Addressing Equity in Urban Green Space Creation in Post Industrial Landscapes

This essay is by Kaitlyn Millsaps, our Conservation Program Coordinator from 2011 through 2014, now a graduate student in the Rutgers Blaustein School of Public Policy. It was awarded a prize in a contest sponsored by the Sustainable Communities Division of the American Planning Association, and is reprinted with her permission.

Cities around the world are embracing opportunities to transform obsolete infrastructure, such as rail lines and brownfields, into new land uses. As cities focus on increasing urban sustainability in an era of decentralized infrastructure, many are creating new green spaces with a goal of improving their environment, economy, and equity. However, these green spaces are often driven by market forces, resulting in disastrous impacts for the local community. Fear of environmental gentrification, when a new park or environmental amenity increases local land values and pushes out low or middle income residents, has led many of the communities most in need of parks to reject such projects altogether. But new approaches and paradigms are emerging that can provide green space to park-poor communities while maintaining their character and affordability.

First, the paper will describe the urban conditions driving the move to revitalize obsolete infrastructure into more sustainable land uses. Next, I will discuss the challenge of environmental gentrification, followed by an examination of the techniques that can be used to minimize or avoid such outcomes. The paper ends with concluding remarks.

Drivers of Infrastructure Redevelopment

Following the 1970's, many cities lost their industrial and manufacturing bases and began focusing on service industries (Checker 2011). This post-industrial landscape has left numerous urban sites derelict, with obsolete land uses. Redeveloping these neighborhoods is seen as a key strategy for future urban growth. Additionally, the reclamation and redevelopment process can include cleaning up the pollution left behind by previous uses (Curran and Hamilton 2012).

Many cities are adopting a "sustainability" paradigm to address this post-industrial legacy in future growth, focusing on the "three E's": environment or ecology, economy, and equity (Jaffe 2014). Cleaning up existing pollution and promoting future environmental health is often a priority. New York City's sustainable development plan, PlaNYC 2030, was launched by Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2007 and calls for the remediation of 7600 acres of contaminated sites by 2030 and the creation of 480 new "pint sized parks" (Pearsall 2010, 877; Checker 2011, 211). However, in many sustainability plans, the final E, equity, is often disregarded, resulting in detrimental social impacts. Checker (2011) found there is often a "contradictory relationship of sustainable policies to inequitable urban redevelopment." In many working class communities, residents feel environmentalism and sustainable policies are being used as a cover for high-end redevelopment projects.

Urban park accessibility is an environmental justice issue as low income and minority residents have worse access than wealthier, white city residents, and less funding to create and maintain such spaces (Jaffe 2014). Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014) also note the fewer parks in low income and minority communities tend to be more congested. Increasing access is a priority in these park-poor communities and reuse of obsolete infrastructure is seen as a key strategy for addressing the problem, as many working class areas contain this type of underutilized land (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014).

Environmental Gentrification: The Challenge

Environmental gentrification is the process by which an improvement to the local environment, the cleanup of brownfields or pollution, the creation of parks, or other "green" projects attracts people more affluent than the current residents to a neighborhood (Curran and Hamilton 2012). This subsequently changes the housing affordability, the housing stock, and the commercial and retail landscape of the area to benefit better-off, newer residents to the disadvantage of long-time residents (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014). Unfortunately, such negative impacts are relatively common. Matsuoka and Kaplan (2007) observed urban parks increased housing and hotel room prices in neighborhoods. A study by Dale and Newman (2009, 1031) found an "inverse relationship between the 'greening' of neighborhoods and affordability." Pearsall (2010, 878) reported about half of the neighborhoods in his study on brownfield redevelopment experienced gentrification impacts between 1990 and 2000.

Environmental gentrification is especially appalling as displaced residents are often those most in need of environmental amenities and increased access to parks. In many cases, the long-time residents suffered from the impacts of the pollution emitted by the obsolete infrastructure. As the site is being cleaned up or redeveloped into a new use, those residents are pushed out and will not enjoy the benefits of the improvement (Curran and Hamilton 2012). The displaced residents often move to other affordable, but park-poor areas, that have higher crime rates and lack retail, infrastructure, and services (Dale and Newman 2009). The environmental gentrification process spatially segregates cities as residents intended to benefit from the green space project are priced out of the neighborhood (Haffner 2015).

Unfortunately, fearing environmental gentrification, some low-income neighborhoods have actively opposed the construction of new environmental amenities. This paradox means the most park-poor areas are fighting to stop new green spaces and environmental cleanups (Curran and Hamilton 2012). Checker (2011) offers an example from 2010, where Harlem residents opposed the expansion of two small existing green spaces into a larger park out of concern the new development was being proposed to attract commercial developers and affluent residents to the area. This paradox may be well founded, as Curran and Hamilton (2012, 1034) found that "green space projects are often tied explicitly to residential and commercial redevelopment," driven by market forces.

The most famous recent example of environmental gentrification is the High Line on Manhattan's Lower West Side. Opening in 2009, the project transformed an abandoned, elevated rail line into a linear park, attracting five million visitors a year (Haffner 2015). The High Line was conceived as an urban sustainability project but has subsequently earned millions of dollars for developers, while driving out long-time residents and small businesses. Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014, 241) note that between 2003-2011 surrounding property values increased 103% and nearby property development investments totaled $2 billion.

Environmental Gentrification: Minimization and Avoidance

Despite the challenges, communities are finding innovative ways to create needed green spaces without attracting big developers. The "just green enough" movement focuses on park creation based on community input, small-scale projects, and equity policies to resist affordability loss.

Eckerd (2011) found some neighborhoods were more vulnerable to environmental gentrification impacts, based on three important factors. The first is the probability that the new green space will create a "rent gap," where the potential rent far exceeds currently price. Therefore, more affordable areas are more vulnerable, as the profitability of gentrification is increased (Curran and Hamilton 2012). Second, environmental gentrification is more likely to occur in neighborhoods with a large pre-1940 housing stock. Finally, location plays a major role in predicting loss of neighborhood affordability as Eckerd (2011, 50) found environmental gentrification potential "decreased for each quarter mile further a neighborhood was from the" Central Business District.

Communities have been focusing on stopping the creation of a "rent gap" and future gentrification by advocating for projects that provide green space while maintaining the character and culture of the neighborhood. Dale and Newman (2009, 679) and Haffner (2015) found communities can actively plan to create "buffers against displacement" through strategies such as maintaining working class jobs and retail landscapes, having changes occur gradually, and rejecting projects such as fancy waterfront developments that have produced displacement outcomes in other locations the past. This approach fosters economic diversity, equity, and democracy while rejecting the neoliberal market forces that produce gentrification (Curran and Hamilton 2012).

An active citizenry is key to ensuring projects are "just green enough" (Curran and Hamilton 2012). The local residents need to raise equity concerns and call for community-based planning as the project is developed and present new visions and initiatives outside the sustainability paradigm to combat developers' plans (Checker 2011). Checker (2011) offers the West Harlem Piers Park project from the early 2000's as an example. Private developers wanted to transform derelict industrial piers into a park surrounded by luxury housing and hotels and other commercial development. Residents were able to demand a community input process where they fought the development proposals and won; the piers were renovated into a two-acre park and greenway without the planned buildings. In Curran and Hamilton's (2012) study of redevelopment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, they attributed the area's success in resisting gentrification to a group of long- active environmental advocates who fought to have a participatory process. The Newtown Creek Nature Walk was built to provide residents waterfront access but still maintained the industrial and working-class character of the neighborhood. The community wanted green space, while allowing Newtown Creek to serve as "a 21st century industrial corridor;" they did not want to simply turn old infrastructure into a park, but valued the preservation of the neighborhood's current character (Curran and Hamilton 2012, 1035). Essentially, community input by low-income and working-class residents ensures the parks being created are the ones they want, not what the gentrifying developers would like to see, and helps to stop the market takeover of their neighborhood.

Planners need to encourage and listen to community input to achieve landscapes the communities support. Matsuoka and Kaplan (2008, 12) found of the newly created parks reviewed in their study, only 46% included citizen participation and only 38% focused on "community identity". This is troubling for ensuring green space design prioritizes maintaining local cultures and histories, as Schauman and Salisbury (1998) recognize landscape planners often lack this knowledge. They call on professionals to increase their "understanding of the environmental needs of people" in order to build landscapes that better suit communities (Schauman and Salisbury 1998, 294). Checker (2011, 241) also found urban planning professionals need to move away from the market driven, "conventional urban design formulae or ecological restoration approaches" to embrace plans founded on community concerns and needs.

The "just green enough" strategy also promotes the construction of many, smaller parks across neighborhoods, instead of large civic projects. Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014, 241) found that creating larger parks and green space projects "geographically concentrate(s) resources and kick-start(s) rounds of gentrification." Small sites offer ecological and equity benefits to residents without attracting big commercial projects: they do not work as an epicenter for market-driven development strategies (Schauman and Salisbury 1998). The more widespread the parks, the more evenly distributed access they provide to residents, while still improving the environmental health of the city overall.

Public policy that plans for and funds equity programs can also curb the impacts of environmental gentrification, but requires political leadership. Popular approaches to pair with new green space creation include affordable housing requirements; rent stabilization for residents and businesses; financial programs and incentives to increase home ownership; shared equity homeownership; quotas for local ownership of businesses; quotas for larger companies to employ local residents; and measures to maintain industrial uses in the area (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014). If residential development is included in the creation of new green spaces, governments must ensure the affordable housing set aside produces housing that meets low income families' needs. Case studies by Dale and Newman (2009) found that often the new high-end residential developments produced one bedroom units to satisfy the quotas, rather than the multi-bedroom units families needed. Pearsall (2010) warns about embracing a rent stabilization program as the perfect solution. In the future, residents could be more vulnerable to pressure from landlords to vacate or may even face eviction, as the owner can then deregulate the unit and charge a market rate.

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Conclusion

In transforming obsolete industrial land uses, equity and preserving a community's character must be a priority to ensure existing residents are best served. Neighborhoods lacking environmental amenities are rejecting the construction of crucial improvements, out of fear of environmental gentrification. Residents and planners can develop techniques and tools to create green spaces while protecting a community's quality of life and affordability. Increased community participation, smaller parks, and equity policies can all be used to convert derelict industrial and manufacturing infrastructure into needed green spaces in our urban areas while ensuring working class residents are not displaced.

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Report from Trenton

Sparta Mountain Logging Plan: Guise or Disguise

From a Press Release issued by our Trenton Staff on March 31, and edited by Joe Testa

The NJ Sierra Club has submitted comments on the NJDEP's destructive "Forest Stewardship Plan" that would allow logging on Sparta Mountain. The proposal, under the guise of providing habitat for one bird species, is a really a disguise to log an environmentally sensitive forest. It would destroy critical natural resources, violate the objectives and goals of the Highlands Act, go against the Regional Master Plan (RMP), and threaten the drinking water supply for half of the state.

Sparta Mountain was purchased with public money to be protected for future generations, but this plan will interfere with recreation and public access for years to come. There is no public benefit to logging, especially when you consider the environmental costs of more pollution, loss of habitat, increased flooding, and the spread of invasive species and deer over-population.

Sparta Mountain is an important forested greenway. The DEP wants to clear-cut the mountain under the excuse of providing habitat a bird, when it is really about bringing in commercial forestry. This is an important canopy forest and the destruction of the canopy will cause pollution and run-off. DEP should not take down 120-year-old oaks to turn them into a logging field. If this plan moves forward, it will threaten the highest water quality in the state. Logging operations will impact pristine trout streams and other birds who depend on a deep forest to protect them from other species.

The Highlands Act was signed into law in 2004 to preserve open space and protect the state's water supply. According to the Highlands RMP, the biggest threats to the region are the alteration of habitat and fragmentation. This proposal would increase fragmentation by removing the forest canopy. Clear-cutting will impact the area 300 ft. inland from the cut. It will change the soil composition by opening the forest floor to more sunlight.

We've seen irreparable damage in forests from logging machinery that create ruts and gullies that persist decades after the project has ceased. In the past, streams near logging operations have run brown for years afterward and the runoff cannot be controlled. We are most concerned because it will remove important 300 ft. buffers near streams that protect high quality waterways and critical headwater areas.

The DEP should not destroy an entire ecosystem to create habitat for one bird species when they can do this somewhere else. There are 75 different species of neo-tropical song birds, along with endangered bats, that would be impacted by logging on Sparta Mountain.

The DEP should be protecting our preserved forests, not logging them. With this plan, instead of hiking trails on Sparta Mountain, we will have logging roads. This horrible sell-out to our open space for private logging companies is part of Governor Christie's plan to privatize our parks. If they do it here, they can do it anywhere in the Highlands or Pinelands, which together hold the drinking water supply for millions of people. Sparta Mountain must be preserved so that its natural resources can be enjoyed today and by future generations. We cannot turn Sparta Mountain over to commercial logging operations.