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STUDENT SHOWCASE

It's in the Fine Print: Investigating the Value of Primary Source Documents and Reflecting on Positionality in Learning about Urban Development

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Abstract

Government developers have put up yet another portion of Harlem's 125th Street for redevelopment. After a 2012 government-sponsored call for development proposals, state developers selected the National Urban League (NUL), a civil rights and urban advocacy organization that serves African Americans and other underserved communities, and Hudson Companies, Inc. for a $242 million development project—the Urban League Empowerment Center (ULEC), which will include the NUL as the lead tenant and will be accompanied by various retailers, other nonprofit organizations, and housing units. In this student showcase essay, I reflect on my experience writing an opinion piece in an urban sociology course about the construction of the ULEC and the story of cross-sector urban development behind it. By bringing primary source documents and relevant course readings into conversation with each other, I was able to revise my understanding of the hidden layers of urban development and the actors that were involved in these processes. Additionally, writing an op-ed that put these sources into conversation allowed me to reflect on my own positionality and relationship to the processes of neighborhood development under study.

Keywords: *cross-sector urban development; cross-sector partnerships; urban change; primary source; self-reflection; positionality*

In the spring of 2022, I took *Introduction to Urban Sociology* as a prospective urban studies major at Barnard College. The course analyzed the urban environment and experience through a sociological lens, investigating the relationships between various urban actors and the built urban landscape. We spent a significant portion of the semester learning about patterns of neighborhood redevelopment, exploring its theoretical foundations, and we concluded the unit with a writing assignment on the topic. The first part of the assignment asked us to craft 500-700-word opinion essays on neighborhood redevelopment in response to a recent media story either in New York City, given Barnard's location, or the cities we were from, while considering the scholarship on urban change we

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covered in the unit. In the second portion of the assignment, we were asked to pair our op-eds with an academic analysis of our arguments to position them within the context of the unit. Although we were not explicitly asked to incorporate other articles besides our chosen news article and course scholarship, I found it necessary to gather additional information from primary source documents that could give me an insight into first-hand perspectives on the project. After bridging these sources, I found that I gained a new understanding of the development—during the process of writing both the op-ed and this commentary—which also allowed me to reflect on my own positionality and connection to the ongoing changes occurring within my neighborhood.

After witnessing the demolition of a four-story building years prior in Harlem, New York—the neighborhood I grew up in—I was curious to know what was being constructed in its place. The news article I chose, "National Urban League breaks ground on a new Beyer Blinder Belle-designed home in Harlem" (Gunts 2021), featured in *The Architect's Newspaper*, broke down more of the details of the new development, including the scale and significance of the project for 125th Street. The 17-story, $242 million National Urban League Empowerment Center (ULEC) is a new mixed-use development on Harlem's 125th Street that will serve as the headquarters for the National Urban League Institute for Race, Equity, and Justice (NUL)—a civil rights and urban advocacy organization that serves African Americans and other underserved communities—and will also house Trader Joe's, Target, three local nonprofits, a civil rights museum, and 170 mixed-income residential units (Gunts 2021). The project emerged out of a call in 2012 from state developers Empire State Development Corporation and the New York City Economic Development Corporation for new projects to "revitalize 125th Street and strengthen Central Harlem's critical mass of arts, cultural and entertainment institutions" and is projected to be completed in January 2025 (Empire State Development 2012; National Urban League 2023).

This development project can be analyzed from multiple angles, such as the development's relationship to surrounding retailers. However, I wanted to know more about the construction process—namely, how it came to be approved and the relationships between the private, public, and nonprofit actors involved. In my research on the ULEC, I discovered that the developers publicly released a General Project Plan (GPP) in 2013 and a Modified General Project Plan (MGPP), a revised version of the GPP, in 2019. This MGPP (Empire State Development 2019) was a 133-page comprehensive review of the development and its impact on the surrounding community, including its effect on Harlem's socioeconomic conditions, historic and cultural resources, and neighborhood character. I chose to focus on the portions of the report that tackled "neighborhood revitalization" because I wanted to see how the developers approached the issues. I also analyzed the interactions between the public, nonprofit, and private entities involved in the development because it seemed like a hidden part of the process that I could bring to light using course materials.

In my opinion piece, I examined the developers' evaluation of the ULEC's projected displacement. They analyzed the effects of direct displacement caused by the development and measured its projected impact on the neighborhood.[1] They concluded that direct business displacement would not have a detrimental effect on the area. In the following excerpt from my op-ed, I use urban sociological scholarship from our course to uncover the hidden compromises that have to occur within cross-sector partnerships:

> In "'Mexicans Love Red' and Other Gentrification Myths," urban geography scholar Winifred Curran writes, 'The fight over the numbers of displaced residents distracts from this larger issue. … How many people can be displaced before it becomes a problem?' (2017). In the ULEC developers' plan, the project reports a total direct displacement of 55 individuals [from the original businesses at the site] in the construction of the ULEC (Empire State Development 2019). The focus on abstract empirical evidence diverts attention from the loss of place as a cause of displacement. For those without the financial privilege to travel outside the neighborhood to find community and support, they must rely on the "meaningful, 'lived' places of everyday social practices within their current neighborhood to develop social ties and community" (Fried 1963, as cited in Shaw and Hagemans 2015, 327). When these "lived" places are displaced by corporations … like Trader Joe's and Target, native residents could lose their sense of place.

As I highlighted in my op-ed, the potential loss of "lived" places is a considerable variable in this development story. It is also one that seems like it would be especially significant to nonprofit organizations because of their work to serve community needs. The fact that the report focused on direct displacement, rather than social displacement (the loss of "lived" place), points to a hidden set of compromises that private banks, governments, and nonprofit organizations must navigate in multi-sector partnerships. Given nonprofits' community-focused missions, nonprofits would theoretically want to minimize the amount of displacement occurring in a neighborhood. However, nonprofits are realistically limited in their power to do so, in contrast to private corporations, because of their economic position. They must compromise and juggle both objectives, which, in this case, means only being able to limit displacement to a certain extent but for the benefit of expanding their capacity as a nonprofit through significant private funding. After putting these sources in conversation with each other, I was able to see some of the ways that the different urban actors had to maneuver around competing priorities.

My perception of the MGPP continued to change as I explored the justification for the project. In my review of the report, I noticed that I felt unconvinced by the way the developers promoted the value of the ULEC. They considered it a form of "neighborhood growth," citing that the development would build on the greater project of urban revitalization along 125th Street. While this claim of neighborhood growth is not

[1] The MGPP uses "direct displacement" to refer to the displacement of businesses, employees, and residential properties caused by the ULEC (Empire State Development 2019).

necessarily false—the nonprofits and community groups in the ULEC will certainly deliver a positive impact on community members—it seemed unrealistic to me because real estate investments are founded on the basis of strong financial returns.

I thought back to a class discussion on American sociologist Harvey Molotch's (1976) theory of the "urban growth machine," which states that the underlying goal of all interest groups, including government developers, private corporations, and national nonprofits, is profit, and I saw the potential for this concept to be present in the construction of the ULEC as well. In the following excerpt from my op-ed, I expand on this observation, pointing to some of the potential reasons for the construction of the development:

> In justifying the need for the ULEC, the developers claim that the development would fuel the "ongoing trend that is shaping the existing mixed-use neighborhood in this area, and would contribute to and support the continued growth of the neighborhood." Here, "growth" is used in reference to the "ongoing revitalization of the 125th Street corridor through … [the encouragement of] mixed-use development, including commercial, residential, entertainment, and arts-related uses" (Empire State Development 2019). The government's authorization of neighborhood redevelopment … is tied to an organized set of capitalist, profit-driven interests from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors that rely on a stable growing population for their profits, otherwise known as the "urban growth machine" (Molotch 1976).

While the construction of the ULEC could be seen as a form of "neighborhood rejuvenation," especially considering the inclusion of several nonprofit organizations, I wondered how the underlying growth-driven interests of all parties came into play here. I felt that the terms "revitalize" and "growth" held deeper meanings than what could be seen from a surface-level perspective. Molotch's concept of the urban growth machine helped clarify some of the dissonance in the report related to the interests of growth elites and the description of the development given in the report.

Reading the report alone, I might not have been able to discern this power play as easily. However, after reading it alongside the literature from class, I understood this story of urban development in Harlem as a deeply complex, multi-layered story. Marc Fried's emphasis on the importance of the "'lived' places of everyday social practices," which I understood as social displacement, showed me that this development might have resulted in much more displacement than the report suggested. If I had read the report alone without an understanding of the other forms of displacement, including social displacement, then I might have been slightly less skeptical of the developers' argument about the projected displacement. With the information about the myriad forms of displacement, however, I was able to untangle this story of displacement as more than just abstract numbers of businesses or residents. Similarly, Molotch's original theory on the urban growth machine helped me understand some of the potential reasons behind the framing of the development as a part of "neighborhood rejuvenation" efforts. Without this

academic framing, it would have been more difficult to see the hidden reality of urban growth—money leads the flow of urban development.

Although the concept of the urban growth machine can be applied to stories of urban development like these, I have come to realize that it is important for me to acknowledge the nuances of the ULEC development story. My original op-ed took firm stances on the ULEC, but after reflecting on my positionality, I now feel that I am not in a position to make any firm value judgments about the project. There are parts of this development story that I am unable to fully understand, including the impact of the entire ULEC building on the social landscape of Harlem. For example, the lead tenant of the ULEC is the National Urban League, which predominately advocates for African Americans. As someone with a different identity, I cannot fully understand the impact of the organization (or its presence in the ULEC) and therefore am not in a position to make a judgment about the ULEC's impact on Harlem's social fabric and cultural vitality. As a result, I realize that I must hold space for the nuances in this development story, and I encourage others with privilege to commit to the process of reflection when learning about urban topics like urban redevelopment.

This sort of reflection is also important because our understanding of urban redevelopment and adjacent topics like gentrification is shaped by the privileged positionality many students are likely to hold as external observers who are not negatively affected by the issues under study. While conducting research on Harlem made me feel more knowledgeable about the neighborhood I grew up in, I came to see that there is still some distance between me and the ongoing gentrification in my community because of my socioeconomic and educational privilege. I recognized that while my findings seemed astonishing to me, they might not be to Harlem community members who have been experiencing gentrification directly for years. In this way, working with primary source documents pushed me to confront my positionality in relation to the issue because I had to tackle questions of audience and intention in my essay: Who am I writing for? What is the purpose of it? How does my positionality impact the way I see this issue?

For educators looking to teach students about urban concepts like gentrification, primary source analysis can not only offer students opportunities to engage with real examples of academic material but also prompt internal reflection on the students' own positionalities if the primary sources relate to places that have personal significance to the student. In my own case, although I was able to learn about gentrification through class discussions and readings, applying these theories to a primary source document related to the neighborhood I grew up in, and then reflecting on my own thought processes and positionality afterward, significantly enriched my own understanding of my relationship to my neighborhood and the privileges I hold. When learning about academic theories, especially in fields centered on the study of real-world experiences and environments, theories can become even more meaningful when taught in a way that encourages

students to apply their knowledge to personal, real-world examples and consider their own identity in relation to their own communities.

This kind of self-reflection, which could actually be seen as a kind of confrontation with the self, holds in the wider industry of academia as well, pushing the boundaries of traditional scholarly certainty required for formulating theories and making room for uncertainty in considering issues that we cannot fully understand because of our positionalities. For me, learning urban sociological theory was necessary to critically analyze primary source documents, but applying this theoretical knowledge and researching examples of gentrification in a more personal context—and then considering the nuances of the situation in relation to my positionality—has allowed me to embrace the value of "not knowing" in both academic learning and concepts that I cannot culturally understand.

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