

## Neoliberalization and Spatial (In)Justice: The Gentrification of Harlem

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### Abstract

Based on the example of Harlem's gentrification, this article questions the impacts of neoliberalization on spatial justice. It supports the hypothesis that gentrification policies result from neoliberal processes of production of space, which both in their results and processes create spatial injustice. After presenting the physical and economical transformation of Harlem in the neoliberal context of New York, the article discusses the distribution of the "benefits" of its gentrification. Then, this study turns to the relations between public and private stakeholders based on the case study of the expansion of Columbia University.

*Keywords: Gentrification, spatial justice, néolibéralization, conflict, résistance, New York City, Harlem, Columbia University*

From the time of their earliest development, cities have been the medium of utopian social visions, and current reflections on the just city concept are the most recent manifestation thereof. Researchers are in general agreement on the fact that the form and organization of urban spaces are both the framework of our social relations – which led David Harvey to say that "The question of the kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the kind of social ties...we desire" (Harvey, 2008, 23) – but also the product of these social ties, and more specifically the differentiations and power relationships within these social ties. As well, since the 1980s cities have "[tr.] become increasingly key in the ongoing reproduction, mutation and reconstitution of neoliberalism" (Brenner, Theodore, 2002, 375). In return, through its openness, deregulation and putting markets in competition, the neoliberalization of cities has profoundly modified not only urban spaces but also the way in which they are produced as shown by the example of New York City that follows (Harvey, 2007; Moody, 2007; Pouzoulet, 2000).

Based on the example of the gentrification of Harlem, this article aspires to examine the ties between neoliberalization, the city and spatial justice. Let us immediately recall that spatial justice<sup>1</sup> is "polysemic" and covers "[tr.] various, often contradictory, to say nothing of conflicting conceptions of what is 'just' and 'unjust'". However, Philippe Gervais-Lambony and Frédéric Dufaux, in their opening remarks for the symposium "Spatial Justice and Injustice" recall that "[tr.] the conceptions of justice which interest [them] here range between two poles": an approach to spatial justice that is structural and one that is procedural (Gervais-Lambony and Dufaux, 2009, 4). We will therefore adopt these two complementary approaches, which consider

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<sup>1</sup> Money has been getting put back into this field of research since the late 2000s as shown by the birth of this journal in 2008, and the appearance of a special issue of *Annales de la Géographie* in 2009.

respectively the equity and equality in the distribution of resources on the one hand (Rawlsian definition), and on the other, the processes by which the city is produced and the negotiation of group and community rights, i.e. relations of oppression or domination among groups (Marion Iris Young's definition (1990)).

Analyzing the impacts of neoliberalization on spatial justice in the city is therefore the question. Neoliberalization can be defined as a set of economic and political measures for market openness, competition, deregulation and privatization of the public sector, in which governments are supposed to intervene as little as possible (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). The hypothesis of this work is that gentrification policies are a neoliberal incarnation of urban policies and bear witness to domination relationships that reconfigure the urban spaces on the local scale, including under the influence of a global sense of logic. And, as David Harvey points out, we postulate that neoliberalization consists "[tr.] since its beginning, in the restoring of class power and specifically, the power of a very privileged elite class" (Harvey, 2007, 12), and that therefore, neoliberalization is inevitably unjust because domination and oppression are the essence thereof. This interpretation would seem particularly relevant in the context of New York City, where urban, economic and political trends are clearly turned toward the managerial classes (Brash, 2011). Using the example of Harlem, this article maintains that gentrification policies are the expression of neoliberal processes of city production, the outcomes and procedures of which both produce spatial injustices. We further explain, however, that Brenner and Theodore (2002) invite us to consider neoliberalization as a contradictory and complex process where, obviously, the local settings and power relationships can be determinants.

This article presents the way in which neoliberal policies have reconfigured Harlem's territory, both physically and economically, and discusses the distribution of the "benefits" of gentrification<sup>2</sup>, that is, its impacts in terms of spatial justice. Considering that one of the tools of neoliberal policies is the subordination of public actors to private actors, the study then goes into greater depth using the example of the expansion of Columbia University. In fact, this private urban project supported by the municipality is an aspect of Harlem's gentrification and its implementation has shown strong signs of procedural injustice. But first, it is appropriate to go back to New York's neoliberal context and the issues of Harlem's gentrification.

## **1- The gentrification of Harlem: A neoliberal urban policy**

### **The neoliberalization of New York**

New York, through its status as a world city and its position in financial capitalism, has a special role in the establishment of neoliberal policies. David Harvey even deems that the neoliberalization of New York after 1975 is one of the most

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, if the restructuring process of urban space that is gentrification is often presented from the perspective of its negative impacts – alteration of local identity, displacement of population, speculation and inflation, business displacement, etc. – there are also many positive impacts such as improved urban services, security, infrastructure, public health indicators, etc. At the core of the protest is knowing who benefits from these improvements.

fascinating (Harvey, 2007). Like many other cities for that matter, New York City suffered deindustrialization and the subsequent loss of 600,000 manufacturing jobs between 1966 and 1977 (Weil, 2006). The urban crisis resulted in a drop in the amount of new construction, office spaces built in great part in the previous decade remaining vacant, and declining rents and financial investments, which led to a serious recession while the banks struggled to sell bonds issued by the city (Moody, 2007; Harvey, 2007). The city centre therefore had growing concentrations of the unemployed and poor, often members of ethnic minorities, while the middle classes settled in the suburbs and the federal government drastically reduced its grants. Tax revenues left the city as expenses rose, along with the resulting social and ethnic tensions<sup>3</sup> (Smith, 1996; Harvey, 2007).

Owing to this fiscal crisis and barely avoiding bankruptcy, the political and financial elites of the city wished to break with the previous policies, which through excessive spending on public services in particular, were deemed responsible for the crisis. “[tr.] This analysis of the 1975 debacle thus justified political refocusing on the middle classes, and curbing social spending and concessions to the unions” (Pouzoulet, 2000, 35). Organized in chambers of commerce or partnerships like the New York City Partnership, these bankers, promoters and financial actors managed to transform the city’s financial priorities and break with the “social democracy” model. In 1977, Edward Koch (1977-1989) was elected mayor on the promise of re-launching the economy. And in fact, he reduced the number of city employees; he institutionalized close ties with business, which from then on had the right to control public policy, and with them, created a climate favourable to business. He also initiated an effective urban marketing campaign around the slogan “I love New York” (Greenberg, 2008). Access to the public university became by tuition, public services were privatized, labour market deregulation measures went into effect with its first victims being city and unionized employees. This “moment” was crucial not only for the city of New York but for all the policies to come in the world. For David Harvey, “[tr.] this is where an extremely important principle that has become global appeared for the first time. If there is a conflict between the well-being of financial institutions and the well-being of people, the government will choose the well-being of financial institutions” (Harvey, 2007, 8).

The impact of these policies on urban spaces is extremely unequal. While investment is being made again in Manhattan and it has essentially been reinvented, many neighbourhoods have been left abandoned, particularly in the outer boroughs (Harvey, 2007; Pouzoulet, 2000). Corrupted by violence, epidemics (particularly AIDS), not to mention crack, the ethnic and poor neighbourhoods of the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn that are not profitable enough from the perspective of the city or investors (low tax receipts, absence of tourism and business revenues), are sacrificed. By contrast, the central neighbourhoods and business districts are experiencing a wave

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<sup>3</sup> The concentration in the city of many poor and/or unemployed individuals, who are often marginalized and victims of racial segregation that the recently acquired Civil Rights (1968) have not yet reversed intensifies the racial and social tensions. The violence of this urban environment is observed particularly among the homeless and the many youth who are the victims of gangs. Unemployment also fosters the development of informal economies.

of renewed public and private investment, significant tax incentives – particularly the financial, insurance and real estate sectors – and gentrification policies, all accentuating the city's ethnic and social polarization (Recoquillon, 2010).

Rudolph Giuliani (1994-2001) would be the incarnation of the extremely hard response. More confident neoliberal elites more and more openly committed both physical and moral violence. After the harsh recession of the 1980s, the white middle classes developed a feeling of rancour and anger toward the increasingly marginalized populations deemed responsible for all the ills: the drug addicts, the homeless, prostitutes and the poor are chased from public spaces by a string of laws criminalizing poverty and stigmatizing ethnic minorities (Wacquant, 1999). The re-conquest of public spaces that had become dangerous looked like a necessity. For Neil Smith, gentrification became the geographic expression of a revanchist attitude on the part of the white middle class that wanted to re-conquer central spaces (Smith, 1996). His study of the expulsion of the homeless from Tompkins Square Park illustrates the violence and antagonism.

It is in this context that Harlem, the epicentre of African-American culture and ethnic pride, as well as of the urban ghetto, became the target of intense public investment intended to impel and sustain its gentrification.

### **The neoliberal urban gentrification policy in Harlem**

The case we are going to present is located in a quite special area due to its history and what it represents. Thus, let's briefly go back to the beginnings of this iconic neighbourhood.

Situated north of Central Park in Manhattan, Harlem developed in the late 18th century as a white, residential suburb. The large families that left the land worn out by cropping, left a neighbourhood of "[tr.] villages of shacks and huts with a few farms here and there" (Osofsky, 1971, 73). In 1811, with the goal of creating a long-term development framework for the city and supporting the real estate market, the authorities decided to implement a redevelopment plan for Manhattan based on a grid – the very example of the strength of New York City's interventionism led by a vision of the future and illustrating its grandeur (Ballon, 2012). The 1904 arrival of the subway supported intense speculation and Harlem's demographic surge (Harlem is located in the extension of the front line of the island's urbanization) caused middle class residences and private hotels to flourish. A strategic territory, Harlem experienced significant real estate development. But expectations were too high and the abundance of luxury homes quickly exceeded demand. The inflated prices were disconnected from actual values and they collapsed starting in 1904. Housing went unrented and some owners and promoters, fearing for their investments, began to rent these homes to Blacks at the very time of their mass emigration from the Southern states in search of better economic opportunities in the big cities up north. This is how in the years following 1910 Harlem became the most famous black neighbourhood and the cradle of African-American culture, particularly during the period called the Harlem Renaissance (1920s), a strong affirmation of identity in reaction to white supremacy. It is in light of this historic episode that we can

understand contemporary gentrification as a process of territorial re-conquest of a neighbourhood lost by the city's white elites.

Harlem's gentrification process began in the 1980s under the Koch administration through a construction and housing rehabilitation program. The exodus of its middle and upper classes since the 1950s and 1960s was the start of a long decline for the area. Poverty, unemployment, and the overpopulation of previous decades, epidemics, and crack had left a territory that was bled out, and decayed where many buildings and a great deal of land were unhealthy or vacant. Blacks made up 98% of Central Harlem's 237,467 inhabitants in 1950, whereas only 163,632 of the poorest and most vulnerable remained in 1960. In 1990, the population of Central Harlem was only 101,026 demonstrating the decline of a neighbourhood that by then was both socially and racially segregated<sup>4</sup>.

These were the conditions when a municipal commission was given a mandate to study reinvestment in Harlem in the early 1980s and gentrification policies began. Signs of neoliberalization are found in Harlem's gentrification for a number of reasons. For example, according to the Furman Center, between 1987 and 2003 40% of the housing in Central Harlem received assistance from the city, which allocated \$10 billion during this period to subsidizing the construction or renovation of primarily private housing. These massive public investments were justified by the extent of the deterioration and were part of an arsenal of policies certainly intended to renovate and improve the neighbourhood, but especially to make it safer for private investment. In fact, private investors had deserted the neighbourhood as it had become economically unprofitable to continue investing and maintaining the housing supply when maintenance costs were exceeding the revenues<sup>5</sup>. And they deemed that Harlem was still too risky for their investments. Since the 1980s, in their speeches and submissions, politicians defended the idea that to remain a great city, New York had to be attractive and favourable to the private sector, that the private sector had to be able to do business there and make profits in an ideal climate. So, when improvements began to have their effect, the city gave over redevelopment to the private sector by selling vacant lots and buildings seized for default on [tax] payments for ridiculous symbolic amounts to private developers who began to consider the profit margin adequate for investment. The city continued to help them through tax abatements and other financial or regulatory assistance. For example, private promoters obtained the right to exceed the number of floors allowed if they reserved 20% of the units for so-called affordable housing.

Federal and municipal government investments combined to promote economic development, the key component of "urban renewal" speeches. Thus, in 1994, under the Clinton administration, Harlem was designated an "empowerment zone" and received hundreds of millions of dollars to develop economic and commercial activities. However, instead of benefitting local businesspeople and traditional businesses, it seems that the funds primarily supported the establishment of large national chains with prices that small shops could not compete against. Another

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<sup>4</sup> Beveridge Andrew (2008), "Harlem's shifting population", *Gotham Gazette*

<sup>5</sup> See Neil Smith's theory on the rent gap and investment-disinvestment cycles (1979).

example of public sector support to the private sector concerns the establishment of the Pathmark supermarket in East Harlem in 1994. This project received municipal assistance of \$6.2 million - i.e. half the cost of the project –in abatements and loans at 1%, as well as \$1 million in additional federal money through UMEZ<sup>6</sup> (Recoquillon, 2013). These investments were justified by the shortages of food supply – like many ghettos, Harlem was a “food desert” – and the jobs that the supermarket was going to create would mainly benefit the neighbourhood’s residents. In terms of spatial distribution of benefits, the profits from the supermarket would go to the company’s shareholders, while the jobs would be created locally and would support the residents’ standard of living. However, - and it’s not unusual in a gentrification context where groups put into competition fight over the fruits of redevelopment – this project created profound tension between the Hispanic and black communities who argued over control of the project on the one hand, and the redistribution of its benefits on the other. In the end, most of the 300 jobs created have no job security and are filled by Hispanics.

Another example of municipal intervention occurred by order of Mayor Giuliani. In order to protect private interests and business activities, African vendors were removed from 125th Street in 1994. These vendors of African products, whose stands covered the sidewalks of the main business street, were perceived as unfair competition, paying neither rent nor taxes. A group of merchants therefore sought the intervention of public officials who responded most spectacularly with 400 police officers in combat gear, and some on horseback, and expelled the thousand or so vendors who were stunned by the extent of the action. The African vendors who continued their activity were moved to a covered market nine blocks away but many of them suffered a decline in their business. Moreover, the merchants themselves pleaded for the reintroduction of a limited number of vendors on the sidewalks of 125th Street as in fact, it was they who attracted the clients.

More recently, Mayor Bloomberg initiated a rezoning of 125th Street, the main objective of which was to streamline the uses and optimization of the economic activities on this thoroughfare. The municipal narratives focussed on the idea of making this local dimension street (economically speaking as in the imagination, 125th Street is known worldwide), into a regional artery and attracting buyers and tourists as well as other New Yorkers. This was to take advantage of Harlem’s historic image as an entertainment area to better make the street and therefore the neighbourhood as a whole, an integral part of Manhattan’s and the city’s economic activities. Making New York a polycentric space is moreover one of Michael Bloomberg’s stated mandates.

Finally, city level public-private partnerships, such as the New York City Partnership, were formed to drive urban development but there were also local public-private partnerships like the West Harlem Development Corporation whose role we will see later in Columbia University’s ability to expand in Harlem.

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<sup>6</sup> The Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone is one of nine empowerment zones created by Bill Clinton in 1994.



With these examples, we hope to have shown that if neoliberalization is defined by openness of markets and the withdrawal of government concurrent with more public-private partnerships, and economic development as a priority, then Harlem's gentrification is indeed a concrete, spatialized translation of this rationale. Now the impacts of this gentrification process in terms of spatial justice must be evaluated.

### The impacts of Harlem's gentrification in terms of spatial justice

There are various ways in which spatial justice can be grasped. For example, the matter of displacements of population seems to be central as it indicates not only who has access to the space, in this case Harlem, but also who has been deprived of this access. Later, we will respond to Sonia Lehman-Frisch's invitation (2009) to reflect on the consequences for spatial justice of Harlem's desegregation.

Displacement causes conflict because it is where opposing concepts of right to the city intersect. On the one hand, a neoliberal vision defends the principle that the inhabitants must live where their means allow and is slow to have public intervention that is social in nature; on the other hand, a more "radical" vision considers that the neighbourhoods belong to those who occupy them, not only when there is no money being invested in them and they are abandoned, but also when money is again being invested. Although researchers are still having problems calculating the number of displacements (despite several studies (Newman and Syly, 2006; Braconi and Freeman, 204)), this argument remains a central issue in the narratives surrounding gentrification. In fact, the protection of individual rights is not the only issue; the protection of community rights is also an issue in that displacements often involve the destruction of neighbourhood networks and social ties, both for those who leave and those who stay (Fullilove, 2004). In Harlem, the neighbourhood has been profoundly transformed in terms of demographics as gentrification has progressed. The table below highlights a strong trend in the demographic evolution of Central Harlem – the historic heart of the black neighbourhood – in recent decades: the accelerating decrease, in absolute and relative terms, in the number of blacks.

**Table 1. The decline of Central Harlem's black population since 1990**

	1990		2000		2010	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Non-Hispanic whites</b>	1511	<b>1.5</b>	2189	<b>2.0</b>	11050	<b>9.5</b>
<b>Non-Hispanic blacks</b>	87149	<b>87.6</b>	82750	<b>77.3</b>	72858	<b>63.0</b>

<b>Hispanics</b>	10055	<b>10.1</b>	18019	<b>16.8</b>	25692	<b>22.2</b>
<b>Other</b>	804	<b>0.8</b>	4151	<b>3.9</b>	6123	<b>5.3</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	99519	<b>100</b>	107109	<b>100</b>	115723	<b>100</b>

Sources: *Bureau of Census, Census 1990, 2000 and 2010 (NYC City Planning Department)*

However, it should not be believed that Harlem's gentrification is only racially based. On the contrary, the social aspect also seems to be at the heart of the process, as the transformation of the neighbourhood is the result of an initial wave of black gentrification, without which the well-to-do white households and the services that go along with them would not have moved in (Schaffer and Smith, 1986; Taylor, 1990; Freeman, 2006). The decrease in the number of blacks in Harlem in absolute and relative numbers is quite real, while the number of whites has increased more quickly over the 2000s, even if the group remains numerically small for the time being. It has been the Hispanics whose demographic has grown significantly in Harlem in recent decades, but as Lance Freeman reminds us, this does not seem to have made as much of an impression or got as much attention as the arrival of whites in much smaller numbers. Blacks, whose middle classes have grown considerably, have been the main gentrifiers in the last two decades and this can be observed through income and education levels. The reasons for their move to Harlem are not limited to economics, which has a great deal to do with the whites' moving in, for example. These households moved to Harlem, especially in the early years, for what it symbolizes and to play a social, economic and cultural role. As explained by Yolanda Jackson, a black middle-class woman who moved into Harlem and was interviewed by Monique Taylor in 1992 (1992, 293):

"[translation] I think that the black middle-class has been negligent in its responsibilities toward this community. In other neighbourhoods, the middle class has not moved away so there has been a certain stability. There was always a certain mix. There were always poor people living side by side with doctors, lawyers, professors or others. And these individuals were role models. (In Harlem) all the role models moved out in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More middle-class blacks must make the commitment to come back to this community..."

In her 1992 article, Monique Taylor demonstrates that a large portion of the gentrifying class is black, contrary to perceptions of the gentrification process, and is "[tr.] motivated by a desire to participate in the rituals that characterize daily life in this famous historically-black community". However, despite this group's initial intentions, Taylor stresses that the "[translation] social distinctions often isolate them from their neighbours to the extent that they try to live the typical life of a middle-class homeowner in a neighbourhood where the majority is poor." And therefore, according to Taylor, while blacks are in the majority, and the desire to live among one's own, among blacks, is what led the black middle-class to return to Harlem, there is a separation encountered now that is no longer racial but economic. Taylor adds however that this confrontation does not have the same intensity for the blacks that



have settled in the already middle class neighbourhoods of Harlem, like Hamilton Heights. With great reinforcement from testimonials, she shows that those who move away from the posh enclaves encounter more daily tension.

Harlem's residents rarely perceive the black bourgeoisie and upper middle-class as responsible for the transformations occurring and the eviction of poorer blacks, in contrast to the relatively small number of whites (Freeman, 2006). Apparently, this attitude engenders less resentment when it involves blacks than when it involves whites, who are perceived as intruders wanting to impose their lifestyle and values. Criticism directed towards whites consists of saying that through what they do, or don't do, they're changing the local culture, dominating it. In the area of restaurants, for example, whites do not frequent the traditional black establishments, they open other restaurants featuring Italian or other cuisine. But once again, the race question must be nuanced by the social as, on the other hand, the black upper and middle classes enthusiastically frequent these new restaurants.

Despite the skin colour they may have in common, the conflicts of interests on the uses of urban space are therefore genuine between black middle- and upper-middle class residents and poorer residents. This highlights the complexity of determining the categories of actors and, here, it must be concluded that the black community does not exist as an organized actor sharing common interests to be protected. This element is important for assessing the benefits of gentrification for each group and determining if the process has led to more or less spatial and social justice.

Thus, the question is whether black gentrification is distinguishable from white gentrification and if either is legitimate and justifies gentrification's social costs (displacements of population, destruction of social networks, loss of local identity, racial and social tensions, conflicts, etc.). We could consider that the first wave of black gentrification, as shown by Yolanda Jackson's testimony above, corresponds to an identity-related strategy, a desire to be with one's own on the basis of affinity and the objectives of which were supposedly not so much to separate oneself from the rest of society as to pool the group's resources and maintain an identity-based pride which enabled black Americans to struggle against racism and segregation, with Harlem as an iconic territory of this struggle. However, two main objections can be raised. One the one hand, the social divisions within the black community are deeper than would appear, which leads to different class strategies, and on the other hand, there are numerous ethnic divisions among blacks (just to mention this group, while some sub-neighbourhoods of Harlem are occupied by Puerto Ricans or Dominicans). Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been rivalries, incomprehension and prejudices among African-Americans, black immigrants from the Caribbean and more recently, black Africans (Recoquillon, 2013). Moreover, whether they are black or white, the arrival of new households with greater economic resources has the same effect: rents, real estate values, the cost of living and services rise, suffocating the precarious fringes of the population to the point that they are displaced or not replaced. Finally, given Harlem's role in black American political and cultural history, its dispossession of blacks would seem problematic and its gentrification has implications that reach well beyond its boundaries.

Displacements of population are at the heart of reflection on the right to the city and spatial justice. Harlem's gentrification was not the overall result of individual initiatives but of an aggressive city policy that favoured fiscally lucrative classes and influential economic sectors, real estate in particular (Recoquillon, 2010). For example, the municipal project for the neighbourhood's economic development also led to many displacements. The studies preceding the rezoning of 125th Street thus anticipated the indirect displacement of 500 individuals (through rent increases related to the area's enhancement), and the direct displacement of 71 businesses and nearly 1,000 jobs<sup>7</sup>. To compensate for the loss of moderate-cost rental housing, the city would have to build approximately 500 units, which was supposed to bolster the supply in Harlem. However, the rules for calculating affordability do not reflect the actual needs of Harlem's population<sup>8</sup>, and nothing guarantees that the new housing will be allocated to displaced individuals. In conclusion, in this example a degree of apparent spatial justice translates into inequality and unfavourable treatment of a portion of the population.

In her reflection on segregation as spatial injustice, Sonia Lehman-Frisch concluded that if "[tr.] freely accepted processes of segregation...cannot be considered *a priori* as unjust", "the social or ethno-racial division of the space is unjust from the moment it results in unjust processes that contravene the intrinsic fundamental principle of individual liberty and equality" (Lehman-Frisch, 2009, 101). Thus, an empirical study of the process that led to Columbia University's expansion to Harlem is a rich source for understanding the link between neoliberalization and gentrification in that it is a concrete example of coalition between public and private actors. The negotiation of a community benefits agreement between the university and a private organization representing the local community is shown to be particularly key.

## **2- The expansion of Columbia University: a fair local participatory process<sup>9</sup>?**

As we have said, the gentrification of Harlem was largely the result of intervention on the part of public authorities. Very often, this intervention consisted of allowing renovation or redevelopment by private actors. This was the case in the housing sector, for example. The municipal support to the university was part of New York's political trends and relates to the gentrification of the neighbourhood in that the expansion contributed to redrawing the local demographic, economic, and urban landscape. Universities play an important role in the creative economies and as such, are a powerful actor. This is what made Cecilia Kushner, Director of Special Initiatives

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<sup>7</sup> New York City Department of City Planning, "125th Street corridor rezoning and related actions EIS", Chapter 3-8, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> The affordability threshold is calculated based on average income of the New York metropolitan area, i.e. it includes the much higher incomes of the city's suburbs.

<sup>9</sup> This part takes up certain elements of a text published by the author in the collected work *Des frontières indépassables ?*, under the direction of Béatrice Giblin and Frédéric Douzet, Armand Colin, 2013.

of the City Planning Department say that “[tr.] What Columbia wanted, New York wanted<sup>10</sup>”.

Therefore, in 2003 when the prestigious Ivy League university announced its intention to extend its campus northward into a neighbourhood of West Harlem, where there was light industrial activity and low residential density, Michael Bloomberg and the City Planning Department began the necessary preliminary studies for modifying the city zoning plan. After five years of strong opposition from the residents, public consultation, and the negotiation of a compensation agreement between the parties, the project was approved by a divided city council in December 2007.

### **A private compensation contract supported by public actors**

When major projects are proposed, the promoters routinely negotiate Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) in order to soften opposition. Negotiations therefore become a show of the power relations among the various actors, who want to protect their interests. When private investors need public subsidies, i.e. support from one or more elected officials, they need to obtain the local community’s “consent”. Thus, even if Michael Bloomberg and his assistant for economic development did not support this process initially – in a neoliberal vision, these agreements put the brakes on free development – they allocated \$335,000 and dispatched a mediator to untangle the situation, which seemed to be getting bogged down.

In 2004, when Columbia was starting to broadly inform the public about its plan, and associations were expressing their anger, a certain number of actors sought to position themselves. Thus, city councillor Robert Jackson, who was “[tr.] at first in favour of the plan, began to add conditions.” His chief of staff, Susan Russell, then understood the residents’ anger and raised the question of their participation in the urban process. In speaking of the protesters, she acknowledged that even if the “[tr.] topic were not gentrification - as gentrification was occurring anyway..., (she) did not blame them for feeling abandoned and frankly, if they had not protested, (she) did not think that the (elected officials) would be as involved, and who knows what would’ve happened!<sup>11</sup>”. For all that, in 2004, “[tr.] instead of solving the problems, all they (the community leaders) did was scream about Columbia, all they did was argue”, she continued. While she is increasingly convinced that “[tr.] Columbia had a responsibility to the community, including because they had the knowledge and power to help, and that at some point, they owed it to the community, simply because if they want to call themselves an urban university, they have to be one.” Susan Russell was contacted by Mathew Wambua, who worked for the deputy mayor, Doctoroff. From then on, the university gained the upper hand in this stakeholders’ match because the deputy-mayor in charge of Economic Development at the time, Daniel Doctoroff, received a phone call from the Vice President of Columbia, Robert Kasdin, with whom he had gone to the university. Kasdin asked him to help his institution in the face of the growing protest and thus, in June 2005, a private framework (the West Harlem Local

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, February 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, February 2012.

Development Corporation-WHLDC, LDC) was put in place for negotiating the compensation agreements with the university. The WHLDC was initially made up of community representatives (neighbourhood council, associations, religious leaders, etc.), invited based on decisions by Susan Russell, Mathew Wambua and neighbourhood council leaders, with the addition of local elected officials<sup>12</sup>.

However, disagreements within the LDC quickly emerged and made this procedure very complicated. These disagreements pertained not only to the strategy to adopt, but to the very mission of the committee. In fact, while certain members limited their mandate to the negotiation and drafting of an agreement on the compensations that Columbia needed to give the community, other members pushed to have an impact directly on the project and demanded, for example, the withdrawal of the expropriation option, pure and simple, and therefore, that the project be built without the land affected. While the latter individuals were perceived as agitators blocking the situation, the other members had accepted realization of the project and wished to concentrate on the agreements. Moreover, a certain number of members chosen for their representation of issues identified as essential (tenants' representatives, entrepreneurs, religious leaders, etc.) were in fact negotiating matters that came under the private sector.

The LDC's opaque practices (closed-door meetings, lack of transparency on the members and the group's activities, on the funds received, etc.) and the accusation of the council being co-opted by politicians, and divisions on the organization's very role in addition to the refusal to set aside the law of eminent domain (expropriation law) finally led to the resignation of three members in late November 2007: Tom DeMott, leader of the *Coalition to Preserve Community*, Nick Sprayregen, a businessman who refused to sell his warehouses to Columbia, and Luisa Henriquez, representing the tenants threatened with displacement.

At the end of a genuine tug-of-war with the university, on December 19, 2007, a little more than two years after its establishment, one year after the start of public meetings, after the resignation of two additional members and a few hours before the city council vote, the LDC reached an agreement in principle on the \$150 million in compensation that Columbia would have to give - \$30 million allocated for the construction of a public school, \$24 million to build affordable housing and \$76 million earmarked for local social and cultural programs. Moreover, Mayor Michael Bloomberg then confirmed the city's support and assured the project's approval by promising \$150 million of additional funding for affordable housing through the municipal housing agency, the Housing Preservation Department (HPD).

The LDC, a private structure that appointed itself to negotiate an agreement with the university, suffered from internal power struggles but also from its members' lack of efficiency, such that there would be a four-year wait (December 2011), for a website to be created; and it would be March 2012 before the offices opened and a new

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<sup>12</sup> Early on, the elected officials were not welcome to sit on the LDC for fear of conflicts of interests (some of them were called upon to speak about the project as part of the public consultation) and that they would use it for election purposes (some of them beginning an election campaign a few months later).

director appointed. In March 2012, \$3.5 million were in the LDC's hands whose action the residents, local journalists and others all continued to find hard to understand.

Basically, it was the economic benefits for the City of New York – and its image – that led the municipality to support the project, to the detriment of the interests of a segment of the local population. So, let's turn our attention to this projects' impacts in terms of spatial justice.

### **The impacts of Columbia's expansion**

The consequences of Columbia's expansion, which anticipated the total reconstruction of 7 hectares between 125th and 135th streets over 25 years for an estimated \$7 billion, will be felt from both an urban and social spatial perspective. In fact, when the 18 glass towers containing housing and education spaces have replaced the 1-storey buildings and manufacturing spaces, warehouses, garages and small residential buildings, the neighbourhood will no longer have any function other than to serve the university community: students, professors and employees.

Since the outset, the university has stressed the job opportunities that their project will create. Twelve hundred (1,200) jobs would supposedly be created every year for 25 years in the construction sector according to the university's expansion project website, as well as 6,000 term positions in the university, half of them being service jobs. For, in fact, despite the university's commitments to hire individuals from the neighbourhood, minorities and women, the problem is that there is a disconnect between the pool of qualifications in West Harlem and the jobs to be filled. That's why the university has also been forced by local organizations and elected officials to establish training programs to prepare residents to fill these jobs or obtain the necessary diplomas. Another criticism on the part of the associations is the temporary nature of the construction sector jobs.

Moreover, from the time that Council approved the expansion, the State of New York authorized the expropriation of the last residents and businesses from West Harlem, who had refused to sell their properties to the university<sup>13</sup> despite the attempts at negotiation or intimidation, depending on the case. Furthermore, the matter of justice was at the core of the battle as expropriations are supposed to fulfil a common need, a "public good". As this matter concerned the interests of a private university whose beneficiaries were not Harlem's residents, the associations disputed its fairness. The court, in the grip of businesspeople and a black local leader who was hoping to get publicity for a future run at the House of Representatives, finally estimated that the revenue generated by the university's economic activity as well as the tax revenues, were enough to justify the project's general interest.

From the socio-demographic perspective, the foreseeable consequences of the university's expansion are significant. The impact studies conducted as part of the mandatory public consultation for amending the zoning plan estimated that 400

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<sup>13</sup> Since the early 2000s, Columbia has adopted a systematic land acquisition strategy in the expansion zone. Thus, Columbia purchased 59 buildings between 2000 and 2009 among the 67 in the expansion area, bringing the total number of its properties to 61.

residents and 85 businesses were directly displaced by the expansion project, and 5,000 jobs threatened. In addition, the space affected by the project extends beyond the "special district" established by Columbia, and the collateral impacts affect West Harlem as a whole, including 5,000 individuals who are indirectly threatened with displacement (mainly through rent increases for non rent controlled apartments<sup>14</sup> in the immediate perimeter of the expansion). And this will be further aggravated when the university has completed the expansion of its campus. In fact, while in 2011 only 5.2% of Columbia's 27,000 students were black (and only 3.6% of graduate students) and 7.5% Hispanic (Columbia University, 2011), according to census information the demographic profile of the expansion area was 33.9% black and 60.5% Hispanic (Census Bureau, 2010)!

When all is said and done, both the negotiation of the compensation agreements and the public consultation, which is mandatory for zoning modification plans, left a local community bitter and divided. In fact, where some are delighted having received a great deal of compensation, others see Harlem's gentrification advancing even more quickly and their own dispossession of the neighbourhood, as well as the victory of a powerful actor's economic interests over their lives. The fact that this project could not be carried out except with the city's support illustrates the neoliberal trend of New York's urban policies.

## Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of Harlem's gentrification is fertile and effectively illustrates the redefinition of the social and political power relations on local metropolitan and global scales. The neoliberalization of the urban space is visible both in the processes for producing this space and in the results produced. Urban policies increasingly and systematically use gentrification mechanisms for developing cities, and urban development is measured solely in economic terms. The case of Columbia University's expansion, in particular, shows how a powerful private actor was able, through city and state government support, to extend its grasp and acquire a piece of territory in exchange for financial compensation. The democratic exercise put in place did not make it possible to reconcile the interests of the residents, the university and the city; indeed, it even allowed certain concerns and actors to be evacuated.

Today, international economic and cultural competition is used to justify neoliberal urban policies, particularly in New York City. Since he has been mayor (2001-2013), Michael Bloomberg has systematized this strategy of territorial re-conquest. The spaces and distribution of resources in these spaces evolve at the cost of displacing residents and the deterioration of local cultures. It is difficult for resistance movements to reach places of power and have an influence on political decisions. The lack of means and resources, and their adversaries' power and numbers, are significant difficulties in their struggle against gentrification, against displacements

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<sup>14</sup> "Protected apartments" are under a rent control and regulation program that restricts their increase every year. The owners whose apartments are not rent controlled may raise the rents quite significantly, particularly in neighbourhoods undergoing gentrification.



and for their right to the city. The question of the legitimacy of living in a territory and controlling its directions must, more than ever, remain at the centre of the debates surrounding gentrification in order to aim for more spatial justice.

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