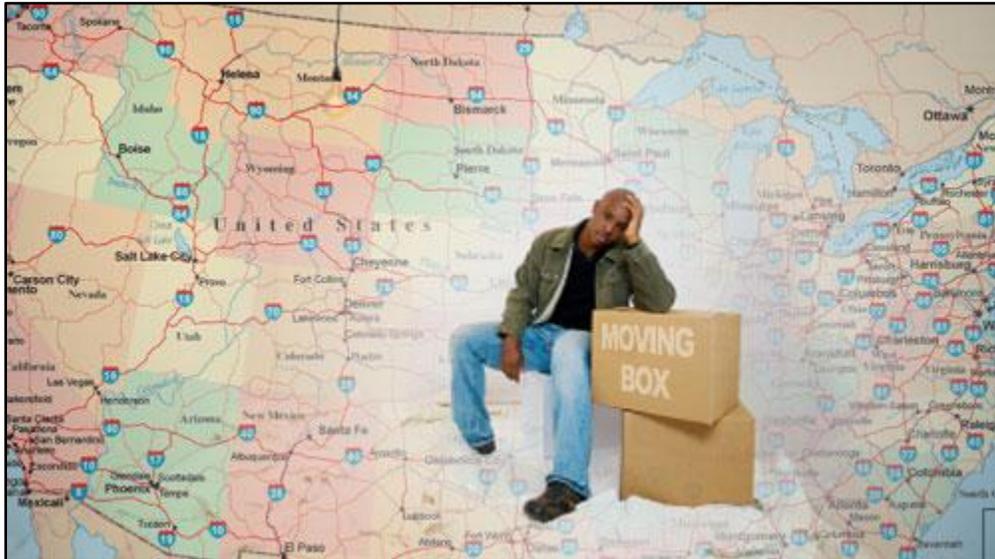




Gentrification Pushing African Americans Out of Cities



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For the better part of three decades, Sikhulu Shange tirelessly labored within the often challenging confines of the only home he's known since arriving here in the States as a 20-something-year-old South African immigrant nearly 40 years ago, only to one day awake to be told he no longer has a place within that very community.

There was a time when Bobby Robinson - who, like Shange, once owned a small record store at the heart of Harlem's legendary 125th Street thoroughfare that even predated his rival's by more than 15 years - might have shed a tear of regret for his longtime buddy and friendly foe.

"But then I wouldn't have any tears left for me," explained Robinson, who, also like Shange, suffered through forced eviction from his storefront, home-away-from-home establishment at the hands of new conglomerate owners.

"We're all being made to do something we don't want to do, and I don't think many of us ever thought we would," said Robinson, whose Bobby's Happy House is reverently shrined as the first black-owned business in the history of Harlem, what many once considered the black capitol of the world. In one of the last interviews he gave before passing away just six months ago, Robinson reflected: "It's hard on all of us. All that's left is for each man to cry himself a river filled with sadness."

Such are the scars borne in many inner cities amid the changes now taking shape all across the country. And yet, that's what seems most in vogue in the new millennium, as metropolis from New York to Los Angeles and seemingly all points in between continue to take on virtually unrecognizable characteristics right before the eyes of all those who long breathed all the wonderment and vitality into them.

"This is what's happening in minority communities everywhere," said Nellie Hester, president of the Harlem Tenants Council, a neighborhood advocacy group committed to providing housing relief for the poor and fighting accelerated gentrification over the last two decades.

"What that says to me is this is about much more than just gentrification," added Hester. "It seems it's all

but become a matter of public policy, one mandated by the big-time real estate, insurance and finance companies that now govern the economies of cities and truly pull all the strings. Among them, the consensus seems to be that black people don't have the right to live in prime sectors and on high-valued, expensive land."

And, try as they might, even the most compassionate of leaders and bureaucrats have been hard pressed to slow the implosion. In Harlem, though recent re-zoning legislation calls for 46 percent of all housing built on or around 125th Street to be set aside as affordable, noted Queens real estate attorney **Adam Bailey** isn't shy in voicing the one critical concern most all longtime Harlemites seem to share fear most.

"This is Harlem's last stand," said **Bailey**, who, though he is white, has represented several small minority business owners in the area faced with eviction proceedings, earning him a high degree of both trust and respect from even the Harlem community's most cynical residents. "I don't think you'll ever be able to recreate it. It's a place where black people once felt super proud to be."

But the issue, insists Hester, runs much deeper than that.

"Our group and the ones we work with are very realistic about what's happening here and what we can truly hope to accomplish," says Hester, who has lived in the area for nearly 50 years. "We all realize we can't save Harlem, but we do feel we can minimize the damage being done. Our movement isn't one simply based on nostalgia. It's very principled and practical in its nature and in what we're demanding to maintain."

But for some, such as Shange, even with new community blueprints in circulation calling for thousands of new condominiums, more high-rise office space and a 21-story tower near the borough's Metro North train station that will possibly house Major League Baseball's new television network as an anchor, the heart of the matter will forever be cloaked in emotion.

"When everybody was running away, I remained here with the few merchants that were willing to stick it out and kept Harlem, Harlem," said Shange, now 68 and a founding member of The Coalition to Save Harlem. "Harlem groomed me into manhood. How could I ever want to leave?"

But that's exactly the fate many other longtime residents now find themselves facing. Advocates cite a recent Vera Institute for Justice Study on family homelessness in NYC, which highlights Central Harlem (also known as "Black Harlem") as having the highest number of homeless families in all of Manhattan. Most of those developments, they not so coincidentally point out, were brought on through eviction. Just five years ago, Hester's Tenants Council noted that there were 17,413 residential eviction proceedings in "Black Harlem" and nearby Washington Heights, and less than a year later, a total of 21,991 eviction warrants had been issued in Manhattan Housing Court.

"Harlem is a hotbed for real estate development and speculation," said **Bailey**. "Without a doubt, long-time Harlem residents are being pushed out and there is no relief in sight."

What's more, the Coalition to Preserve Community points out that nearby Columbia University, with the support of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, plans to carry out its Harlem-centric Manhattanville Expansion Plan by snaring 17 additional acres of land, thereby doubling the present size of its neighborhood campus through the use of eminent domain laws.

With goals of building a five-story bio-chemical research center below ground firmly in place, many fear the university's plan will not only displace more homes and small businesses along 125th Street and beyond, but also wreak environmental havoc throughout the borough luminaries such as Malcolm X, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Marcus Garvey and Adam Clayton Powell all once found so attractive.

Even the plan calling for the 46 percent housing set asides is skeptically viewed by many as an unquestionable instance of "smoke and mirrors."

"It's bogus, a typical kind of politics that seeks to promote a system of exchange like, 'You buy our neighborhood, but make sure our park is renovated,'" Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts of the Coalition to Save Harlem recently told the Village Voice. Others express equal outrage over a plan that will allow 24 blocks of Harlem to be re-zoned, thus paving the way for the dismantling of many four- and five-story buildings long reserved for housing small businesses that will now give way to new office towers and market-rate condominiums.

Of the 3,858 new units outlined for construction in accordance with the new bill, Rhodes-Pitts adds that the coalition is desperately seeking assurances that the 1,758 reserved for moderate housing will actually be affordable to existing neighborhood residents with median household incomes of around \$22,000 and that full-time, above minimum wage jobs will be forthcoming from all the projects.

"The development should be from the bottom up, from the people up, not from the top down, from rich white developers and the city planning commission," agrees Brooklyn Councilman and one-time Black Panther member Charles Barron. "Ten to 12 years from now, they will see that the housing will not be affordable. This will be the wholesale sellout of Harlem from river to river."

As a counter, **Bailey** and others have drafted additional legislation that would essentially brand numerous historical structures across the district as landmarks, all but removing them from the path of the neighborhood's perpetually-swinging wrecking ball.

"The standing of New York City as a world capital of culture cannot be maintained or enhanced by disregarding the historical heritage of the city of such cultural assets," notes **Bailey**, who adds that such structures as The Audubon Ballroom (where Malcolm X was assassinated), the legendary Cotton Club and The Harlem Opera House have all been lost via demolition.

In cross-country Chicago, the scene and level of the contentiousness mirror what's taking place in NYC. But then, what might you expect when one awakes to essentially find the neighborhood and community that bore them has essentially evaporated overnight?

Homegrown Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mary Mitchell struggles with such a reality each and every time she ventures into her no-longer-recognizable South Side Bronzeville neighborhood. In 2001, the City Council remapped the neighborhood bounded by 31st Street and McCormick Place to 65th Street and from Cottage Grove Blvd. to the I-90/94 Expressway to encompass parts of several other communities, among them the ultra-chic, yuppie-filled Mid South Loop.

"I grew up in the 'hood, but I can't go back to the 'hood today," Mitchell noted. "I can't afford the housing there. It all boils down to a land grab on part of builders and developers fueled by their urges to make as much money as they can. This is about class as much as any racial component; the same thing is happening to white people all along the Lake Shore, especially in neighborhoods like Lake View."

Yet, perhaps nowhere have the consequences proved more revolting than for longtime Bronzeville area residents, who all once pridefully rejoiced in the knowledge their neighborhood was the first even Jean Baptist Point Dusable locally called home.

During the peak of the Great Migration between 1910 and 1920, the population of Bronzeville dramatically spiked as thousands of African-Americans fled the oppression of the south and immigrated to Chicago in search of industry jobs, soon constituting what historically became known as a "city within a city." By 1960, more than 800,000 blacks made their home in the so-called "Black Belt," whose history also boasts the presence of the first locally black-owned bank and insurance companies.

Today, all that seems far too much like ancient history to community lifer Harold Lucas, president of the Bronxville Information Center. "You can just feel the towers going up, getting taller," he said. "It's obnoxious, but the developers are destroying historical and cultural parts of Chicago."

Perhaps just as troubling, recently the percentage of African-Americans in the neighborhood dropped by 24 percent, even as the area was experiencing increases in white, Asian and Hispanic populations. Still, Lucas and members of his Black Metropolis Heritage Area Project are determined to preserve a measure of their own history.

With the aid of 1st District Congressman Bobby Rush, the group recently petitioned to have the federal government designate the neighborhood a national heritage (defined by the U.S. Congress as an area "where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally-distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography.")

Adds Rush: "The Black Metropolis District has a cohesive and distinctive history that is worthy of national heritage designation. By highlighting the past, we can inspire the future."

A light, the voltage of which Rush speaks of, has recently shone on downtown Los Angeles - but for entirely different reasons. Law enforcement recently came under fire for exerting force in expediting the city's planned gentrification.

Dubiously distinguished as recently as 2006 for having the highest concentration of homelessness in the nation, authorities, under the command of the mayor and city attorney, dramatically increased their presence and activity along a 50-block trail known as Skid Row to coincide with the emergence of scores of high rise units, loft apartments and rising property values.

The shakedowns continued even after a federal appeals court termed the arrests and issuing of citations to people sleeping on the sidewalk because they have nowhere else to go as "cruel and unusual punishment."

"People on the streets are in a state of fear and apprehension," said Rick Mantley of the Los Angeles Community Action Network's Community Watch program. "The objective is to gentrify the area," adds fellow community organizer General Dogon. "They do not want you on the streets, nor do they want you walking around. It's bad for business."