When Affordability Fails: New York's Black Exodus and the City It Leaves Behind

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Abstract

A growing body of literature examines the increasing unaffordability of New York City and its effects on black residents in a pattern known as "black flight." One major contributor is the cost of housing, which has risen dramatically in recent years. This article draws a connection between this phenomenon and the history of affordable housing and the demographic shifts that led to it. Starting with a chronology of New York's public housing including regulatory, policy, and design setbacks, the article then focuses on the racial migration patterns of the last half century and the contributions of gentrification to neighborhood change, examining how these factors gave rise to today's challenges. Finally, other avenues for affordable housing are weighed as potential approaches for addressing New York's affordability crisis and retaining longtime residents. Drawing parallels between black flight and the destruction of Seneca Village, this article raises questions about the implications of New York City's black exodus.

Introduction

In 2011, archeologists from Columbia University and City College of New York embarked on a treasure hunt in Manhattan's backyard. Under the hot summer sun, interns probed the baking soil with electromagnetic pulses, which told them exactly where to dig. Their spoils included a toothbrush handle, a teapot, and a child's shoe. After eight weeks of digging, the hunt had been a success.

The purpose of this project was to uncover the tangible history of a long-forgotten antebellum African American community called Seneca Village. In 1825, the landowners of what would become Seneca Village divided their estate and sold much of it to African Americans and Irish Americans. The land lies on what is now West 82nd to West 89th Street, but at the time, the area was undeveloped. Over the next thirty years, the settlement grew to a community of fifty homes, complete with three churches and a school. While the community was hardly a utopia, it represented an escape from the discrimination faced in urbanized downtown Manhattan to a remote corner of the island. It also represented access to freedom that not all black New Yorkers enjoyed: at the time, New York State law limited black suffrage to property owners (Reddick, 2021).

The life of this community was cut short with the planning of the country's first landscaped public park, whose proposed borders enclosed the burgeoning settlement. To evict Seneca Village residents for the construction of Central Park, the city relied on the concept of eminent domain. A clause in the Fifth Amendment allows the government to take private property for public use in exchange for compensation. Eminent domain gave the city constitutional authority to use the land on which Seneca Village stood as part of the new park. Just 32 years after its inception, Seneca Village was vacated. As the belongings of the residents—their dishes, candlesticks, and jars—sank deeper into the ground, so too sank the collective memory of the place that they represented. With their entrenched roots and innocent branches, the trees planted in its wake seem to suggest that Seneca Village never even existed.

Seneca Village remained virtually unknown until the publication of *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* by Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar in 1992. This comprehensive account of the park and its development "brought Seneca Village back into modern memory," according to Diana diZerega Wall, one of the archeologists on the 2011 dig (Warsh, 2019). Tying together census data, land records, and academic scholarship on black communities in Antebellum New York, the book counteracted the predominant narrative that pre-park residents were a "debased population of savages," instead illustrating the community's organization and stability (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992, p. 63). It was how Wall first learned about Seneca Village, inspiring the excavation she led nearly two decades later. The tragedy of Seneca Village lies not only in its demolition but also in its erasure from the New York narrative, its legacy buried below a rosy tale of America's first and perhaps most famous park.

Although eminent domain now poses less of a threat to black communities, the story of Seneca Village is a disturbing precedent for current shifts in New York's demographic and cultural landscape. In a phenomenon known as black flight, black Americans are reversing the course of the Great Migration and leaving cities for the suburbs. New York City is no exception. Over the past two decades, the city has lost about 200,000 black residents, or about 9% of the black population (Closson and Hong, 2023). The decision to leave New York City stems from many factors, but one seems universal: the city's growing unaffordability. After a pandemic respite, StreetEasy reports that as of June 2022, median rents in the city reached $3500 asking rent, a 35% increase from just a year before (qtd. in Bajuelos, 2022). Half of New York City residents spend more than 30% or more of their income on rent, and a third spend more than 50% ("NYCHVS Selected Initial Findings," 2022). New York City has surpassed San Francisco for the highest market rate for a one-bedroom apartment, according to average rent estimations on Zumper (qtd. in Bajuelos, 2022). With no end in sight for increasing costs, affordable housing programs seem to be an avenue for retaining residents. But long waitlists (and sometimes no waitlists at all) for these programs reflect the reality that limits on supply make affordable housing an unachievable dream for many New Yorkers.

The scarcity of affordable housing options in New York City provides little relief from skyrocketing market rent prices for low- and middle-income residents. This trend has particular implications for the city's black residents, who have been leaving the city in a decades-long trend. How did public housing programs and subsidies become so inadequate? What role did city government play in actively and passively under-serving black communities, and how did this result in their exodus? And what happens to the city when outpriced communities leave? I will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which a decline in the scale and quality of housing assistance initiatives contributed to gentrification, displacement, dissatisfaction, and ultimately the exodus of black residents from New York City. What will happen, as in the case of Seneca Village, to the place they leave behind?

The Trajectory of Public Housing

Initial Velocities

The origins of affordable housing in New York, despite being championed as progressive, were rooted in racial exclusion. Public housing began as a response to the tenement system. Until the early twentieth century, the tenement was the primary housing for New York's poor and immigrant population. These buildings were cramped, hazardous, and hotspots for the spread of disease and fire (Plunz, 2016, p. 6). In 1934, the city's mayor Fiorello Laguardia created a housing organization called the New York City Housing Authority, or Nycha. Nycha's purpose

was to replace tenement housing as well as respond to a housing crisis created by the Great Depression (Ferre-Sadurni, 2018).

The construction of public housing was seen as a progressive alternative to tenements. However, Nycha's first developments employed exclusionary policies through tenant screening for factors such as alcoholism, single parenthood, irregular work history, or lack of furniture. As a result, in these first few years, Nycha housing was primarily populated by white residents who were not on welfare. These "moral" screening tests effectively barred lower-income welfare recipients who were less likely to have furniture or a consistent work record. Natividad Nieves, a longtime resident of the Queensbridge public housing complex, observed that until the 1950s "only white people lived [in the Queensbridge Houses]" (qtd. in Ferre-Sadurni, 2018). Black New Yorkers did not fit into the original Nycha vision.

The emergence of public housing in New York and elsewhere in America brought forth questions about who "deserved" housing. In screening potential residents through morality factors, Nycha implicitly suggested that "moral" residents were more deserving of public housing; in other words, higher-income white residents were more deserving of public housing. Nycha rewarded these residents with high-quality design. These developments were low-rise, well-constructed buildings that received high praise for their design (Ferre-Sadurni, 2018). Since these buildings were experimental in nature, they were able to prioritize livability over economic efficiency (Plunz, 2016, p. 208). As Nicolas D. Bloom, a Hunter College professor of urban policy and planning, put it, the experimental projects were seen as "too good" (qtd. in Ferre-Sadurni, 2018). The prominent ideology of free enterprise dictated that high-quality housing could not be provided at cheaper rates. In other words, lower-income residents were not seen as deserving of high-quality housing. Thus when the experimental phase ended and priorities shifted towards promoting affordability and inclusion, it came at the cost of design and livability (Plunz, 2016, p. 208). Among lawmakers and the public, the view persisted that public housing residents did not deserve the assistance they received.

Beginning the Descent

Racial inclusion in New York's public housing, unfortunately, though perhaps not coincidentally, corresponded with poor design and unpopularity. After World War II, Nycha began to shift towards a "tower in the park" model by focusing on constructing high-rise buildings surrounded by landscaped property as an economical strategy of housing production (Plunz, 2016, p. 257). The buildings' isolation in the bland green spaces of the "park" mirrored their isolation in the neighborhood. These projects were not well integrated aesthetically or structurally in the surrounding community. This was one way that the remodeled public housing projects underserved their residents: they isolated them from the neighborhood community and culture. The transition to the tower in the park model was accompanied by loosening standards for tenant admission. Although the authority had previously been allowed to use racially and socioeconomically biased screening questions, these standards changed in the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, by the end of the 1960s, the proportion of residents on public assistance doubled and minorities outnumbered white residents (Plunz, 2016, p. 273; Ferre-Sadurni, 2018). The tower in the park model, which is still the dominant model of public housing in the city, had pushed minority and low-income communities into isolated high rises and deprived them of connection to the surrounding neighborhood.

Although public housing projects, however poorly designed, provided needed housing outside the market, the construction of these projects themselves also damaged many New York

neighborhoods. The Federal Housing Act of 1949 legalized a practice of urban renewal known as slum-clearing. The policy relied on eminent domain to justify these demolition projects, just as the city government had relied on eminent domain to justify the demolition of Seneca Village a century earlier. In some cases, these slum-clearing projects had a direct relationship with the construction of new public housing. West 99th Street, a majority-black enclave only a few blocks from the site of Seneca Village, was one of the first neighborhoods to be razed in the urban renewal program. Nearby the Frederick Douglass Houses were constructed as public housing to rehouse the West 99th community (Ballon, 2008, p. 102). But the new houses were no cure for the loss of community. Scattered across the ends of the city, the West 99th community grappled with isolation. Former resident Jim Torain organized annual reunions for former residents to keep in touch (Lewis, 2011). Kathryn Massengberg, another displaced resident, wrote down the names of the people she remembered from the block (Lewis, 2011). Jim and Kathryn's preservation efforts demonstrate the value of the West 99th community and the gravity of its loss. James Baldwin famously renamed urban renewal "negro removal," and the prevalence of this phrase within the black community demonstrates the collective memory of the injustice inflicted upon urban black communities through urban renewal projects ("A Conversation With James Baldwin," 2023).

As the progressive political trends of the depression gave way to mid-century liberalism and low-rise buildings gave rise to high-rise developments, support for public housing in New York and across the country waned just as it had become more broadly inclusive. Support for urban living in general also declined. The construction of the towers in the park coincided with a shift toward an ideal of suburban living. This shift set the scene for white flight, a term for the exodus of white people from ethnically diverse urban areas. In the 1950s, New York's suburban population overtook its urban population for the first time. This shift was likely due to white flight and increasing popularity of the suburbs. Unequal distributions in funding incentivized this shift: funding for public housing paled in comparison to subsidies for suburban homeowners (Plunz, 2016, pp. 274, 260). Anti-communist sentiment also played into support for homeownership over renting. William Levitt, an American real estate developer credited with the creation of the modern American suburb, claimed that "no man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist." Suburban living aligned with a capitalist ideal of property ownership and Levitt's comment illustrated the growing distrust of urban lifestyles. The midcentury quintessential American family lived behind a white picket fence, not an apartment door.

On the other hand, an association was also growing between urban centers and poverty and crime, particularly during the crack epidemic of the 1980s. The epidemic exacerbated the negative conceptions of public housing in New York, but it also represented a more meaningful shift. While Nycha's extensive staff and, in particular, its police force had previously been able to keep crime under control, the epidemic represented perhaps the first time it was unsafe to live in public housing (Ferre-Sadurni, 2018). The rise in violent crime on Nycha property was likely the nail in the coffin in turning public opinion against New York's public housing.

Crash and Burn

Shifts in public opinion due to white flight and the crack epidemic influenced policy as well. By the beginning of the 21st century, Nycha lost billions of dollars in funding from various levels of government in a broader disinvestment trend (Ferre-Sadurni, 2018). Living conditions deteriorated as the aging mid-century buildings lacked necessary repairs and renovations. Nycha buildings play host to mold and lead, which can have detrimental effects on cardiovascular,

immunological, endocrine, and respiratory health (La Mort, 2018, pp. 392, 394). Colder winters, lack of boiler maintenance, and extreme weather events such as Hurricane Sandy mean that heat loss is a reality for many Nycha tenants throughout the winter, even though landlords are legally required to provide heat during this time of year (Ferre-Sadurni, 2018; La Mort, 2018, p.393). Residents also have few avenues for redress. Complaints are made internally through Nycha and are not publicly accessible, and thus there is no body of existing literature that can guide tenants on what constitutes code violations (La Mort, 2018, p. 389). There is also no way to follow up on repair requests, which simply go unaddressed. By contrast, private housing tenants can make public complaints and landlords can be fined for neglect of these complaints. Nycha faces no consequence for lack of repairs because it is not subject to these same fine structures. Low standards for health and lack of tenant rights are among the reasons that Nycha housing is the last choice for many New Yorkers (La Mort, 2018, p. 388).

Although Nycha's inception promised a solution to slum conditions, it ended up recreating them by isolating lower-income populations in deteriorating high rises. The stigma of public housing also had tangible impacts on funding and housing quality. The racialized elements of public housing, rooted first in racial exclusion and then in racial sequestering, have denied black residents access to livable public housing throughout Nycha's history.

Role Reversal: White flight gives way to black flight

The end of the twentieth century brought a challenge to the mid-century dominance of the suburban dream. Rapid development of luxury apartments in Manhattan may have contributed to renewed interest in city living for the wealthy white metropolitan population (Plunz, 2016, pp. 322-325). Additionally, in this same period, a young upper-middle class continued the gentrification of previously affordable outer boroughs by seeking lower cost alternatives to Manhattan luxury. But this revitalization was also accompanied by growing poverty, particularly amongst black communities. The number of New Yorkers under the poverty line increased by 8.5% from 1969 to 1983. By 1987, the official percentage of black people in poverty was 32% compared to a citywide average of 23.4%. The widening gap between New York's rich and poor was accompanied by a population decline between 1970 and 1980, most drastically in Brooklyn and the Bronx, which have traditionally housed large black populations (Plunz, 2016, p. 323). The growing wealth gap and patterns of gentrification in the city set the stage for the next demographic shift.

Against the backdrop of black flight, New York City lost over 100,000 black residents from 2000 to 2010; this represents the third largest urban population loss in the country over this period (Frey, 2011, p. 8). By contrast, the national black suburban population as a proportion of total black metro population has increased from 37% in 1990 to 51% in 2010, demonstrating that the majority of black people in metro areas now live in the suburbs (Frey, 2011, p. 9). Additionally, black New Yorkers who leave the city seem to be leaving the New York metropolitan area entirely. A lack of diversity in the city's suburbs combined with the concentration of black population increase in Southern and Midwestern suburbs suggests that black New Yorkers are moving to suburbs across the country.

In an op-ed to the New York Times, regular contributor Thomas Edsall argued that the period of urban renewal that began in the 1980s has come to an end as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (2023). The public health dangers presented by dense urban living and dependency on public transport caused an outflow of residents of all races from 2020 to 2021. In particular, the white population of the New York and Newark metropolitan area fell by 222,530. Stanford

economist Nicholas Bloom, whom Edsall consulted, claimed that an increase in remote work was partly to blame for urban population decline. Bloom argued that this new demographic shift would create more room and affordability for younger and lower-income residents. While a repeat of mid-century urban flight may be in progress, the housing market is not as quick to adjust. Manhattan rents continued to rise in the second half of 2022, despite stabilizing trends in other parts of the country (Frank, 2022). As of November 2022, the vacancy rate in Manhattan was still 0.6% lower than its historical average; consequently, landlords can continue charging higher rents and still receive applicants.

Rents may eventually lower, as Bloom predicts. But it may be too late. The most significant population decline from 2010-2020 was among black minors, a group that saw a 19.1% decline ("2020 Census Results for New York City," 2021, p. 40). The data suggests that black families are the ones leaving. When black children leave, the ramifications echo across generations. In America, half of parents have at least one child that lives less than 10 miles away from them, and data analysis from the New York Times suggests that the "typical adult lives only 18 miles from his or her mother" ("The Health and Retirement Study," 2021, p. 23; Bui and Miller, 2015). When children leave the city, they are more likely to stay away. Retention of black families is essential for maintaining the city's black population in the generations to come.

Changing neighborhoods, changing culture

The influx of white residents and the loss of black residents can impact neighborhood culture. An example of this demographic and cultural shift can be found in Harlem, which was one of the last Manhattan neighborhoods to experience gentrification (Plunz, 2016, p. 325). Harlem was a popular destination during the Great Migration in the early twentieth century, resulting in the cultural revitalization known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance played an important role in establishing New York City as one of the most important hosts of black urban life. By 1950, black people represented 98% of central Harlem's population, and in 1970 the share of black residents in the greater Harlem area peaked at 64% (Roberts, 2010).

The peaks of the black population in Harlem during the middle of the twentieth century coincided with poor conditions in the neighborhood. Demolition, arson, and abandonment plagued the community (Roberts, 2010). As a result, the black population in central Harlem declined by over 30% in the 1970s. The gentrification of Harlem is less a story of displacement and moreso a story of abandonment by the existing black community and repopulation by a wealthier community. Although the city government owned 40% of buildings and vacant land in Harlem, it did nothing to incentivize black homeownership and preserve Harlem's cultural integrity, instead opting to encourage private development on its land, which outpriced black residents. When Harlem, which had been a holdout, succumbed to gentrification, serious questions were raised about the preservation of affordability in the New York City center, and little relief could be found in affordable housing.

The cultural changes in Harlem followed not too far behind the demographic ones. In her piece entitled "'The White-ification of the Hood': Power, Politics, and Youth Performing Narratives of Community," Valerie Kinloch interviewed a black teenage Harlem resident named Quentin on his experience of gentrification in the community. The article was part of a larger ethnographic study documenting the narratives of Harlem youth and their experiences of gentrification. Quentin illustrates the ways that new development can seem to build over existing cultural conceptions. In describing the unnamed university that housed Kinloch's office, Quentin identified the encroachment of gentrification as "when the community where the university is

located is given a different name from the actual community" (Kinloch, 2007, p. 64). The separation between this university name and the neighborhood name creates a dissonance where the university and other new buildings feel removed from the community they reside in. The erasure of the Harlem name is only the beginning of cultural changes that Quentin observes. He describes the social isolation and disintegration of community connection he feels amongst new residents: "Nobody talks to us. They [white people] just walk by" (Kinloch, 2007, p. 65). He views gentrification as a "clean…up" effort to rewrite Harlem's reputation as a hood (Kinloch, 2007, p. 64). His fears of erasure and of new development on top of existing communities are reminiscent of the erasure of Seneca Village and the park that was built on its land.

Housing Vouchers: Limitations and Potential

Alternatives to public housing projects offer promising strategies for increasing access to affordability, but racism still cripples their application. Aside from Nycha's public housing program, New York provides housing assistance through a federal program of housing choice vouchers, created under a 1974 law referred to as "Section 8," as well as local programs with similar functions (Metcalf, 2018, p. 64). Under these programs, tenants contribute 30% of their income towards rent and Nycha covers the rest. In theory, this program offers an important alternative to public housing because it grants tenants the ability to choose their own housing and creates more socioeconomic diversity in different neighborhoods as opposed to concentrating all low-income residents in public housing projects. However, the program is severely inadequate. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that only 25% of eligible households end up receiving funding (Mazarra, 2021). Many families spend years on waitlists and never receive funding. In many cases, when households do get lucky and receive vouchers, they are unable to use them. Although racism and other forms of discrimination in housing are illegal under the Fair Housing Act of 1968, indirect racism can prevent tenants from securing housing with their vouchers (Vesoulis, 2020). Landlords have the power to reject tenant applications because of their participation in the Section 8 program, and when almost half of these voucher holders are black, voucher discrimination translates to racial discrimination.

An expansion of the voucher program could be transformational for New York City's black residents. With more funding and political will, Section 8 and other voucher programs could provide subsidies to every eligible family. Subsiding all eligible families could mean a 6% decrease in poverty in the black community nationwide (Mazzara, 2021). Even for middle class black families, rental assistance could be the difference between staying in the city and leaving for cheaper living elsewhere.

An expansion of housing assistance for black residents could also be implemented through a reparations lens. In 2021 Evanston, Illinois became the first city to implement a reparations program. Black Evanston households can receive up to $25,000 of assistance towards down payments or home repairs if they can demonstrate that they or their ancestors lived in Evanston or faced housing discrimination under the redlining program (Treisman, 2021). Although much of the conversation around reparations has focused on subsidizing homeownership or providing cash payments, rental assistance is also crucial to reparations ideology. For reparations to adequately address the systemic harm towards black Americans, they must address the harm done by urban policies such as slum clearing and exclusionary screening.

The Trees

There is a stand of cherry blossom trees around the southwest edge of the Central Park reservoir. For a few weeks in the spring, the path around the water swells with people, all trying to catch a glimpse of the elusive pink. What the onlookers don't see are the cherry trees' root systems. They are shallow, staying close to the oxygen in the surface soil. So I imagine they do not disturb the remains of Seneca Village, which sit several feet below the pink blossoms.

It's hard to imagine that trees as beautiful as these are responsible for overwriting New York's history. When I think of displacement, I think of demolition. I think of a Starbucks on every other corner. I think of blocky buildings with absurd colors that stick out like a sore thumb. I think of gentrification proudly signing its name in the neighborhood. But I don't think of trees. As natural symbols, they seem to predate the city's residents. They offer no indication of what came before.

Amidst cultural shifts and demographic shifts that threaten to bury the city's historical legacies and contemporary injustices, how do we keep the story of the current black exodus above ground? Drawing on Jim Torain and Kathryn Massengberg's methodologies with the West 99th community, maintaining place-based bonds through reunions, grassroots archiving, and digital spaces can keep collective memory alive through those who experienced them. As with Rosenzweig and Blackmar's 1992 Central Park book, counteracting simplistic and misleading accounts through academic scholarship and media production can also bring these stories to the public record, where they can attract wider attention. But beyond changing the narrative, there is an opportunity to change the reality of unaffordability that gives rise to it—to make sure that people can stay.

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