Summer 2006

Comprehensive Approaches to Urban Development: Gentrification, Community, and Business in Harlem, New York

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Gentrification, Community, and Business in Harlem, New York

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This paper emerges from research conducted for DAVID J. MAURRASSE, LISTENING TO HARLEM: GENTRIFICATION, COMMUNITY, AND BUSINESS (2006).

Introduction

Place versus people-based approaches to urban development have long been debated among scholars, policymakers, and various community development practitioners. The divergence of opinion revolves around one fundamental question: should the primary approach to neighborhood development focus on geographical surroundings by refurbishing housing and attracting new businesses? Or, should the approach be to develop people by concentrating on economic and social empowerment for existing, longtime residents, especially those who are low income and of color? Ideally, some bit of both would be simultaneously pursued. However, this "perfect storm" of sorts has proved daunting in various environments.

Often, urban development strategies tend to lean more towards place when communities face significant local deterioration and economic disinvestment. In many such instances, actually altering the composition of neighborhoods – gentrification – becomes the goal.[1] However, when the place where people live becomes less and less affordable, new challenges are created, often defeating the very purpose of an effort to stimulate jobs and economic development. The question we are left with is: *what are the factors that influence development initiatives and what are the most important*

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[1] *See* DAVID J. MAURRASSE, LISTENING TO HARLEM: GENTRIFICATION, COMMUNITY, AND BUSINESS 44 (2006).

considerations for an effective urban development strategy (that sufficiently incorporates

people and place)?

The challenges associated with improving the place while also improving

opportunities for low-income residents is one dynamic that particularly faces

contemporary Harlem. In *Listening to Harlem: Gentrification, Community, and*

Business, we looked at the state of economic development in Harlem – a rapidly

changing urban neighborhood in New York City.[2] Harlem has experienced an infusion of

new businesses, which have brought with them jobs for local residents.[3] Bringing jobs to

where people live, on the surface, is a sound strategy, as neighborhoods such as Harlem

have been dislocated from any significant concentration of jobs for decades. However,

many longtime residents have been unable to take advantage of these jobs.[4] In effect,

people-based development strategies have yet to connect longtime residents with these

place-based improvements.

In this essay, we will examine the trends in urban neighborhoods, looking at the

positive and negative effects of gentrification, specifically highlighting findings from our

research in Harlem. And, we will consider and discuss the factors that influence and

drive urban development. Overall, we hope to convey that a comprehensive approach that

includes both people- and place-based strategies is the only way to simultaneously

preserve and improve urban communities.

Gentrification and the Urban Future

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[2] *See id.* at 41-57.

[3] *Id.* at 93, 117-118.

[4] *Id.* at 94.

During the '70s and '80s, American urban areas faced significant decreases in capital as many businesses and people moved to suburban locations. Although this trend has not ceased in all or even most cities around the country, we have seen a more recent movement of capital back to the central city, which has led to increased real estate rates as well as displacement, particularly of low-income residents who rent.[5] Examples of this phenomenon include New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and some places outside of the United States, such as London. As a result, inner-city residents, often with little economic means, are forced to leave neighborhoods they have called home for—in some cases—generations.[6] This makes way for a wealthier population, a sort of modern "gentry," to move in. This new population desires increased services and new establishments to suit its tastes. The old population becomes priced out of the area and has little hope of returning. This process, known as "gentrification," is becoming increasingly apparent across the United States.

As a result of gentrification, two issues emerge for urban development, one in the realm of affordability and the other in access and opportunity. Many neighborhoods undergoing the process of gentrification lack the availability of mixed *opportunities.* Because the capital that vacated urban areas in the '70s, '80s, and '90s carried with it stable, manufacturing unionized jobs either to the outskirts of urban areas or to other countries, the majority of jobs available to lower-skilled labor and those with less formal education are in the service industry, and for less income and stability, and fewer

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[5] *Id.* at 31, 65.

[6] *Id.* at 44.

benefits.[7] As gentrifying areas become less affordable, it becomes more difficult for residents relying on these service jobs to make ends meet.

Gentrification is a daunting threat to many urban communities because of the unfortunate decrease in access to employment for low-income residents. The lack of diverse, secure employment opportunities for low-income people is apparent in the persistently vast and continually increasing worldwide gap in income and wealth. This gap has, in fact, become a barrier for low-income and low-wealth communities, making it far more difficult for individuals and families to improve their livelihood. Even though the neighborhood may become cleaner, safer, and more convenient, unless specific action is undertaken to preserve *opportunities* for low-income people, mixed economic communities, like Harlem at present, will remain temporary phases in the process of neighborhood transition from affordable to exclusive.

Stages of Gentrification

Because gentrification is a relatively new concept, rooted in a very particular history of urban decline and followed by a return to vogue for certain inner city areas, we have only begun to understand this concept. Today's reality is that urban development takes place in stages. Therefore, we now have enough examples to think about the phases of neighborhood change that could result in gentrification. Taking a stab at this, a crude way to look at this might be the following:

Stage 1 – Grassroots-level Organizing

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[7] *Id.* at 45, 64.

Residents engage in cleaning up their streets and begin to hold public officials accountable to the community, and so on.

Stage 2 – Planning

Policy makers become involved in actively developing community-betterment strategies by working with local Community Development Corporations (CDCs) and businesses and explicitly soliciting more affluent potential residents.

Stage 3: Pioneering

New residents begin to move in and a few new shops appear; real estate prices begin to rise.

Stage 4: Intensive Investment

Policy makers, businesses, new residents, and developers intensify their investments.

Stage 5: Population shift

Demographics and businesses are noticeably different, and the previous culture appears out of date.

Stage 6: Displacement

Fewer and fewer low-income residents can hold onto their rent-stabilized apartments or longtime residents have sold their properties.

Stage 7: Full Transformation

The old neighborhood is largely unrecognizable; most residents are of the newer population, their culture dominates, and most businesses cater to them.[8]

A number of factors shape these stages, such as the size of the neighborhood, the availability of affordable housing, the strength of the pre-existing community, and certainly the level of resources and determination among those wishing to see substantial

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[8] *Id.* at 50.

change. The neighborhood known as Park Slope in Brooklyn is probably somewhere

between Stages 6 and 7. Certain parts of San Francisco are indeed at Stage 7. The Upper

West Side of Manhattan, below 96th Street, is pretty much at Stage 7. Harlem is

probably somewhere between Stages 4 and 5. The fact that data has not pointed to

significant displacement in Harlem has received significant press. But this does not mean

that Harlem's changes will not evolve to later phases in gentrification, especially since

quite a bit of Harlem's housing stock had once been abandoned, and the neighborhood

contains extensive public housing. Furthermore, rent stabilization keeps many people

who might have otherwise been displaced in their apartments. Gentrification can be a

slow process depending on land use policy and housing availability.

Harlem & Gentrification

Harlem is vast, heavily populated, world-renowned, and part of the even more

renowned New York City. It boasts incredible access to public transportation, bridges,

and highways, and is in close proximity to some of the most abundant resources in the

world. Nevertheless, the issues of gentrification appear to be the same here as in many

other vastly different cities.[9]

Although Harlem is by no means fully "gentrified," it is experiencing

redevelopment. We can already see that some Harlem residents are losing out as a result

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[9] Angela Glover Blackwell, *Holding Onto Harlem*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 12, 2001, at A29. Blackwell's organization, PolicyLink, in conjunction with the National Community Building Network and others, has been discussing issues of equitable development in every major city in the United States. They have been finding significant similarities in the characteristics of gentrification. Harlem, because of its size and other aforementioned characteristics, may take longer to gentrify than many other areas. This is partly because of its extensive public housing, as is discussed in greater detail in MAURRASSE, *supra* note 1.

of increased prices.[10] Many could argue that these are simple market forces at work.

One could say that Manhattan is the engine behind the nation's economy, increasing its

desirability for residents and visitors. With this increase in demand for space and

services catering to the elite, Harlem is ripe for transformation. Given its close proximity

to Midtown Manhattan, Harlem is valuable to a host of parties who previously

overlooked or even dismissed the area's potential. Now, wealthier individual house or

apartment hunters of all races, retail businesses, restaurateurs, and real estate developers

are all taking note of the emergence of a new era in Harlem.[11]

Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter's landmark *Harvard Business

Review* article published in 1995, "The Competitive Advantage of the Inner City," argued

that inner-city communities must create wealth, and do so by capitalizing on "strategic

location, local market demand, integration with regional clusters, and human

resources."[12] In order to do this, according to Porter, communities must abandon anti-

business sentiments, and accept a "new model."[13] As previously noted, the attraction of

new businesses to Harlem has the potential to leverage new resources for existing

residents.

Porter is right in that communities like Harlem could benefit from new local

businesses and wealth-creation strategies. However, context is essential; business-

focused strategies absent of safeguards for the community, accountability for newer

companies, business opportunities for residents themselves, avenues for training and

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[10] MAURRASSE, *supra* note 1, at 31, 65.

[11] *Id.* at 51.

[12] Michael Porter, *The Competitive Advantage of the Inner City*, HARV. BUS. REV., May-June 1995, at 57.

[13] *Id.* at 65.

advancement in new jobs for residents, and multiple other factors, merely replicate

existing inequalities. Knowing what the sociologists Melvin Oliver and Harvey Shapiro

highlighted in their landmark book, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, regarding the racial gap

in wealth,[14] local business and economic development strategies are necessary for a

predominantly African American neighborhood like Harlem.

Urban development does not automatically foster inequality. Economic

improvements in poor urban neighborhoods can stimulate opportunities. Low-income

residents could benefit from linkages to the resources housed in major institutions and

industries. On the one hand, market forces left to their own devices can be highly

detrimental to low-income people. But, on the other, low-income people do not always

have the access, skill, or knowledge to take advantage of market forces. Both dynamics

are at work in Harlem. The residential housing market, for example, has exceeded the

reach of many residents and some simply do not have the knowledge to make the housing

market work to their advantage.[15] Key barriers to mortgages, for example, have

remained, but government regulations against redlining have enhanced access to

mortgages to varying degrees.[16] But even with increased access, some residents require

education in terms of investigating the housing market, approaching banks, brokers, and

so on. In other words, approaches seeking equitable development require both new

strategies to increase access as well as efforts to educate and enable low-income people to

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[14] MELVIN L. OLIVER & THOMAS M. SHAPIRO, BLACK WEALTH/WHITE WEALTH 28-29, 99-104 (1995). This book demonstrated that inequality between African Americans and Whites should be measured by wealth more than income. The true realities of inequities between these races is far more stark when looking at wealth rather than income.

[15] MAURRASSE, *supra* note 1, at 53, 102.

[16] *Id.* at 53.

take advantage of preexisting opportunities.[17] If new jobs are created, residents should

be able to access those positions *and* the training and supportive services needed for them

to succeed in those jobs.

Considerations for Urban Development

Overall, comprehensiveness is essential; approaches taking account of numerous

interrelated issues and potential consequences enhance the chances of widespread benefit.

Urban development strategies should strongly consider the state of the neighborhood and

where, along the gentrification continuum, the community falls. Therefore, urban

development in Harlem would differ from the strategies employed in Park Slope or San

Francisco.

Gentrification often has been addressed largely in the context of housing and the

relative access to affordable residential units. However, gentrification has many

interrelated dimensions and affects neighborhoods at a variety of levels. A *residential

real estate* dimension is obvious, as housing ultimately becomes a central obstacle for

low-income communities once gentrification is underway. *Commercial development* is

another key dimension, as new businesses enter changing communities and real estate

developers become increasingly interested in properties and land use. Finally, an

interpersonal dimension is also critical as neighborhoods undergo demographic shifts

during gentrification, and tensions arise between old and new populations. Many other

issues also come into play; however, in the study of gentrification, residential real estate

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[17] *Id.*

and interpersonal relations are often key focal points.[18] All of these contextual factors

should be considered in any urban development strategy.

Harlem Survey

As part of the research for *Listening to Harlem,* we engaged and spoke with

longtime Harlem residents, employees of various local nonprofit organizations, and small

business owners.[19] Through these conversations, we started to develop a picture of some

of the ingredients that would be necessary for urban development that does more good

than harm, and increases opportunities for low-income residents. Although these

individuals did not agree on everything, common themes became apparent from interview

to interview.

1. The availability of **a***venues for resident ownership* arose as a core theme from the

   interviews. Ownership is not the panacea for everything, but those positioned to

   own fair better in urban development than those who are not. Creative efforts to

   own property and businesses that benefit the entire community, instead of a

   smaller cluster of individuals, can be pursued. Collective ownership of land,

   economic activity, or other areas, enhance the decision-making capacity of

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[18] *See generally* NEIL SMITH, THE NEW URBAN FRONTIER 51-75, 92-116 (1996) (addressing gentrification primarily through the people and real estate dimensions); *see also* GREGORY SQUIRES, CAPITAL AND COMMUNITIES IN BLACK AND WHITE 3-4 (1994). Squires rightfully maintains that race drives disinvestment from urban communities. This work does address the business dimension through lending, but less through the sort of retail industry thrust in Harlem's recent development.

[19] MAURRASSE, *supra* note 1, at 54, 77-86.

residents—they can decide for themselves how they wish to relate to their neighborhoods.[20]

2. Given the significance of displacement in many urban development initiatives, the availability of ***affordable housing*** is crucial. Set asides in buildings and affordable developments can mean the difference between staying and going. Rent control policies are also important but still not guarantees when residents don't own. Again, ownership potential is the best possible scenario.[21]

3. Government/community partnerships can lead to ***logical and useful planning and design***. Zoning and land use issues are essential in that the types and locations of commercial and residential property should correlate with resident interests.[22]

4. While the presence of larger businesses can increase local jobs, **attention to small business needs** can provide additional options. Technical assistance and skill development is a prerequisite for effective business management, and many of Harlem's small businesses have received such. It is also important that resident owned and run businesses have some priority in terms of access to capital. An equitable approach would strengthen small businesses as well as attract large corporations.[23]

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[20] *Id*. at 54, 109-117.

[21] *Id*. at 55, 97-98, 99-109.

[22] *Id*. at 55, 122-123.

[23] *Id*. at 54-55, 112-120.

5. It is difficult to imagine realistic ownership opportunities without access to ***employment with advancement and training opportunities.*** New businesses may bring jobs, but if residents only have access to lower-rung positions, absent of advancement or training opportunities, then the community is not much more empowered than it was before those new resources arrived.[24]

6. ***Resident involvement in setting policy*** can place community interests and government decisions in greater accord. Although it is important to solicit resident opinions beforehand, this input only goes so far, and can be easily ignored once policy is set. Not only should residents be extensively involved in advising; they also should have some role in making the actual decisions that affect their neighborhood.[25]

7. Although the creation of formal avenues to resident participation in policy making can enhance the likelihood that development will lead to empowerment, no democratic structure will work without ***informed, involved, and organized residents.*** In fact, it is probably not likely that effective equitable development will come to fruition without resident involvement. On the one hand, policy makers, businesses, developers, and others should consult residents; on the other, residents should actively seek out information and take advantage of opportunities

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[24] *Id*. at 55, 117-118.

[25] *Id*. at 55, 142-143, 144-149.

that will enable them to benefit from their neighborhood's assets. An organized

community is better positioned to advocate on its own behalf.[26]

8. ***Strong community-based organizations*** are central to continuous effective

community participation, and very well can be the portal through which resident

concerns can be voiced and acted on.[27]

9. Resident concerns are more likely to be understood and heeded when **effective**

partnerships between community residents and various major institutions, such as

corporations, universities, banks, and others, are in place.[28]

10. As new residents and businesses enter an area, ethnic and racial demographics

change. It is important that those new to the area ***appreciate the existing local***

culture. If businesses want to do well in new areas such as Harlem, they must

recognize that the old residents still keep them in business; paying attention to

existing residents' needs is in their best interest.[29]

11. ***A spirit of common good*** could go a long way toward equitable development. If

everyone focuses on only their gain, ignoring the interdependency between

renters, homeowners, developers, banks, corporations, new residents, small

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[26] *Id*. at 56, 148-149.

[27] *Id*. at 42, 56, 160-161, 169-186.

[28] *Id*. at 55, 135-139.

[29] *Id*. at 56, 118-120.

businesses, street vendors, community based organizations, and others, development will likely foster inequality. In the past, too many decisions have been made at the expense of low-income people particularly.[30]

It is important that the drive toward economic development does not eclipse the importance of tending to a range of other needs. Because of the multiple dimensions at work in making communities whole, urban development is highly complex and often unlikely to please all constituents. But great potential lies in the effort to transcend the errors of the past.

Managing the Ripple Effects of Gentrification & Neighborhood Change

Neighborhood change is inevitable. Urban development, often designed to improve the quality of low-income neighborhoods, while improving some services, and enhancing some opportunities, also can spawn ripple effects that exacerbate or create economic, social, political, and cultural challenges for those of limited means. Urban development that can positively impact a critical mass of longtime low-income residents requires attention to two important factors—an anticipation of the potentially damaging consequences of decisions and a commitment to achieving a common good.[31]

Over the last few decades, an entire field of study and practice has emerged, focusing on comprehensive community development to improve inner-city conditions by addressing multiple issues simultaneously and by leveraging existing neighborhood resources through collaboration. In response to this growing movement, the Aspen

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[30] *Id.* at 56-57, 121.

[31] *Id.* at 45.

Institute, a nonprofit think tank, convened a "roundtable" of people who have been

engaged in this kind of work to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of such efforts

and help the field think about how to most effectively revitalize urban communities.[32]

Aspen, as a result of numerous conversations with its roundtable, emphasizes two key

principles for urban development: "comprehensiveness" – simultaneously addressing

social, economic, and physical conditions; and "community building" – promoting

widespread participation in forging development efforts.[33]

      Standing alone, any strategy that tries to address everything at once probably

sounds a bit too utopian to support. In practice, however, these principles have merit, and

can be applied to productive efforts. Development efforts can focus on "strategic

drivers," or particular social issues, such as employment, housing, and so on, but the

analysis remains broad. This enables those participating in development initiatives to

hone in on particular short-term goals, while keeping the bigger picture in mind.[34]

      In many ways, community building is a means of creating new vehicles through

which residents can impact policy. Too often, the perspectives of those impacted by

policy are not addressed when decisions are made. The philosophy behind this thinking

has logic—if the recipients of policy do not have a say, they will not own the results. The

philosophy behind comprehensive approaches also makes sense in that the issues

confronting communities are deeply intertwined, to the point where it is difficult to

separate job access from the state of schooling from the relative affordability of housing.

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[32] *See* ANNE C. KUBISH, PATRICIA AUSPOS, PRUDENCE BROWN, ROBERT CHASKIN, KAREN FULBRIGHT-ANDERSON & RALPH HAMILTON, VOICES FROM THE FIELD II: REFLECTIONS ON COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY CHANGE (2002).

[33] *Id.* at 21-33.

[34] MAURRASSE, *supra* note 1, at 46.

Although, with limited resources, it is practical to focus on one issue, the broader context must be kept in mind at all times.[35]

Keeping the big picture in constant view makes it easier to anticipate the ripple effects of particular development decisions. For example, if an employment development strategy is pursued, how does it impact small businesses, real estate, the environment, and other issues? Ripple effects occur with any decision, but how can potentially negative ripple effects be transformed to create positive ones? How can development lead to widespread empowerment? In thinking about development, we recommend what we call *ripple effects management.* What we mean by this is a development strategy that is thoughtful enough on the front end to anticipate how particular decisions can affect other areas, especially concerning low-income communities, and increase the chances of this development yielding positive ripple effects. The intent is to turn potentially negative consequences for low-income communities into positive ones. A *ripple effects management* strategy cannot be successfully conducted without including the participation of those who will be affected.[36]

Importance of Resident Input

No matter how many ideas around comprehensive development might be discussed, policy makers, corporations, and developers may not have the best interest of communities, particularly low-income ones, automatically in mind. Yet with a deeper understanding of residents' point of view, it is more likely that various influential figures will become better positioned to collaboratively craft mutually beneficial strategies, and

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[35] *Id.*

[36] *Id.* at 46-47.

institutions will have a greater understanding of their point of view. The other continuous challenge to the pursuit of such broad, contextual development approaches is decision making. Involving community residents is not new, but opening up genuine avenues to shared governance between communities, institutions, and government is a more elusive proposition.[37]

The limited formal avenues through which inner-city residents and community organizations can influence those who ultimately make the decisions decreases the likelihood that urban development will take a holistic direction, because the resident voices and experiences recognize, understand, and reflect the need for comprehensive approaches. Anyone would be hard-pressed to find a completely unified community voice. In most communities, some own homes while others rent, for example. Self-interest and experience foster differing opinions. And in some cases, people simply don't agree. However, in general, the voices of disadvantaged communities often do not become incorporated into high-level discussions about the market impacts on poor neighborhoods. This missing piece is part of the reason why urban development initiatives have not succeeded in substantially improving the lives of low income communities.

Finally, community residents are not passive recipients of policies and programs. However, some active civic engagement among residents can better position communities to avoid catching the short end of the stick when their neighborhoods become fashionable. When residents are included in discussions about the future of their

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[37] *Id.* at 47.

neighborhood, and have access to legal advice, resources, and information, they are much better positioned to make their neighborhoods work in their interest.

Approaching Urban Development

Any attempt to understand the relative success of urban development initiatives includes residents' interactions with the social, economic, and political dimensions affecting their lives. But effective development should also include a multitude of other strategies, including strategic partnerships, workforce development, education, and the involvement of institutions to ensure comprehensiveness, effectiveness and to mitigate the potentially negative consequences associated with gentrification.

Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnerships will be required in order to maximize urban development, particularly for those in lower income brackets. Bringing jobs to an underserved community is, of course, essential. However, connecting residents to those jobs is a task in itself. Furthermore, how many residents will actually be able to maintain those jobs, and how many residents will be able to parlay entry level jobs into sustained careers and some broader degree of economic empowerment? Another critical factor to consider is the education (or literacy) level of a certain percentage of residents in any economically challenged community.

It will be difficult to imagine any widespread improvement in the livelihoods of low-income African Americans without attention to a comprehensive array of challenges. By extension, it will be difficult to simultaneously address a wide range of social issues

without partnerships – business, government, higher education, nonprofits, and other

entities working in tandem to apply their strengths with some focus on a common end.

Workforce Development & Education

Many workforce development initiatives stall when they reach beyond a first

wave of program participants. First wave participants are generally better prepared to

take advantage of the opportunities presented to them through workforce development

programs. Frequently, these individuals are eager to make the extra effort, and to seek

out the initiatives that will help them find employment or move to better paying jobs.

However, after this first round of participants, the next wave of people often needs a

higher level of skills training that may be beyond the scope of the program. As we move

deeper and deeper into a knowledge-based, boundary-less, rapidly technologically

advancing society, jobs that do not require an ability to read or use computers are

becoming scarcer. Therefore, workforce development programs have an uphill battle, not

only in providing skills training and placement of program participants, but also in

finding employment that will match the skill level of many low-income individuals with

limited education.

As a result, education is increasingly critical to economic empowerment and

reaching a very low-income population with limited education requires more than job

training. Without an ability to read, write, and access technology, second and third wave

workforce development program participants will not be able to take advantage of the job

opportunities in their neighborhoods. Job training will not work as a strategy if it is not

coupled with broader improvements in education. Urban economic development should

include both educational and workforce development in order to achieve a more comprehensive impact.

Involvement of Institutions and Leveraging Resources

For major institutions, community involvement is no mere matter of charity. Indeed, it is an extension of the interdependency between employers and prospective employees, between entities residing in the same city or region. Institutions of higher education, for example, are among the highest local employers in most urban centers, particularly in cities that once relied on a manufacturing base. In order for those institutions of higher education to function, they need laborers who can afford to live locally and not become saddled with exhausting commutes.

With institutions of higher education, we are seeing a certain geographical rooting that bypasses many industries in an age of mobility. Institutions of higher education are anchored institutions, which cannot simply get up and move. Their investments are often too extensive to make moving cost effective. As a result, communities may be able to increasingly count on institutions of higher education as partners in economic and community development.

Conclusion

A comprehensive view of the various dimensions at work in neighborhood change is essential in shaping how we craft solutions to the negative consequences that can occur as a result of urban development. It is, in fact, heavy attention to one aspect of development, while overlooking other key aspects, that fosters unbalanced approaches

that benefit only those with resources. Extant literature on gentrification and related

issues has begun to address the strengths and limitations of urban development and

resident efforts to leverage accessible directions. However, research has only begun to

address a more holistic, solution-based approach that could lead to greater equity in urban

communities undergoing development.