

The rapid "revitalization" of American cities

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Don't be fooled by [the news out of Detroit](#): cities are cool again. [One of the big takeaways from the 2010 census](#) was that, after a century-long love affair with suburban subdivisions, affluent Americans are jumping back on [the \(worldwide\) urbanizing bandwagon](#). For a new generation of hipsters, yuppies and retirees, city living is not only aesthetically and culturally preferable. It is an essential piece of a progressive lifestyle.

This sensibility springs from a degree of historical consciousness. "White flight"—a phenomenon propelled by the mingling currents of individual and institutional racism—devastated mid-20th-century cities. Thanks to a generation of excellent historical scholarship, we now know that religious identities introduced variations into this process:

- Jews and Protestants tended to evacuate at the first sign that African Americans might move into the vicinity. In 1950, Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood boasted 48 synagogues. By the end of that decade all had left or dissolved. Events unfolded similarly in Atlanta's Moreland Heights district, where white Protestant churches—long a staple—disappeared altogether during the rapid racial transition of the 1950s.
- Events often unfolded differently in the Catholic parts of town. Deeply attached to the geographically defined parish, white Catholics tended to fight before they fled. In many cities, parishes became the nerve centers for concerted and even violent resistance to African American mobility. White Catholics predominated in the housing mobs that rocked Chicago, Detroit, Boston and other cities during the period. Such vigilante tactics often succeeded in intimidating black residents. When they did not, Catholics, too, usually uprooted their families and headed for whiter pastures.

However and wherever it happened, the massive divestment of human and economic resources that was white flight contributed mightily to the nation's urban crisis. For those who have even a vague sense of this story, it can become all too easy to interpret the more recent movement back to the inner city as a kind of moral counterpoint. We are so much different than they were.

The reality is more complicated. When today's upwardly mobile arrive in urban neighborhoods, it does not take long for independent cafes, boutique shops and—crucially—higher rents to follow. Some style this gentrification process “[revitalization](#).” But revitalization for whom? As the nation's cities gentrify, their poorest residents are being displaced at an alarming rate:

- In Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, an influx of hipsters and university students has sent [10,000 Mexican Americans packing in the last ten years alone](#).
- The construction of a new light-rail line has accelerated the pace of racial transition in North Portland, Oregon, where [neighborhoods long inhabited by African Americans are now up to 90 percent white](#).
- Brooklyn's historically black Brownsville district is “[gentrifying into the shelters](#).” Rates of homelessness in the neighborhood are on the rise, due in no small part to the fact that rents there skyrocketed 22 percent between 2005 and 2010, even as renters' median household income decreased.

Similar developments are remaking [Baltimore](#), [Houston](#), [San Francisco](#), [Newark](#), [Pittsburgh](#), [Philadelphia](#), [Washington D.C.](#) and countless other municipalities. No wonder [the poor are now more likely to live in suburbs than in cities](#). The growing prevalence of “cul-de-sac poverty” underscores a disturbing parallel between mid-century white flight and present-day gentrification: in both cases, prosperous (and most often white) city dwellers made choices that helped to upend the lives of their poor (and most often African American and Latino) would-be neighbors.

Of course, neither white flight nor gentrification can be reduced to a matter of individual choice. Market forces and powerful institutions have loomed large in both processes. But these macro-transformations of urban America have nevertheless been contingent, at least in part, on developments at the micro level. Indeed,

conversations in church fellowship halls and decisions made around dinner tables did—and do—matter.

Those who do not want to see the poor altogether evicted from cities would do well to start talking and acting now. A more robust commitment to affordable housing would go a long way toward softening gentrification's blow. In this season of austerity and gridlock, it might take a mass movement to exact such a commitment from our public officials. If that seems daunting, remember that movements almost always start small. This one could begin in faith-sharing groups and Sunday school classes, where those blessed with the privilege of choosing where they will live come to see that choice for what it is: laden with unexpected ethical implications.

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