Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

This is Ourselves (Under Pressure)

Robin Grearson · Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

Last fall, Chiwan Choi invited me to guest-edit this issue of *Cultural Weekly*. *What's the theme?* Open. *Format?* Open. *Sure,* I said. I knew I wanted to ask people to share stories about "gentrification," but I also knew I wanted to avoid the word, *gentrification.*

I've come to realize the power of the word itself to *sell* real estate—something to think about if you're protesting it, and inviting the media to write about it. There are many more than two sides to the complex issue, but there are definitely loud *NO* voices and loud *YES* voices. Lately I imagine that when someone cries, "Gentrification In Process!"—because for renters this implies displacement and pressure and upheaval and instability and the danger of becoming disenfranchised or worse—the *YES* person maybe just calls their real estate agent.

To the *YES* person, reports of *gentrification* and *revitalization* in the media scream "opportunity." We often talk about the tenants who move in, but that's not what I mean here. The *YES* person might find an "up-and-coming" neighborhood, and then seek out information about blogs or cultural events in these "improving" neighborhoods—like TEDx talks, for instance—to verify that the "revitalization" is bona fide. Upon finding a culture of events, the presence of major brands, sufficient media interest, the investor feels even more confident that investing his own money in [insert neighborhood here] is smart. Cities themselves, through their media offices, business-improvement districts and various legislative tools, nudge and support both private investment and strategic cultural entrepreneurship every day. Eventually, the investor—who may live anywhere—becomes fully convinced of a neighborhood's ability to grow even more valuable tomorrow than it is today, buys a property, and let's say, lives happily ever after.

The NO voices are often not saying no to what gentrification *is* or how a neighborhood looks after it is *"refreshed,"* but about the anguish of what it *does,* creating effects (market-driven evictions and business turnover) that pretend not to have causes ("I just moved where I could afford to live.") But how does investment-based cultural change function at human scale?

The five writers who have contributed here live in neighborhoods that are or have been under great pressure. I asked, could they write something to convey their experience of that pressure? Five stories are not a comprehensive study but glimpses of variations and similarities of the lived experience of change as it is occurring across geography, identity and even decades.

(I can't think about the word *pressure* this year without thinking of David Bowie & Freddie Mercury singing *Under Pressure:* "Insanity laughs, under pressure we're breaking.") Bonds *are* breaking, yes. The shifts taking place in neighborhoods around the world are not only about the displacement of communities and families, they are declarations and new assignments of power, values, agency. Fresh betrayals and new confidences. *How* this is occurring is worthy of our attention and thoughtful scrutiny.

I spent a lot of time last week watching the New York City Council's public hearing to consider Mayor Bill DeBlasio's plan to introduce Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning, a key part of his plan to build more affordable housing in New York City. Inclusionary zoning essentially requires that a percentage of units include affordable housing. Sounds fine. But what is affordable, and what percentage? Can developers use "poor doors" or make tiny "micro-apartments?" The devil is in the loopholes, as always.

During the MIZ hearing, a woman mentioned to City Council members that she does not have heat or hot water in her apartment, and when a Council member reminded her this was illegal and invited her to talk to him before she left, she dismissively said: "I've already been in the newspaper five times." Heat and hot water (in February) were hardly her greatest concerns, she explained. What she needed was to be able to tell her daughter she has a future as a New Yorker, that her Mom would have some time to spend with her, that Mom would not have to choose between buying food and paying rent. She pressed the Council to listen to her views on zoning.

Her voice was heard here, yes. But cities are not run for her. Cities are run for the *YES* voices who want to build luxury housing, and all the luxury consumption that goes with it. Hearings and affordability rules and grants are apologies and exception-making and loopholes meant to save only a few from falling through the cracks. I say this, because I did not hear one *YES* voice willing to argue in public that renters should receive *LESS* consideration than the mayor's plan proposed. Those voices have already negotiated their slice of the pie. (As *The New York Times* reported, "city officials said they designed their zoning proposals so that they are financially viable for developers and can withstand any potential legal challenges from the real estate industry."

Put another way: the hearings are about the leftovers. And despite 50 of 59 community boards opposing the Mayor's plans, the City Council is expected to ask for concessions—but approve the plan anyway.

The last time I visited Los Angeles, the cranes were the most distinctive feature of the skyline. What's with the building boom? I asked everyone I spoke with. The answers ranged from "affordable housing crisis," to "rent control expired," to, "football is coming back." Aside from football, the answers were the same as what you hear in New York. Zoning and land use are where the fight over power in cities begins, and economic and planning departments work closely with developers on "financially viable deals" that are complex (526 pages, in New York's case) yet monolithic, and insulated from community input. Our stories here and others like them reflect the anxieties and hardships of people in gentrifying communities, but I would argue these stories are not side effects of "revitalization," they are the foreseeable, intended outcomes of the macro-planning, at human-scale.

While each of the pieces in this issue can be read in any order, I suggest starting with Erika Sequeira, who contributes two vignettes from her childhood as a first-generation immigrant in early '90s Alphabet City. Erika points to the essence of childhood as a time of not entirely seeing what is around you. Perhaps that is why we tend to forgive so much about the places we love…except change? Reading Artist Doug Gillen's account of current-day life in post-Olympics London conveys a sense of dread and inevitability about the near future closer to home, where everything will likely be half as much fun but cost twice as much.

Following Doug's account, Nicole Brydson recounts the debacle of a recently cancelled so-called "Bushwick 200" event and she critiques the way the issue played out, first in social media and then through various reporters' accounts. In focusing on media itself, Nicole calls attention to the balance-sheet reality of the local-blog business model, one that lets investors and advertisers influence conversations while remaining invisible. Perhaps we are wrong to trust much of what we read, even when it's true.

Anthony Rosado also deconstructs the Fuchs' Projects plan, but through a sharp lens of identity, opening his piece with the strong assertion of that identity: "I am a Queer Boricua Cis-Gendered Man." Rosado continues to use his identity as a screen through which he sees capital scrapping with capital, carving up the neighborhood's brand. Rosado unapologetically lays blame at the feet of "artist-saviors" and asks white people to take a close look at themselves, because, "Black bodies do not boom real estate."

Jessica Ceballos helped inspire this series, this theme. She published a photo-essay about Highland Park last year on Medium, featuring the vacant and shuttered storefronts there, the closed businesses people don't talk about. The piece stayed with me, and I kept wondering what it would be like, to have people from different cities create work, present their stories together.

I didn't ask Nicole or Anthony to focus specifically on the Bushwick 200, but they were among several others who were verbally attacked as that situation unfolded, and I feel fortunate to share with readers two stories that reflect on one incident and its surrounding context. In this battle it was also interesting to see Ethan Pettit among the others who were fanning the flames. Wherever I see Ethan Pettit engaging with Bushwick, he seems to be sowing seeds of division. Which has me wondering: What's in it for him?

As Bushwick the brand slowly and awkwardly inches towards a tech-hub destiny and all that goes with it (think SF Mission), only the most united coalition of neighbors could shout loud enough to be heard. These days, wherever I see neighbors divided by outsiders, I think: who benefits?

I offer Jessica's piece in conclusion here, because the poetry of Jessica's critical questions for Los Angeles—What Is A City?, and equally important, *whose is it*?—are questions that felt present in the others. But Jessica pushes beyond asking and asserts that it is time that we answer these questions (before they are answered for us).

And answering these questions, about what comprises our cities, requires reflection not just on where we are now and where we are headed but on our precedents. When Jessica points to fallen trees, I wonder: where were we and who were we, before we were here?

And then I am back with Erika, in Sauer Park. I am Playing House, on 12th Street.

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