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## The Racial Inequities of Green Gentrification in Washington, DC

### Working Paper

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### Summary

Washington, DC is one of the most intensively gentrifying cities in the United States (Hyra 2015, Hyra and Prince 2015, Prince 2016, Richardson, Mitchell, and Franco 2019), but gentrification and displacement are not homogenous across its landscape. In this chapter we consider the process of green gentrification, focusing on the transformations of the Anacostia River. Many residents remember the Anacostia River as a highly polluted, neglected, and segregating river. More recently, however, the river's partial clean-up and revitalization have turned it into a new green icon of the revived US capital. While many see it as a symbol and opportunity for racial reconciliation in the highly segregated "Chocolate City," it also increasingly embodies the traits of a gentrifying and displacing riverfront.

Neighbourhoods in southeast Washington along the Anacostia River have come to represent two extremes and frontiers: on the one hand, a green and gentrification frontier in the wealthy Navy Yard on the western shore, and on the other, an open frontier on the east shore (Williams 2015). In this chapter, we examine urban redevelopment and greening trends in the east frontier and zoom in on the 11th Street Bridge Park construction project and its surrounding area. Our analysis demonstrates that while this project claims to be equity-driven, it currently fails to fundamentally address the city's historic racial inequality and the erosion of Black land ownership. Furthermore, as the intervention is driven by external corporate and philanthropic interventions, it risks neglecting or undermining longstanding racial justice efforts at the grassroots level and overlooks local calls and mobilization for more abolitionist and emancipatory urban greening practice.

## Contrasting legacies east and west of the Anacostia river

The area east of the Anacostia River, which includes the broader neighborhood of far southeast/southwest, encompassing Historic Anacostia, has traditionally been an area with the largest concentration of African American residents (still 95%<sup>1</sup> up to this date, and home to almost 50% of DC's total Black residents). These demographics are explained by generations of African-American land- and home-owners settling in the area. Indeed, from a slave plantation during most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the community of Barry Farm became the first African-American settlement of freedmen in post-civil war Washington. Such freedmen worked in the Navy Yard or on Capitol Hill and returned at night across the river to build their home. These hard-fought achievements, also reflected in the growth of local Black businesses, were followed by post World War II urban renewal policies in Southwest DC (Gillette 1995) that evicted African-American residents and rehoused them into concentrated public housing units, many of which were built in Anacostia (such as the 444-unit development known as Barry Farm<sup>2</sup>).

In the 1970s and 1980s, many subsidized rental units for working-class residents were also developed in the southeast. As expected, after decades of housing segregation policies and practices and urban renewal interventions, poverty rates east of the river soared. During this time, Black, formerly middle-class, and disinvested residential areas such as Mayfair Mansions in the northeast also came to be associated with outdoor drug markets, tense police relations and patrolling by Black community groups, including those associated with the Nation of Islam (Page, 1989). More recently, the financial crisis of the late 2000s and ensuing unequal recovery contributed to widening racial inequality in the DC region (Hyra 2017). This is the context for which aggressive new real estate and commercial investments have taken place, largely from the 2010s onwards (Hyra, Fullilove, Moulden, and Silva 2020).



Historic Anacostia (left) vs. remaining buildings and demolition of Barry Farms public housing development (right). Photos by Isabelle Anguelovski taken in April 2019

By contrast, directly west of the Anacostia River, Navy Yard (together with near southeast) is a post-military and post-industrial neighbourhood cleaned up and redeveloped in 2020 to host new townhomes, bike lanes, shops, restaurants, wineries, a Whole Foods Market, restored waterfronts, bike and walking nature trails, and other so-called accessible and attractive green

<sup>1</sup> <https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/District-of-Columbia/Washington/Anacostia/Race-and-Ethnicity>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2019/03/01/barry-farm-isdown-to-three-households-a-new.html>

spaces. Coordinated by the Capitol Riverfront Business Improvement District, the Navy Yard transformation is presented by DC officials, planners, and business leaders as a successful example of clean-up, rebranding, economic development and demographic growth. According to its supporters,<sup>3</sup> the Navy Yard demonstrates best practices around what an environmentally sustainable, compact, transit-oriented development can produce—a new green asset that increases livability in an economically booming and attractive Washington. Notably, Navy Yard has also seen the most dramatic influx of affluent White residents and households earning \$100,000 or more (+29% and +18% between 2006-2010 and 2011-2015 respectively) (Rabinowitz 2017).



The 2010 Navy Yard Park and adjacent new public space. Photos by authors, taken in April 2019

In short, as of 2020, west and east of the Anacostia River could not be more different. This chapter focuses specifically on how new green developments in particular are set to impact the east side of the Anacostia River. In 2014, the global New York City architecture firm OMA won the competition for the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Park (henceforth “Bridge Park”), a \$50-60M planned development to enhance environmental and recreational access between the Navy Yard neighborhood and Anacostia, while further contributing to the clean-up and revitalization of the two shorelines and parks. Both metaphorically and literally, the Bridge Park aims to connect the segregated east to the west banks of the river. The project brings new attention to formerly disinvested areas east of the river, and associates public (i.e., Anacostia Waterfront Initiative), private (i.e., Capitol Riverfront BID members) and nonprofit (i.e., Anacostia Watershed Society) efforts that began in the 2000s to make the Anacostia a renewed environmental amenity. There are also plans to enhance the environmental and recreational offerings of the Anacostia Park. Note, however, that the remediation of heavy contamination elsewhere in the region, including the former trash incinerator at Kenilworth Park in Ward 7 and the toxicity near Barry Farms housing in Ward 8 are not part of these environmental plans. This choice demonstrates that not all environmental issues are receiving the same treatment east of the river, with some projects being glossier than others and privileging green growth and sustainability fixes (Long, 2016; Loughran, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sellingdc.com/navy-yard-homes.php>

## The futuristic 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Park project

Supported by a comprehensive 2018 Equitable Development Plan<sup>4</sup> (EDP) and headed by the nonprofit Building Bridges Across the River conceived by the DC developer WC Smith to support the revitalization of SouthEast DC, the Bridge Park has been touted as possibly the best model of green, inclusive, healthy, and housing rights-centered infrastructure planning in the US (Avni 2018). It did not arise directly from residents' demands, but is rather an externally conceived, nonprofit-driven project. However, the nonprofit leaders of the Bridge Park have explicitly framed the project as community-centered, unlike other projects like the now infamous New York High Line, the Chicago 606, or the Atlanta Beltline, which have had negative economic and racial impacts. For instance, Bridge Park explicitly put African American arts and culture at the center of the vision for the new space.



Rendering of the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Park. Source: OMA+OLIN

Based on a transparent, comprehensive community-driven planning process, the EDP includes workforce training and development for local residents, support to new or existing small businesses, a community land trust (CLT) for the construction of new affordable housing, technical help and training towards homeownership opportunities for existing renters (using what are known as TOPA, Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, and DOPA, District Opportunity to Purchase Act, DC legislations), and partnerships with local lenders and nonprofit developers such as Manna, Inc. and LISC towards housing down-payment assistance. Through Manna, Inc., the equity plan is also creating a home-buyer's club to support residents in becoming homeowners. All of these tools are envisioned as buffers and mechanisms to promote economic stability, wealth creation, and permanent affordability. Just in the last three to four years, Building Bridges Across the River has secured \$54M of funding towards these programs and others linked to environmental education, the arts and culture—even before the start of construction, scheduled to begin in 2021 and finish by 2023.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://bbardc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Equitable-Development-Plan\\_09.04.18.pdf](https://bbardc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Equitable-Development-Plan_09.04.18.pdf)

One of the core anti-displacement elements of the plan is the Douglass community land trust, which will develop 250-350 units to preserve affordable rental housing for residents in the 30-50% area median income range. As one of the leaders of the 11th street project explains, “when we’re talking about housing, it’s about working with some of these housing developers, where if they have some kind of equity gap, or they are looking to provide some affordable housing, the community land trust can help to add some equity to lessen the gap of what’s affordable and what’s not affordable. With the community land trust model, a housing subsidy continues to stay in the home, so that those homes are permanently affordable. Because one thing we know is for community land trusts to be truly successful it can’t be done without the city’s support, whatever the municipality is.”

The Bridge Park is not the only new green redevelopment east of the river. In 2006, the local government had already announced the demolition and redevelopment of the Barry Farm public housing complex into a mixed-use, mixed-income, transit oriented, open space, new public infrastructure, and recreation center development (Turè 2017). Adjacent to it is a new pedestrian and transit-oriented mixed-use redevelopment on Poplar Point which will include a new 70-acre park, solar panels, and bike lanes. The new development is touted by the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Equity development as “one of the last great urban redevelopment opportunities on the whole East Coast of the United States.” However, equity considerations have been largely overlooked as part of the planning process. Only 10% of the 700-800 new units are reserved for affordable housing. In the words of Ari Theresa, the attorney of Barry Farm residents, Red Brick Partners has failed to account for issues of gentrification included in the DC comprehensive plan and preserve the neighborhood (Zhan 2019). Interestingly, brochures about Poplar Point already advertise the future 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Park as a new recreational amenity for residents. While Poplar Point is the largest development on the waterfront, inland in Anacostia the St. Elizabeth’s hospital conversion will anchor the new headquarter of the Department of Homeland Security (NHS) and welcome multi-billion dollar investments in related industries, contractors, services, housing, small business developments, and beyond (Cowell and Mayer 2015).



Sign for the new MLK Gateway project planned for 2020. Photo by Isabelle Anguelovski taken in April 2019

### **Racial justice concerns**

The above discussion should make it clear that the Bridge Project is making the investment path into the Anacostia neighborhood more direct and attractive for new real estate developments that have already reshaped the broader political economy of the city. One current developer justifies his “first mover” investment strategy in Anacostia by pointing at the project (and the private investors that support it) as the “first entry point” to Anacostia, offering the needed credibility that legitimizes investments. In his own words, “the strategy of our company is to go in early to emerging neighborhoods that [...] are ready for redevelopment and to buy property and redevelop it and re-tenant it.” But such large-scale developments require deeper conversations about political, cultural, and economic displacement (Hyra 2015) and about who will be able to own land and homes and rent at affordable rates.

For good reason, critics have called the Bridge Park project the “bridge to gentrification,” arguing that it offers a direct physical path for new “gateway” projects into the Anacostia neighborhood, including the equity-oriented MLK Gateway project and the Reunion Square development project, funded through a \$60.8M TIF (Tax Increment Financing) tax scheme widely used in DC to fund redevelopment project in “emerging” neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Anacostia’s attractiveness has been spurred more recently by the opening of a new Busboys and Poets café, a local hip restaurant and book store chain showcasing the work of Black artists and intellectuals in the District and beyond, by the recent Historic Anacostia preservation trail and by the renewed attention to the once home of Frederick Douglass, a former escaped slave and historic American abolitionist. In this redevelopment context, a broader question arises: Whose Blackness is being valued, for which purpose, and for whose benefits in the green and redeveloped Anacostia?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bisnow.com/washington-dc/news/economic-development/mayor-bowser-proposes-tif-bond-for-anacostias-reunion-square-development-93498>

On the one hand, the strategy used by nonprofits such as Building Bridges Across the River to bring new financial resources to Anacostia by using the bridge project's aesthetic, environmental, and recreational attractiveness is a remarkable shift. Anacostia is a community of color that has suffered from disinvestment, and the redevelopment effort aims to benefit longtime residents through support for CLTs and affordable housing measures in a neighbourhood where only 20% of residents own homes and are particularly sensitive to rent increases. On the other hand, local activists and residents point to the limitation of the community land trust model in building financial equity and, in turn, socio-economic mobility. They recognize that equity challenges run deep. In a country where the racial wealth gap is enormous—median White families are projected to own 86 times more wealth than Black families over the next 5 years (Nieves, Collins, and Hoxie 2017)—land is seen as key in addressing this gap.

To this end, some nonprofits such as Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE DC) are mobilizing to secure additional land and resources for Black families. As one organizer explained, "You need a different plan for people to control the land. We tie the environment to housing and land." Some housing and economic development activists also argue that the \$50-60M that the green bridge will cost could be easily reverted into funding for community-initiated green projects and enterprises, and other minority-driven and Anacostia-based developments and buildings, while limited funding could be allocated to the renovation of the existing Anacostia Park and Trail east of the river.

Activists and residents fear that the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Park, with its acquired financial value, will activate the commodification of greenness and diversity together, enabling the profit-driven consumption of race and ethnicity through "cool", comfortable, multi-cultural events in new green areas and their surrounding retail spaces (even if those embody Black achievement) (Summers 2019). Residents note that such green projects are envisioned and driven by White—albeit progressive—leaders, financed by global banking institutions such as JP/Morgan Chase, and designed by international New York City-based firms (OMA), revealing who holds the economic power in the southeast and who might make the next move in Anacostia.

The fact remains that no matter how much equity planning is embedded into urban greening interventions, high-value "green" real estate projects might be directly paving the way for a new dispossession and displacement frontier. Such fears are justified in light of one developer's vision to make the east of the river a "destination for residents from across the city." As he further explains, the more his firm "can own in the neighborhood, the more successful the firm will be." Local fears of broader neighborhood loss already materialized in 2016 when a developer's "space finding" bus tour through Anacostia showcased potential sites to developers seeking ground zero spaces or land to buy. The tour bus was kicked out by protestors, who denounced how developers had just "discovered" Anacostia as an investment site, exhibiting what Safransky calls green settler colonialism (Safransky 2014) and threatening residents with racialized dispossession. Anacostia residents risk suffering what Oren Yiftachel calls (Yiftachel 2020) a "permanent state of displaceability," or erasure, in the quest for more profit. In Anacostia, house prices are already going up quickly—median sale prices have multiplied by 2.5 between 2014 and 2018<sup>6</sup>—signifying that, except for wealthier African American residents who might be able to pay premium prices for homes and increased property values, the majority of African Americans will likely lose out, and will ultimately be displaced.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.trulia.com/for\\_sale/1850\\_nh/](https://www.trulia.com/for_sale/1850_nh/)



Protestors block the “space finding” gentrification bus tour in Anacostia. Source: [Washington Business Journal](#)

### **Towards abolitionist imperatives for greening and sustainability in DC**

In the push to green formerly disinvested areas and carve them up for new market opportunities, Blackness is being rebranded to become palatable to White consumers who enjoy Black heritage, arts, and music as “cool” without necessarily interacting with Black people and older residents of the area (Summers 2019). This commodified Blackness has been deployed by developers for the purpose of pushing the green development agenda in southeast, whereas the Blackness that actually built the southeast and its historic relationship with the river, and that made its neighbourhoods thrive despite racialized land appropriation, abandonment and conversion—seems erased. Such an erasure undermines the ability of the community to thrive. As a longtime resident says about the future Bridge Park, “I will be good enough to serve you slurpies and hotdogs at the river festival, but not good enough to live there.” Good, green intentions are not good enough to reconcile and empower.

Furthermore, some activists and residents see these gentrified green spaces as a new plantation for day laborer residents who cannot access or feel uncomfortable in these places, but must work in or near them in order not to be displaced. Here, grassroots movements such as ONE DC or EmpowerDC are playing an important role in empowering residents to reaffirm their roots and identity. Others have even articulated a reparation claim for gentrified Anacostia residents, arguing that “Barry Farm residents were injured ‘cause they were getting pushed out, they were injured ‘cause they were living in horrible conditions and the idea is to get them some kind of remedy. The demolition went forward. People were displaced. Barry Farm just was like the most egregious example of everything wrong with zoning.”

Ultimately, the Bridge Park and other green improvements east of the river invisibilize existing modes of place-making, every-day resistance, and bottom-up networks of resilience, support, and care that are so fundamental to the sustainability of the city. This is particularly true for low-income residents and those living in affordable or public housing complexes who fear they will experience social or economic barriers or discomfort in attending recreational green events and



lose a sense of belonging. Outsider-imposed plans in the Anacostia region might undermine the dignity, humanity and resilience of long-term vulnerable residents. What might also become erased through such a grand project is collective memory and history with regards to the river. Building on McKittrick's work (McKittrick 2011), we see that new green projects fail to recognize how Black residents practice place-making outside of what McKittrick sees as normalized, accepted and official cartographies of power.

An alternative to top-down greening efforts would be an abolitionist ethics of environmental justice (Ranganathan and Bratman 2019) and urban greening (Anguelovski et al. Online). As Ranganathan and Bratman (2019) have argued, longtime African American residents of Wards 7 and 8 have developed social and neighborhood networks rooted in an ethics of care and healing. During times of weather emergency, for instance, neighbors bring food for the elderly and offer childcare support—a pattern that critical urban and environmental scholars have argued are essential for building bottom-up resilience (Klinenberg 2002) As one interviewee stated, “People offer each other all sorts of in-kind support in times of crisis; they look after each other’s kids, share rides, check in on each other. Now, how do we strengthen those bonds? That’s what we need to focus on. Instead, there’s the city’s response, which is almost always to bring in outside people and groups in to help” (cited in Ranganatha and Bratman 2019: 16). Older activists and leaders east of the river have connections to historic Black power and abolitionist movements and narrate their organizing through abolitionist idioms, while also communicating with fellow residents through these embedded cultural and political registers. Bruce Purnell of the Love More Movement, for instance—a community-based initiative that helps to provide support for seniors and youth—is a fifth-generation descendant of abolitionists who organized the Underground Railroad with Frederick Douglass. Similarly, Black churches, community centers, and senior gatherings are centers of gravity for community building and cohesion. But as new waves of real estate development take over, they risk whitening and sanitizing these culturally-rooted forms of belonging.

### **Decolonizing urban greening**

In conclusion, despite an equity-driven progressive agenda embedded in new efforts such as the Bridge Park, Anacostia still risks becoming a new White and upper class racialized greenscape. Today a partially outsider-driven green virtue seems underpinned by a form of whiteness which risks eventually “activating” formerly no-go zones through light memories of the past, but whose unsavory past of racial settlement and legacy (as a deep memory) is left obscured or invisible. In the southeast, it is the profound racialized inequality that allows greening, sustainability, and corporate financial capture to advance.

The projection and the imagination deployed around the Bridge Park project risks effacing dissonant green and land experiences. In contrast, developing an abolitionist green practice in Anacostia would mean recognizing the centrality of land recognition, redistribution and control for residents. Put differently, to understand and value the relations of deeply rooted groups in a landscape, one must deal with the history of racialized multi-layer geography. Engaging with that racialized landscape and history would help achieve a different outcome for green and sustainable Anacostia, rather than new racialized landscapes of vulnerability and displaceability. Thus, a final question emerges: What are the best ways to rehumanize a space, to value the soul, memory, and history of its residents, and create a new sense of (green) ownership and leadership through green spaces?

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