part of the Association for Neighborhood Housing Development's (ANHD) *Housing Data Project*. It is an “alert” map because it is intended to be used as a proactive tool to work against tenant displacement. The map is significant both for its risk predictive elements and because of its fine-grained scale. It is designed for greatest accessibility and usability to the public in order to “demystify the information used to target neighborhoods for gentrification” while building up the capacity for communities to fight back. With interactive features connected to building-level data, the DAP map is a way for activists to best target their efforts to high-risk areas and location under immediate threat.

<sup>49</sup> Nick Revington, “Gentrification, Transit, and Land Use: Moving Beyond Neoclassical Theory,” *Geography Compass* (2015)

<sup>50</sup> Karen Chapple, “Mapping Susceptibility to Gentrification: The Early Warning Toolkit,” *Center for Community Innovation* (2009)

<sup>51</sup> Yoonku Kwon, Shinha Joo, Soyoung Han & Chan Park, “Mapping the Distribution Pattern of Gentrification near Urban Parks in the Case of Gyeongui Line Forest Park, Seoul, Korea.” *Sustainability*, (2017)

<sup>52</sup> Kirkland, “What's Race Got to Do With it,” 26

black neighborhoods, that seem to make them irresistible to gentrification.”<sup>53</sup> The interdependent relationship between gentrification and race necessitates that *environmental* gentrification and race are deeply connected as well.

It was race – not income or rent – that stood out most in my analysis of CPI renovation impacts. From this I don’t conclude that rent and income are dissociated from environmental gentrification, but it does indicate that race stands out in a significant way. I hypothesize that this is the case because racial changes are more easily visible as gentrification starts to take hold. From coffee shops to pilates studios, the visible indicators that we commonly associate with gentrification cannot be dissociated from their racial connotations. In popular imaginations, it is *white* people sitting in coffee shops and *white* people traveling to and from their morning pilates workouts. Using this notion of visibility, I argue that racially-coded visual factors serve both a symbolic and material exclusionary role in gentrifying neighborhoods. CPI and its contradictions are constructed through these visual indicators, holding onto and enacting racial exclusion more quickly than impacts on rent or income take noticeable measurable effect.

The racial politics of environmental gentrification are hyper-visible through NYC’s public housing system. Wyly and Hammel suggest that gentrification has spread so pervasively that it has necessarily been pushed into the public realm, “bumping up” against the infrastructural legacies of the twentieth century welfare state.<sup>54</sup> In the context of my research, environmental gentrification can be newly viewed through examining renovated CPI sites in comparison to public housing parks, and where the two “bump up” against one another.

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<sup>53</sup> Adams, “The End of Black Harlem.”

<sup>54</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 449

Public housing in NYC is managed by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). I spoke with Ari, a landscape architect, to learn more about NYCHA parks. Ari periodically works with NYCHA to re-design the often meager patches of green space tucked into public housing complexes. Removed from what Jane Jacobs would call the “eyes” of the street, the city has left these insular spaces in a state of disrepair.<sup>55</sup> These are the spaces that Ari has to work with.

“Infill” proposals are challenging the existence of these open spaces all together. With NYCHA finances in dire straits, the housing authority has looked towards these decaying parks as potentially profitable land on which to build new housing to fund the ailing system. Through infill, the authority proposes to sell off NYCHA land to private developers who will fill it in with a combination of subsidized and market-rate housing.<sup>56</sup> “Well NYCHA’s broke; you know that,” Ari told me, “the infill proposals are all about trying to put money back into the public housing system.”<sup>57</sup> So NYCHA’s green spaces are already low quality, unsafe, and underutilized – what’s the problem with building new housing on this land? As housing authority representatives argue, this win-win proposal will do away with “useless” space in a city where land is highly coveted, while adding to the city’s affordable housing stock, and new income to the cash-strapped NYCHA budget.<sup>58</sup>

Even as infill proposals remain under debate, selling off NYCHA green space has already been underway for the last few years.<sup>59</sup> According to a report from the *New York Daily News*, as of 2015 NYCHA had already sold off approximately 441,000 acres

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<sup>55</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>56</sup> Alexis Stephans, “City Council Candidate: We Need to Shed Parks,” *Next City*, 2015

<sup>57</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>58</sup> Stephans, “We Need to Shed Parks.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

over 54 pieces of land to private developers. In a statement about the sales, NYCHA director Shola Olatoye commented that selling these “underutilized” pieces of land simply reflects the reality of the authority’s budget deficits.<sup>60</sup>

This begs the question, why are NYCHA green spaces of such poor quality? Furthermore, why is the NYCHA budget crisis such that the agency must resort to selling off land into private hands? (“You can’t even call it public housing” Ari says referring to the private development of infill sites).<sup>61</sup> These questions are deeply interconnected. They both have to do with funding (or the lack there of) and the basic quality-of-life that the city of New York has decided its public housing residents deserve. It has to do with what is considered a luxury amenity for some types of residents and an essential piece of city infrastructure for others. As the city pursues a more equitable system of park access through CPI, it has also decided that for NYCHA residents, access to these green spaces is something extra that can be sacrificed to pay for a housing system that should have been better funded in the first place.

### Racialized Demobilization and Insurgent Participation

Examining CPI and environmental gentrification through an explicitly racial lens sheds new light on possibilities for equity and participation. To explain this further, I reinterpret the contradictions between equity/displacement, participation/exclusion, and past/present/future as a vector of racialized political demobilization.<sup>62</sup> Using a broad

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<sup>60</sup> Stephans, “We Need to Shed Parks.”

<sup>61</sup> Ari (landscape architect), interview with the author, February 2017

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Newman, Yamil Velez, & ShAnna Pearson-Merkowitz, “Diversity of a Different Kind: Gentrification and Its Impact on Social Capital and Political Participation in Black Communities,” *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* (2016): 6



interpretation of political participation, I argue that gentrification has racially demobilizing effects in the political making of public park spaces.

The impact of racial disenfranchisement in gentrifying contexts helps us understand the failures of CPI's participatory model. It is not enough to point out that participation is undermined by catering to a stratified and socially hierarchical set of publics; it is that gentrification itself has racially demobilizing impacts that undermine participatory processes before they even begin. The question that future research must address is how the politically demobilizing impacts of these exclusionary structures can be challenged. While the answer to this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, I will briefly explore the possibilities of insurgent participation as one potential direction this further research could take.

Rather than looking for new ways to facilitate participatory planning in an institutionalized setting, I argue that we must turn towards non-institutional or “insurgent” models in order to create more equitable public spaces. Community visioning must be reframed in terms of community control over the land itself.<sup>63</sup>

Making public space is not simply at the whims of private interests; the public, too, engages in the struggle and negotiation over space. Harvey reminds us that “the capacity of capitalist class powers to dominate urban processes...does not come easily, if at all. The city and the urban process that produces it are therefore major sites of political, social, and class struggles.”<sup>64</sup> Amidst struggle, there is room for something different.<sup>65</sup> I will refer to these moments as spaces of “insurgency.”

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<sup>63</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 273

<sup>64</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 66

<sup>65</sup> Karen A Franck and Te-Sheng Huang, “Occupying Public Space,” in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, ed. Ron Shiffman (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2012): 3

As Jeffery Hou notes, there are ultimately two kinds of public spaces: institutionalized and insurgent. Any place can be occupied and taken over, despite best attempts to design and program it otherwise.<sup>66</sup> Space, of course, need not exist in the binary of insurgent or institutional. In the constant remaking of public space, this designation can shift and change course, facilitated by the push and pull of power. Institutionally made spaces can become sites of public convergence, while community built space can be wrestled away from the public realm. In the context of these alternative modes of place-making, the power of insurgent participation also serves to challenge the inevitability of environmental gentrification.

#### Towards a New Theory of Environmental Gentrification

Throughout my research, I have relied on theories of environmental gentrification which consider “green gentrification” in the context of dominant urban social, economic, and political systems. While I have begun the process of differentiating environmental gentrification as something more than simply a *type* of gentrification, there is still more work to be done. Theories of environmental gentrification must question what it is about “nature,” “sustainability,” and “green” that particularize the environment as a political tool of urban development and displacement.

We can better understand this specificity by examining urban parks as sites at the boundary between urban and nature. In understanding how urban parks contest and reinforce this boundary, we can begin to understand the unique role that they play in enabling new and growing forms of commodification and value-generation. Additionally, this may help explain why environmental gentrification is emerging as a particularly

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<sup>66</sup> Kimmelman, “Preface,” xvi

successful means of gentrification in our current urban moment, and to pose new ways of fostering urban resiliency beyond the participatory planning models offered through CPI.

Cities and nature are often defined against one another, but urban parks complicate this conceptual divide.<sup>67</sup> The juxtaposition of “urban” and “park” highlights the tense and sometimes precarious position park spaces inhabit both physically and ideologically in the city. What *is* the urban park? Where does it begin and where does it end? Thus, park sites can be a central axis from which to observe the ways urban and nature work with and against one another in the cityscape at large.

The changing social and political meanings imbued into park spaces demonstrate the “cultural hybridity of urban nature”<sup>68</sup> and its “socio-spatial fluidity.”<sup>69</sup> Rather than conceptualizing parks as “‘spatially-fixed’ or ‘self-contained’ entities,” Byrne says that we can imagine them as “fluid and contested socio-spatial and socio-ecological assemblages.”<sup>70</sup> In doing so, the relationship between cities and nature – what Gandy calls “metropolitan nature” – can be used as a proxy to understand the changing forms and production of urban space.<sup>71</sup>

Although the history of urban parks demonstrates an increasingly fluid understanding of parks in terms of their economic, moral, and otherwise “catalytic” capacities, these spaces continue to be managed and described in bounded and isolated terms. Indeed, that the NYC Parks Department excluded environmental gentrification

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<sup>67</sup> Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 8

<sup>68</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 2

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Jason Byrne, “When green is White: The cultural politics of race, nature and social exclusion in a Los Angeles urban national park,” *Geoforum* (2012): 595

<sup>71</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 6

from consideration in CPI reflects this approach. There are bigger consequences here than simply a discord between theory and practice. As Byrne argues,

Taking for granted the ‘naturalness’ of parks and regarding them as mere settings for human activity, rather than as socio-natural artifacts which shape human activity, means that we can easily become blind to how park spaces entrench and reproduce ethno-racial formations and racist and/or elitist power dynamics.<sup>72</sup>

The political decision to sequester the scope of “social issues” that CPI takes into consideration further entrenches existing blind spots. It re-inscribes a sense of status quo as “natural” where a more critical eye is necessary.

This political instrumentalization of nature is one element of environmental gentrification that is particular. It has to do with the environment as it is *visualized*, providing green coverage to hide its internal contradictions. In Marxist terms, “softened under the shade of oaks [and] maples,” parks are uniquely apt at hiding their means of production.<sup>73</sup>

The “innate ambiguity of nature” also serves as a rhetorical tool.<sup>74</sup> This lens is a mechanism to view the reproduction of racially exclusionary boundaries built on top of a legacy of historic precedent.<sup>75</sup> This is more than just symbolic work; as my research demonstrates, it has material implications. Through urban change, particularly with respect to the highly racialized forms of capital accumulation and urbanization, “the place of nature within cities has been radically reconfigured... among competing perspectives on the meaning and iconographic significance of urban landscapes.”<sup>76</sup> These meanings take on racially inclusive or exclusive forms, and in doing so mediate who

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<sup>72</sup> Byrne, “When green is White,” 606

<sup>73</sup> Gandy, *Concrete and Clay*, 79

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 13

<sup>75</sup> Samuel Shaw & Daniel M. Sullivan, “White Night”: Gentrification, Racial Exclusion, and Perceptions and Participation in the Arts,” *City & Community* (2011):243

<sup>76</sup> Byrne, “When green is White”

participates and who stays away.<sup>77</sup> Parks are, as Byrne calls them, “racialized nature-spaces.”<sup>78</sup> Together, the work of environmental imagery and the visually harnessed racial work of gentrification bring environmental gentrification into new conversation with gentrification’s racially demobilizing aspects.

The politics of visibility shape how cities, neighborhoods, and parks are envisioned. They are deeply embedded in a planning process, even as such processes increasingly make claims of objectivity through data-driven methodological approaches. The way race is seen and imagined can lend insight to exploring alternative, non-institutionalized models of participation. While further exploration is needed, I pose visibility as a starting point to bring these ideas together.

I am using this approach to environmental gentrification to do work on two fronts. First, its particular visual role at the urban/nature boundary has effects on the political demobilization and social exclusion of people of color from urban park spaces. This process undermines the inclusionary capacity of community visioning and participatory planning “solutions” used by the city. Second, I hope that this theory can do work to contest the “pernicious paradox” of environmental gentrification: that inevitably urban park renovation will enable a steady march of environmental gentrification through NYC neighborhoods.

The inevitability of change does not signal the inevitability of gentrification. It does, however, indicate that change needs to happen differently. There are ways to “use the land entrusted to our care to guide social justice.”<sup>79</sup> I insist that it is possible for “neighborhoods [to] be well designed and beautiful and accessible,” and still be

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<sup>77</sup> Byrne, “When green is White,” 595

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 596

<sup>79</sup> “New York City Council: Meeting Minutes.”

equitable.<sup>80</sup> From developers to anti-gentrification activists, the problem of displacement is, nevertheless, a sticky one. To reconfigure the current pathways that enable displacement will require dramatically adjusting the infrastructures and boundaries that guide it. As Moody forewarns, “the long line of interests who stand to profit from such construction will be enough to drive this development unless or until some other force, a movement of resistance or a real estate slump, slows it, stops it, or redirects it.”<sup>81</sup> It is not just that I believe this task is possible, but that it is necessary; regardless of community, people want “to live in a city and neighborhood they are proud of.”<sup>82</sup> Environmental amenities must be able to exist alongside The Right to Stay Put.<sup>83</sup>

Just as parks have served to blur the edges between city and nature, parks have served as mediating ground between other functions – both spatial and social – in the city. To resist environmental gentrification is to make room for

Different socio-economic and ecological futures [to] be ‘imagined, fought over, and constructed’... [to] retain a claim on the political itself, to insist on the deeply political nature of the production and construction of urban space, to demand political solutions to environmental crises and to assert *everyone’s* right to a sustainable urban future.<sup>84</sup>

To question what defines the park, what belongs inside and outside its boundaries, is to acknowledge that urban nature is politically contested space. Amidst this struggle, the hierarchies of spatial conflict serve to question *who* belongs inside and outside as well.

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<sup>80</sup> D. W. Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center*, 245

<sup>81</sup> Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*, 218

<sup>82</sup> Segal, “Room to Grow Something,” 166

<sup>83</sup> Lees, Slater & Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*

<sup>84</sup> Checker, *Greenwave*, 225

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