

Wiped Out by the “Greenwave”: Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability

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Abstract

This essay examines the intersection of environmental justice activism and state-sponsored sustainable urban development—how is environmental justice activism enabled or disabled in the context of rapid urban development, consensual politics and the seemingly a-political language of sustainability? Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, I define a process I refer to as “environmental gentrification,” which builds on the material and discursive successes of the environmental justice movement and appropriates them to serve high-end development. While it appears as politically-neutral, consensus-based planning that is both ecologically and socially sensitive, in practice, environmental gentrification subordinates equity to profit-minded development. I propose that this process offers a new way of exploring the paradoxes and conundrums facing contemporary urban residents as they fight to challenge the vast economic and ecological disparities that increasingly divide today’s cities. [Environmental gentrification, environmental justice, just sustainability, New York City]

In early January 2010, I climbed the polished marble stairs of the New York Public Library’s 115th Street branch and entered its stately, high-ceilinged meeting room. The library, a historic landmark building that recently celebrated its centennial, sits on the western edge of a complicated intersection in Central Harlem. Three wide avenues form a triangle that is bisected by a fourth major thoroughfare, creating two triangular “pocket” parks. In this case, both parks are small cement-covered islands, inhabited by a few strands of grass, some tattered benches, discarded cigarettes, empty bottles and frequently, homeless people. I had gone to the library that January evening, to attend a public meeting sponsored by the Harlem Community Development Corporation (HCDC) to “engage the Harlem community in a discussion of how to improve [their] lives as pedestrians in an era of green awareness” (Harlem CDC 2010:2). Specifically, the HCDC proposed closing off two blocks between 115th and 117th Streets and expand the two triangle parks to create one, large green space. According to an HCDC newsletter, the park would “‘green’ the physical environment, improve local air quality and give some more breathing room to Harlem’s increasingly dense residential population” (Harlem CDC 2010:2). At the head of the meeting room, colorful photos of gardens, benches, people feeding pigeons and kids playing arranged on a poster-board depicted the HCDC’s vision, which they had named “the GreenX:Change.”

However, for the approximately 50 local residents who filled the room, the photos did not necessarily represent the best way to “improve their lives,” and the definition of “green awareness” was open to interpretation. For instance,

meeting-goers pointed out that they had been asking the city to improve the triangle parks for years. Only now that luxury condos surrounded the parks the city was responding. One Community Board 10 member noted that this was not the first time the HCDC has proposed such a project. "Initially, this was about commercial space zoning—now they're saying it's about 'green.' Why?" Several residents asked who, really, stood to profit from this project. Local ministers were among the project's most vocal opponents—many of their parishioners traveled to Harlem from other parts of the metropolitan area, and they relied on every parking space they could find. Others wondered whether congestion caused by closing off the streets would worsen Harlem's air quality and negate the benefits of new green space. Finally, one woman questioned the HCDC's most basic assumptions, "Kids have plenty of places to play around here. We already have three parks nearby. We need an adult park. I need a place to go and smoke a cigarette and hang out and shoot the shit . . . This is retarded." Suddenly, meeting attendants wanted to know who was looking out for the "winos" and homeless people that currently populated the park.

Green X:Change planners appeared surprised at these reactions. On its face, the project offered Harlem something that it badly needed. The area's per capita green space was the lowest in the borough while both its poverty levels and its asthma rates had historically been among the highest.¹ A joint effort by HCDC (an arm of the city's larger economic development corporation), Community Board 10, Central Harlem's local representative body, and the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Green X:Change represented an important piece of Mayor Bloomberg's long-range sustainability plan, also known as PlaNYC 2030.² In the plan, Bloomberg promised to create 480 new "pint sized parks" throughout the five boroughs, and the DOT had recently received a federal grant to initiate such projects. In addition, as the HCDC newsletter explained, the Green X:Change would "promote sustainable economic development and community revitalization" while "color[ing] St. Nicholas Avenue a more prosperous shade of green" by promoting the growth of restaurants and other small businesses (Harlem CDC 2010:2). Yet, Harlem was already seeing an influx of economic development. In 2007, the same year that PlaNYC was launched, the average sale price of an apartment reached \$895,000, a price that was 93 percent higher than it was at the end of 2006 (Haughney 2008). No wonder the long-term Harlemites that populated the Green X:Change meeting were skeptical. For whom was the project making Harlem sustainable? Surely, it was not the homeless people or those residents who just wanted a place to "shoot the shit."

The drama that unfolded at the Green X:Change is being replayed in major cities around the world, as low income residents challenge contradictory and selective sustainable policies that threaten their displacement. I argue that these challengers face a pernicious paradox—**must they reject environmental amenities in their neighborhoods in order resist the gentrification that tends to follow such amenities?** What happens to environmental justice activism when it meets state-sponsored sustainable urban development? How is it enabled or disabled in the context of rapid urban development, consensual politics and the seemingly a-political language of sustainability? This essay addresses such questions through ethnographic research conducted in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City from 2007–2011. Bringing together scholarship on urban redevelopment, sustainability and environmental justice, I define a process that I refer to as environmental gentrification. I propose that this process offers a new way of exploring the paradoxes and conundrums facing contemporary urban residents as they fight to challenge the vast economic and ecological disparities that increasingly divide today's cities.

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Environmental gentrification describes the convergence of urban redevelopment, ecologically-minded initiatives and environmental justice activism in an era of advanced capitalism. Operating under the seemingly a-political rubric of sustainability, environmental gentrification builds on the material and discursive successes of the urban environmental justice movement and appropriates them to serve high-end redevelopment that displaces low income residents. Materially, the efforts of environmental justice activists to improve their neighborhoods (i.e. the removal of environmental burdens and the installation of environmental benefits) now help those neighborhoods attract an influx of affluent residents. On the discursive side, environmental gentrification selectively adopts a language of sustainability, also put forward by environmental justice activists. Thus, while it appears as politically neutral planning that is consensual as well as ecologically and socially sensitive, in practice it subordinates equity to profit-minded development. Importantly, my intent in this essay is not to make a causal connection between the successes of environmental justice activists and gentrification, or to propose that environmental justice causes gentrification. Rather, I wish to examine the unintended consequences of environmental justice activism and how it gets swept up in the multiplicity of factors that foment gentrification and displacement. By asking how environmental justice activists and their constituents navigate this paradoxical situation, I also gain insight into some of the implications of environmental gentrification for contemporary urban planning and politics.

Certainly, environmental gentrification does not mark the first time that low income residents' efforts to improve their neighborhoods have been co-opted; nor is this the first time that a positive and politically neutral discourse has masked unequal urban development. Indeed, I argue that environmental gentrification is both old and new. On one hand, I argue that it marks a recent iteration of old discourses about urban reform, renewal and revitalization, which similarly masked inequitable urban development. But, on another hand, environmental gentrification reflects political, economic and social contexts that are unique to this particular historic moment. More specifically, environmental gentrification operates through a discourse of sustainability which simultaneously describes a vision of ecologically and socially responsible urban planning, a "green" lifestyle which appeals to affluent, eco-conscious residents, and a technocratic, politically neutral approach to solving environmental problems. I argue that this particular combination reflects a move towards a new form of politics, which some scholars refer to as the "post political." According to Slavoj Žižek, this mode of governance shies away from traditional, conflictual politics in favor of policies set forth by "enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists . . .) via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus." (1999:198). For Eric Swyngedouw this consensus serves a neoliberal order in which governments fail to address citizens' most basic needs in order to subsidize the financial sector and take on grandiose projects designed to attract global capital (2007). I argue that environmental gentrification follows this pattern, becoming a mode of "post-political" governance that shuns politics and de-links sustainability from justice. Thereby, it disables meaningful resistance.

I begin by introducing New York City's sweeping but contradictory sustainability plan. I then review recent scholarship that critically examines such contradictions, including the absence of environmental justice principles in sustainable urban planning. As I point out, these scholars rarely recognize the *presence* of environmental justice in sustainable urban development—or the ways in which it has historically facilitated gentrification. I next review schol-

arship that addresses the historic role that green space has played in urban redevelopment, imaginaries about social reform, and discourses that legitimate uneven urban geographies. Turning to the case of Harlem, I show how for generations it bore the brunt of Manhattan's toxic waste. Until, that is, some local residents began to fight for environmental justice. Yet, just as their most hard-fought battles were being won, the neighborhood began to change—zoning changes primed Harlem for gentrification which peaked along with an ambiguous and often contradictory rubric of sustainability. I thus examine how activists and long-term residents navigated and resisted the paradox presented by environmental gentrification. I conclude by arguing that environmental gentrification moves community groups into a technocratic dialogue. In turn, sustainability planning becomes part of a post-political project based on technocratic, deliberation and consensus, which sidelines questions of real political inclusion and justice.

Selective sustainability and environmental justice: an ethnographic account

On Earth Day 2007, Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched New York City's first long-range plan, amid great fanfare. For the first few years of his administration, Bloomberg had drawn fire for lagging behind cities like London and Paris that were viewed as being on the cutting-edge of sustainability planning. Already, sustainability had become a ubiquitous strategy for rebranding major urban centers and establishing their competitiveness in a global marketplace for commercial and residential investment (see McDonogh this volume). With the release of PlaNYC 2030 (also known as "PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York") Bloomberg repositioned himself as a top contender in the sustainable city race. With 127 separate initiatives, the plan laid out sweeping and lofty goals for New York City, ranging from increasing affordable housing to increased park access to reducing citywide carbon emissions by 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030.³

However, some critics pointed out important contradictions between the plan's stated goals and the city's redevelopment initiatives. For instance, one of the most publicized parts of the plan includes the planting of one million street trees by 2030, but the city also approved large-scale developments that destroyed hundreds of existing trees (Mason 2008). Similarly, while the plan promotes biking and transit-oriented development, the mayor's office has also encouraged several large-scale car-based development projects.⁴ In addition, new waterfront developments proliferate along New York City's coasts, regardless of the plan's warnings about sea level rise (Checker 2008a). Indeed, during Bloomberg's mayoral tenure an unprecedented number of rezoning measures resulted in a massive increase in residential units, most of them targeted towards high-end renters and buyers (Furman Center 2009). Meanwhile, the number of homeless families in New York City shelters hit all-time record levels in 2010, reaching the highest levels since the Great Depression (Routhier 2010). Finally, critics have shown how despite the fact that the plan includes an entire chapter devoted to public participation, it was written mostly by an independent consulting firm with minimal public input (Angotti 2010; Katz and Baron 2011).

Such contradictions are mirrored in cities across the globe, as economic and ecological disparities widen while municipal leaders tout definitions of sustainability that are premised, at least discursively, on the interconnectedness of

ecological and social issues (Warner 2002; Krueger and Gibbs 2007; Krueger and Agyeman 2005; Agyeman et al. 2003). An emerging literature addresses the contradictory relationship of sustainable policies to inequitable urban redevelopment. Hagerman (2007) for instance, looks at Portland, Oregon (often held up as an icon of urban sustainability) and finds that the production of new green spaces appealed to very specific and elitist visions of “liveability” while forcing low income housing and service agencies to fight their own displacement. Pearsall and Pierce (2010) examine the sustainability plans of 107 US cities and evaluate how many of those include environmental justice both conceptually and as part of their sustainability indicators. Similarly, Finn and McCormick (2011) study the climate change plans of three major US cities and find that, despite stated holistic visions, they fail to attend to issues of equitable economic development and environmental justice. As the latter two of these studies find, as sustainability becomes a pervasive framework, it concentrates increasingly on issues such as climate change, and environmental amenities (i.e., parks, trees, open spaces). These policies, however, eclipse the long-standing issue of unequally distributed environmental burdens (i.e., toxic waste facilities, bus depots, waste producing industries) in low income neighborhoods and communities of color.

More macroscopic analysts bring critical sustainability studies together with recent scholarship on an era of “post-politics.” These scholars posit that the last few decades have been characterized by deepening processes of de-politicization characterized by technocratic management and consensual policy-making which disallow spaces for conflictual politics and the imagining of alternative modes of governance (Swyngedouw 2009). Or, as Diken and Laustsen write, “[e]verything is politicised, can be discussed, but only in a non-committal way and as a non-conflict. Absolute and irreversible choices are kept away; politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate” (2004: 7). Contemporary fixes to environmental issues, especially climate change, provide a prime example of the rise of technocracy, managerial governance and consensual politics. As geographer Eric Swyngedouw explains, sustainability is built on

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the basic vision that techno-natural and socio-metabolic interventions are urgently needed if we wish to secure the survival of the planet and much of what it contains.. Difficulties and problems, such as environmental concerns that are generally staged and accepted as problematic need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus. (2007:26)

Here, in the contemporary global liberal order, those who do not subscribe to the need for sustainability are relegated to the political margins. Debate, then, focuses on the best kinds of technological or managerial fixes for environmental problems, and competing visions for “new socio-ecological order[s]” that more radically departs from the neoliberal status quo are foreclosed (Swyngedouw 2007:26).

This essay builds on these critical studies of urban sustainability and contributes to them in three main ways. First, while these studies tend to be a-historic, I pay close attention to the direct connections between sustainability discourses and venerable discourses of urban reform, renewal and revitalization. Second, in their zeal to promote the cause of environmental justice, political ecologists and urban sustainability scholars have shied away from examining how that movement’s agenda might be inadvertently co-opted to facilitate gentrification (but see Dooling 2009). Third, we have few ethnographic

accounts of how the "post politics" of sustainability are actually lived by environmental justice activists and their constituents.

Just after its launch, I began to examine how PlaNYC played out in the daily lives of low income and working class New Yorkers, and how environmental justice activists and their constituents were responding both to the plan and to its implications. I used ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews and archival research to learn how urban residents contest and resist sustainable policies that threaten their displacement. More specifically, I selected five neighborhoods (Harlem, North Shore of Staten Island, Williamsburg, Sunset Park, South Bronx) that had long-standing environmental justice organizations and that were in varying phases of gentrification. From 2007 to the present, I attended public meetings and meetings of activist organizations. As I got to know people, I also held numerous informal conversations with both activists and residents of these neighborhoods, as well as conducted more formal interviews. Finally, I spent many hours reading city planning documents, materials posted on the websites of environmental justice organizations and newspaper accounts of both environmental justice activism and gentrification.

Of the five neighborhoods in my study, Harlem provided a most exemplary case of environmental gentrification. Until the mid-2000s, Harlem's gentrification had stuttered and stalled, due in part to its history as a repository for industry, waste stations and bus depots. The neighborhood also still suffered from the legacy of Robert Moses, who notoriously built 255 playgrounds in the 1930s but placed only one in Harlem (Caro 1975). This history had spawned an active environmental justice organization that had an impressive track record of winning its battles. At the same time, thanks to several controversial zoning changes and the economic boom of the early 2000s, gentrification had taken off in Harlem. Between 2000 and 2008, the proportion of whites living in Central Harlem more than doubled (Beveridge 2008). In 2008, 22 percent of Harlem's white households had moved in within the previous year (compared to 7 percent of black households; Roberts 2010). But in 2009, average household income was still \$27,515, (compared to \$50,033 in New York City as a whole).⁵ Moreover, while Planyc2030 promised to install green space Harlem, it made little mention of the area's toxic burdens, aside from redeveloping some of its brownfield sites (former industrial sites whose contamination limited economic investment). Thus, the gentrification of the neighborhood embodied a curious contradiction—while environmental benefits were being boosted, scant mention was being made of lingering environmental burdens.

Sustainable uplift

The linking of ecological benefits to social uplift goes back to the turn of the 20th century. In response to anxieties over rampant urban development (akin to contemporary anxieties over urbanization), social reformers drew on Enlightenment ideals about the redeeming power of nature (see Page 2001). In large part, these reformers viewed nature, including parks, as democratic curatives for the social ills wrought by urban growth and industrialization. While for some this motivation spurred suburbanization and escapes from dense urban zones, for others social uplift also stemmed directly from creating urban green space. As reformer John H. Rauch, M.D. wrote in 1869:

The moral influence of parks is decided. Man is brought in contact with nature,—is taken away from the artificial conditions in which he lives

in cities; and such associations exercise a vast influence for good.
(1869:83)

In New York City, such ideologies led to the development of Central and Prospect Parks (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992; Low et al. 2005; Zukin 1995; see also Page 2001), as well as smaller parks, similar in size to the Green X:Change.

Yet, these new green spaces did not necessarily serve the needs of those most in need of social uplift. For instance, in 1903, in an attempt to prevent children from joining youth gangs, the city decided to build Seward Park in the Lower East Side, one of the city's most overcrowded districts. But in order to build the park, the city razed three blocks of tenements and displaced almost 3,000 residents, without necessarily re-housing them (Jackson 2010).⁶ Contradictions between discourses of social reform and practices of exclusion took on new forms during post 1970s economic restructuring. As cities like New York sought to replace their manufacturing base with service industries, especially real estate, the redevelopment of attractive, affluent neighborhoods became a cornerstone of urban growth strategy (see Hackworth 2002; Logan and Molotch 1988; Maskovsky 2006; Smith 1996; Zukin 1993). The displacements that ensued from such reclamations were now couched in a language of "revitalization" and "renewal." As sociologist Stephen Steinberg argues, throughout the latter half of the 20th century, these discourses provided "an ideological façade for the neoliberal war against the poor" (Steinberg 2010:223). Once again, neighborhood reinvestment certainly included, and in many cases relied on, the provision and/or restoration of environmental amenities (such as parks, playgrounds, waterfront promenades) to attract affluent residents (Dooling 2009; Low et al. 2005; Williams 1988). For instance, in the well-known case of Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, the city undertook a project of restoring the park and displacing its homeless residents, just as new condominiums were going up around it (Smith 1996).

More recently, Kenneth Gould and Tammy Lewis find that the 1990s restoration of Brooklyn's Prospect Park led to a massive increase in new construction in certain areas around the park and a corresponding decrease in the race and class mix of those areas (see also Zukin 1993). They conclude,

The combination of market-forces in urban real estate, institutional and cultural racism, and urban environmental policy can be a powerful tool of urban renewal and urban removal, with the 'greening' of urban areas becoming code for the 'whitening' of urban areas. (Gould and Lewis 2009:13)

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Harlem's gentrification is no exception to this pattern of simultaneous greening and whitening. Beginning in the late 1980s, the city began restoring two of Harlem's largest parks, just as it embarked on a much larger effort to redevelop the neighborhood for affluent residents. Later in this essay, I describe those efforts in greater detail. As well, I show how long-term Harlem residents' reactions to gentrification crystallized in battles over parks, further underscoring both the real and symbolic role of green space in gentrification and displacement. For now, I highlight the degree to which sustainability also grows out of ideas about the intrinsic social value of nature, and thus it operates as a new iteration of historic discourses that legitimated uneven development. Moreover, by emphasizing ecological amenities and greenhouse gas reductions, sustainability tends to elide the issue of toxic waste, which is closely linked to social injustice.

Across 110th Street: space, waste, and activism in Harlem

Prior to 1910, Central Harlem (which runs north of Central Park to 155th Street and is bordered by Morningside and St. Nicholas Avenues to the west and 5th Avenue to the east) was primarily middleclass, and included many notable African Americans. But in the first part of the 20th Century, the Great Migration of African Americans from the South led thousands of new, and poor, residents to settle in Harlem. Between 1910 and 1920, the area's black population grew from approximately 10 percent to 32 percent and by 1930 it was 70 percent (Beveridge 2008). Industry in the area consisted mainly of dairies and meatpacking plants, automobile manufacturers, warehouses and other maritime businesses. However, some of those were forced to relocate in the 1930s and 40s to make way for the building of the George Washington Bridge and the Henry Hudson Parkway (We Act for Environmental Justice 2004). Once trucking replaced water and rail transportation, even more industries relocated out of Harlem. As industries and jobs left the area, poverty intensified.

City policies that prioritized capital accumulation and the protection of property values further contributed to Harlem's environmental and social decline. Around the turn of the 20th century new zoning regulations limited the use and density of certain areas, and divided the city into residential, business or unrestricted (usually industrial) uses (Sze 2007). Although zoning ostensibly protected residents from noxious industries, in the end it acted to protect property values and reinforce the city's social stratifications. For example, despite their high residential densities, many poor and working-class areas like Harlem were classified as unrestricted (Sze 2007:43). As the city grew, these unrestricted districts came to house increasing numbers of both industries and residents. By 1961, over half of the city's inhabitants lived in non-residential districts (Sze 2007:45). By that point, city leaders saw the need to revise zoning laws. In 1961, they created four new kinds of districts—residential, mixed, commercial, and manufacturing—and classified them according to density. As a whole, Harlem was zoned mixed use—its waterfront was zoned M3 for heavy manufacturing, while much of West and Central Harlem were zoned residential. No matter what the zoning changes, the city's new regulations allowed industries operating before 1961 to remain in place, and they did not require buffer zones between existing manufacturing and residential areas.

Post-industrial restructuring further concentrated the location of noxious facilities. As the city rezoned some manufacturing areas to accommodate new uses, it expanded the zoning of its remaining manufacturing areas, especially in "marginal" areas (deemed inappropriate for residential or commercial development; Sze 2007:46). Geographer Juliana Maantay (2001) finds a high correlation between those areas slated for increased manufacturing and the number of low income and people of color living there. The passing of the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts in the 1970s unexpectedly exacerbated this situation by setting into motion new mechanisms for community input into environmental siting decisions. For, although the Act enabled well-resourced communities in both urban and suburban areas to resist the placement of toxic facilities in their neighborhoods, this further concentrated toxins in less affluent areas, and especially in communities of color (Gottlieb 1993). In one of several examples from New York City, in the 1980s, residents in downtown Manhattan successfully opposed a city proposal to build a medical waste incinerator, which was instead built in the South Bronx (Sze 2007; see also Angotti 2008). Thus, just as a

disposable consumer culture was taking hold and generating ever more waste, “Not in My Backyard” (NIMBY) activism shifted growing environmental burdens even further onto the shoulders of cities rather than suburbs. Within those cities, it fell onto the shoulders of low income and powerless neighborhoods.

Similarly, in the early 1960s, the city decided to build a massive plant to treat the sewage needs of most of Manhattan’s west side. Originally this plant was slated for the Upper West Side, but it did not jibe with Robert Moses’ plans to develop that neighborhood. Moreover, the neighborhood’s political and economic clout made it politically unattractive. The City Council reconsidered and, despite opposition from Harlemites, voted to locate the site on 137th Street in West Harlem (Sze 2007; see also Angotti 2008). In 1986, the North River Sewage Treatment Plant (NRSTP) began operations, only two blocks from the borough’s only 24-hour Marine Transfer Station. Between the two enormous plants, northern Manhattan neighborhoods now treated most of Manhattan’s solid waste.

In addition, West and Central Harlem shouldered many of Manhattan’s transportation burdens. Several major truck transportation routes traversed the neighborhood as well as a diesel-fueled Amtrak rail line, a large NY/NJ Port Authority bus station. Adding a final ingredient to this noxious recipe, Harlem housed five of Manhattan’s eight diesel bus depots. Not only did buses travel through the neighborhood, but also on cold days, many buses idled for hours as they warmed up. Making matters worse, even though Harlem housed most of Manhattan’s environmental burdens, it had far fewer environmental amenities than other borough neighborhoods. In the 1930s, Robert Moses notoriously excluded northern Manhattan from his massive effort to pepper Manhattan with playgrounds. In addition, he spent millions of dollars to improve Riverside Park and cover the old tracks of the Hudson rail line, but stopped his plans at 125th Street, in West Harlem (Caro 1975). Of course, these disparities were not lost on Harlem’s residents.

Fighting for environmental improvements

At 7 a.m. on Martin Luther King Day in 1988, a few Harlem residents and activists (including former New York State Governor David Paterson) donned gas masks and placards, and held up traffic on the West Side Highway in front of the sewage treatment plant. Soon after the protest, its organizers formed West Harlem Environmental Action Coalition (WE ACT), a grassroots organization that fought against environmental burdens and worked to create environmental amenities. WE ACT incorporated as a non-profit organization, with a wide-ranging mission that included community-based research and advocacy, indoor pollution outreach campaigns, lobbying for state policy reform and national outreach and coordination with other environmental justice organizations. This approach to environmental justice echoed that of the growing U.S. environmental justice movement, which called national attention to the disproportionate siting of toxic industries in communities of color throughout the country.⁷ Within a few years, WE ACT established itself on the forefront of the national environmental justice movement, and as a force to be reckoned with in terms of industrial siting and maintenance in northern Manhattan. Its activities also had environmental implications for the entire city.

Building on the success of the NRSTP protest, in 1992, WE ACT sued the Department of Environmental Protection for operating that plant as a public and private nuisance. After six years of litigation, the city settled the suit and established a \$1.1 million fund to address community concerns. The fund

enabled WE ACT to hire three full-time staff members and to ensure that the city completed its \$55 million renovation of the plant (Checker 2008b). In addition to improving operations at the NRSTP, one of WE ACT's early priorities was to mitigate local air pollution. As mentioned, the neighborhood housed five of Manhattan's eight bus depots. Most were located next to schools, hospitals and housing projects. During the winter, buses would often idle over night to prepare for the morning commute (Shepard 2007). In 1988 WE ACT filed a suit to block the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) from constructing a 6th diesel bus depot in Northern Manhattan. Although they eventually lost that suit, by 1996 they had convinced the EPA to conduct the first assessment of Northern Manhattan's air quality, which revealed harmful particulates more than 200 percent higher than the air quality standards for Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5 (the smallest and thus most easily inhaled particles in diesel soot). A year later, WE ACT launched its "Clean Air/Clean Fuel" bus campaign which focusing on community outreach and education as well as state-level lobbying. According to WE ACT, this effort played a significant role in convincing "the Governor and key state legislators to mandate that the MTA make hundreds of alternative fuel bus purchases and retrofit diesel depots to compressed natural gas."⁸

In 2000, the organization again sued the MTA, this time filing a complaint with the Federal Transportation Authority (FTA) that charged the authority with "siting diesel bus depots and parking lots disproportionately in minority neighborhoods in Northern Manhattan" (<http://www.weact.org/Programs/>). Four years later, the FTA ruled that the authority had failed to comply with the "required federal environmental impact analysis regulations in constructing, rehabilitating and reconstructing its Northern Manhattan facilities and had failed to ensure the non-discriminatory distribution of service its facilities".⁹ After the ruling WE ACT convened a community advisory board composed of community residents living next door to these Northern Manhattan bus depots to monitor MTA practices. In 2006, when the MTA announced plans to demolish and rebuild one of Harlem's major bus depots, the board fought to close the depot permanently. Although that effort was not successful, WE ACT did collaborate with experts to design a "green" bus depot that includes a green roof, energy efficient infrastructure and recycled building materials (Butrymowicz 2009).

By this point, WE ACT had a full staff of approximately twelve people and received ongoing funding from a variety of public and private sources. Although the only environmental justice organization in Northern Manhattan, it allied with other community-based organizations that focused on housing, health and poverty issues. That level of organization then enabled WE ACT to mobilize a massive campaign to block a proposal to retrofit and expand the 135th Street marine waste station (literally adjacent to the still problematic NRST; Taylor 2004). This time, WE ACT handily won its fight and within a year, Mayor Bloomberg announced that the transfer station would not be reopened. Shortly thereafter, the mayor asked WE ACT to lead a community-based effort (which they quickly deemed the "From Trash to Treasure" campaign) to develop a new use for marine transfer station site.¹⁰

Winning the battle over the marine transfer station boosted WE ACT's green space initiatives. In particular, for the past five years, the organization had been partnering with Harlem's Community Board 9 to transform a section of defunct, industrial piers into a 2-acre park with public walkways and seating areas as well as a greenway that would link Harlem to the entire west side of Manhattan. The park plan had won federal, state and local dollars, and included a carefully constructed community input process. However, maintaining that

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vision had not been easy. Throughout the protracted planning process, WE ACT had to fight off private funding proposals including the building of a luxury hotel, luxury housing, a dinner theater and a concert band shell (Williams 2006). Clearly, WE ACT's efforts did not cause real estate developers to designate Harlem for gentrification, but they did boost the area's attractiveness to those developers.

"Greening" Harlem

In recent years, Harlem's gentrification has become almost as iconic as its cultural status (Freeman 2006; Jackson 2003; Zukin 2010). Yet, due to its high number of public housing projects and toxic sites, as well as specific economic trends, Harlem was one of the last neighborhoods in Manhattan to gentrify (Schaffer and Smith 1986). In 1979, the Department of Housing and Urban Development designated Central Harlem a "Neighborhood Strategy Area," stimulating investment in mostly low income residential rehabilitations (Schaffer and Smith 1986). Then in 1982, Mayor Koch commissioned a "Harlem Task Force" this time generating market-rate residential and commercial development, including the city's famed selling of repossessed brownstones for \$1. Municipal investment then stalled for several years, thanks to a recession that began in 1989, but by the mid-1990s it picked up again (Brash and Smith 2001). In 1993, Mayor David Dinkins designated Harlem as an Empowerment Zone, as part of a Clinton administration initiative to promote economic self-sufficiency in declining neighborhoods (Zukin 2010; Zukin et al. 2009; see also Maurrasse 2006). The designation catalyzed an influx of federal, state and city loans and incentives designed to attract new businesses to Harlem, many of which moved onto 125th Street, the neighborhood's main commercial corridor.

Until 2000, the majority of Harlem's gentrifiers were middle and upper class African Americans (see Jackson 2003), what Neil Smith (1996) would refer to as marginal gentrifiers. But after the 2000 opening of HarlemUSA, the Empowerment Zone initiative's centerpiece, the pace of gentrification accelerated, in large measure because of the entry into the neighborhood of large-scale developers. Featuring a nine-screen AMC Magic Johnson movie theater, Old Navy, Modell's Sporting Goods, and other major retailers, HarlemUSA anchored a host of new chain stores on 125th Street. A year after its opening, former President Clinton very publicly moved into an office on that shopping corridor. However, Harlem's gentrification remained somewhat slow, largely because it still housed Manhattan's highest concentration of public housing projects. Counterbalancing that impediment, the city passed two highly controversial rezoning decisions in the late 2000s. The first of these would rezone 125th Street, Harlem's central artery, to allow for high-rise office towers and some 2,100 new market-rate condominiums. The second involved rezoning a 35-acre swath of West Harlem from light manufacturing to mixed use in order to allow Columbia University to extend its campus. Despite concerted community opposition, by 2009, the city council approved both rezoning decisions.¹¹

Importantly, these decisions coincided with the City's release of PlaNYC 2030. They also starkly contrasted with the plan's sustainable goals. For instance, by encouraging construction and high density development, the 125th Street rezoning further endangered neighborhood air quality. Moreover, high density residences threatened to stress the city's already overburdened waste infrastructure.¹² The Columbia expansion created another set of contradictions. The plan, which called for the creation of a seven-story underground structure that would contain biotech research laboratories, business school programs, storage facilities, an underground MTA bus depot, and swimming facilities,

borders the Hudson River (WE ACT 2006). Many local activists expressed concern that the rising sea levels and flooding associated with climate change increased the risk of materials from the biotech research laboratories being released into the neighborhood (Morais 2008). The expansion also came extremely close to WE ACT's hard won and newly opened West Harlem Piers Park. In fact, recognizing that gentrification put their constituents at risk for displacement, WE ACT campaigned for measures that would soften the potential blows of both zoning decisions.

Challenging selective sustainability

As early as the mid-2000s, WE ACT began incorporating sustainable development into its stated goals and program areas through its "Sustainable Development Program." Their website states:

The goal of WE ACT's Sustainable Development Program Area is to develop and apply tools that empower the residents of Northern Manhattan and New York City to plan, design and achieve a healthy, sustainable and environmentally just community. WE ACT empowers residents to address irresponsible development proposals with community-based planning and development of sustainable, proactive initiatives.¹³

In 2007 WE ACT hired a new staff person to act as "Environmental Policy and Advocacy Coordinator for Food Justice/Sustainable Public Spaces." Here, sustainability means maximal community participation, environmentally and socially responsible development and truly public space. In turn, this vision echoes the ideas of the global climate justice movement, in which WE ACT had been a key player since 1998. That year, a coalition of environmental justice groups working to influence climate change-related policy and to prepare vulnerable communities for the effects of climate change formed the Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative. In 2007 WE ACT also joined an international working group to address the challenges of confronting climate change on a global level.

According to WE ACT, these coalitions and groups propelled sustainability onto urban planning agendas. As three top-ranking WE ACT staff members write in an article for the journal, *Race, Poverty and Environment*:

Sustainable development is often presented as a traditional environmental issue, but the forces that led to its emergence are not the traditional "greens." Any credible analysis of sustainable development will reveal that it was social justice movements that propelled the "greens" into thinking in terms of equity and justice for present and future generations (Shepard, Tyree and Corbin-Mark 2007).

Certainly, in New York City, WE ACT's sustainable development initiatives predated Bloomberg's. In addition to the efforts mentioned, WE ACT began working on local climate change adaptation in the late 1990s, around the same time they developed a green jobs training program (Checker 2008c). This history led the new director of the mayor's Office of Sustainability and Long Range Planning to ask WE ACT's director, Peggy Shepard to sit on its initial Sustainability Advisory Board. But Shepard quickly found that the mayor's office did not share WE ACT's vision of sustainability. In the article quoted above, she and her colleagues note:

It soon became clear that the long-term vision for the plan would focus narrowly on infrastructure needs and metrics that would enable the city to effectively track and evaluate its progress. PlaNYC was never envisioned as a broad-based planning process that engaged area residents (Shepard, Tyree and Corbin-Mark 2007).

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As this quote suggests, the city's version of sustainable planning emphasized metrics, outcomes and evaluation—mechanisms of technocratic governance. These tools also appeared to be neutral and transparent, even though in reality, they did little to engage a truly democratic planning process (Brash 2011). Despite input from WE ACT and other advisory board members, the final plan relied far more on input from a high-end consulting firm than from its advisory board (Angotti 2010).

After the plan's release, WE ACT staffers found they had to be vigilant in ensuring that it included their constituents. For instance, the mayor's plan provided incentives for taxi cab drivers to convert their cars to hybrids. But as WE ACT pointed out, taxicabs are relatively scarce in Harlem; rather those services are provided by "black cars," or liveries. Eventually, WE ACT convinced the mayor's office to offer a program that also incentivized livery owners to convert to hybrids (Checker 2008b). In addition, as part of its emphasis on greenhouse gas emissions, PlaNYC 2030 called for all buildings of 50,000 square feet or more to make energy efficiency changes. Initially the plan expected owners to pay for those changes, and it failed to include any provisions to prevent landlords from passing the cost of boiler upgrades onto their tenants. Forming an unusual alliance, both owners and social justice activists raised a huge outcry.¹⁴ WE ACT quickly began working to fund programs that will help landlords in northern Manhattan not only to retrofit their boilers to require less oil, but also to use cleaner, more renewable energy sources. Finally, WE ACT worked with the city to make its climate change adaptation program in East Harlem more locally relevant (Checker 2008b).

The city's sustainability plan thus presented both opportunities and challenges for WE ACT and other environmental justice organizations. With a foot in the door, organizations now had the chance to guide the city's initiatives to align with their goals. However, the city was able to pick and choose which initiatives they put into practice. Making things even more difficult, by operating through a discourse borrowed from WEACTION's own rubric of sustainability, the city moved them into a shared, technocratic dialogue that left out questions of justice. In the end, WE ACT remained on the defensive, working to develop compromises that would ensure the two-edged sword presented by the sustainability plan did not cut their constituents too sharply.

Whose green? Contesting eco-elitism

In 2007, the same year that Mayor Bloomberg launched PlaNYC, Al Gore won an Academy Award for *An Inconvenient Truth*. Almost immediately alarm over global warming sparked a groundswell in concern for the environment. Dozens of new books told consumers how to adopt greener lifestyles, and corporations like Dell, General Electric, and Wal-Mart announced the adoption of environmentally-friendly practices (see Kanter 2007; Monbiot 2007). From hybrid cars to organic vegetables to "clean" dishwashing detergent, being eco-friendly came to mean having enough disposable income to buy more expensive, products branded as "green."

Here again, Harlem became a site of contradiction. Although it continued to house a number of bus depots and other industrial burdens, new condomini-

ums advertised eco-friendly building materials and energy saving equipment. In 2008, Harlem was the site of New York City's first silver LEED-certified townhouse. An advertisement for that townhouse reads,

You don't have to pretend to be environmentally friendly anymore; with ownership of this trophy landmark you are entitled. You can now live in decadence and snub your nose to all when you purchase this GREEN Master Piece.

According to a real estate agent, the buildings' green amenities commanded a 35 percent higher price than a comparable non-green townhouse.¹⁵ The greening of Harlem had come full circle.

Just as they did at throughout urban history, green amenities both signaled and facilitated Harlem's new elitism. They also became battlefields where struggles over class position and privilege were hard-fought. Marcus Garvey Park, on the eastern edge of Central Harlem provides a dramatic example. In 1969 Mount Morris Park (renamed Marcus Garvey Park in 1973) was the site of the Harlem Cultural Festival, which came to be known as "Black Woodstock." That event also started one of New York City's most venerable park traditions—the drum circle. For four decades, a group of drummers played in the park until 10 p.m. every summer Saturday. During the 1970s and 80s when the park became a center for drug-selling, musicians would sometimes drum up to ten hours in order to provide a window of time for children to play in safety (Williams 2008b). In 1998, in keeping with the city's early attempts at gentrifying Harlem, the City began to make some renovations to the park. In 2006 the first luxury high-rise opened on the park, and two years later in the summer of 2008, Mayor Bloomberg allocated four million dollars to renovate the amphitheater.

That summer became one of great discontent. Residents of the new high rise, who had paid between \$500,000 and \$1million for a co-op apartment, began complaining about the noise from the drum circle. In the past, when neighbors complained, the drummers had moved peacefully. However, this time the police got involved, and they ordered the drummers to relocate twice. Acerbic online debates ensued. On the blog, "Harlem Fur: Dogs, Cats and Petrification," one commenter declared, "no matter how many good things are happening up here, things will never truly raise [sic] up to the Manhattan standard unless these MASSIVE projects are destroyed." While another threatened, "There will be severe backlash against you new comers who complain about noise in Harlem. Adapt or perish you fucks" (harlemfur.com). By mid-summer the controversy escalated after a racist e-mail message was circulated among co-op residents advocating violence against the musicians, and the New Black Panther Party led a march in support of the drummers (Williams 2008b).

Directly across Central Harlem from Marcus Garvey Park sits venerable Morningside Park. In the late 1960s, Columbia University overtook a section of this park to construct a new gym. Community members, joined by some Columbia student groups, raised a great hue and cry. The protests culminated a series of events including the arrest of students gathered in the park to block gym construction and the occupation of campus buildings by both students and community residents. In fact, black power leaders like H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and others led black Harlemites onto campus to join the occupation (Bradley 2009). Although Columbia moved its gym elsewhere, throughout the 1970s and 80s, Morningside declined until it became a drug selling hub—one of New York's notorious "needle parks." In the late 1980s, the city began to renovate Morningside, a decade-long process that finished just as gentrification began to intensify.

The restoration brought strict rules and regulations that catered to particular kinds of park consumption while excluding others. For instance, residents claimed that whereas police had always ignored the park, now they were removing benches, fining people for walking through the park outside of the park's regular hours (from dawn to dusk) and cracking down on other rules that inhibited family picnics and other traditional activities. As with Marcus Garvey Park, residents did not take such changes lightly. In 2006 they crowded a town hall meeting where one angry resident told park officials, "we have been barbecuing for years. We have a Father's Day event that's been going on for over 30 years and now they want to stop us from doing it. You want us to enjoy the park and the park is for the community; we *are* the community" (Moorehouse 2006; emphasis added).¹⁶ In both cases, the enforcement of park rules privileged the needs and desires of Harlem's newer, affluent community while disallowing the recreative customs and expressive culture of its old-timers.

The vehemence of their reactions to Morningside and Marcus Garvey Parks indicate the high value that all residents placed on green spaces. At the same time, what was the point of restoring such spaces if they would become exclusive enclaves that allowed certain kinds of cultural expression while suppressing others? In short, for whom did such spaces make the neighborhood sustainable? No wonder the Green X:Change project was met with such skepticism. Indeed, back at that meeting, one woman asked, "Is this going to be like Morningside? Now you need permission to get into play there." Her comment was met with a round of nods and affirmations from those assembled. For, sustainability, and the green amenities that came with it, arrived in Harlem just as gentrification accelerated from a steady pace to full speed. Sustainability, in other words, was anything but politically neutral.

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Conclusions: how sustainable is sustainability?

To conclude, I return to the Green X:Change meeting. Long-term Harlem residents had expressed concern over what would happen to the "winos" and homeless people who currently inhabited the triangle parks. One man, who was on the board of a local community garden wanted to know whether the space could be used to house a large greenhouse for growing heirloom vegetables that neighborhood residents (including the homeless population) could sell for profit. City planners responded that they wanted to keep the space open and free of enclosed structures. Amid mounting tensions, a WE ACT representative stood up and introduced himself. He suggested compromise—planners could reduce the size of the parks and remove fewer parking spaces in exchange for residents' support of the project. He also reminded everyone that the purpose of the meeting was for community members to provide their input, and he pleaded for them to continue to participate in the planning process. By that point, attendants appeared to wholly reject any planning for a new park, favoring the status quo. At the meeting's conclusion, a staff person from the Department of Transportation shook his head and said, "If the community wants parking over taking back space, then we will go to other communities with this project."

In the end, Harlem residents and WE ACT activists ran headlong into the paradox of sustainability. For all their efforts, WE ACT had been unable to recoup their holistic vision of sustainability—improving their neighborhood while ensuring that their constituents still had a place in it. Indeed, by giving them a seat at the advisory table and by adopting some aspects of their initiatives, the city limited WE ACT leaders' ability to take a critical stance and obligated them to adopt a more consensual form of politics. Attempts to co-opt oppositional groups and individuals, especially in the post-civil rights era, are

certainly nothing new (see Maskovsky 2001, 2006; Piven and Cloward 1977). But, I argue that environmental gentrification entails specific kinds of compromises and co-optations that in turn indicate a significant shift in the terrain of local politics. Residents were not being asked to accept a compromise between political factions, as we understand traditional compromise to mean. In fact, they were not asked to accept a political compromise at all. Rather, residents were encouraged to accommodate a technocratic compromise that shunned politics as unseemly and counter-productive, and that sought instead only to engage "community" at the level of governance. At that level, technocratic issues, such as where to put green space and what to do about parking, could be delinked from the questions of social justice to which they were once attached. A rubric of sustainability then becomes part of a post-political project that sidelines questions of real political inclusion and justice in the name of technocratic, community-based deliberation. At the same time, by *resisting* the Green X:Change, residents transformed the meeting into a space where different socio-economic and ecological futures could be "imagined, fought over, and constructed" (Swyngedouw 2009:38). In this way, residents attempted to retain a claim on the political itself, to insist on the deeply political nature of the production and construction of urban space, to demand political solutions to environmental crises and to assert *everyone's* right to a sustainable urban future.

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Notes

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¹In 2009, 41% of Central Harlem's population received income support (http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/neighborhood_info/mn10_info.shtml). In 2010, Central Harlem ranked first in the city for cerebrovascular diseases (34 deaths per 100,000 people) and had the second highest rate of cancer deaths (Evans 2011). Central Harlem also had asthma rates that were five times the national average (Santora 2005).

²See <http://communitybasedplanning.wordpress.com>.

³See <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030>.

⁴These include the building of big-box stores like Ikea in Brooklyn and Costco and Target in Manhattan, as well as several stadium projects.

⁵<http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Harlem-New-York-NY.html>.

⁶Once built, the degree to which the park accomplished its mission remained questionable. Immigrant mothers were concerned that they could not keep an eye on their children while they were in the playground, and children complained that city-hired park monitors watched them too closely (Jackson 2010).

⁷The literature on this movement is extensive, see Bullard 2000; Bryant 1995; Checker 2005; Novotny 1995.

⁸See <http://www.weact.org/Programs/EJAdvocacyGovtAccountability/MTAAccountabilityCampaign/tabid/210/Default.aspx>.

⁹See <http://www.weact.org/AboutUs/WEACTTimeline/tabid/310/Default.aspx>.

¹⁰See <http://www.weact.org/Programs/SustainableDevelopment/WestHarlemWaterfrontParkProject/MTSFromTrashToTreasure/tabid/265/Default.aspx>.

¹¹The Columbia expansion did include an extensive Community Benefits Agreement, which had been painstakingly developed by a coalition of community groups. However, few stipulations would go into effect immediately, and most of them would not necessarily be enforceable by future legislators (Williams 2008a).

¹²See <http://weact.org/Portals/7/WE%20ACT%20Key%20Concerns%20Re%20125th%20Street%20Rezoning.pdf>.

¹³See <http://weact.org/Programs/SustainableDevelopment/tabid/190/Default.aspx>.

¹⁴In 2009 the mayor stepped back from the proposal in response to protests from both tenants' rights advocates and building owners (Navarro 2009). Two years later, Mayor Bloomberg announced a plan to use \$40 million in federal stimulus funds to start a loan program to help property owners pay for energy-efficiency upgrades. However, the city continued to neglect the issue of owners passing upgrade costs onto tenants.

¹⁵This townhouse first hit the market in September 2008, asking \$4.05 million. By early 2010, that price had been lowered to \$2.79 million. http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2010/02/17/is_green_harlem_townhouse_too_sanitized_to_sell.php.

¹⁶Five years later, barbecues continued to be a fiercely contested issue. Even a recent early-evening shooting in Morningside Park turned into a debate over barbecues (see Leland 2011).

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