Striving for Just Green Enough

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The benefits of urban green space have been well-documented, resulting in a push for incorporating green infrastructure within the built environment. Efforts to design more biodiverse, nature-rich cities have been shown not only to provide resounding ecological benefits, but also to generally improve the quality of human life and well-being. Yet a dichotomy exists between the theory and practice of the integration of green space in urban areas. The benefits coupled with urban green infrastructure have hidden costs that contribute to the creation of spatially distributed inequities, which in turn lead to "eco-gentrification." For development to be truly sustainable, it must also be equitable. Therefore, urban green space must be designed in the context of the co-evolving complexities of socio-natural processes. Officials involved in green space implementation must acknowledge and account for the environmental justice issues produced by urban socio-economic structures through "just green enough" strategies that integrate community-based participatory planning and anti-gentrification policies—thus ensuring the equitable realization of green space benefits.

The United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. Among these is the objective to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."[1] In light of this, a growing number of cities are altering their development strategies to incorporate more public urban green space—including parks, parkways, gardens, and street trees—within the built environment. Studies consistently show that urban green space enriches biodiversity; provides ecosystem services; enhances physical, mental, and social well-being; grants opportunities for education and civic engagement; and generally improves local quality of life.

However, urban green space and its accompanying benefits are often inequitably distributed within cities. Access is often limited by "income, ethno-racial characteristics, age, gender, (dis)ability, and other axes of difference."[2] Furthermore, "eco-gentrification" is often intensified by neighborhood turnover and rising rents. Therefore, to truly contribute to sustainable development, urban green space development strategies must recognize the co-evolving complexities of socio-natural processes. This means recognizing that the environment is not separate from the socio-economic structures of the city, and that there are important human interdependencies and justice issues related to green space. Keeping these principles in mind,

cities can realize urban green space benefits while minimizing eco-gentrification through "just green enough" strategies. These strategies seek to add public green space and co-opt their social, physical, and economic benefits to the greatest extent possible without creating gentrification or concentrating resources in a manner that limits more equitable distribution throughout a city.

"Just green enough" strategies uniquely recognize the political economies associated with a changing environment. They recognize that economic and political structures typically drive the creation of urban green space projects, and that these structures, their associated processes, and the outcomes they create, have hidden costs that contribute to disparities in the spatial distribution of "winners" and "losers". Though not always the case, districts with greater access to green space, including yards, street trees, and public parks, are often more desirable and more expensive. This consequently benefits residents who can afford higher costs of living ("the winners"), while burdening low- and middle-income citizens ("the losers"), who often are priced-out to less desirable neighborhoods. Numerous studies have shown that lower-income neighborhoods and ethnic or racially diverse communities are more likely to have decreased access to urban green space.[3, 4, 5, 6] The winners are able to experience the "goods" associated with green spaces (such as biodiversity, ecosystem services including improved air and water quality, recreational opportunities, etc.) while the losers feel the burden of the "bads" (especially poor air and water quality, and lower levels of mental and physical well-being).

By understanding the chain of explanation for gentrification processes and differential power relations that contribute to these disparities, policymakers can pair anti-gentrification strategies with urban green space development projects. Curran and Hamilton's "just green enough" approach is one such method.[7] In a 2015 issue of the international policy, administration, and institutions journal *Governance*, Daigneau describes how "just green enough" areas are successful due to their concomitant popularity with and benefice for neighborhood residents, and lack of appeal "for tourists or other neighborhood newcomers."[8] Haffner similarly elaborates on how projects following the "just green enough" strategy strive "to increase the environmental quality and public health of a neighbourhood, but without changing its socio-economic character."[9] Haffner then provides concrete steps that can be taken to minimize gentrification: "explicitly rejecting elements ... such as fancy waterfronts ... including neighbourhood residents in the planning process; and ... implementing changes gradually."[10] Her suggestion for community involvement is particularly salient as a method for addressing both urban green space inequities and eco-gentrification.

Though urban green spaces ought to welcome all, it is important for planners to explicitly cater to the needs and desires of neighborhood groups that could otherwise be threatened by inequitable access and eco-gentrification processes. Green space designs must link utility and usability with the culture and values of the neighborhood community. As Cilliers and Timmermans state in their article on participatory planning's role in the place-making process, "the aim of place-making is to determine the need of actual users of a public space, then link that to the functionality and opportunities of that space, setting the scene for the development."[11]

The High Line in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood is a notable example of an urban green space that has received criticism for its failure to set the scene for development around

the needs of the original neighborhood residents. Designed to be a space for "strolling and taking in views of the city from a unique elevated perspective"—pastimes that generally pertain to relatively affluent white residents—it attracts a significantly different demographic than that of Chelsea.[12, 13] While two large public housing projects bookend the High Line, and nearly one-third of neighborhood residents are of color, park visitors are "overwhelmingly white," and the majority of visitors are tourists, not locals.[14] A reported 7.8 million people visited the High Line in 2015, making it the most popular attraction in New York City; however, only 6 percent of these visitors hailed from the High Line area.[15] The High Line's appeal to outsiders and tourists has ushered in neighborhood newcomers while pushing out longtime residents. Rothenburg reports that almost immediately after the park's opening, the area became "canopied and abutted by chic hotels, restaurants, and auction houses."[16] In 2005, the City adopted a policy for the West Chelsea Special District that rezoned the area for luxury development.[17, 18] A study by the New York City Economic Development Corporation states that while the residential properties surrounding the High Line "were valued 8 percent below the overall median for Manhattan" before the redevelopment (between 2003 and 2011), property values near the park have increased 103 percent.[19]

The inequities and eco-gentrification associated with the High Line could have been minimized had planners consulted with the community to collaboratively conceptualize and design a more modest and diverse space—a park for residents and not for tourists. Such a park would be attractive for a wider variety of uses and consequently "a wider variety of users [i.e. longtime residents]."[20] Payne et. al found race to play an especially significant role in park use, with black residents more likely to favor spaces that allow for active recreation.[21] These findings tie into a larger body of research showing that black residents prefer more "natural environments that are open, well-groomed, and have more structured (i.e. built) amenities."[22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27]

It is also important to note that design decisions not only influence which groups realize the utility of a space, but also which groups feel either welcome or excluded from that space.[28] Participation during the planning process alleviates the issue by imparting a sense of ownership upon citizens. By collaboratively planning with the community, integrating its needs and desires to design a "just green enough" urban space, inequities and eco-gentrification challenges may have been minimized with the High Line and in future projects.

Recognition of the differential power structures that arise from co-evolving socio-economic and natural processes is also important when working to minimize eco-gentrification and inequities related to urban green space. Wolch et al. propose that these issues can be addressed through the provision of affordable housing and housing trust funds as well as rent stabilization programs.[29] Wachsmuth et al. recommend that "policymakers should treat social equity and ecological effectiveness as mutually reinforcing dynamics in urban sustainability. They should bring the widest range of social movements to the table and see those groups' demands—such as revitalizing rent regulation and public housing—as central."[30] Urban green space projects ought to focus on the development of people, not just the place. Leveraging "just green enough" strategies, planners and policymakers can balance this socio-natural dualism to minimize inequities and eco-gentrification.

In order to safeguard against "urban environments [that] are controlled, manipulated, and [used to serve] the interest of the elite at the expense of marginalized populations," planners and policymakers ought to adopt "just green enough" strategies that couple community-based methodologies with anti-gentrification policies.[31] Such strategies dictate that planners and policymakers consider cultural relevance during the design of a space and refrain from implementing "fancy" features that tend to draw in outsiders and tourists, thereby ensuring that green space benefits can be realized by local residents. As cities continue to progress towards sustainability, the next steps in urban green space development involve taking a hatchet to the traditionally myopic institutional approaches. Instead they need to be sowing the seeds for more prudent "just green enough" improvements that incorporate broader social equity agendas. ■

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