

The Downsides of a Neighborhood 'Turnaround'

BY: J.B. Wogan | February 1, 2015

This story is part of a series on gentrification, which appears online and in the February 2015 print issue.

By many measures, the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C. is a national model for how city governments can target public resources in a small area to attract new residents and businesses.

After a subway stop opened in 1999, the neighborhood population grew by 6 percent in 10 years, with developers putting up more than a million square feet of new office and retail to meet the demand for shopping, food, entertainment and work space. The city added or updated public amenities at the same time, such as sidewalks, bike rental stations and parks. The development boom also coincided with a concerted effort by city planners to create and preserve affordable housing, so low-income residents could enjoy the changes in the neighborhood.

The city's work won national recognition from the Urban Land Institute and the Congress for New Urbanism because it included mixed-use development, accommodated pedestrians, enhanced transit access, preserved some historic buildings and created some housing priced below market rate.

But Kathryn Howell, a former policy specialist in the city's housing department, felt that the praise heaped on the project overlooked some important flaws. Her concern was two-fold: Much of Columbia Heights was becoming unaffordable to anyone making less than the metro area's median income (about \$90,000 in 2013) and many of the new businesses and public spaces reflected the tastes and preferences of new, wealthier residents, alienating the existing community.

When Howell left government for a PhD program in community and regional planning at the University of Texas at Austin, she decided to make Columbia Heights the subject of her doctoral dissertation. (It is also the subject of a feature story in the March issue of *Governing*.) Howell spent a few years studying change in the neighborhood and interviewed residents, policy makers, agency staff, housing advocates and developers. Today, she is an assistant professor in urban planning at the Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. Much of her research on Columbia Heights will appear in a chapter she wrote for an upcoming book, *Capital Dilemma: Growth and Inequality in Washington, D.C.*

Howell discussed her findings with *Governing* on Jan. 23. The transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

How did you decide to make Columbia Heights the focus of your research?

Before I went back to school, I worked for the city and I happened to be working there in 2007 to 2008. In 2008, there was a ribbon cutting for the Columbia Heights Target and DC USA complex. The Department of Housing and Community Development wasn't super involved on the large-scale development side anymore -- that was before my time -- but we were working with tenants purchasing their buildings through the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA). The city preserved something like 2,100 units in the neighborhood between 2002 and 2009. So, what we were seeing was the larger city government be very proud of what was going on in Columbia Heights.

At the same time, my job was working with local advocates who were telling us, "Look we're losing Section 8 properties, we're losing market-rate affordable units, people are getting tossed out or are really struggling." So, we were seeing this contrast.

Before going back to work for the city, I had studied a lot of mixed-income programs. I was interested in this law, TOPA, that essentially creates mixed-income communities in the midst of rapid gentrification. With most research on gentrification, the interviews with low-income people are with residents who are at risk of losing their places, so that plays into how they think about the neighborhood and how they think about the change. I was interested in what happens when you have a population that stays and you actually have to deal with the fallout.

How did your former co-workers react when they learned you were researching Columbia Heights for your academic work?

My take didn't end up being too different from what people in my department felt. You know, we were all in housing, right? You go into housing for a reason. You tend to have this perspective about low-income people and you think they should be able to stay.

I don't know how people in the mayor's office might have felt. City government is not monolithic. People in planning and people in housing didn't have too negative a reaction to what I was doing. My critique was, "Overall the city doesn't have a preservation policy, but with the tools that were available, they were doing their best." And I think that's what most people tend to feel at the city level.

The title of your dissertation does not use the term "gentrification," though it appears 19 times in the text itself. Is it safe to say that you consider the change that has occurred in Columbia Heights gentrification? What do you consider to be the telltale signs of gentrification?

I don't think there's anybody who's going to look at Columbia Heights and say it's not gentrification. But I was interested in a broader question of neighborhood change and how we deal with neighborhood change. Cities have gone through constant flux, from the turn of the century with tenements and slum clearance, moving through urban renewal and disinvestment and white flight all the way to gentrification and where we are now with hyper gentrification in D.C. Cities are in flux and we have to deal with the constant change that happens without displacing people.

In terms of a definition of gentrification, I look at displacement. Some of that is direct displacement that results from rising rents or landlords letting the building deteriorate so that people move out faster. But I also look at whether you can get a similarly situated apartment in the area. That's *collective displacement*. Low-income people are fairly mobile and they tend to move a lot for natural reasons -- maybe for a new job or for their family. As that happens, can another low-income person move into that neighborhood? That's the issue with collective displacement. The neighborhood becomes very expensive, very rapidly. At that point, there is only one particular income group that can live there.

You highlight a dichotomy in how new and old residents perceive the same spaces in Columbia Heights. A good example, I think, is a redeveloped neighborhood park you describe at 11th and Monroe. One set of residents was the adults already using the park, who hung out and drank there. They wanted some new amenities like bathrooms and tables. Another set of newer residents called it a drunk park and wanted a playground with a heavier police presence. Ultimately, the newer residents won. What do you think a city planner or local elected official should take away from the story?

I looked at the contrast with what happened with the 14th and Girard Park [also in Columbia Heights]. There planners said ok, the park shouldn't be open all hours of the night, that's challenging for police, that's challenging for neighbors who have to deal with noise, but we understand that these folks have been using the park for years and it's been a social space. So, we'll set it back, we'll renovate, we'll make it easier to see from a police standpoint. You can change it so that the safety element is maintained while that social element is preserved.

With the park at 11th and Monroe, the design is beautiful. At the same time, it's unusable for the people who used to hang out there. It was redeveloped with one group in mind and that was really kids. There are a lot of kids in Columbia Heights and that playground section is very well used. But I think there could have been a balance in the park. They could have thought about shaded tables or bathrooms. It's always a challenge as a planner. You have to listen to both sides.

At one point in the dissertation, you note that "Columbia Heights had hit all the planning checklist items: a dense, transformative, infill development that was built on vacant property requiring no direct displacement of residents and featuring retail, office, and residential – both market rate and affordable." What's absent from the current planning checklist?

Dealing with the indirect implications. One of the things that I've been following is talk about developing a new [Major League Soccer] stadium in Buzzard Point [in Southwest D.C.] There's a lot of subsidized and market-rate affordable housing down there. Obviously, the stadium itself is not going to directly displace anybody, but there are impacts when you do city-backed development. The city should be looking into what's subsidized around there and how we can actively preserve that.

You draw a distinction between the redevelopment focused on community and neighborhood. Explain what the difference is.

Neighborhoods are more than just the built environment. It's also about the community that's already there. Typically planning has dealt with the physical place. So, the way we thought about urban renewal is we thought about a place where we see slums that needs to be redeveloped into this vision that we have.

We tend to forget that there is a whole community that exists there that is legitimate. They've been there because they couldn't move for financial reasons or didn't want to move. But they've lived their lives there and built a community. Just because it doesn't look like what some planning visionary says is the right thing doesn't mean that they didn't manage to eke out a great community.

We tend to confuse physical deterioration with social deterioration. When we say, "People should love it. It's so much better looking now. You now have a Target." Well, yeah, but you've lost a sense of community, and that, too, is a loss.

That came up in my research. People had mixed feelings. They'd say, "It's great, I can go to IHOP and sit down with my family for dinner." Or Ruby Tuesdays, which is closed now, but old people would love it. They'd go have soup or their iced tea. Everyone at Ruby Tuesdays knew their names. It was affordable. But they were also very frustrated because the rest of the neighborhood didn't feel like theirs. On the street or in public spaces or in going to community meetings, they felt like people didn't want them there.

You also devote attention to ways that change has been good for the residents. What are some ways people in Columbia Heights are indisputably better off than 15 years ago?

Safety and building conditions. The crime that's happening in Columbia Heights is petty crime. It's theft. It's not violence related to gang activity and drugs. It's not murder. Those things are not happening to the same extent, so people can be out in their community and feel safer.

Those who are still there, they're living in better housing than they were before because they're owning or someone else has redeveloped it for them. The conditions of the buildings have improved. Management of the buildings has improved.

Transportation access is better, too. They have [the subway station] now. A lot people are pretty bus dependent and bus service has probably improved, too.

Where should the D.C. mayor rank "limit negative side effects of gentrification" on her list of policy priorities?

It's got to be at the top at this point. Mayor Bowser is actually doing that. She's really prioritizing \$100 million in the [housing production] trust fund. She's prioritizing preservation. Housing and homelessness, she's already made that a priority and alerted her cabinet to that. She gets that this city is not the city where Anthony Williams stepped in as mayor [in 1999]. It's not the city that's thinking about changing. Change is happening and residents in the city are struggling to afford to live anywhere. That's got to be high on the priority list because the economic development pieces are going to happen. We're not going to turn the clock back. Cities are hip and they're going to be hip for awhile.

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