

Headline: Are greener cities inequitable?

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Pictures caption:

Photo with a green overlay: “Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan (Credit: Greater New Orleans, Inc)”

Photo with a kids playground and a yellow toboggan: “Shoreditch Park, London” (Credit: Isabelle Anguelovski) Or Photo with a star-shape climbing structure “London Fields, Hackney (London)” (Credit: Isabelle Anguelovski)

Photo with a canal: “Regent Canal Regeneration, London” (Credit: Isabelle Anguelovski)

Photo with a green house: “Pop Brixton, Brixton, London (Credit: Isabelle Anguelovski)

Photos called 9132 and 9116: “Green Belt infrastructure, Medellin, Colombia (Credit: Isabelle Anguelovski)

You can probably choose 3 or 4 pictures that you think fit your purposes the best.

Introduction (10-20 words): Green planning in cities can create new forms of inequities by excluding socially vulnerable residents from the benefits of environmental projects

Main Profile Content

Enhancing environmental quality in historically underprivileged urban communities

In the 1980s, when environmental justice (EJ) activists in the US and elsewhere first noticeably organized to address unequal impacts from environmental contamination, their target was clear: polluting factories, waste dumping offenders, or operators of incinerators. These were what residents saw as Locally Unwanted Land Uses, or LULUs. As early EJ fights took place in Love Canal, NY (1978) and Warren County, NC (1982), they illustrated the prevalence of toxic waste in low-income and minority communities – a struggle against environmental racism that was made visible once more in the recent lead contamination and poisoning in Flint, MI of more than 6,000 children, the majority of them black.

Over time, however, environmental justice activism in urban neighborhoods has come to be multi-faceted, with community groups in places such as Cleveland, Rome, Lyon, or London advocating for or self-initiating green projects – such as urban farms, gardens, ecological corridors, playgrounds, parks – that can improve their environment, address physical and mental health needs, and overcome long-time neighborhood abandonment and environmental trauma.

Green planning in cities creates new forms of inequities for minority or poor residents

Yet, today green planning in cities seems to increasingly translate into environmental gentrification trends, that is the implementation of an environmental planning agenda related to public green spaces that leads to the exclusion of the most vulnerable groups (see Dooling 2009 and Checker 2011). Gentrification puts emphasis on the fact that new or restored environmental goods tend to be accompanied by rising property values, which in turn attracts wealthier groups, while creating greater gap with poorer neighborhoods.

In many instances, neighborhood greening— in the form of new or restored parks, green infrastructure, green belts, ecological corridors, or climate-proofing infrastructure—is officially sponsored by municipal policymakers and elected officials as it helps them fulfill their sustainability agenda. An esthetically vivid example of green gentrification is the High Line areal park in New York City, a former elevated railroad that the city restored and transformed into a large urban green space. This transformation has been accompanied by high increases in area property values and by local businesses and working-class residents being squeezed out by rising rents. Between 2003 and 2011, property values near the High Line have increased indeed by 103% and luxury condominium developments have sprouted.

In Barcelona, a preliminary study we conducted at the UAB-ICTA in 2015 shows instances of environmental gentrification in the Sant Martí district around new parks and green spaces created by the municipality, with wealthier and more educated residents moving in while socially vulnerable residents have left. For example, the area around the Poble Nou Park has experienced an increase of 20,53% of household income levels in 5 years -- in comparison with the 2,8% in the district as a whole. In 10 years, the percentage of college-educated residents increased by 689,24% against only 139.52% for the district as a whole.

As such examples illustrate, green planning might be counter-productive for environmental justice agendas if new inequities emerge from public investments in environmental amenities such as parks, waterfronts, ecological corridors, or even bike lanes. While such projects seem at first glance to benefit the residents originally exposed to environmental neglect, in reality only wealthier and more educated groups might be able over the mid-term to afford the higher real estate prices that green planning projects seem to create. Such green initiatives seem to create profit opportunities for real estate developers and real estate agencies who redevelop vacant or contaminated lots into high-end housing and green spaces for more privileged residents.

New paradoxes for environmental justice activism - and looking ahead

As a result, urban interventions in the name of greening or sustainability create a new paradox for activists defending an environmental justice agenda. Many activists are indeed starting to perceive these green interventions as GREENLULUS (what I call Green Locally Unwanted Land Uses) because of the exclusion of more marginalized groups from the benefits of new or restored green amenities. For instance, in Barcelona new concerns are emerging with the recent inauguration of Barcelona's own High Line, the Jardins de Sants.

To address community concerns, EU municipalities must strengthen their commitment to social or public housing by acquiring and renovating unused buildings and flats in the city center, building social housing units on empty lots, sponsoring social housing vouchers for market-rate flats, or establishing rent control. They could also incorporate the US model of inclusionary zoning into their local policies. This model requires developers to dedicate a certain percentage of new housing units to social housing. In Denmark, not for profit housing consists of housing associations providing housing for rent provided at cost prices with the special feature of tenants' democracy. New cooperative models are also starting to emerge in many European cities, such as Barcelona, that could be further scaled up. Municipalities could also put in place community land trusts. In Dudley, Boston, the DNI Land Trust has given residents increased power over the types of development that take place in their neighborhood and allow them to control real estate speculation.

From a EU policy standpoint, funding priorities, especially those of the European Regional Development Fund, should be directed towards municipal projects that take into consideration and evaluate the social impact of nature-based solutions in cities. Such projects should include both the social and environmental revitalization of urban distressed neighborhoods and be inclusive of community voices. More funding should also be directed towards research that considers the equity impact of different environmental and green urban initiatives.

Yet, despite our identification of green gentrification impacts, we must defend ourselves from calling for the elimination or cancellation of new or restored green amenities in low-income neighborhoods or communities of color. Such decisions would further marginalize them, concentrate green or sustainability investment in higher and more privileged neighborhoods, and eventually create new cycles of abandonment and disinvestment in urban distressed communities. My use of the term GREENLULUS is meant to repoliticize a post-political sustainability discourse and to point at the fact that green projects do not always bring win-win outcomes for all residents.

In sum, environmental gentrification forces us to ask: Can green cities be just? Do urban greening processes actually reproduce or exacerbate socio-spatial inequities in cities? And under which conditions do urban greening projects in distressed neighborhoods positively redistribute access to environmental amenities? Our ERC project GREENLULUS will focus on these. Much remains at stake for a more transformative and equitable planning practice during and after the completion of new or restored urban green amenities.

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References:

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