Green gentrification is the process by which environmental investments, sustainability programs, and green rhetoric lead to increases in perceived local desirability as expressed through property values. What results can be a mix of new wealthier residents and businesses that cater to their tastes, while lower-income, longer-term residents face rising costs of living, vanishing community institutions, and physical displacement.

GREEN INVESTMENTS IN CONTEXT

We are in the midst of an ever-worsening housing crisis. Over the past two decades unprecedented increases in housing costs coupled with stagnant wages have left low- and middle-income families with few affordable housing options. In urban spaces across the United States, the effects of this affordability crisis manifest through gentrification, in which low-income communities and communities of color are priced out of their long-time homes and neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are increasingly transformed into upscale enclaves only accessible to the wealthy.

While there is much to learn from community anti-gentrification efforts in general, issues of green gentrification raise a particular set of questions and concerns. What green gentrification shows us is that sustainability policies must be viewed within their political and social context. Green investments interact with an economic system that incentivizes property speculation, private profit, and growth. Any reference to environmental justice without a sincere consideration for who will benefit from green investments in a context of privilege and power is merely an appropriation of the movement.

To understand green gentrification as a system, Melissa Checker (2011) offers the following definition:

“the convergence of urban redevelopment, ecologically minded initiatives and environmental activism in an era of advanced capitalism. Operating under the seemingly a-political rubric of sustainability, environmental gentrification builds on the material and discursive successes of the urban environmental justice movement and appropriates them to serve high-end redevelopment that displaces low income residents.”

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE IS STILL A GOOD THING

Research has shown that access to environmental goods, such as parks, can improve physical and mental health, can strengthen community bonds and can aid child development. Equitable access to high-quality green amenities is part of building a more just world. The risk of environmental gentrification does not nullify environmental justice efforts nor the goal of bringing higher quality green amenities to historically marginalized communities - it is simply a complicating factor.
Green Gentrification is not a reason to stop investing in greening our communities, nor is it a reason to lower the quality of these green amenities to avoid raising property values. Rather, green gentrification presents us with an opportunity and obligation to understand our system of green infrastructure in conversation with systems of housing, ownership, and property. **Green gentrification is only inevitable if we incorrectly assume that our political, economic, and development processes cannot be changed.** Instead, we can ask questions about how green investments and anti-displacement policy can effectively be tied together. We can investigate how green spaces can be sites of community wealth building. And we can examine alternative systems of owning and inhabiting land that allow people to stay in place for more equitable green infrastructure benefits.

**LEARN MORE**

Visit the Resources page at [create.umn.edu](http://create.umn.edu) to explore some of the tools and case studies that can help us imagine what our more equitable and just systems of greening can look like.

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**Defining Green Infrastructure**

In technical terms, green infrastructure is the practice of harnessing natural processes to serve infrastructure needs in human-built environments. City and federal policy have increasingly championed the switch “from gray to green” wherein “gray infrastructure” (using materials like metal and concrete) is replaced by soils and plants. Infrastructure such as green roofs, permeable pavement, and rain gardens can help divert water runoff, absorb chemical pollutants before reaching waterways, and improve urban air quality. Not only are green infrastructure practices effective, they often have compounding benefits such as cost-efficient maintenance, providing pollinator habitat, and urban beautification.

Green infrastructure additionally includes green alterations to the physical landscape beyond those that serve strictly infrastructural purposes in an engineering sense. Open spaces, parks, and planters are also elements of green infrastructure even if their primary intent is social or recreational.