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GEOG 341

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Toward a Just City: Resisting Gentrification in Frogtown

Introduction

In 2014, the Green Line, a new light rail project, arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota, connecting the city's downtown with that of its western neighbor of Minneapolis. This rail project abuts several of St. Paul's most underprivileged neighborhoods, and one such neighborhood is Thomas-Dale, also known as Frogtown. In recent years, working-class Frogtown has become a vibrant, culturally rich and diverse neighborhood home to many residents of East African and Southeast Asian descent. Around 75 percent of Frogtown residents are people of color, and over 20 percent of residents were born outside of the United States (Kirk, 2018). However, with the advent of the Green Line, many Frogtown residents have seen their rents and property taxes increase, and the threat of more investment and development continues to loom. Over 60 percent of households in Frogtown are renters and are thus much more vulnerable to displacement ("Frogtown/Thomas-Dale | Gentrification in Minneapolis & St. Paul", n.d.). Many housing complexes and trendy developments have already sprung up along the Green Line on University Avenue, especially further west. Local residents, led by the Frogtown Neighborhood Association, are worried about gentrification making its way to their community, and the consequent danger of neighborhood displacement.

This paper discusses the Frogtown Neighborhood Association and their efforts to resist displacement in Frogtown. In partnership with several other organizations,

including the Summit-University Planning Council and the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, they have developed a small area plan with several policy recommendations and core tenets that uphold residents' stories, perspectives, and desires to stay in Frogtown. Particularly, this paper will focus on debates surrounding a controversial proposed infill development just outside of Frogtown near the Green Line. Ultimately, I reflect on the shortcomings of the Frogtown Neighborhood Association in their efforts to resist gentrification, and I identify lessons learned through their struggles.

Explaining Gentrification

Gentrification is a complex problem of neighborhood change that occurs in inner-city neighborhoods. In *City Life*, we understand gentrification as the process of race and class transformation by which a neighborhood becomes more affluent. Historically, white, middle-class households have been responsible for this change in predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods like Frogtown. Academics continue to debate whether gentrification entails displacement or if the two processes are distinct. For many struggling neighborhoods, development and investment are important and direly needed. However, it is often the case that upon receiving this investment, the demographics of the neighborhood change and longtime residents are priced out. As a result, community groups in many of these vulnerable communities have started organizing around the concept of *development without displacement*, and Frogtown is no exception.

One popular proposal to mitigate gentrification-induced displacement is to apply typical economics logic: increasing the supply of housing decreases the demand for

housing and therefore lowers or stabilizes housing prices. If a city "builds enough for everyone," then all residents, whether established or incoming, are satisfied. Several recent studies support this claim (Asquith, Mast, & Reed, 2019; Li, 2019). However, these studies admit correlations between new construction and demographic and/or amenity changes, and neither study uses informative qualitative data from residents in changing neighborhoods.

Furthermore, gentrification can still induce negative change for longtime residents if we account for displacement and rising rents. In a 2015 study, Shaw & Hagemans (2015) found that despite not suffering from displacement, low-income residents of gentrified neighborhoods still experienced a sense of loss of place as a result of changing government and social structures and the transformation of business and meeting places. Moreover, low-income residents who manage to stay in gentrified areas continue to be at risk of displacement as protections for low-income renters keep dwindling (Newman & Wyly, 2006). For example, Frogtown stakeholders have reported that landlords are scarcely accepting Section 8 housing vouchers ("Frogtown/Thomas-Dale | Gentrification in Minneapolis & St. Paul", n.d.). Reeling from the danger of being forced out, many Frogtown residents have joined alongside the Frogtown Neighborhood Association to fight back against gentrification.

Frogtown and the Wilder lot

In response to the threat of loss of place, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association has furthered their efforts to inform the community about the ills of gentrification. One approach they have taken to this end is to frame the neighborhood's small area plan as an

informative cartoon titled *SMAPL!*. A small area plan is essentially an informal outline of changes that neighborhood residents would like to see—it has no final say over the matters in the neighborhood. Through *SMAPL!*, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association has hoped to lay out gentrification and its processes in a much more accessible way to local residents.

They have also collaborated with several groups, including the Summit-University Planning Council and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota, to develop a housing and land use plan with core values, including the right to safe, healthy and sustainable homes; access to resources; government transparency; and fostering community. This housing and land use plan also recommends several direct policy actions, including the creation of a community land trust, promoting inclusionary zoning, and a moratorium on development and the sale of public land.

The Frogtown Neighborhood Association's efforts to resist gentrification span further than just these plans and proposals. Recently, Frogtown has found strife with the nonprofit Amherst H. Wilder Foundation and Minneapolis-based developer Alatus. The latter has proposed an infill development on an empty lot owned by Wilder near the Green Line in the Union Park neighborhood just outside of Frogtown. Upon completion, the six-storey, $60 million, 288-unit mixed-use housing complex would be complete with a grocery store and shopping at the ground level. Alatus needed no variances or subsidies to move forward with the development, save for a $1.25 million grant from the Metropolitan Council on the grounds of being a Transit-Oriented Development.

However, after Alatus pitched its proposal, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association, led by co-directors Caty Royce and Tia Williams, sparked a campaign against the new development. They argued that Alatus pushed the development forward without incorporating community input, and that the project did not accurately assess affordability. The development allotted 150 units of its nearly 300 total for residents making up to 60 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI) for the entire 13 county Twin Cities metropolitan area. However, Frogtown community leaders argued the AMI was not representative of the median income in neighborhoods near the proposed development. For instance, in 2017, the AMI for the Twin Cities metro area was about $90,000, but the AMI for Frogtown was around $35,000, and the number was even lower for renters ("Frogtown/Thomas-Dale | Gentrification in Minneapolis & St. Paul", n.d.). Units priced at 60 percent of the AMI would have rents starting at $850 per bed, nearly twice as expensive as what low-income families in Frogtown could afford. Leaders argued that this metric inhibits families of all income levels from truly being able to access housing in the development.

The Frogtown Neighborhood Association penned multiple letters to the St. Paul City Council, the Wilder Foundation, and city committees, expressing concerns over the development. Frogtown community leaders were worried that this new development would lead local landlords to raise rents and cause increases in property taxes. They expressed demands that at least half of the units in the development be "truly affordable" with rates at 30 percent of the AMI. Leaders also pointed out that the development violated both St. Paul's Comprehensive Plan, which is made up of various neighborhoods' small area plans, and the city's commitment to racial equity. The

development was also contrary to city leaders' espoused values. These efforts by the Frogtown Neighborhood Association and other stakeholders were mostly successful—they were able to convince City Council member Dai Thao, the representative for Frogtown and the area slated for this development, to heed to their cause. They also managed to successfully lobby the St. Paul Planning Commission to deny Alatus' site plan, a move that ran in stark contrast to the recommendation of staff from St. Paul's Planning and Economic Development department.

When Alatus appealed this decision to the City Council, stakeholders kept pushing the City Council to deny the appeal, which they eventually did via a 4-3 vote in April 2021. However, in a rare use of power, Mayor Melvin Carter vetoed this decision, allowing Alatus to push forward with the development. Despite this, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association is continuing to push back, arguing that Mayor Carter overstepped his legal jurisdiction. It remains to be seen whether the Frogtown Neighborhood Association and their efforts to resist this new development will ultimately be successful.

Conclusion

Though the Frogtown Neighborhood Association successfully managed to cull together a broad movement in solidarity with other neighborhood and community groups against gentrification, unfortunately building a strong coalition is not always enough. Neighborhoods can only resist gentrification insofar as they have the power and influence to do so. Groups can advocate for policy action, but individuals in positions of power may always choose not to listen. The dire necessity for housing of all types in general can

drown out the cries for more affordable housing. Additionally, part of the failure of Frogtown's campaign may be attributed to the way St. Paul structures its city government, with Mayor Carter sitting with veto power atop a strong mayor-weak council system. These shortcomings show how different power structures and ineffective policymaking can stunt progress towards just and equitable city development.

One large lesson learned from the Wilder lot debacle is that though a citywide Comprehensive Plan and smaller, localized small area plans might argue for equity and transparency in new housing developments, goals like these are open to interpretation, and these plans are non-binding. In the past when St. Paul has struck down developments for not following the city's Comprehensive Plan, they have lost in court on the grounds that Comprehensive Plans are visionary, not concrete. Until the city revamps its housing affordability policies and enacts measures that empower community voices, development proposals like Alatus' Wilder development will continue to be divisive.

In looking for solutions, St. Paul urban geographer Bill Lindeke proposes that the city look to its western neighbor for ideas. Minneapolis has made several efforts to tackle the city's housing shortcomings, including increasing funding for affordable housing, granting more legal power to renters, eliminating single-family zoning, and passing an inclusionary zoning ordinance (Lindeke, 2021). Many of these policy actions are similar to those the Frogtown Neighborhood Association and similar community organizations are pushing for in St. Paul. Lastly, though they may not have successfully blocked the Wilder development, Frogtown and other vulnerable neighborhoods are only at the beginning stage of organizing, only having created their newest small area plan in 2017. The Frogtown Neighborhood Association has likely yet to reach the potential of its

organizational power, and only time will tell what the future holds for their efforts to resist gentrification in St. Paul's most underprivileged neighborhoods.

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