The Washington Post

Opinions

How blighted urban areas transform into trendy, gentrified communities

By Pamela Newkirk May 19

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For more than a decade, the transformation of blighted urban areas into glistening global beacons for trendy coffee shops and well-heeled whites has commanded national headlines. Rarely do the articles reveal the behind-the-scenes machinations that result in the systematic displacement of tens of thousands of often black and brown poor, working- and middle-class people who vanish, seemingly overnight, followed by their churches, cultural institutions, beauty salons and other haunts.

But two new books fix a bright light on the underside of gentrification and the racialized policies and practices behind the dramatic revitalization of under-resourced communities that somehow become upscale bastions of white millennials and privileged elites.

"The New Urban Crisis" by Richard Florida and "How to Kill a City" by Peter Moskowitz vividly expose how gentrification, followed by rising housing costs, concentrated affluence and glaring inequality, has pushed the displaced into deteriorating suburbs far from mass transit, employment, services and decent schools.

Florida, an urban-theory professor at the University of Toronto, became the global guru of gentrification with his 2002 book, the "The Rise of the Creative Class." The celebrated book secured him a TED Talk and international acclaim by outlining how cities could revitalize under-resourced communities by offering generous tax breaks and other incentives to lure developers, high-tech businesses and the creative class — an amorphous mix of artists, intellectuals and college-educated millennials. By highlighting the profitability of investments in depressed areas that offer mass transportation, innovation and opportunities, Florida helped spark a reverse white flight, drawing residents from the suburbs into cities.

In retrospect, Florida now says the transformation he long championed benefited a relatively small, privileged elite in a handful of what he calls superstar cities such as New York, London, Paris and San Francisco. "I realized I had been overly optimistic to believe that cities and the creative class could, by themselves, bring forth a better and more inclusive kind of

urbanism," he writes. Instead, the cities with the highest levels of wage inequality happened to be those with the most developed creative economies. "But even as I was documenting these new divides," Florida writes, "I had no idea how fast they would metastasize, or how deeply polarized these cities would become." He says there are now 3.5 million more poor people in suburbs than in cities. "And the ranks of the suburban poor are growing much faster than they are in cities, by a staggering 66 percent between 2000 and 2013," he says.

While both new books highlight the policies and practices that kicked gentrification into overdrive, they dramatically differ in tone, perspective and approach. Florida's data-driven book clinically dissects global gentrification and highlights its impact on America's declining white middle-class. Moskowitz, a journalist, movingly conveys the phenomenon's emotional and sometimes tragic toll as he highlights its stark racial realities in Detroit, San Francisco, New York and New Orleans.

In Detroit he discovered a tale of two cities: an enclave of affluent whites occupying 7.2 square miles of the bustling downtown core, while many African Americans struggle for survival in the remaining and crumbling 135 square miles. African Americans make up 83 percent of the population, and many endure crippling poverty, foreclosures, water shut-offs, depression and illness.

Moskowitz says 68 percent of the city's mortgages were subprime, compared with 24 percent nationally, and half of residents who tried to participate in a tax relief program were denied, resulting in more than half their homes being gutted or left vacant.

Meanwhile, Dan Gilbert, the owner of Quicken Loans, one of the nation's largest mortgage companies, as well as the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers, owns at least 80 buildings in Detroit's flourishing core where hundreds of millions of dollars in new public transportation, parks, bike lanes and housing have sprung up. The development, fueled by government tax breaks and other incentives, is overseen by powerful nonprofits that are not accountable to the citizenry.

"Detroit is 83 percent black, but the new Detroit — the one that gets all the attention and press — is overwhelmingly white," Moskowitz says. Moreover, nearly 70 percent of the grantees of nonprofits committed to revitalization are white.

The changing portrait of the new, gentrified city comes at the cost of mass displacement of tens of thousands of low- and middle-class residents, many of them black and brown. Moskowitz says some 5,500 San Francisco residents are evicted each year; the city's Mission area, which was largely Latino, lost 1,400 Latinos and gained 2,900 whites between 1990 and 2011. In neighboring Oakland, the African American population dropped from 43 percent to 26 percent during that same period. New Orleans lost nearly 100,000 African Americans who were unable to return after Hurricane Katrina.

Meanwhile, during Michael Bloomberg's tenure as New York's mayor, thousands of rent-controlled apartments were deregulated, resulting in tens of thousands of evictions, with 29,000 during his last year in office alone. Under Bloomberg, 40 percent of the city — and most of Brooklyn — was rezoned to create high-end developments. In neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Greenpoint, 170 blocks were rezoned in 2005; rent has increased 78 percent in those two neighborhoods over the past two decades, helping to make Brooklyn the least-affordable market in the country.

Moskowitz, who was himself priced out of the Greenwich Village neighborhood he grew up in, relocated to Brooklyn and is mindful of his own complicity in the cycle he bemoans. “I represent the domino effect,” he writes. “I know my existence in this borough comes at the cost of the erasure of others’ cultures and senses of home.” He adds: “If people saw themselves as part of a system perpetuating white supremacy, brunch would be less fun.”

“How to Kill a City” often casts the problem of gentrification in stark terms, pitting rich against poor, black against white, while deemphasizing the fate of the disappearing middle of all races. At times the blatantly discriminatory policies Moskowitz cites cry out for comment from city and state officials. However, he poignantly conveys how gentrification grows out of a legacy of racial discrimination as he unmasks the wrenching and often overlooked erasure of people of color from the city’s landscape and memory. In the process Moskowitz valiantly captures the human dimension of a crisis for which many are complicit but few claim responsibility.

“The New Urban Crisis” is more nuanced and proposes solutions, including more clustering in suburbs to spark innovation, the creation of “refugee cities” for the displaced and international development policies that prioritize strategic investments in urban schools and neighborhoods. However, some may view Florida’s fresh round of prescriptions with skepticism, given his prominent role in promoting many of the policies that created the very crisis cities now face.

THE URBAN CRISIS

How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class — And What We Can Do About It

By Richard Florida

Basic. 310 pp. $28

HOW TOKILL A CITY

Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood

By Peter Moskowitz

Nation. 258 pp. $26.99