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**Article**

## Privatization and its aftermath: Are we facing a new displacement force?

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## Research Article

## Privatization and its aftermath: Are we facing a new displacement force?



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## ABSTRACT

The privatization of once publicly-funded affordable housing is the primary tool for preserving and maintaining affordable housing. This process, however, is quietly creating urban migration patterns that are altering the demographic profile of cities with cumulative change that we cannot fully estimate at this stage. There is growing need for a granular analysis at the parcel level to refocus the spotlight on this quiet displacement force. To start filling this lacuna, the article links privatization processes to gentrification and displacement. Through a case study of the privatization of Mitchell Lama buildings on Roosevelt Island, NYC, and the demographic changes it has engendered, this study points to a more significant trend of privatization of housing projects in American cities and worldwide. Its main argument is that, despite their quiet nature, which differs fundamentally from the Urban Renewal projects of the 1960s, the cumulative change they produce may be similar. On this basis, **this study's main contribution is an in-depth, small-scale analysis aimed at deciphering the mechanisms, motivations, and decision-making processes of households experiencing ongoing privatization.** Through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, urban historical research, and statistical analysis, the study identifies three urban trends: 1. Privatization may lead to exclusionary displacement through increases in rent and cost of living; 2. Privatization may lead to social displacement pressures such as a sense of loss of place, loss of friends and community, and resentment among long-term residents; and 3. If the right policies are developed, privatization can present an opportunity for upward social mobility.

## 1. Introduction

In his article “Urban Renewal and its Aftermath,” Jon Teaford (2000), retrospectively observes the lessons learned from the federal urban redevelopment program enacted in Title I of the Housing Act of 1949. He refers to the US Urban Renewal policy that, by the end of the 1960s, had sparked public and scholarly criticism for displacing millions of primarily Black and Latino residents from their homes (Judd, 1979, p. 273; Dreier et al., 2001, 119). He argues that despite the critiques that point to the failure of Urban Renewal (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2004; Anderson & Kelly, 1976; Gans, 1965a), in the long run, it led to the Community Development approach that provided local authorities with greater flexibility and emphasized rehabilitation and urban context. His use of the term “aftermath,” therefore, refers to the lessons learned, which resulted in better and more nuanced policies.

Similarly, this article also shifts the focus of research to “privatization and its aftermath” by focusing on the privatization of publicly

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funded affordable housing in New York City [NYC]. By closely examining a case-study of the privatization of Mitchell Lama [ML]<sup>1</sup> buildings on Roosevelt Island [RI] and the demographic changes it engendered, I point to a broader trend of privatization of housing projects in American cities (Bowie, 2001; Rubinowitz, 1991; Schill, 1989) and around the world (Norris & Hearne, 2016; Tosics, 1994; Werczberger & Reshef, 1993). In this way, I add my voice to the research community that is currently engaged in highlighting new displacement forces in cities throughout the world (Bhagat, 2019; Sharma, 2021; Slater, 2021).

Because of the silent nature of privatization, the numbers and scale of the phenomenon may seem to be different. However, the number of households displaced by Urban Renewal projects in the United States between 1956 and 1967 is estimated at 330,000, with 30,000 households in NYC alone, 41% of which were families of colour (Nelson, 2018). An NYC comptroller's report from 2006 points to the loss of more than 36,000 units of ML housing (24% of the units developed) and the then future prospect of more than 40,000 units scheduled to retire their mortgages by 2015 (Thompson, 2006, p. 5). When we consider these numbers side by side, we are presented with an alarming picture.

My main argument is that despite the quiet nature of privatization processes, which differs fundamentally from the federal bulldozer era, the cumulative change they produce may be as dramatic as the Urban Renewal projects that forced underprivileged populations out of city centres. Privatization processes, I argue, are quietly and gradually creating urban migration patterns that are transforming the demographic profile of cities through cumulative change that cannot be fully assessed at this stage. To start estimating this change, this study focuses on the cumulative impact of the gentrification and displacement that may result from processes of privatization.

A number of attempts have been made to estimate the impact of privatization, showing that the process might lead to mortgage foreclosures, crises when financial investors shift their interests, and inherent instability of pricing once the affordability requirements expire (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Fraser, Oakley, & Bazuin, 2012). In addition, some have highlighted the fact that privatization usually harms those citizens who are most in need (Galvez & Wagner, 2011; Marcuse, 2009; Martin, 2011; Wyly, Moos, Hammel, & Kabahizi, 2009), and that it threatens democratic processes (Imbroscio, 2016; Mirafteb, 2016). More specifically Khare (2017), who surveyed the privatization of US public housing, has argued that the mixed-income strategy developed in the privatization process needs to be restructured to generate a mix of housing tenures, rather than subsidizing private development in gentrifying neighbourhoods that already attract market-rate populations. This research enriches the scholarly literature and attempts to estimate the impact of privatization by focusing on the displacement pressures accumulating in households involved in the privatization process.

RI was selected as a unique case study of a planned mixed-income, mixed-race community with tenants protected under ML affordability that have already expired. Based on a mixed-methods approach of urban historical research, ethnographic fieldwork, and quantitative analysis of census data, this article follows the privatization of four ML buildings and discusses the demographic changes that their privatization engenders. This granular analysis is necessary due to the quiet nature of privatization processes: first, because they do not manifest themselves in urban space like the tearing down of a building and therefore **cannot be seen**; and second, because displacement pressures and exclusionary displacement (Marcuse, 1985, p. 206) are so hard to define and quantify that they **cannot be measured**. Big data and advanced technology may help create maps and spatial analyses of the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> However, these geo-spatial analyses are based on the level of the census tract or the block (Zuk, Bierbaum, Chapple, Gorska, & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2018), whereas the phenomenon itself is more granular. Privatization happens in town-hall meetings, in the corridors of housing projects, and on the street. **For these reasons, this article's main contribution is an in-depth, small-scale analysis aimed at deciphering the mechanisms, the motivations, and the decision-making processes of the people and households involved.**

Following this introduction, the Theoretical background reviews the history of affordable housing in NYC and the privatization of ML programs and links them to the discourse of gentrification and displacement. Next, the Rationale and methods section explains the mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative ethnographic fieldwork with urban historical research and the quantitative analysis of census data about the island demographic trends in comparison to NYC. The Results section then presents multiple perspectives on the privatization process: a qualitative view through the eyes of the residents, and a quantitative view through the prism of the conversion rate and changes in the island's demographics. Finally, the Discussion highlights privatization as a quiet gentrifying force that must be addressed in order to prevent an aftermath that is limited to displacement.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. The privatization of affordable housing in New York City

NYC housing policy is one of the most progressive in the US (Schwartz, 1999, p. 839) and can be traced back to the Tenement House Act of 1879, which predates all other meaningful federal interventions (Elmedni, 2018, p. 1). In its decades-long history of national and local interventions for the provision of affordable housing, one of the most successful public-sector affordable housing programs was the ML program. As noted in the introduction, the large-scale displacement caused by the policy of Urban Renewal led to the Community Development approach (Teaford, 2000), which emphasized the rehabilitation of the community and the urban context (Fields, 2015; Halpern, 1995; Kelly, 1976). During this short phase of federal and state support to cities, NYC was among the first jurisdictions to issue tax-exempt bonds to finance moderate-income housing, including more than 150,000 units built in the 1960s and 1970s under the ML

<sup>1</sup> The Mitchell Lama Program was created by the Limited Profit Housing Act in 1955. Initiated by New York State Senator MacNeil Mitchell and former Brooklyn Assemblyman Alfred Lama, it provided affordable housing for middle income residents. <https://hcr.ny.gov/ml>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, The Urban Displacement Project is an extensive study. Led by Prof. Chapple, it aims to quantify, measure, and map displacement and gentrification using interactive maps. <https://www.urbandisplacement.org/>.

program (Schwartz, 1999, p. 839). However, with the dismantling of federal aid to cities in the 1970s, the ML program ceased the development of new projects (Elmedni, 2018, p. 5).

In the current US system, private-public partnership (PPP) serves as the major tool for creating affordable housing (Fainstein, 2001; Sutton et al., 2008, p. 38). As result, the newer affordable housing plans leverage private capital using varied policy tools (He, 2016, p. 4). Among these more recent affordable housing plans is the *Ten-Year Plan for Housing* issued by Mayor Koch in 1985, which consisted of more than 100 programs with different incentives. Later, Mayor Bloomberg's *New Housing Marketplace Plan* (2003–2014) rested mainly on partnerships between the private sector, non-profits, and public agencies and introduced the 80-20 rule, according to which at least 20% of all new units must be affordable (He, 2016; Stabrowski, 2015). Shortly after his election in 2014, Mayor de Blasio introduced *Housing New York: A Five, Ten-Year Plan* (WNYC 2014), which aimed to create and/or preserve 300,000 affordable housing units for all income groups, with a special focus on low-income (Elmedni, 2018, p. 1).

Despite this extensive history of affordable housing policies, and as the federal funding for the existing affordable housing programs continues to dwindle (Elmedni, 2018, p. 3; Kleit & Page, 2015), the city can neither supply nor build enough to provide and preserve the necessary amount of affordable housing (Stringer, 2018). This is strikingly obvious from the *New York Times* report that since 2013, 25 million applications have been submitted to the Housing Lottery system, competing for roughly 40,000 units.<sup>3</sup>

In this battle to preserve and provide more affordable housing, the privatization of once publicly-funded ML programs lies at the heart of this case study. ML developers are allowed to “go private” or “buy out” at the end of the contract, which usually lasts 20 years (Geberer, 2005; Thompson, 2006). Privatization gives the owner the option of charging market rates for the apartments after they are vacated, and since many of the neighbourhoods containing ML buildings have witnessed a dramatic increase in real estate prices, privatization has become even more attractive (Geberer, 2005). However, pursuing a buyout can lead to an immediate and sharp increase in rent and maintenance fees, making the buildings unaffordable to many or most of the residents (Thompson, 2006, p. 5).

The scale and scope of the affordability crisis facing the residents of ML programs came to the fore in the comptroller's 2004 policy report *Affordable No More* and its 2006 update. These reports reviewed the status of ML and Limited Dividend Programs. Fig. 1., for example, contains the Manhattan-focused map from the comptroller report. Both reports document the loss of more than 36,000 units of ML and Limited Dividend housing (24% of all the units developed) and identify more than 40,000 units that were scheduled to retire their mortgages by 2015, thereby removing a major barrier to leaving the program (Thompson, 2006, p. 5). Once a Section 8 tenant vacates an apartment, it is permanently lost to the inventory of affordable housing.

There are ongoing efforts to preserve ML projects. In 2004, the city announced a NYC *Housing Development Corporation* plan to refinance and incentivize developers to remain in the program for 15 more years (Thompson, 2006). In 2012, additional steps were taken to refinance Co-op City and keep the development affordable for another 35 years (Geberer, 2015). In Mayor de Blasio's *Housing New York* plan, one of the changes included saving 15,000 ML homes (Elmedni, 2018, p. 4). Despite these efforts, the privatization process continues to move forward.

## 2.2. Privatization within the discourse of gentrification and displacement

The privatization of once publicly funded affordable housing has been the main tool for preserving and maintaining affordable housing. Moreover, in a market-based municipal economy, the private market is the best way to develop more affordable housing (He, 2016). Those who favour privatization argue that the motivation of the private sector to maximize profits drives developers to deliver quality housing at lower costs. Therefore, relying on the private sector expedites the development process and reduces state bureaucracies' inefficiencies and citizens' dependence on the state (Glaeser, Gyourko, & Saiz, 2008). Those who oppose privatization highlight how these processes harm frail populations first. Instead of being provided with free-market opportunities, disadvantaged residents are compelled to navigate a private housing market full of inherited discrimination (Galvez, 2011; Kleit, Kang, & Scally, 2016). Specifically, objecting to the mixed-income development strategy that has also been at the foundation of RI development, critics argue that it is a scheme to ease private sector access to public land that eventually leads to displacement and control over marginalized populations (DeFilippis & Fraser, 2010; Hackworth, 2007; Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008).

This research joins the critics in arguing that such privatization processes are gradually and quietly producing urban migration patterns that are changing the demographic profile of cities with a cumulative change that we cannot fully assess at this stage.

Therefore, to start evaluating privatization processes' impact, this section contextualizes privatization within the discourse of gentrification and displacement.

Gentrification and displacement are two terms that refer to population movements that have been debated by the scholarly literature since the 1960s (Zuk, Bierbaum, Chapple, Gorska, Loukaitou- et al., 2018). Gentrification is typically used to describe the influx of a younger, high-income population into a low-income neighbourhood (Glass, 1964). Displacement refers to the involuntary outflow of low-income populations from their places of residence (Grier & Grier, 1978). It is a multi-generational cycle in which the physical environment may improve or deteriorate and the population may move in or out of the neighbourhood (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009a).

In the US, the policies for developing affordable housing have evolved based on the lessons learned from displacement and gentrification – beginning with the Housing Act of 1937, which aimed at eliminating the economic and social liability of slums through Urban Renewal (Alex F. Schwartz, 2015). Although the policy of Urban Renewal provided public housing alternatives for low-income families, an undesirable by-product was the displacement of millions of low-income people of colour from inner-city slums into public housing projects in the boroughs (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2004; Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2001; Judd, 1979). Ultimately, this

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/nyregion/nyc-affordable-housing-lottery.html>.

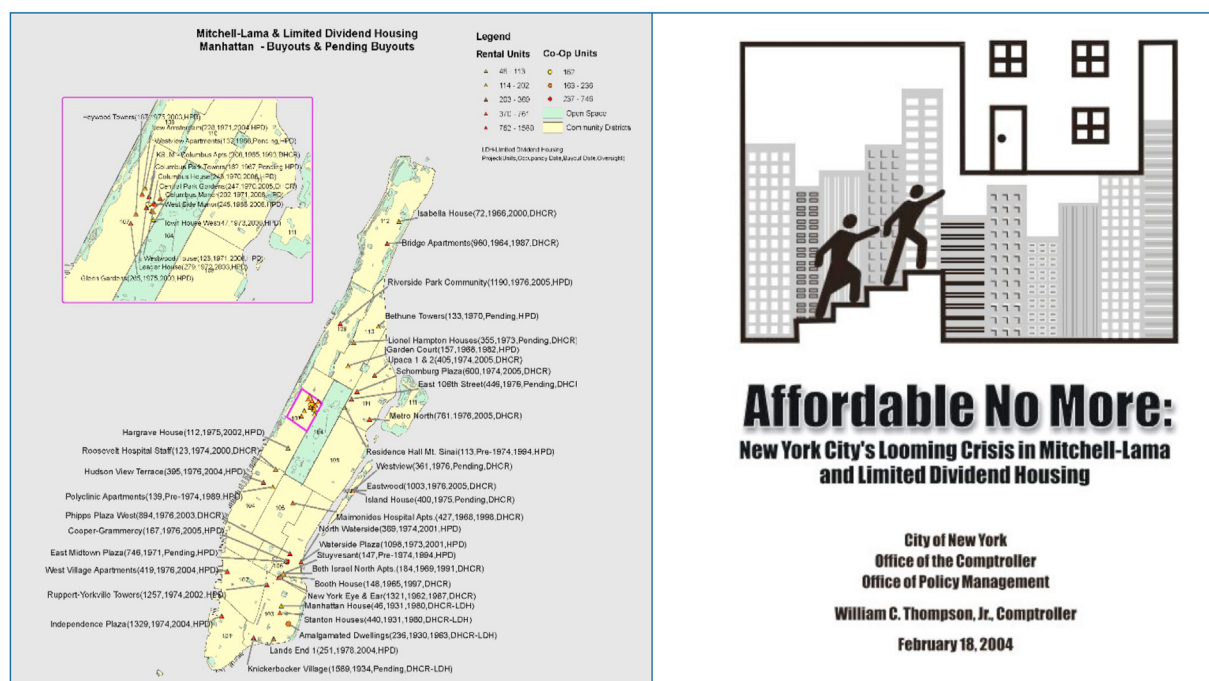


Fig. 1. Mitchell-Lama and limited dividend housing: Manhattan - buyouts & pending buyouts according to the 2006 NYC comptroller policy report *Affordable No More*.

created racially segregated neighbourhoods with high concentrations of poverty and crime (Anderson, 1964; Gans, 1965b; Hendrickson, Lindberg, Connelly, & Roseland, 2011; Teaford, 2000). While the displacement of low-income residents from the deteriorated areas of inner cities led to the revitalization and gentrification of these areas, pushing low-income residents into the outskirts caused the high-income residents to move further away to the suburbs – a phenomenon that has been known as “white flight” (Wilson & Toub, 2006).

Improved urban environments' renewed interest in urban lifestyles (Zukin, 1995) and the appeal of the creative city (Florida, 2005) led to a second wave of this cyclical movement, as millennials and retiring baby boomers started to return to city centres (Ehrenhalt, 2012), contributing to the revitalization of poor and deteriorated urban neighbourhoods (Hamnett, 1984; Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008) and the improvement of physical environments, services, maintenance, housing, and infrastructure (Bridge & Butler, 2011; Davidson & Lees, 2009). This influx has resulted in the displacement of low-income residents, this time not directly imposed through raze and rebuild projects but rather due to the increase in rent and cost of living in the neighbourhood, to the point that existing residents could no longer afford to live there (Davidson & Lees, 2009; Eckerd, Kim, & Campbell, 2019; Marcuse, 1985).

Whether gentrification is caused by demographic factors such as the movement of artists and alternative households creating increased demand for an urban lifestyle, or, alternatively, is induced by capitalist interests and public policy, the question remains whether it must necessarily result in displacement (Chapple, 2017, p. 86). Some argue that gentrification may accrue without displacement (Freeman, 2005; Freeman & Braconi, 2004; Hamnett, 2003; Vigdor, Massey, & Rivlin, 2002). Opposing scholars stress that the exclusion of low-income households is an inherent aspect of gentrification (Davidson & Lees, 2009; Newman & Wyly, 2006; Slater, 2009b). Others highlight that although displacement may be a defining characteristic and outcome of gentrification, it can also occur in the absence of gentrification (Zuk, Bierbaum, Chapple, Gorska, & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2018, p. 35).

Despite this ongoing dispute, most studies agree that the people moving in are wealthier, whiter, and better educated, and that those moving out are more likely to be renters, poorer, and people of colour. There is also broad consensus that even without direct displacement, gentrification results in **displacement pressures** and **exclusionary displacement** at best (Zuk, Bierbaum, Chapple, Gorska, & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2018, p. 40).

The term **exclusionary displacement** was coined by Marcuse to describe a situation in which a middle-class presence is sufficient to cause the exclusion of low-income households, through the loss of affordable housing inventory and reduced options (Marcuse, 1985, p. 206). Marcuse also identifies changes in neighbourhoods that make them less liveable for their long-term residents and defines them as **displacement pressures**. He refers to changes such as the loss of friends and community, the loss of familiar shops and the opening of new shops for other clientele, and change to public facilities, transportation patterns, and support services (Marcuse, 1985; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Following Marcuse, Davidson (2009), argues that physically being pushed out is not the only form of displacement. Low-income residents may remain in place, but the changes in the population's demographic character produce a sense of loss of place; the disappearance of familiar faces, the introduction of many new ones, and changes in local governance lead to a sense of loss of control and stability. Shaw and Hagemans (2015, p. 339) show that secure housing is insufficient to alleviate the pressure of displacement on

low-income residents. They argue that the impact of exclusionary displacement and displacement pressures can be similar to physical displacement, producing the same feelings of grief associated with any significant loss.

Chapple and Zuk et al. (2018, 33–39) introduce parameters to define and measure gentrification and displacement while highlighting that most quantitative research on displacement and gentrification is based on the level of the census tract or the census block. They also emphasize the data limitations and the need for a more granular analysis at the parcel level (Chapple, Waddell, & Loukaitou-sideris, 2017, p. 308). To address this issue, I focus on RI using a mixed-methods approach that enables an in-depth granular understanding of the privatization process on the housing project scale.

### 3. Rationale and methods

This article aims to understand the demographic changes occurring on RI as a result of the privatization of four ML buildings. Because of the granularity, small scale, and quiet nature of the process, it cannot be completely understood by analysing big-data and interactive maps, or by ethnographic field work alone. To meet this challenge the research method was developed specifically to combine qualitative research methods such as urban historical research and ethnographic field work with and a quantitative analysis of census data about the island's demographic trends in comparison to NYC.

*The urban research* focused on historical and current urban development and the planning policies out of which they emerged. This stage was based on primary and secondary sources such as historical city plans, archival records, and a literature review. Most of the archival work was made possible by the generosity of the RI Historical Society [RIHS]. This included a thorough analysis of the Island's master plan (Johnson & Burgee, 1969) to understand the motivations and planning ideologies that informed the development of the Island. By going over the texts and analysing the architectural drawings, I was able to articulate the spatial relationship between the buildings and the hierarchical distribution related to affordable versus market-rate units. Another essential historical source was “The application for the plan's approval by the state” (Logue, 1972), which informed the development rationale and strategy. Finally, to understand the legal aspects of the privatization, I thoroughly read and analysed the privatization agreements for each building and watched the recordings of past town hall meetings.

This part of the research informed the historical development process of the island section of the results and framed it within the spirit of the times that led to its unique mixed-race, mixed-income approach.

*The ethnographic fieldwork* sought to understand the changes as seen through the eyes of the local population and included the author's residency on the Island between August 2019 and August 2021. It included her children's enrolment in local schools and participation in after-school activities and cultural events, observing everyday life at all hours of the day, and engaging in informal conversations with residents. The field observations from over 24 months were documented in a field diary and underwent thematic analysis. In addition, the analysis draws from in-depth interviews from 30 semi-structured interviews with residents from different backgrounds and policymakers and real estate agents. The stratified sample included a relatively balanced distribution of 5 residents who live as protected tenants, five residents who purchased their apartments during the process, and five tenants who are new to the Island and bought their apartments at market rate. Additionally, I interviewed five representatives from the real estate companies that developed and managed the buildings, three real estate agents who work on the Island, and several students from Cornell-Tech. Interview transcripts were thematically coded and triangulated with the filed observations. In addition to descriptive questions to understand demographic characteristics and relation to the Island (How long have they lived there, why they chose to move to the island, and so forth), interviewees were explicitly asked about the privatization process and their roles in it. They were free to add or disclose any part they chose to. This aspect of the study was supported by online research based on institutional websites, newspaper reports, and internet news from local websites, including primarily, but not exclusively, the Roosevelt Islander Online blog, the RI Historical Society website, the RIOCI website, and the RI Facebook group, where most Island residents receive their updates. This part of the research helped articulate the privatization through the eyes of the resident's part of the results.

*Quantitative analysis* was used to understand the demographic changes on RI. It was based mainly on the American Community Survey from 2000 to 2019. To this end, I extracted the relevant data sets of income level, age distribution, and racial distribution of RI's zip code in the years 2000, 2010, 2017, 2019 (the most updated to date). Then, I compared RI's trends to the same year's data sets on NYC as a whole and the zip codes of the Upper East Side of Manhattan (See links to the relevant data sets in appendix 1. a). The data sets were cleaned and visualized using graphs and pie charts to show changes, as elaborated in Fig. 6. To analyse the conversion rate from affordable to market-rate units, I used RIOCI Performance Measure Reports from between the years 2013 and 2020, which are available online (see links in appendix 1. b). These reports elaborate on the privatization date and the number of units converted to market in each building every year. Based on this and the historical research, I created the graph in Fig. 5, which follows the island's development and the conversion rate. The future prediction is a rough estimation based on the past rates. This part of the research helped determine the privatization rate and the results related to demographic change.

The research's mixed-methods approach combining big data and small-scale interactions resulted in a nuanced analysis that provided multiple perspectives on the privatization processes. The Results section that follows is divided into a historical review of the process followed by a qualitative view through the eyes of the residents and a quantitative analysis based on the conversion rate and changes in the island's demographics.

### 4. Results: Multiple perspectives on the privatization processes of Roosevelt Island

Fig. 2 shows the location of RI in the East River, just off of Manhattan's Upper East Side. For many years it was “the island nobody knows” (Johnson & Burgee, 1969), extremely inaccessible to the public, and a home for public health institutions. RI's development as a

residential neighbourhood was based on the philosophy of community development that was sponsored by the federal Department of HUD and New York State's Urban Development Corporation [UDC]. Designed by Johnson and Burgee, the master plan was inspired by the Garden City planning ideology that envisioned a “building in the park” layout that would provide affordable housing for people of different income levels and age groups. The plan included two residential areas, Northtown and Southtown, separated by five parks and a town centre (Johnson & Burgee, 1969, p. 15). Edward Logue, then the new head of New York State's UDC, elaborated on the plan and assigned a specific income and age group to each building (Logue 1972). As part of the financial agreement to develop RI, it was leased to the state in 1969 for 99 years and continues to be managed today by a state-led management company: the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation [RIOC]. The first part of the plan was publicly funded and built through an architectural competition in 1974. The four residential WIRE buildings of Northtown – Westview, Island House, Rivercross, and Eastwood, (now Roosevelt Landings) – were built in the late 1970s and provided affordable housing under the federal Section 8 and New York State ML programs. To meet development challenges the low-income affordable units were located at Roosevelt Landings facing the Queens power plant, whereas the middle to moderate affordable units were located at Westview, Island House, and Rivercross (Logue 1972). However, due to financial difficulties, this plan did not proceed beyond the first stage, and later residential buildings were developed from the late 1990s onward based on various new affordability plans. These newer units are usually marketed as luxury rental apartments or condos at a market rate similar to that of Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Since 2006 each of the WIRE buildings has had its own plan for exiting the ML program according to its ownership structure (rental or co-op). Gradually, the units in each building are being converted from affordable to market rate. According to the RIOC Performance Measure Reports, by March 2020 27% of the 2141 affordable WIRE units had been converted to market rate (RIOC 2020). Fig. 3. elaborates on the income level and number of affordable units in each of the buildings.

Upon privatization, tenants are usually given the opportunity to purchase their apartments at a discount, for approximately 65% off the market price (buy in). Those who do not wish to do so, or cannot afford to do so, may remain as tenants for the next 30 years under a rental program mirroring rent stabilization. Ground Lease and Tax Equivalency Payments for affordable units remain low during the 30-year affordability period and thereafter phase into a market-level tax payment (according to the Island House privatization agreement). Although tenants are usually protected by a new affordability plan for several years, the expiration date hangs over their heads as displacement pressures accrue. As I will show in the following section, this process of privatization is gradually changing the atmosphere and demography of the island.

#### 4.1. Privatization through the eyes of the community

The RI community was envisioned in Johnson and Burgee's 1969 masterplan: “We have tried to create not a flat plan, but a three- or four-dimensional image of a new kind of town ... a very different sort of town. Our Island Town will be A community, not a housing project ...” (Johnson & Burgee, 1969, p. 7). And indeed, over the years, RI transformed into a community with local identity and particular social relations (Ours, forthcoming 2022). Based on an examination of the island's numerous social networks, RIOC websites, newspapers, online Facebook groups, and interviews with residents, it is clear that this community has its own unique traditions, such as RI Day in June, when residents “give back” to the island by planting flowers; an active community theatre group; outdoor concerts; a



Fig. 2. Roosevelt Island's location in NYC.

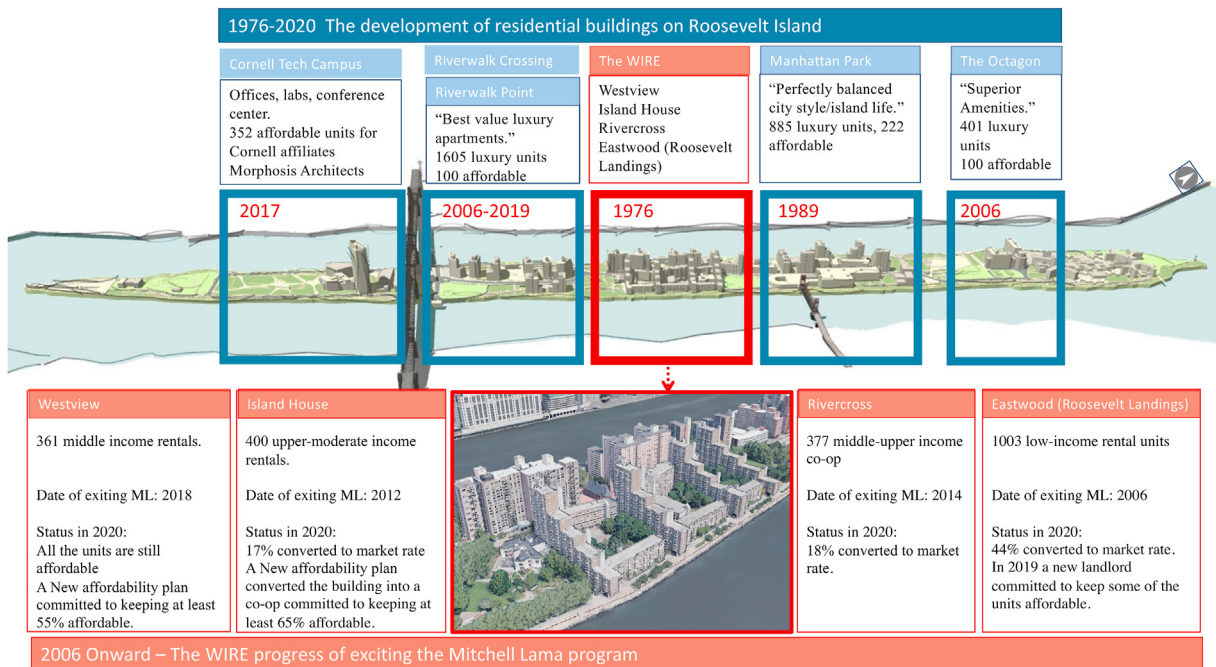


Fig. 3. The housing projects on Roosevelt Island and the WIRE privatization status.



Fig. 4. Image from the 2018 Westview Town Hall meeting. Photo by Rick O'Connor.<sup>7</sup>

Halloween parade; a holiday tree lighting ceremony; and more. There are highly involved activist groups that influence decision making in their neighbourhoods, including a residents' association, a seniors' association, a disabled association, and a visual art association, to

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from The Roosevelt Islander blog <https://rooseveltislander.blogspot.com/search?q=westview> July 30, 2021.

name just a few. Each of the WIRE buildings has its own tenants' association, which held meetings during the privatization process to inform tenants of the expected changes, as reflected in the photograph of a Westview Town Hall Meeting in Fig. 4.

To understand the nature of the privatization process through the eyes of the people, I interviewed more than 20 residents from several age groups and socio-economic backgrounds to get multiple perspectives on the Island's ongoing changes.

The WIRE tenants who are experiencing the privatization can be divided into those who were able to purchase their apartments at the discounted price (buy in) and, alternatively, those who are remaining in their apartments as protected tenants. "I am lucky," says a resident who managed to buy in. "I bought my apartment at a ridiculous price after I waited many years on the waiting list. Now that it is mine, it is great."<sup>4</sup> For such residents, privatization was an excellent opportunity for upward social mobility, enabling them to change their financial and social status from protected tenants to owners of apartments in the middle of NYC and part of the Upper East Side Community District. They are now homeowners in one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in the US, which is a status that comes with a sense of security and self-esteem.

For residents who were not able to buy in, the new affordability plan usually provides an element of security and keeps their rent stabilized under more current plans for a certain number of years. However, the expiration date remains, creating a resentful atmosphere, as reflected in the words of one interviewee: "They think they can get rid of us, but we are here for the long run."<sup>5</sup> When using the word "they," the interviewees were sometimes referring to the developer or the management company and other times to the co-op shareholders, who were previously their equals. The tension created in this process of defining two groups of residents was amplified, as reflected in the words of another member of the community:

When they cut the deal to change the owners and to enable some of the residents to buy their own apartments a lot of tension was created between the tenants because some got better terms than others. Some felt that the deal they struck was not in the best interest of everyone but only those who took part in the negotiation. This created a great deal of resentment between the tenants that lingers on today.<sup>6</sup>

This division into two statuses of residents can be understood as a **displacement pressure stemming from the loss of friends and community**.

But displacement pressures accrue for both types of residents: those who purchased their apartments and became homeowners, and those who did not and remained in them as protected tenants. One example is the **rising cost of living and maintenance fees**. "They keep raising the maintenance fees. It has gone up almost 3% every year since we bought in, and that's a real challenge." Another resident explained that the ground-lease terms keep changing and that this also causes tension, "because we don't know for sure what will be the exact terms next year, or the year after." This change impacts only the new homeowners, although increased utility fees and cost of living effects everyone, even the protected tenant. "There are some months that my electric bill is higher than what I pay for rent,"<sup>8</sup> explained one protected tenant. A neighbour in the same building also mentioned the high prices of the three grocery stores on the island. This **sense of loss of control and stability** is also related to the age of long-term tenants. Most of them bought their apartments as young families in the 1970s and are now in their early seventies. They understand that when the expiration date arrives, they will be much older, and the risk of being displaced at such an age is not a reassuring prospect for the future.

And so, both the fortunate (those who bought-in) and the less fortunate (those who did not) long-term residents share the same building with newcomers, whom one long-term tenant described as "our new, snobbish neighbours with their well-groomed dogs,"<sup>9</sup> expressing the differences between the newcomers' socio-economic profile and lifestyle preferences and their own, and fear that this difference will effect their familiar day to day life. "Their way of thinking is different ..." said another long-term tenant, "it's a market-rate way of thinking: while we [islanders] usually think 'how do I keep my rent low,' in the last tenants' meetings I heard one of the new owners asking 'What are we going to do to increase the property value of our apartments' ..." <sup>10</sup> This is another source of division among the residents of the same building, leading to a **sense of a loss of social ties and community**.

The change from an income-based community to a market-rate way of thinking is also what distinguishes the WIRE tenants from the tenants of newer developments. "It used to be a very intimate community, and I think it's losing that intimacy,"<sup>11</sup> stated a long-term resident in reference to the developments at Southtown in a 2007 interview in the *New York Times*. Interviewing long-time residents for this study more than a decade later, I heard similar claims regarding the development of Cornell Tech's campus: "Now it's a transient island; we used to be a community of families, and now there are less families and more students." Families are more involved in the community, the resident explained, "and students, who come to the island for a year or two, have their [own] internal social life and academic workload and are less involved in the social activity on the island."

The long-time residents are concerned by the changes that privatization ushers in. However, the perspective of the newcomers is also a force to be reckoned with. For them, privatization is an opportunity. Described by one of the real-estate brokers working on the island as "Manhattan's best kept secret,"<sup>12</sup> the availability of co-op apartments on RI is attracting younger populations that might otherwise not have considered the island as an option. Some of them are young academics, as parts of the Southtown buildings are currently serving as Cornell Weil and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre faculty housing. Others are UN employees, who are attracted by the location –

<sup>4</sup> Interview date: November 27, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Interview date: October 23, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Interview date January 29, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Interview date: November 15, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Interview date: January 20, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Interview date: January 29, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> A resident in an interview with the *New York Times*, September 2, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/realestate/02livi.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from a real estate advertisement inside the RI red bus in the fall of 2019.

just a ferry ride away from the UN building – and the isolation and the quiet and quality of life on the island.<sup>13</sup> One interesting process that I have identified is that of the families of young academics deciding to settle down on the island. Some of the transitional families who were first introduced to the island through this employment arrangement are now the new owners of apartments in the buildings that are undergoing privatization. This process indicates a change from a transitional population to a more community oriented one, vis-à-vis the complaints of long-time residents regarding the transient nature of the population. The academic orientation of the new population was also brought up in an interview with one of the real-estate brokers working on the island, who explained that most of her clients are international students seeking low rent prices near the universities in Manhattan.<sup>14</sup> She usually refers such students to the rental buildings on the island, which are in good condition and low priced in comparison to Manhattan. The academic nature of the new population is now increasing because of Cornell Tech's new campus. It includes The House, which is a student residence with more than 300 units that increases the young population of the island. In this sense, one of the long-term residents defined a new geographical boundary on the island: "Cornell Tech students never pass the subway station. It serves as a portal that takes them to other parts of the city. They are not involved with the community." This was reaffirmed in several conversations with students who acknowledged that they have never passed the subway line to Northtown (and did not know what Northtown was). Most of the interviews with newcomers confirmed their involvement in higher education, as master's and doctoral students, post-doctoral fellows, and faculty.

#### 4.2. The privatization rate and demographic changes

An additional, more quantitative perspective on this process is offered by the rate of conversion from affordable to market-rate units. The graph in Fig. 5 reflects the island's development process and follows the conversion rate from affordable units (dotted line) to market-rate units (solid line). Fig. 5.1 denotes the starting point in 1976 with the development of the four WIRE buildings, with 100% affordable units. Fig. 5.2 marks the beginning of the market-based development, with Manhattan Park built in 1989 as a five-building complex of luxury rental apartments according to the 80-20 affordability plan. This addition changed the supply of apartments on the island to 70% affordable units versus 30% market-rate units. In 2004, Riverwalk Crossing, a six-building complex, kicked off the development of Southtown with a 60-40 affordability plan, commencing with two new buildings in 2019 (Fig. 5.3). In 2006, the former asylum re-opened as The Octagon (5.4), a luxury apartment complex with an 80-20 affordability plan. These three housing projects tipped the scales from affordable to market-rate units, and in 2017 the Cornell Tech campus added student housing at the south tip of the island. In addition to the development of market-rate units since 2006, each of the WIRE buildings has had its own plan for exiting the ML program (indicated on the graph by red boxes). Box A represents the first privatization of Roosevelt Landings' low-income affordable housing in 2006. After changing ownership several times, in 2019, a new landlord committed to keeping some affordable units; however, by 2020, 44% of the units have been sold at market rate. Box B marks Island House's exit from the ML program in 2012. The new affordability plan converted the building into a co-op and committed to maintaining an affordable housing rate of 65%. By 2020, 17% of the units were converted to market rate. Box C represents Rivercross's privatization in 2014. Due to its location and its views of Manhattan, Rivercross was initially designated as a middle-to-upper income co-op. According to interviews with newcomers and real-estate agents, it is still the most desirable building on the island. By 2020, 18% of the units were converted to market rate. Box D Marks the end of the ML period for Westview in 2018, with a new affordability plan committed to maintaining at least 55% affordable housing.

The graphs reflect the change from a neighbourhood that was largely affordable during its first two decades to the current rate of 48% affordable housing, according to RIOC 2020 reports. Between 2014 and 2018, there seems to have been an equilibrium between the affordable and market rate units, and this stage also marks the onset of the accrual of displacement pressures mentioned in section 4.1. Based on the same conversion rate, the second part of the graph is a rough estimate for the future. It shows that if no corrective measures are taken, by 2040 the affordable housing rate will be only 43% (5.5), and by 2070 only 35% affordable units will remain (5.6). The decline in the affordable housing stock can be understood using Marcuse's term of **exclusionary displacement**, as the low-income households that live in the original WIRE buildings cannot afford to buy or rent in the same place they once could. Since the low-income building was the first to convert and its total units equal the number of units in all the other three buildings, the number of units that are experiencing these pressures has been rising since 2006.

The demographic changes reflected in the American Community Survey dataset indicate that the past decade has also eroded the diversity of the population. Freemark (2011, 355) compared the island's demographics to those of NYC, arguing in 2011 that RI remains "living proof of the public sector's ability to produce a mixed-income and mixed-race neighbourhood." A similar comparison conducted in 2020 indicates several changes. Fig. 6.1 represents the income composition of RI, reflecting a gradual rise in median household income. Fig. 6.2 reflects the race composition, indicating that while NYC's racial composite has remained relatively stable, the percentage of African Americans within RI's overall population is on the decline, whereas the Asian population continues to rise. Fig. 6.3 represents the island's age composition between 2000 and 2019, reflecting a significant increase in the number of younger residents over the past decade.

Considering these demographic changes alongside the conversion rate shows the correlation between the change in supply of affordable units and the demographic profile of the island, reflecting a rise in income and a decrease in age. Stated simply, the island's population is gradually becoming wealthier and younger. The racial change of a decreasing African American population shows another correlation with the agreed-upon notion that those moving in are wealthier, whiter, and better educated. In contrast, those moving out are more likely to be renters, poorer, and people of colour.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a UN worker who chose to live on the island (March 20, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Interview date: January 27, 2020.

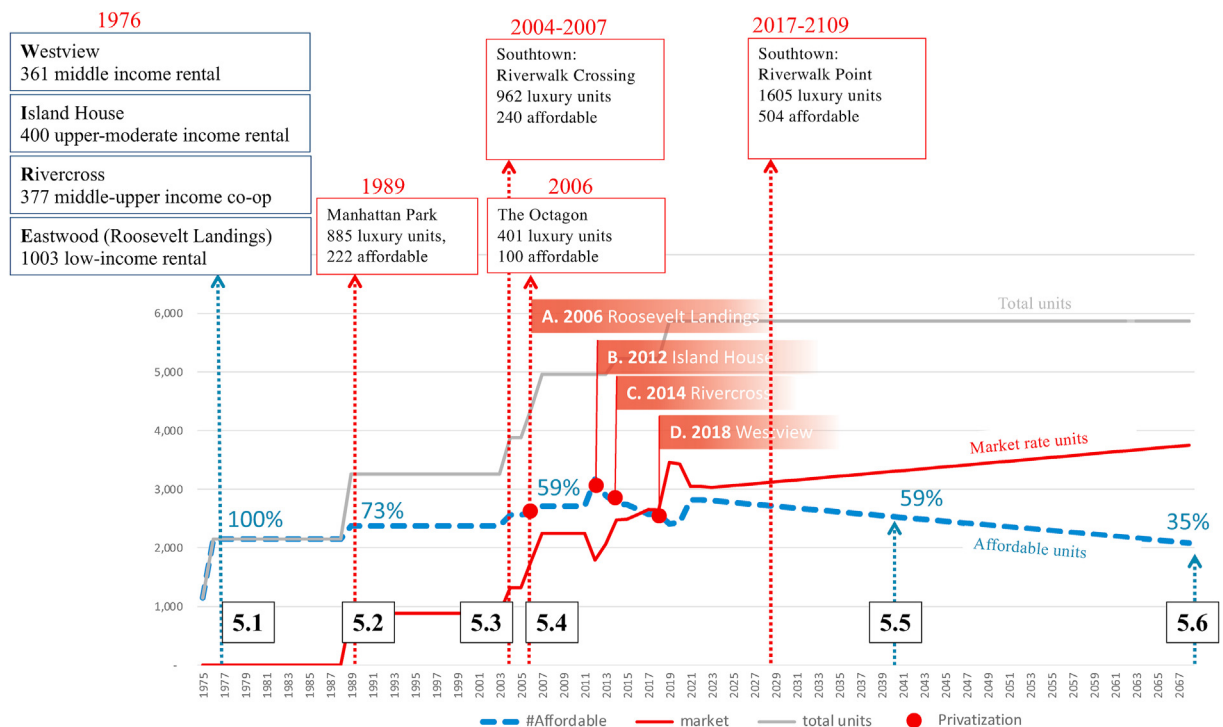


Fig. 5. RI development and the conversion rate from affordable units to market-rate units.



Fig. 6. Demographic changes in income level, age, and racial distribution on Roosevelt Island.

## 5. Discussion: The accrual of displacement pressures or an opportunity for upward social mobility?

Affordability is a multifaceted problem that cannot be solved by a single program or a quick remedy. The privatization of once

publicly funded-affordable housing, such as the ML program, are merely one aspect of this challenge. Although privatization is the primary way to increase the affordable housing stock in the neoliberal economy, the findings of this research show that these processes lead to the accrual of displacement pressures and exclusionary displacement for the local community. At the same time, privatization is an opportunity for upward social mobility for those able to purchase their apartment and for newcomers. Both trends are at play and do not stand in contradiction to one another.

Considering these two trends, the critical question raised by this study is: How can privatization benefit long-term residents as well as new ones? Furthermore, how can privatization not undermine the community's resilience but rather become a structure of opportunities for long-term residents? Clay (1979) suggests that the public sector should take action to protect long-term residents from gentrification-induced displacement. This research joins his call to use incumbent upgrading as a revitalization method that includes raising neighbourhood consciousness and advocacy to improve local conditions and motivate existing residents to make improvements. For example, an extensive cultural institution network can become a tool for raising neighbourhood consciousness (Yavo-Ayalon, Aharon-Gutman, & Alon-Mozes, 2019) and for upward social mobility (Yavo-Ayalon, 2018). The goal should be to enhance the resilience of the community in a manner that those who manage to stay reap the benefits of neighbourhood improvements. Therefore, a suggestion for essential future research is to find ways of harnessing the second trend of upward social mobility to benefit the local community. Although this helps only those who will be able to stay in their apartments and does not prevent displacement, it might help ease displacement pressures such as loss of social ties and community. Another critical question raised by the study's findings is: How can privatization become an opportunity for a new kind of affordability and a new kind of community? The demographic changes and the ethnographic observations regarding the island reflected a profile of newcomers as highly educated. This marks the island as a place that offers an opportunity for young academics to thrive in a very expensive city, linking it to Florida's creative class theory (Florida, 2005; Sasaki, 2010) and to the idea of using an academic institution as an anchor for urban regeneration (Addie, 2019). Observing these theories retrospectively with their critiques in mind (Bodnar, 2015; Morgan & Ren, 2012; Peck, 2005; Silver & Miller, 2013; Waitt & Gibson, 2009; Sharon Yavo-Ayalon, 2019a,b), the research seeks to imagine a community of young academics supporting and being supported by longer-term residents. The ethnographic research reflected early initiatives of Cornell Tech to create programs for the island's primary school and senior centres,<sup>15</sup> as well as calls issued by island residents for employment opportunities at Cornell Tech, and not only as independent contractors.<sup>16</sup> Can the existing community provide a social infrastructure and home for young academics raising their families?

Since the privatization processes on RI are ongoing, the research cannot yet identify "privatization aftermath." However, observing these changes at the present moment in time makes this example even more important, as it contextualizes them within the discourse of gentrification and displacement. Although the process and its spatial manifestations may be different, the social impact is the same: displacement of low-income people of colour and the elderly.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has focused on the privatization of once publicly-funded affordable housing through an in-depth, small-scale analysis of the privatization of ML buildings on RI. Such a granular analysis is necessary because of the quiet nature of these processes, which cannot be seen and are very difficult to measure. The study's main contribution is the granular perspective on privatization that stems from talking to people and observing town-hall meetings, housing-project corridors, and the streets of RI. Additionally, it backs up those small-scale interactions with big data to provide multiple perspectives on the phenomenon. By doing so, it corresponds with the scholarly call for more granular analysis and makes three innovative contributions: (a) it places privatization within the discourse of displacement and gentrification; (b) it suggests an in-depth, small-scale analysis to decipher the mechanisms, the motivations, and the decision-making processes of people and households; and (c) it serves as the first step toward a computerized, data-driven microsimulation. Our future research will build on these ethnographic findings to develop the basic assumptions for a predictive simulation (ours forthcoming).

The article provided multiple perspectives; a qualitative perspective, through historical urban research and ethnographic fieldwork, which highlighted the resident's displacement pressures; and a qualitative perspective through the analysis of demographic changes. First, the qualitative research leads to a conclusion similar to that of Davidson, who showed that displacement can occur even if the resident is not pushed out. Similarly, the changes to the home environment and the island population, the disappearance of familiar faces, and the appearance of many new students and transient populations translate into a sense of loss of place. Second, the disparity created between two statuses of long-time residents – those who bought in and those who stayed in place as protected tenants – translates into feelings of loss of friends and community (Marcuse, 1985; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Third, the social displacement pressures are intensified by a feeling of resentment toward their peers, with whom they were once on equal terms and who are now homeowners, and toward the newcomers, who are different from them and wealthier.

These social displacement pressures are enhanced by economic displacement pressures. For those who bought in, it is the increased cost of maintenance fees and the terms of the ground lease that create financial insecurity. For those who remained as protected tenants, it is the higher cost of utilities and the higher cost of living in the neighbourhoods. For both groups of long-term residents, the age gap is an issue. However, it is more crucial for the protected tenants with the affordability expiration date hanging over their heads, who know

<sup>15</sup> For example, a coding night at school <https://www.217pta.com/news/category/cornell-tech>, class activities, and Craft@Large, which invite local residents to take part (<https://nitiparikh.com/>), or the Community Engagement program, <https://tech.cornell.edu/roosevelt-island-community-engagement/>.

<sup>16</sup> A call issued by a community member at a Cornell Tech Construction Task Force Meeting, in which Cornell Tech presented its plans for the campus. September 9, 2019.

that they will be much older when this arrangement expires.

The quantitative analysis of the privatization rate and the demographic changes I have shown highlight the resemblance of this process to the common scholarly observation that those moving in tend to be wealthier, whiter, and better educated, whereas those moving out are more likely to be renters, poorer, and people of colour. Both aspects also support the second scholarly consensus that even without direct displacement, gentrification, at the very least, leads to displacement pressures and exclusionary displacement (Zuk, at el., 2018, p. 40).

This article has highlighted privatization as a quiet force of displacement that needs to be addressed, showing how the social effects are not that different from the Urban Renewal projects of the 1960s. To prevent the aftermath of privatization from being limited to displacement alone, the research suggests focusing future efforts on enhancing the resilience of the long-term community. New strategies, policies, and funding methods should be developed to ensure long-term residents' ability to age in place while becoming the “tribe's elders” and envoys of the new community. At the same time, the city's commitment to affordable housing development should be pursued by any means possible to ensure that the urban lifestyle is accessible not only to the elites but also to the middle class, young academics, essential workers, and low-income households.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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