Green gentrification is the process by which environmental greening leads to increases in perceived local desirability that result in higher property values and rents. Greening can mean anything from environmental investments to sustainability programs and green rhetoric, all increasingly popular “win-win” tools in the context of climate change and urban sustainability logic. Under conditions of green gentrification, these different methods of greening are leveraged to drive capital and wealth accumulation. 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.

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. At the same time, the popularization of green infrastructure and the urgent need to mitigate negative climate impacts have led to the proliferation of green investments in urban centers.

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. In this context, viewing environmental investments as universal goods and without a sincere consideration for who benefits misses the impact of privilege and power, an impact that the environmental justice movement so clearly brings to light.

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

“Environmental gentrification describes 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.”

Spotlight on: The High Line (NYC)

The High Line is 1.5 mile long elevated park atop an abandoned railway in lower Manhattan. Since the first section of the park opened in 2009, the High Line has become one of the city’s top attractions, drawing millions of annual visitors and architectural accolades. The neighborhood surrounding the park has also been drastically transformed. Real estate values directly adjacent to the park are more than 100% higher than just one block further away. So dramatic are these impacts, that green gentrification is sometimes called “the High Line Effect.”
GREEN GENTRIFICATION IS NOT INEVITABLE

Green investments are still a good thing. 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. Research has shown that access to environmental goods can improve physical and mental health, strengthen community bonds, and aid child development. Equitable access to high-quality green amenities is part of building a more just world.

Green gentrification presents us with an opportunity and obligation to understand 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.

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, plants, and other natural materials. 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.

When it comes to green gentrification, the definition of green infrastructure is used more broadly. In addition to engineered water and land management practices, here green infrastructure includes open spaces, parks, and greenways where the primary intent might be social or recreational.