Urban Revitalization, Residential Gentrification, and Community Protests in the Liberty City Section of Miami

This case study provides information about the city of Miami's use of gentrification in the poor, predominantly African American Liberty City neighborhoods. The city renovated houses, closed public housing developments, and seized land so that more affluent residents would move to those areas. Their presence would transform Liberty City's image and boost the city's economic base; however, many low-income people of color had to leave the area because of a shortage of low-income housing.

This case study explains the protests against gentrification and displacement with an emphasis on the Take Back the Land Movement's role in both mobilizing Liberty City residents and developing the Umoja Village Shantytown as an alternative housing option for low and moderate-income citizens. The Umoja Village protests were part of larger protests by disenchanted Liberty City residents against the gentrification of land and property in the region.

What is Gentrification?

Gentrification is, "the Government's commitment to encourage an urban renaissance through private-sector reinvestment in deprived and run-down areas" (Atkinson, 2002, 1). Local politicians, businessmen, and developers collaborate for the purpose of implementing commercial and residential gentrification projects for a number of reasons including the revitalization of poor, inner-city areas, the enhancement of the city's tax base, the restoration of an area and a city's image, and the attraction of middle-class residents. According to one study, neighborhoods in proximity to downtown areas are targeted for residential development as a way to lure young professionals, with a desire to live in close proximity to their workplace, back into the central cities (Cordova, 1991, 26). In addition, abandoned buildings, once used for factories, are transformed into new offices and businesses as part of commercial gentrification efforts.
Several factors contribute to the gentrification process. First, employment opportunities and housing shortages in cities provide the impetus for residential gentrification projects because individuals with higher incomes seek affordable housing in gentrified areas. Low-income, inner-city communities are primary targets for these projects because of the abundance of inexpensive and vacant land. In addition, cities have demolished public housing developments and sold the land at relatively low prices to developers for new office buildings and gentrified housing.

Gentrification also occurs because of a desire among middle-class professionals to experience the cultural activities in cities which also allows them to reside near their workplace and entertainment venues. Finally, political leaders encourage gentrification by approving the seizure of vacant land through eminent domain and then replacing large public housing units with smaller townhouses with provisions for mixed income housing. State or city governments may offer tax incentives for revitalization of downtown areas. City governments may also use zoning changes to encourage an influx of new businesses and residents (Anonymous, 2009, 1).

Gentrification can result in positive development in communities where development might not normally occur. Redevelopment changes the image and appearance of an area. This redevelopment brings middle-class residents back into cities that they once left in large numbers. Their presence raises the city's tax base and results in the opening of schools, businesses, restaurants, and recreational places.

Alternatively, low-income families are sometimes displaced because of higher residential taxes and rental fees. In many cases, elderly and other residents of "gentrified" communities must move to other areas of the city because they can no longer afford to live in their original communities after gentrification occurs. This disrupts their lives and causes them to lose their social connections (Interview with Max Rameau, August 2009).

Second, the displacement of the community's original residents, the influx of new residents, and other changes result in a completely different character for the gentrified community. Liberty City as well as parts of Chinatown in Lower Manhattan, New York, and Harlem, New York all lost their identities as historically significant African American and Asian American communities as a result of gentrification. Small family-owned businesses and restaurants lack the resources to compete against established department stores and franchise restaurants. More importantly, these individuals lose any political influence that they may have amassed over the years because the minority population declines.

Finally, several researchers find that gentrification does not result in its expected economic benefits. For example, one author concludes that, "The positive impacts of gentrification are hard to find and were rarely found by researchers. The positive effects regularly cited by the literature are as follows: boost to city tax revenues, increased property values, increased social mix, and improvements to local services and to the physical environment. However, none of the research examined contains any concrete evidence on these effects" (Atkinson, 2002, 2).
The Gentrification of the Liberty City Area

The City of Miami experienced a real estate boom during the early 2000s that was accompanied by a drastic decrease in the availability of low-income housing. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, homes in the Miami metropolitan area were much more expensive than those in other urban areas. Because of the rising costs and housing shortages in prior years, Miami Mayor Manny Diaz, local developers, and County Commissioners Dorrin Rolle and Michelle Spence-Jones planned gentrification projects in the predominantly black areas of Coconut Grove, Liberty City, and Little Haiti. Each of these predominantly black communities were once viable working class areas before experiencing white flight, abject poverty, low educational achievement, high unemployment rates, urban blight, and crime.

Most of the residential gentrification efforts have taken place in Liberty City because of its prime location near the downtown area, availability of inexpensive, vacant land, and a politically marginalized populace. Before the project began, political officials assured residents that public housing developments would be destroyed but rebuilt. They would then have opportunities to return to the mixed-income housing in the area and a better community would emerge.

The initial move toward gentrification began in 1999 when the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded the Miami-Dade Public Housing Agency a $35 million Homeownership Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) grant. Miami-Dade set out to demolish two public housing developments-the Liberty Square Projects and the James E. Scott and Carver Projects. Both consisted of a total of 1,600 low income units which housed 5,000 people in Liberty City (Anonymous, 2007, 1). Because of protests from members of the Miami Workers Center’s (MWC) community empowerment organization, Low-Income Families Fighting Together (LIFFT), the city decided not to close the 750-unit Liberty Square Projects (nicknamed the Pork and Beans), but instead demolished the 850-unit Scott and Carver development.

After the city decided to replace the Scott-Carver Projects with only 80 units of housing, over 300 former Scott-Carver residents held a rally at a local park to call attention to their plight (Anonymous, 2007, 1). The City of Miami also reneged on a promise to provide financial assistance to residents who wished to purchase new homes in the region. By the fall of 2004 only 2% of those requesting assistance had received it (Miami Workers Center, 2005).

To make matters worse, the 2007 Miami Herald newspaper series, "House of Lies," detailed the corruption and mismanagement of local governmental officials and private developers on the Liberty City housing situation. The city paid millions of dollars to developers who failed to build homes in Liberty City. For example, the East Little Havana Community Development Corporation received almost $80,000 in administrative fees from 2000 to 2003, but had only built 45 units over a nine year period (Cenziper and Lebowitz, 2007, 2).

Displacement has become a significant problem for Liberty City. Between 1999 and 2004, 1,129 families were displaced and were promised access to the new low-income housing units after they were built. However, the City of Miami failed to keep this promise, neglecting to keep a record of the resident’s addresses and other contact information. Some of the displaced families
were able to purchase homes in Miami-Dade County, including Liberty City, as a result of the MDHA Section 8 Homeownership Program, implemented in 2001 (Miami-Dade Housing Agency, 2009, 1). This program allowed individuals to use Section 8 vouchers to buy homes.

Other displaced families moved back into the area where the Scott Carver homes once stood after the Corinthian Apartments, a new 126-unit affordable rental community, opened in the same area. The $20 million community included new homes at rental rates that accommodate working families who earn no more than 60 percent of Miami-Dade County's median income. However, most of the residents had already moved to the predominantly black El Portal, Florida City, North Miami, or Opa-Locka municipalities of Miami-Dade County when these apartments opened in 2006 (Miami Workers Center, 2005).

Taking Back the Land: The Umoja Village Shantytown

The Take Back the Land (TBTL) organization refers to itself as a movement rather than a group. TBTL is a conglomeration of several local organizations that use a variety of tactics to address housing dilemmas in Miami. Their main objective is to "[elevate] housing to the level of a human right" because of their belief that every American is entitled to decent housing opportunities, regardless of their economic status (www.takebacktheland.org). As part of their mission, TBTL also focuses on: local community control over land and housing; developing leaders, particularly low income women of color, in impacted communities; and nonviolent direct-action protests (www.takebacktheland.org). In addition to protesting gentrification's impact on low-income citizens, the group addresses other housing dilemmas such as assisting individuals who have lost their homes due to foreclosure, allowing homeless families to move into vacant homes, and demanding increases in public housing units. The movement essentially believes that individuals have a right to remain in their homes even if they have lost them to foreclosure and to return to communities they have been displaced from because of gentrification (www.takebacktheland.org).

On October 23, 2006, members of the Take Back the Land Movement erected the Umoja Village Shantytown on a lot in Liberty City that had been vacant for several years. The shantytown consisted of several tents and wooden shelters and provided housing for homeless and low-income individuals. As a result of the settlement in the 1996 case, Pottinger v. City of Miami, neither the local police force nor elected officials can evict Umoja Village residents. The case’s settlement prohibits the arrests of homeless persons if they live on public land, are unable to find bedding at homeless shelters, and “engage in life sustaining conduct. . . eating, sleeping, bathing, [or] responding to calls of nature” (Pottinger v. City of Miami, 1996). By late December 2006, approximately 50 homeless persons lived at Umoja Village. Because Umoja Village attracted positive coverage from the Miami Herald, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, documentary filmmakers, and was viewed favorably by local residents, political officials failed in their numerous attempts to evict its residents.

As activists negotiated with local officials to legally claim the land and planned to replace the shantytown with permanent low-income housing units, a mysterious fire destroyed the entire village. Although no casualties or injuries occurred, 11 residents and activists were arrested because of their refusal to leave. In addition, the city placed a barbed wire fence around the
property on the day after the fire (Rameau, 2008). In order to avoid protests, the city agreed to build low-income housing units on the lot, but reneged on this promise after receiving objections from developers and local elected officials. The lot where Umoja once stood continues to be surrounded by a barbed wire fence and remains vacant.

**The Current Housing Situation in Liberty City**

In February 2007, the Miami Housing Agency reached an agreement with MWC/LIFFT about the issues of concern to the residents of the Scott Carver neighborhood. The agency agreed to replace all of the 850 units, allow the 1,129 displaced residents of Scott Carver to move into these new units, develop a "community building" area that provides certain services and information to the unit's residents, and commemorate the history and significance of the Scott Carver Homes for African Americans (Anonymous, 2007, 2).

The city of Miami is also planning to build 411 housing units which include 126 single family homes, 160 public housing town homes, and 125 non-public housing town homes in the area where the Scott-Carver Homes once stood. In response to critics who question the closure of the Scott Carver development, the city is accepting the input of community residents. Residents receive updates and are able to give a “wishlist” of things that they would like to see in the neighborhood. They are able to view a variety of unit sizes (from 1 bedroom to 4 bedrooms) with amenities such as central A/C, washers and dryers, attractive buildings with porches and yards, parks and open space, good lighting, fencing and sidewalks, playgrounds, a use for the Historic Building left on the site, “Green” design and construction, and upgrades to the existing community facilities on the site.

In collaboration with Habitat for Humanity, the city has already built houses in the area where vacant land and the development once stood. In order to promote individual and community development, Miami-Dade County’s Department of Human Services (DHS) HOPE VI-DHS office also provides former Scott Carver residents with job training skills, GED courses, parenting classes, subsidized childcare, substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence counseling and homeownership assistance within the HOPE VI target area. These former residents also benefit from job fairs, a HOPE VI newsletter that provides updates on new developments in the area, task force meetings with developers and politicians, community cleanup and money management programs.

**What Can We Learn From This Issue?**

The issues associated with the Umoja Village erection and the overall gentrification of Liberty City provides several compelling lessons for students of politics and public policy. With regards to Liberty City, this case demonstrates that poor people of color can gain the resources necessary to fight perceived injustices in their communities by calling attention to the issues. In essence, this case study proves that individuals with few economic and political resources do indeed have the power to confront wealthier business and political elites.
Students should now visit the following sources for more information on Liberty City.

The accompanying case study “Max Rameau’s Mission”

www.takebacktheland.org

http://www.miamidade.gov/housing/library/Newsletters/HOPEVI_fall_07.pdf


YouTube videos:

“Umoja Village 11.20.06”

“Umoja Burns”

“Max Rameau on Umoja Village Part 2”
References


Pottinger v. City of Miami, 76 F.3d 1154 (11th Cir. 1996).

Rameau, Max. Take Back the Land: Land, Gentrification and the Umoja Village Shantytown. (Miami, FL: Nia Interactive Press, 2008).