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More Than a Hot Neighborhood

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More Than a Hot Neighborhood

Abstract

Maybe you don't have to care about what goes on outside of your little bubble, whether that's Gettysburg or your hometown. After all, ignorance is bliss. But while you find comfort in your home, I find my comfort slipping away more and more each time I go back to what is supposed to be my haven. Where I once saw the small, familiar-looking apartment buildings, I now see daunting, tall buildings with impenetrable glass windows. Where I once saw local businesses thrive, I now only see the old rusty overhead doors with a bright red sign that says, "FOR RENT". Maybe you don't have to care but I do especially when a lot of changes are happening in my own home, East Harlem, otherwise known as "El Barrio".

Before you go on reading, take a moment to think about what the words "progress" and "development" mean to you and what do you think they look like? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Change, Class, Community, Development, Displacement, el Barrio, Gentrification, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Harlem, Home, Identity, Neighborhood

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

MORE THAN A HOT NEIGHBORHOOD

October 9, 2018

Maybe you don't have to care about what goes on outside of your little bubble, whether that's Gettysburg or your hometown. After all, ignorance is bliss. But while you find comfort in your home, I find my comfort slipping away more and more each time I go back to what is supposed to be my haven. Where I once saw the small, familiar-looking apartment buildings, I now see daunting, tall buildings with impenetrable glass windows. Where I once saw local businesses thrive, I now only see the old rusty overhead doors with a bright red sign that says, "FOR RENT". Maybe you don't have to care but I do especially when a lot of changes are happening in my own home, East Harlem, otherwise known as "El Barrio".

Before you go on reading, take a moment to think about what the words "progress" and "development" mean to you and what do you think they look like?

Does it look like that new trendy café with overpriced coffee? Maybe it looks like that new apartment building with excellent housing conditions that nobody can afford? Or maybe it looks like the new Whole Foods Market in Harlem on W. 125th Street and Lenox Avenue, or as [Angela Helm from The Root](#) calls it, "the final nail in black Harlem's coffin".

This isn't progress. It's gentrification. Gentrification is the process of renewal and rebuilding that occurs as wealthier people arrive in an existing urban district and it often results in the displacement of people of color and low-income communities. You may have learned this term from class, a peer, or an article. I have had to learn it because I see it happening in a place that is feeling and looking less and less like "home".

Sure, the neighborhoods look "nicer" with these recent developments, but at whose expense? Who are the ones who truly benefit from these new businesses and who are the ones forced to deal with the consequences?

According to Adam Bonislawski from the [New York Post](#), the construction being done to "improve" the area has been raising prices in rent. Once businesses such as Whole Foods are built in places like Harlem, many original residents are no longer able to afford the apartments they grew up in. The new luxury apartments that I keep seeing more of also contribute to the nearly 21% increase in rental prices that has occurred since 2012 according to [Real Estate Weekly](#). I do not see anyone I grew up with living

in those buildings. So then why is this considered “progress” when these changes do not benefit the whole community?

These new “resources” being built are meant to benefit the wealthier people arriving, and they are made without consideration for the original residents in the area. In fact, these “resources” that are being built end up harming original residents by taking away their homes and erasing their histories that they have worked to build over the years through their families and businesses. However, people do not pay attention to the negative impacts that gentrification has on original residents, who are primarily people of color and low-income families; the new arrivals only seem to care that East Harlem is one of New York’s next hot neighborhoods, along with other neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens, according to Michelle Higgins from the New York Times.

But that’s not what East Harlem is to me, my family, and my community. El Barrio is home. El Barrio is my childhood. It’s the sweet smell of panaderías, the sound of vibrant music from cars passing through, the excitement of seeing the street vendors selling tamales or churros, the laughter filling the playgrounds in the summer until late at night, and simple moments like that which I hope makes you understand why I continue to advocate for my home even when I’m not there.

Progress should not be the process of tearing down and building something new in its place. It should be supporting the local businesses that already exist in these neighborhoods. It should be the improvement of the public schools in the districts. It should be advocating for better housing conditions at an affordable rate for the people who are already living there. It should be providing support and resources to the local community gardens. Unfortunately, this version of “progress” does not occur often in many of these regions because people are moving into Harlem, Washington Heights, and other countless inner-city neighborhoods without contributing anything to the community.

Now think about what your own community means to you. Is it the support and love of family and friends you’ve grown up with? Is it the comfort you feel when you walk down familiar streets and see people you’ve known for years? Can you imagine that being taken away from you right before your very eyes and feeling powerless about it? Imagine seeing drastic changes up to point where you start wondering if you can even still call this your home.

Many of you may think this has nothing to do with you because your community is not the one under attack, but when we leave, there will be some of you who will think about moving into the “hot neighborhoods” while only paying attention to what it can provide for you and not what you can provide for it. You may be looking into being a physical part of the process of gentrification, knowingly or unknowingly. There will be some of you expecting to have access to your Starbucks stores and Whole Foods while ignoring the local community. Maybe moving to the city after graduation is an idea that appeals to you once you complete your four years at Gettysburg, but would you do it if you knew it was at the expense of a local community that has already established their home?

Gisselle Flores '20