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“We're not in the business of housing:” Environmental gentrification and the nonprofitization of green infrastructure projects

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ABSTRACT

Environmental gentrification, or the influx of wealthy residents to historically disenfranchised neighborhoods due to new green spaces, is an increasingly common phenomenon around the globe. In particular, investments in large green infrastructure projects (LGIPs) such as New York's High Line have contributed to displacing long-term low-income residents. Many consider environmental gentrification to be an important environmental justice issue, but most of this research has focused on *distributional* justice; that is, quantifying whether LGIPs have indeed contributed to gentrifying neighborhoods around them. Limited work has focused on *procedural* justice in the context of environmental gentrification, or how planning processes can shape project outcomes. This is a particularly critical oversight because many LGIP planning processes are led by nonprofits, a governance model that has already raised important equity concerns in the context of planning and maintenance of smaller neighborhood parks. Yet less is known about the impacts of park nonprofits leading LGIPs. To address these gaps, we study the planning process of the 606, a rails-to-trails project located in Chicago, U.S. that contributed to environmental gentrification. Through interviews with key actors and a review of planning documents, we find that although delegation of leadership to park nonprofits has some benefits, a number of drawbacks also arise that might make gentrification a more likely outcome, namely the fragmentation of efforts to develop economically viable LGIPs while also preserving affordable housing. These findings suggest the need for cross-sectoral municipal planning efforts and for building more robust coalitions comprised of parks and housing nonprofits.

1. Introduction

On a sunny Saturday in June 2015, Chicago's 606 Trail opened with an official ribbon-cutting by Mayor Rahm Emanuel and representatives of multiple organizations involved in its development. The nearly three-mile, \$95 million bicycle and pedestrian path, once a disused elevated rail line, was the result of years of work by the City of Chicago, community organizations, and park and active transportation advocates who had supported this signature project connecting four neighborhoods. But less than a year later, in May 2016, hundreds of protesters marched along the trail to decry the massive increases in rents and other major changes to the character of the neighborhoods along the 606. Several more protests ensued, all demanding that the City adopt regulations to help long-time residents avoid displacement due to rent and property value increases.

The 606 had met the same fate as award-winning projects like New York's High Line, Atlanta's BeltLine, and Seoul's Gyeongui Line Forest Park, all of which turned disused infrastructure into vital green spaces

intended to increase the value of land and property in surrounding neighborhoods (Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Kwon, Joo, Han, & Park, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Smith, Duda, Lee, & Thompson, 2016). Although these projects are part of important urban sustainability initiatives that seek to make cities more livable, healthy, and resilient, many have also resulted in significant gentrification along these corridors and, often, regret by the very organizations that championed their establishment.

Large green infrastructure projects (LGIPs) such as urban parks, waterways, and active transportation corridors are intended to stimulate private development by connecting people to destinations and increasing local quality of life. LGIPs are different from smaller neighborhood green spaces in that they often link commerce, recreation, tourism, and real estate development to create signature projects in urban areas. Since many LGIPs include walking, bicycling, and other active transportation components, they frequently avail of transportation or infrastructure funding. In recent years, some scholars and activists have shown that, in contrast to most small park interventions,

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most LGIPs have led to environmental gentrification, or the influx of affluent residents to historically disadvantaged neighborhoods due to investments that improve environmental quality, which may result in the displacement of long-term low-income residents (Anguelovski, 2016; Checker, 2011; Curran & Hamilton, 2012, 2017; Dooling, 2009; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Smith et al., 2016).

Like others, we view environmental gentrification as an environmental justice (EJ) issue (Anguelovski, 2016; Checker, 2011; Gould & Lewis, 2017; Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). Environmental justice not only entails a fair distribution of environmental goods and bads (*distributive justice*), but it also should rely on fair and inclusive processes to achieve such outcomes (*procedural justice*). In addition, these processes should result in places where vulnerable people such as residents of color and immigrants feel welcome and safe (*interactional justice*; Boone, Buckley, Grove, & Sister, 2009; Kabisch & Haase, 2014; Low, 2013; Pearsall, 2010; Schlosberg, 2004; Walker, 2009). In other words, a holistic research agenda on environmental gentrification should examine the distribution of benefits and burdens from the development of a new LGIP, how the project came to be, and whether the resulting green space and surroundings provide quality experiences for long-marginalized residents.

But limited studies have investigated the LGIP planning processes that have fostered environmental gentrification (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall, 2017; Roy, 2015), and none have done so with a deliberate focus on environmental justice. Also, planning processes for LGIPs in the U.S. have often involved park-oriented environmental nonprofits that have played key advocacy, fundraising, and project coordination roles (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall, 2017). Although the reliance on nonprofits for the provision of recreation services and park maintenance in the context of smaller neighborhood parks has raised equity concerns (Holifield & Williams, 2014; Joassart-Marcelli, Wolch, & Salim, 2011; Pincetl, 2003), we know considerably less about how concerns related to gentrification and displacement play out when nonprofits become the coordinators of much larger enterprises such as LGIPs. Given these gaps, we ask: *To what extent does the nature of planning processes for LGIPs, and in particular the use of park nonprofits as project managers, tend to produce unjust outcomes, namely the gentrification of surrounding neighborhoods?*

We conduct an in-depth case study (Yin, 2003) to uncover critical aspects in the planning process of one LGIP that resulted in significant gentrification of the surrounding areas – the 606 rails-to-trails project in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. Our analysis primarily focuses on uncovering issues of procedural justice in planning LGIPs, but it also sheds some light on interactional justice issues related to such projects (Kabisch & Haase, 2014; Low, 2013). Based on interviews with 16 key actors in the planning process, including members of nonprofits organizations and city officials, and a review of planning documents, we show that a reliance on park nonprofits, a popular approach in the U.S. and elsewhere, provides a compelling explanation for why so many of these projects result in gentrification. Although the nonprofitization of project management for LGIPs has some real benefits in terms of efficiency, this strategy can increase the chances of environmental gentrification due to the fragmentation of green space development and affordable housing goals, an overemphasis on the ecological and public health benefits of parks that can draw away attention from displacement concerns, and the reduced accountability of both public and non-state actors. These findings are particularly worrisome given that the public sector is increasingly devolving LGIP planning and management roles to park nonprofits that have no mandate to address critical housing concerns. In the context of neoliberal governance, we show that the use of environmentally-oriented nonprofits can provide cover for growth coalitions seeking to maximize development profits. Therefore, our findings highlight the need for more robust alliances of public and nonprofit actors that integrate the housing, environmental, and recreation sectors.

2. The conundrum of environmental gentrification

Access to environmental amenities is an issue of justice, as substantial disparities in green space provision have been found to exist between affluent White people and low-income communities of color around the world (Rigolon, 2016; Wolch et al., 2014). In recent years, environmental justice advocates have been fighting for green healthy spaces such as parks, trails, and open spaces in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Anguelovski, 2013, 2016; Wolch et al., 2014). And yet, especially in some highly publicized cases such as New York's High Line, investments in new green spaces have been so successful as to ultimately gentrify neighborhoods and even displace the communities these investments are intended to benefit (Anguelovski, 2016; Curran & Hamilton, 2017; Gould & Lewis, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017).

This is the conundrum of *green, environmental, or ecological gentrification*. A number of studies in the U.S., Spain, Germany, and South Korea have documented environmental gentrification as a result of LGIPs (Anguelovski, Connolly, Masip, & Pearsall, 2017; García & Mok, 2017; Gould & Lewis, 2017; Haase et al., 2017; Immergluck, 2009; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Kwon et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019). These scholars and others argue that environmental gentrification is not just an “unintended consequence” of poor planning; instead, public agencies with the support of the development community are deliberately establishing new green spaces in underserved areas with depressed property values in order to exploit rent gaps and attract well-heeled newcomers (Gould & Lewis, 2017; Immergluck, 2009; Loughran, 2014; Roy, 2015). Building on Molotch's (1976) urban growth machine theory and on work by Dilworth and Stokes (2013), Gould and Lewis (2017) refer to these partnerships as “green growth machines” in describing the deeply inscribed alliances between public agencies and the development community that aim to establish LGIPs in gentrification susceptible neighborhoods. Benefits accrue to both parties: Investments in new green spaces provide cities with capital through increased property tax revenues, and developers are able to charge substantial premiums for real estate located in close proximity to new green amenities (Gould & Lewis, 2017; Immergluck, 2009; Loughran, 2014).

Frequently using a discourse of sustainability and ecology to depoliticize planning processes and leave little room for dissent, green growth machine actors also often turn to park nonprofits for LGIP coordination and facilitation (Checker, 2011; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Loughran, 2014). For example, 13 of 18 projects (72%) in the *High Line Network* (2017), a collaborative of LGIPs in North America, are led by nonprofits, most of which are parks and conservation-focused organizations. Although the use of nonprofit organizations to develop, maintain, and operate LGIPs is most common in the U.S., several projects in other countries have also followed this private-public partnership model, including the Bentway, the West Toronto Railpath, and the planned Rail Deck Park in Toronto, Canada (City of Toronto, 2017; Friends of West Toronto Railpath, 2016; The Bentway Conservancy, 2018), and the Vauxhall Missing Link and the now defunct Garden Bridge in London, England (Jones & Somper, 2014; Khomami, 2017). In all of these cases, public agencies have devolved power to nonprofits relying on substantial private capital to deliver new green spaces, which some argue has made these nonprofits more responsive to private interests than the public good (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017).

Some scholars have used the lens of neoliberalism to make sense of this delegation of project leadership to the nonprofit sector (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Perkins, 2010; Roy, 2015). Neoliberalism is an approach to public governance that, in order to promote free-market capitalism, seeks to limit state regulations and reduce public spending for social services (Hackworth, 2006). Among other impacts, this approach has led to substantial cuts to public spending for parks and recreation facilities in the U.S. in the last few decades (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). With public park agencies facing

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