

NEXT ECONOMY

The Steady Destruction of America's Cities

Peter Moskowitz's new book on gentrification outlines how local governments cede their power over residents' lives to private interests.

GILLIAN B. WHITE MARCH 9, 2017



Construction in downtown Detroit (PAUL SANCYA / AP)

To live in a city is to watch it change, sometimes quickly and in troubling ways. These changes, more often than not, are the product of decisions by city planners on which longtime residents often have little input or sway. This process is usually referred to with a commonly used term: gentrification. But there is no single answer to the questions of what gentrification really means, what causes it, who controls it, and how it actually changes neighborhoods and the people who live in them.

How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood, a new book by the journalist Peter Moskowitz, brings some much-needed clarity to thinking about a slippery concept. “While urban renewal, the suburbanization of cities, and other forms of capital creation are relatively easy to spot (a highway built through a neighborhood is a relatively obvious event), gentrification is more

discreet, dispersed, and hands-off,” he writes. Moskowitz adds to the growing canon aimed at understanding and explaining the process of gentrification, and he not so subtly suggests that while gentrification naturally brings some improvements to a city, including more people and money, it also frequently kills some cultural traditions and diversity, the precise characteristics that make cities so dynamic and desirable in the first place.

Moskowitz tells of how gentrification has swept through some of America’s biggest cities, writing case studies of Detroit, San Francisco, New York, and post-Katrina New Orleans. In each city, there are specific problems and circumstances that helped the process along, but it’s striking how similar the choices made by politicians, business leaders, and developers and their effect on poor really are across the country. Gentrification, in each of these cities, dismantles and displaces existing neighborhoods and communities in order to make way for new residents who are mostly whiter, and always richer, than those who predate them. And the same choices seem to be made again and again.

While Moskowitz includes the important stories of those who called a neighborhood home long before coffee shops and luxury condos appeared, it’s his outline of the systemic process of displacement that is the most devastating. He convincingly shows how the choices that a city and its government make in the name of a booming economy assign value to some residents and not others: From choices on where and how to fund affordable housing, to invest in public schools, to support new local businesses, but not old ones, the process that goes by the name “revitalization” is often something more pernicious.

In *How to Kill a City’s* section on New Orleans, Moskowitz highlights the uneven treatment of poor neighborhoods and rich ones in the post-Katrina period, noting that some who saw a need for economic revitalization have said that the storm cleared out some of the less desirable neighborhoods, leaving room for them to be rebuilt without as much concentrated poverty and blight. But they were also being rebuilt more slowly and in a way that ultimately left their previous residents adrift. On top of that, Moskowitz writes, changes to the city’s basic services, particularly its school system, disadvantaged poorer families, who were burdened by undue amounts of paperwork. The city also dismantled the teacher’s union, which had helped build part of New Orleans’s black middle class.

In his chronicle of Detroit, Moskowitz shows how gentrification differs in a city that is steadily emptying out because of economic hardship rather than a natural disaster. He notes that in a 2010 attempt to recast the city as an urban center on the rise, rather than one facing a staggering financial failure, the city's mayor, Dave Bing, proposed shrinking the boundaries of Detroit in order to focus on the downtown area while cutting out the struggling outer ring. The idea, though it was shot down, has had long-lasting implications for how people conceptualize the city, Moskowitz argues, with developers, city planners, and corporations focusing most of their energy and money on a relatively small section of it. "The new Detroit is now a nearly closed loop," he writes, "It is possible to live in this new Detroit and essentially never set foot in the old one." And after filing for bankruptcy, the city's government has had less power to plot out the city's future, leaving it in the hands of developers and nonprofits, who may still have a somewhat limited view of what qualifies as Detroit.

San Francisco and New York, in many ways, have problems and opportunities that are the opposite of Detroit's. Instead of wanting to gin up economic growth in concentrated areas, residents there are struggling to contain it. As San Francisco becomes a hub for bigger, richer companies and their employees, the displacement of longtime residents has vastly outpaced any efforts at maintaining or creating affordable housing in the city. And despite stable economies, liberal leanings, and high involvement in municipal politics in both New York and San Francisco, policies that could potentially help poorer residents have been much slower to come and less robust than the influx of new private capital that devours neighborhoods and displaces residents. In just about every city Moskowitz examines, he finds that choices by city and state governments limited the creation of affordable housing and changed public-housing policies, giving poorer residents little refuge in increasingly expensive cities.

Ultimately, Moskowitz says that a big part of the problem when it comes to the unremitting pace of gentrification is that it is a process that often involves the investments and decisions of the private entities, including developers and big corporations, that decide to set up shop in new neighborhoods. In some ways, that's great for areas that are floundering, but when city leaders become too reliant on the plans and dollars of the private sector, the people who had been living and working in these neighborhoods all along have no one to look out for them and the lives they've built. Private organizations have different interests and responsibilities when

it comes to making plans to spruce up a neighborhood. And that can mean that their investments don't happen in an egalitarian manner, or benefit a diverse group of residents.

Regarding this point, Moskowitz writes:

Believing that hipsters can reverse the consequences of late-stage capitalism is a more attractive thought for city planners in cash-strapped cities than realizing that many American cities are, for now, screwed thanks to postindustrial decline and growing inequality. Gentrification may provide a new tax base, but it also reshapes what cities are, turning them into explicit supporters of inequality, reliant on it to self-fund, yet still unable to meet the needs of their poor. A real solution to the economics of American cities would require more work—more taxes, more laws, more intervention from the federal government. Those things are hard. Gentrification is easy.

Moskowitz says that while gentrification is a problem in just about every developed country in the world, its propensity to become a full-blown crisis in American cities has a lot to do with insufficient housing regulation. “In nearly every other industrialized nation besides the United States, there is near-consensus that purely private land markets will not meet the needs of the poor, and so measures have been taken to ensure that at least some land remains off the market or subject to regulations that make it affordable.”

And in that vein, Moskowitz has some ideas for how to lessen the sting of gentrification: expanding and protecting access to public lands and giving residents more of a voice in the city via community boards and similar organizations, to name two possibilities. Moskowitz also wants cities to heavily regulate housing and to raise taxes, wages, and spending on the poor. He doesn't expect that all, or most, of these plans will come to fruition. But implementing any of them, he writes, would constitute progress.

Related Video