

In Brooklyn, gentrification wipes out pigeons and chickens to make room for cats and dogs

Gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods into pseudo-suburbs have created a line between the haves and the have-nots

Detroit demolishes its ruins: 'the capitalists will take care of the rest'



Robin, who raised pigeons in Park Slope until gentrified residents shut it down: 'They got rid of the chickens first.' Photograph: Chris Arnade/Chris Arnade

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Robin used to keep chickens in his backyard, and pigeons on the roof of his Park Slope, Brooklyn, brownstone. The chickens for eggs, the pigeons for sport.

Many of his neighbors did the same.

He isn't allowed either anymore. "When the new people started moving into this neighborhood, buying up the buildings, they started demanding changes. They got rid of the chickens first. Then they complained about the pigeons. I was the last guy to be able to keep them. These new folks love their animals and spend crazy amounts on them, as long as it's cats and dogs."

Robin's parents moved from Puerto Rico in the late 50s to a neighborhood, and a city, that was changing dramatically. His family was filling a void left after many of the previous residents, mostly working-class Irish and Italians, had left for the appeal, and perceived safety, of the newer suburbs.

Robin and his friends learned the sport of pigeon keeping as kids from the older Italians

who didn't leave. The chickens and roosters were his family's own familiar touch.

Robin's story has been played out many times in many cities: newer residents, often immigrants, drive many of the changes that are at the core of urban landscapes. Cities change far faster and with more urgency than smaller towns.

Now New York, and particularly Robin's Brooklyn neighborhood, is changing again, this time driven by a wave of younger, whiter and wealthier residents.

They are, curiously, often the children and grandchildren of those who had left for the suburbs, the ones who taught Robin how to keep pigeons.

These children no longer see the city as dangerous, viewing their parents' suburban life as static and wanting. It is an unwinding of white flight of the 50s.

Their arrival has remade Robin's neighborhood, and many others in New York City. They come demanding changes far greater than ridding the neighborhood of chickens and pigeons. They are demanding - and getting - better schools, more sympathetic police and more city resources.

They can do this because they come with money, and as such immediately occupy a primary position in the neighborhood. This position allows them to rebuild the area in their image, without taking into account what has come before, or what is already there.

City planners and the media applaud this transformation because of a false, but all too prevalent, assumption that a poor or rough neighborhood does not have a culture worth understanding and saving. That dogs and cats are better than pigeons and chickens.

Robin is the exception amongst his friends. He has owned his home for the last 30 years, so as real estate prices have inflated he has benefited, except for losing his pigeons and chickens.

Most of his friends haven't done so well. Their families came impoverished, and were faced with limited opportunities to buy. Access to mortgages was scarce, often due to outright racism.

So they, like the majority of Latinos and African Americans in Brooklyn, rented and are now being forced by rising rents to move from the place they grew up.

They have relocated to cheaper, more dangerous, and less convenient parts of New York City. Many can be found in the South Bronx. The younger, whiter and wealthier crowds haven't discovered the Bronx, so there are still plenty of chickens in the yards and pigeons on the roofs.

Also, few people in South Bronx own their homes, and still find it very hard to buy. Jesus has kept pigeons on the roof of the building he has worked at as the superintendant for 15 years. "Are you crazy? A bank give me a loan? If I walked into a bank they would call the cops."

Without owning, Jesus and his friend will be forced to move should the wealthy decide they want the Bronx back as well.

Once a neighborhood has been changed, economically whitewashed, the changes are cemented in place by use of zoning laws and historical preservation boards. These laws, often enacted by liberals who claim to be egalitarian, limit the stock of homes, which further pushes prices and rents higher, and which further reduces who can afford to live in the neighborhood.

Cities do change, often for the better. But change is not the issue alone, it is who and what is driving that change, and whether the benefits are accessible to everyone.

The changes now taking place in Robin's Brooklyn, and elsewhere, are being driven by the wealthy and their desire to once again live in large cities. They have made the city safer and richer. Yet they have also made much of the city far more economically exclusive.

You can come to this new safe city, but you better have money.