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Teaching and Learning in San Francisco's Gentrification Tide

By Rachel Brahinsky

Gentrification has taken the San Francisco region in a big way. It came through the influx of tech wealth that has stacked the housing market against the middle class. It came, too, through the rising use of home-sharing services like Airbnb, which convert houses into hotels and put pressure on the cost of residential life. It came through a nationwide shift, where more and more of us are seeking out urbanism, whether cities are ready or not.

My students at the University of San Francisco would call the situation quite *real*, and it is pervasive in our conversations. When prospective students come to visit and get a sense of the campus, faculty gather with them and share stories about the classes we teach and the experiences they may have, should they enroll. We can't help but talk about the challenge of housing and the role that our students will play in the region as they move from dorm to apartment and beyond.

I can imagine a recruitment officer urging me to turn the dialogue elsewhere, but we all know that this conversation cannot be avoided. Newspapers and blogs discuss the high cost of living in San Francisco on a regular basis, and the local and national conversations about changing cities are often focused on the role of the Bay Area in exemplifying the good and the bad of urbanism.

On the one hand, the region is stunningly beautiful and has been a cultural hearth for so many communities, attracting waves of immigrants, artists, and people interested in making a better world in various ways. This diversity is one of the region's greatest strengths, generating both beauty and jobs. On the other hand, this same diversity has been under threat by the rapid rise in the cost of

housing. Many affordable pockets of the region have flipped in the last five years, with median home values rising over a million dollars and median rents soaring in new and shocking ways each month.

So how do we handle this? It's a challenge for faculty and staff, as much as for students. Housing costs were central to recent union negotiations and always present in hiring conversations. We collectively engage with the same challenge all San Franciscans face: how to contribute to the region; how to find a sense of home in a context of a rising cost of living; and how to participate in the growth and expansion of the creativity of the region without threatening its history. It is indeed an urgent task.

Yet, as my students show me in each urban history seminar: history teaches us that there is a way to walk lightly in a city, to share in its development, and to contribute rather than only take and consume. Each semester I am inspired by their optimism, and



Above, Loyola Village residence halls at University of San Francisco.

Left, Lone Mountain North residence hall delivers spectacular views of the Marin headlands, San Francisco Bay, and Richmond neighborhood.

I am hopeful about the role that they can play as long-term residents of the region after college.

My own research has also been a guide for me. I'm currently working on a book that looks at how racism and property have shaped our urban past and how the activism of communities on these issues has offered us stories that can help us re-imagine how we work through the challenges of contemporary urbanism like gentrification.

One of the histories that I have focused on is a social movement led by a group of African American women in San Francisco's southeast sector. The story begins right next door to USF in the Fillmore District, where residents faced dramatic urban change in the 1950s and '60s. City leaders, as part of a national effort to remake cities, identified that neighborhood as a key site for urban redevelopment. The notion of urban renewal, as the program was called at the time, sounded upbeat. But it quickly became clear that one of the primary effects of the program was the displacement of a majority African-American and Japanese-American community.

The redevelopment program pushed residents from their homes and bulldozed 20 square blocks, including many Victorian structures that were not yet viewed as special. Community pressure was ultimately successful in forcing the city to replace the old neighborhood with subsidized housing, but this was a devastating time and the area still struggles to remake home and a sense of place. The writer James Baldwin, in assessing the impact of the program in the Fillmore and places like it across the country, noted that what had been called urban renewal was in fact a strategy for "negro removal."

Meanwhile, the redevelopment program moved on to other parts of the city. Across town, Bayview-Hunter's Point has been home to an important and instructive social movement. It's a neighborhood that has long been cut off geographically from the rest of San Francisco in spite of the city's tiny size (it's only about 7 miles by 7 miles, after all).

In the 1960s, while the Fillmore was facing those bulldozers, a group of African American women in Bayview organized. The group, which was called the "Big Five," pushed for community participation in the redevelopment process in their neighborhood. Some of them had lost their homes in the Fillmore; they all had friends and family impacted by the upheaval there.

Over time, with coordinated efforts across the city, the Big Five inserted themselves into the urban planning process that sought to reshape their neighborhood. Through persistence, collective education around the rules of urban planning, and direct action – in which they staged a successful sit-in in government offices to demand funding for affordable housing – the Big Five slowly pushed the wheels of urban justice in their favor.

When I had the privilege to interview one of the leaders of the Big Five in her Fillmore District apartment years ago, she recounted stories of tenacity and bravery, where poor women with little social capital forced open a political space in the city and created a place for themselves. These days, the hills of Hunter's Point once again face economic challenges, but the streets are seeded with the names of the Big Five women and their collaborators. The legend of the Big Five is not well known outside of Bayview, but the story sustains people there today who are still working to redirect urban planning towards community needs.

The lessons of the Big Five are relevant across the city, and indeed in any urban neighborhood. As the USF community engages with gentrification and its impacts, we can learn from these histories. It is not an easy process. These kinds of stories, however, offer a roadmap for challenging the urban status quo and a way through which the USF community can imagine and work for an urban future that includes us all.

It's a matter of everyday practice. Most of our students spend time doing community work as part of their degree expectations. As our students blend ideas and theories about challenges like urban displacement with hands-on action that can reshape cities in more equitable ways, they further embed themselves—and the university itself—as good neighbors and long-term caretakers of San Francisco. The more they can learn to truly listen and engage with longtime residents like the women of the Big Five, the better our students can design equitable policy and programming for the broader community.

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