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Why Environmental Racism in the Bronx May Be A More Pressing Issue Than Gentrification

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During the last few years, no subject has been more on the mind of students I work with, especially those focusing on the Bronx, than gentrification. The construction of new market level high rises along the Bronx waterfront right across the river from Harlem, along with some new buildings along the Sheridan Expressway and Grand Concourse have aroused fears that the Bronx will be the next focal point of developers who have transformed, and some would say deformed Williamsburg, the Lower East Side and Harlem, in ways that make them almost unrecognizable to people who lived in them, and visited them regularly, 30 years ago.

Given what has happened to the communities I have mentioned, along with Washington Heights, Astoria, Long Island City, Clinton Hill, and many other New York neighborhoods, fears of uncontrolled development, along with rent increases, changes in police practices, and displacement of long time residents and businesses is something everyone who loves the Bronx needs to be vigilant about. As organizer/advocates like Ed Garcia Conde and Carolyn McLaughlin have pointed out, it would be truly tragic of the people who worked so hard to bring the Bronx back from the arson and disinvestment that destroyed so many neighborhoods in the 70's, as well as the crack epidemic which struck ten years later, would themselves be forced out of neighborhoods they helped rebuild physically and culturally.

But though vigilance against gentrification and displacement should always be a priority among justice advocates, it is important not to exaggerate its impact. Truth be told, Bronx communities most in the crossfire of developers are not gentrifying at close to the rate that Harlem has. Harlem's white population has gone up from a little over 2 percent in 2000 to over 15 percent in 2019, a 7 fold increase. In Mott Haven/ Melrose, the Bronx neighborhoods right across the river from Harlem, the white population went up from 1.3 percent to 2.6 percent during those same years. While a doubling of the white population in a little less than 20 years is definitely significant, neither the percentage increase, nor the numbers, represent a fundamental change in neighborhood character.

To understand why gentrification in the South Bronx, or indeed in any part of the Bronx, has not proceeded as quickly as it has in Harlem, the Lower East Side, Williamsburg or Bed Stuy, we need to look at a phenomenon that gets far less attention in the media or among scholars-environmental racism. The Bronx neighborhoods below the Cross Bronx Expressway have been saddled with an array of pollution generating facilities that no other section of the country can match, exacerbated by a highway system that shortens the lives of its residents and threatens its children's well being. The major components are as follows

1. The Hunts Point Market, the main food distribution center for New York City, which has more than 15,000 trucks entering and leaving it per day, all of them using the South Bronx's streets and highways

2. The 9 Waste Transfer Stations along the Bronx Waterfront, handling 1/3 of the city's solid waste, shipping it to other locations by truck and rail, once again using the Bronx's streets and highways

3. The unprecedented location, in the South Bronx, of no less than 4 Expressways handling truck traffic, the Major Deegan Expressway to the West, the Bruckner Expressway to the South, the Sheridan Expressway to the East, and the Cross Bronx Expressway to the North.

Several hundred thousand people, most of them poor, virtually all of them people of color, live surrounded by the four expressways i have mentioned, and several hundred thousand live adjoining their borders. Is it any wonder that the Bronx has the highest asthma rates in the country, and one of the lowest life expectancies

But that isn't all. Environmental racism isn't just about pollution, truck traffic, and unjust allocation of waste management facilities, it is also about an unfair concentration of facilities housing people suffering from addiction, mental illness, and homelessness in the poorest and least politically powerful communities. Make no mistake about it, it is the responsibility of a city to care for its most vulnerable and troubled groups. But putting them in the poorest neighborhoods of the Bronx because middle class neighborhoods in Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn refuse to take them, places an unfair burden on the Bronx's struggling families.

Take homeless services. The Bronx, which has less than 16 percent of the city's population, houses over 30 percent of the city's homeless population in shelters. It also has a disproportionate share of addiction services and drug treatment centers, as well as halfway houses for those leaving incarceration. The largest park in the South Bronx, St Mary's Park in Mott Haven, close to many schools and housing projects, has three needle boxes in its midst where heroin and methadone users can discard their works. A neighborhood activist, Carmen Santiago, took me on a tour of the park to show me discarded needles in playgrounds, pathways and wooded areas, spaces used by children and area families. You can find this in no middle class community in the city that I have ever visited

When you put together the combined burdens imposed on the Bronx by opportunistic and cruel city planners for several generations, you can see why middle class New Yorkers might not be in a great hurry to move there, even if some luxury buildings are constructed with rents lower than those in Manhattan

Until the city stops using the Bronx as the prime location for essential services that place a burden on local residents, it is more likely that the Bronx will receive refugees from gentrification in other boroughs than to be gentrified itself.