The “Greening” of Gentrification: A Case Study of the East Bay Greenway

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Environmental gentrification refers to a form of gentrification that is predicated on an environmental agenda. Neil Smith defines gentrification as "the process by which working class residential neighborhoods are rehabilitated by middle class homebuyers, landlords, and professional developers." Similar to traditional accounts of gentrification, the increased desirability of an area due to physical improvements often drives an influx of middle-class residents as well as increases in property values and rent costs, which are often coupled with the displacement of vulnerable populations.

Unique to environmental gentrification is a paradox in which sustainable development and efforts that aim to address environmental equity ultimately naturalize the exclusion and displacement of working-class communities and minorities as improvements to environmental amenities or environmental quality become targets for new development projects that are usually intended for more affluent residents. The strategy of "just green enough" was proposed by Curran and Hamilton to challenge the presumed inevitability of environmental gentrification and to contest the choice between cleaning up or clearing out. The strategy implies that development efforts motivated by environmental justice concerns to increase amenities and remove disamenities can be "just green enough" to improve the quality of life for existing residents, but should resist the urge to go so far as to attract new sustainable development that brings with it the "creative class" or middle-class gentrifiers.

Through a case study of the proposed East Bay Greenway development project, in the San Francisco Bay Area, this study sheds light on the ability of a regional green infrastructure development project to address environmental equity concerns, and explores whether communities can prevent gentrification before it happens.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the environmental justice concerns of the communities surrounding the East Bay Greenway?
2. How does the East Bay Greenway development project address the environmental justice concerns of the affected communities?
3. Have the agencies involved in the East Bay Greenway development project considered potential gentrification in the planning of this project? If so, what are they doing to prevent environmental gentrification from occurring?

STUDY AREA

Study Area:
• Quarter-mile buffer surrounding the proposed East Bay Greenway
Research Sample:
• Local and regional municipalities
• Non-profit organization related to the East Bay Greenway development
• Community residents who buffer the proposed greenway project

METHODS

This study utilizes a mixed-method case study methodology in order to develop theoretical and applicable knowledge of environmental gentrification.

Primary Data Collection:
• Over 14 semi-structured interviews with city staff, county staff, non-profit staff, and community residents
• Online community questionnaire

Secondary Data Collection:
• Academic journal articles
• Census data
• Planning documents
• Newspaper articles

DISCUSSION

• In examining the East Bay Greenway through an environmental justice framework, this research provides an opportunity to assess the degree to which social and environmental justice are incorporated into urban planning and what effect, if any, this can have on mitigating environmental gentrification.
• This study is unique in that, it provides a valuable "before" snapshot of an area prior to the completion of a county-wide public works project related to environmental justice improvements. Through this work, we can gain an expanded understanding of the complex relationship between environmental gentrification, environmental justice, and sustainable development discourses.
• Early data analysis shows that there are conflicts in the development priorities of the East Bay Greenway project, including the understandings of how it might impact the surrounding community.
• This study has academic and applied significance in that it further develops the understanding of environmental gentrification in the San Francisco Bay Area.

REFERENCES


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