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## Livable Cities: A Conference on Issues Affecting Life in Cities



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# INTRODUCTION

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## Livable Cities: A Conference on Issues Affecting Life in Cities

What makes a city livable? Transport, housing, health. Open space, mobility and the environment. Matters of culture, entrepreneurship, crime and safety. Affordability and access to education. Depending on whose 'livability index' you look at, it may include design quality, sustainability and the digital infrastructures of the smart city. Other criteria applied may encompass food access, job opportunities or walkability. Inclusivity and the politics of participation also come into play. Discrimination in all its forms impacts livability and social and political equity.

The past two decades have seen an exponential rise of livability measures. Reflecting increased urbanity globally, they risk making the notion of the city ever more contested. The two cities that host this event are cases in point. The Mercer Livability Ranking takes New York as the datum by which all other cities globally are graded – as better or worse. London, by contrast, measures itself: the London Assembly scoring everything from air quality to indices of deprivation. When we consider the livability of cities then, it is clear we are dealing with a plethora of issues – both isolated and, inevitably, interconnected.

Responding to this scenario, the papers in this publication tackle these issues above from various angles. They examine how we live in cities, and how every issue we encounter morphs with considerations of others, whether housing, architecture, urban planning, health, IT, crime and safety, city management, economics or the environment.

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# **ARE GATEWAY COMMUNITIES FACING A NEW URBAN APARTHEID?**

## **LESSONS FROM CHELSEA, MASSACHUSETTS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Black radical tradition<sup>1</sup> has recently re-energized the urban geography and planning debates, pushing for the study of antiracist and counterhegemonic spatial practices. Along these lines, Roy suggests stepping away from displacement and gentrification jargon and switching attention to processes of dispossession and “racial banishment” as a primary reconceptualization driving relevant ontologies and epistemologies of resistance.<sup>2</sup> This conceptual framework leads to the investigation of how state power and planning practices dispossess and deprive racialized bodies – Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals – of their place, identity, inner-self feelings, and emotions.

In this paper, we are interested in exploring the effects of planning in the face of intertwined crises: ongoing decision-making processes tackling housing, climate, and pandemic crises. In this realm of planning practice, we concur with the scholars who have stepped away from mainstream conceptualizations of gentrification and displacement. We look at the role of planning (broadly defined) in producing urban change that intentionally or implicitly excludes racialized bodies through the generation of discourse and other tactics. We argue that innovative forms of counter-planning should consider all of the subtle evidence of dispossession manifested in what we define as symbols of exclusion to build credible alternatives for resistance.

### **BEYOND GENTRIFICATION: PLANNING AS A MECHANISM OF EXCLUSION OF RACIALIZED BODIES**

Since the conceptualization of the term gentrification,<sup>3</sup> much scholarship has shown the connection between gentrification phenomena (however defined) and their effects on Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Within this debate, planning scholars have highlighted how gentrification driven by planning initiatives in the face of structural change determines the exclusion of target communities along racial lines.<sup>4</sup> This stream of research parallels old and more recent research that has attempted to go beyond the jargon of gentrification and explore the intentionality of planning to exclude racialized bodies from having access to rights, land, and other resources.

Scholars within the progressive planning tradition have exposed the sinister nature of planning and how planning practice and research could be instrumental in addressing such shortcomings. In the 1960s, Davidoff and Davidoff introduced the term urban apartheid to describe the intentional use of planning law to limit access to certain rights (e.g., the access to new urban opportunities) by people of



color amid suburbanization and the subsequent decay of central cities. “[T]he term ‘apartheid,’” they write, “began to be used to describe the de jure, as well as the de facto methods employed to separate rich communities from poor, to protect rich Americans and their children from contact with poor and even middle-class Americans and their children; and to separate black Americans from white Americans.”<sup>5</sup> Years later, Yiftachel used the term apartheid to bolster powerful acts of exclusion committed or exacerbated by government-sanctioned interventions.<sup>6</sup> The term was invoked to go beyond the narrative of marginalization and exclusion and instead make scholarship capable of describing “deeply embedded institutional, material and spatial systems which accord unequal ‘packages’ of rights and capabilities to the various groups.”<sup>7</sup>

Recent conceptualizations of banishment and apartheid in critical geography provide a closer and more complete view of urban change phenomena, especially in light of contemporary challenges such as climate change, the fight for housing, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Roy recharacterizes the collective movement redefining home and land amid national and international housing crises by considering the history of “banishment” in citymaking.<sup>8</sup> By building on conceptualizations of apartheid and the general injustice over climate-related policies and urban phenomena, Rice and colleagues coined the term “climate apartheid” to indicate all forms of planning or planning-related phenomena determined to face the climate crises which have disruptive effects on BIPOC communities worldwide.<sup>9</sup> As articulated in several different venues, the brunt of those crises has been borne by BIPOC communities, a phenomenon that has accelerated exclusions, with racially variegated planning implications.<sup>10</sup>

### **CHELSEA (MA): THE TESTING GROUND FOR A COMING APARTHEID?**

The City of Chelsea (MA) is one of three cities in the Boston Metro Region (along with Lawrence and Holyoke) that are minority-majority occupied. 65.9% of the Chelsea population is of Latino heritage, primarily Salvadorian, Honduran, and Puerto Rican. Since the 1980s, the city has experienced high levels of corruption in public offices, which led to the city’s bankruptcy. Concurrent social tensions due to ethnic conflicts, street crime, and a demoralized police force further destabilized the city.<sup>11</sup> The economic and social upheaval roiling Chelsea reached a head when the municipality was placed into State receivership in 1991. The event prompted the City of Chelsea and its community to engage in the process of re-imagining their future while addressing pervasive conflicts “from below” (at the community level) and “from above” (at the city level). A significant milestone was the ratification of the City Charter in 1993, which occurred through a difficult mediation process that reconciled forces and tensions from “above” and “below” in a novel way.<sup>12</sup> Lessons learned from this pivotal moment – still very recent in Chelsea history – remain at the basis of public life in Chelsea, where non-profit organizations, residents, and city departments try to maintain a constructive dialectical relationship to address citywide issues.

This dialectical relationship between the public and civic society in all its constituencies characterizes a uniquely concerted planning history for Chelsea. In the last two decades, state-city-nonprofit planning efforts have targeted the Chelsea coastline to transition it from an industrial zone to a housing and leisure destination.<sup>13</sup> This rapid and deliberate transformation of the built environment has generated a lot of skepticism among Chelsea’s Latino community. Chelsea has long been a gateway community for immigrants fleeing financial hardship and persecution. Immigrants from Central America have had a strong presence in the city since the 2000s, and their population continues to grow due to the strong formal and informal networks of support that exist in Chelsea and the city’s Sanctuary City designation.<sup>14</sup>

In the last five years, skepticism of planning initiatives has grown amid worsening housing and climate crises and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>15</sup> Such conditions require more scrutiny of neighborhood

and citywide change as experienced by immigrant residents. Between 2020 and 2022, we have conducted research to explore the lived experiences of Chelsea immigrant residents facing a massive transformation of their city. This paper draws from 42 in-depth interviews, community engagement workshops and engaged learning pedagogy experiments designed as part of an ongoing research process in the City of Chelsea to inquire about immigrant communities' perceptions of and ideas for change. By building on previous conceptualizations of banishment and apartheid, we probe the existence of a targeted exclusion of racialized bodies by exploring the opinions about planning-led neighborhood change viewed from the eyes of Chelsea's immigrant residents.

## **PROBING APARTHEID IN CHELSEA**

Amid the threats of racial banishment posed to BIPOC Chelsea residents by both market-driven and state-led change, tangible and perceived indicators of neighborhood apartheid stoke the fears of Chelsea's most vulnerable residents and signify a permitted, racialized assault on their right to remain in the city and thrive. These representations emerged from the findings as symbols. They are iconic, as they cause "a sensory likeness relation [which] is intended or interpreted<sup>16</sup>" among immigrant research participants, a gut reaction of panic, anger, withdrawal, or self-denigration. The symbols we introduce here signify a breakdown of the local community through a dismantling of place, home, social networks, and culture—systems and objects that enabled Chelsea's underserved residents to survive. We call these symbols of exclusion.

Within these symbols of exclusion emerged three types: symbols of everyday life, symbols of the material appearance of things, and perceptual/sensory symbols. Symbols of everyday life include changes to residents' daily routines, which signify an assault on the most basic aspects of their survival: food, health and wellness, education, and safety. Symbols of the material appearance of things are changes in the built environment which they associate with expulsion, encroachment, dismantling, and dispossession. Perceptual/sensory symbols are signifiers that do not directly represent a changing landscape but are secondary associations that generate anxiety and unease. In the following section, we articulate the empirical findings we used to create this typology by accompanying each symbol with one exemplary quote. Although telling, these quotes are limited and therefore do not provide an encompassing view of all residents' perceptions of the effects of planning measures on the intertwined housing, climate, and public health crises.

### **Symbols of everyday life**

Symbols of everyday life include the closure of a grocery store to make way for luxury apartments, de facto segregation at a local playground, and challenges to school registration for young people whose families are not included on the leases of overcrowded apartments. While the city's discourse around housing growth is positive-sum, residents perceive new development as zero-sum because it directly threatens their everyday lives. One resident described the changes as follows:

I've been living in Chelsea for more than 10 years now; when I came, there weren't as many white families like I'm seeing now. So, I can see it's changing a little bit, and that's a little scary for me, because [...] when I take my son to Admiral's Hill Park and I see the white parents and the white mother, they don't engage with us. They like isolate themselves. It's kind of sad, because they don't even let their children play with the Latino children. So, it's just very awkward when I go to the park now and it wasn't like that when I came more than ten years ago. [...] Something is happening here. I guess Chelsea is getting better, because we have the Silver Line here that is brand new, so it's attracting other types of families. So, what's that going to mean for us<sup>17</sup>?

For this Chelsea mother, new residents—who she felt acted more like bodies in space than neighbors—reflected a changing demographic which compromised her day-to-day routines and

signified looming displacement. Like her, many interviewees shared fears not of the incorporation of white residents into the urban fabric, but of the gradual, trickle-down effect such a demographic shift would have on community norms and on housing costs.

### **Symbols of the material appearance of things**

Symbols of the material appearance of things include physical changes to the urban landscape which suggest a deepening of spatial segregation based on residents' race, ethnicity, family size, and income. These changes represent, for Latinx resident-respondents, their intentional exclusion from decision-making and, therefore, from enjoying the fruits of its outcomes. They manifest as mismatches between new construction or new uses and community needs, which occur on a bedrock of residential segregation and the inequitable distribution of open space and environmental hazards. As the quote below illustrates, even new affordable housing units became symbols of both hope and deception:

My hairdresser, she had this dream that she was going to hit the lottery and get one of the new luxury condos they're building near my house on the Revere line, and that's her dream, and she prays and she says, 'it's just, I feel that God's gonna give me that...' and I say, '[hairdresser's name], I love you, and that's your dream, and that's sacred to you, but you need to know what are your chances...' just like she likes to do her scratch tickets, [...] 'when you do your scratch tickets, you want to know your odds? Well, this is kinda like that.' I said, 'let's look at the mathematics of it all. But if this is your dream and God's gonna give it to you I will be real happy. I will make a party for you.' But you see what they're doing to people, they're playing with people's heads.<sup>18</sup>

Chelsea residents reported dire challenges in their search of alternatives to homelessness or intense overcrowding. Some interviewees reported sharing three-bedroom apartments with three other families. For these residents, learning "the odds" brought disappointment where they once saw hope as new residential buildings cropped up throughout the city. Residents 'without papers' felt even more than exclusion; they felt direct threat as private, luxury housing complexes had not in any way been conceived for them. Many interviewees mirror the previous quote by stating how, for Chelsea's most vulnerable renters, even construction with affordable units came to symbolize deception, disappointment, and even peril.

### **Perceptual/sensory symbols**

These include symbols that do not directly relate to real estate or even to changes in the built environment. Instead, they are signifiers that float around residents' daily lives as indicators of encroachment by newcomers and can even pose direct, physical threats to their well-being. These markers cause feelings of anxiety, anger, and unease due to their associations with community harm, fragmentation, and dispossession. They may lack a direct cause or one which cannot be pinpointed. For example, Latinx Chelsea residents who expressed struggling with affording their housing felt sensorily assaulted when they encountered other residents they did not know, particularly those who appeared to be in better financial situations or who seemed to be cultural outsiders. One renter, who grew up in East Boston, believed that the other tenants in his building might have worked at the FBI building recently built in Chelsea because they wore face masks and were not friendly:

I was shocked because I cannot believe the type of people that are my neighbors... I see a lot of people who I can tell [...] are out of state, out of the city. [...] this building is not with people that you would see in Chelsea. [...] You can also tell that [...] by talking to them or even the way they behave. You can tell they're...highly educated, most likely with graduate degrees. You can tell they are professionals and you can tell they're non-Spanish speaking...They come out the building, you can spot them, you can spot them easily, like it's obvious. They're not friendly. They keep to themselves. They often seem suspicious. They, they are anti-social. They are not talkative. [...] It's like they're

[saying] why are you here? [...] You know what? I think there's something going on here. There's something in people there. There's people moving in the city and they're trying to, trying to, somehow they have an agenda. Someone has an agenda. It's just that things don't happen out of the blue. Something is going on in the city. I can see it in my neighborhood.<sup>19</sup>

This respondent's descriptions of suspicious neighbors reflect the sentiments of other respondents who were skeptical about ongoing change. Without any prior information about the holes in the ground next to their buildings, or the new foundations laid over open space, and without inclusion in a city-led planning process, respondents concluded that an intentional agenda drives urban change. That agenda intends the exclusion of lower-income, Latinx Chelsea residents for the inclusion of more affluent, Boston in-movers. Interviewees felt threatened by their new, more affluent neighbors because they represented a process without a direct cause that sought to eject them from Chelsea. Moreover, they foreshadowed the unraveling of the informal social safety net, which helped residents make rent when they came up short and keep food on their table. In the absence of forms of inclusive planning that can address some of these issues and provide attainable and affordable housing options, lower-income Latinx residents are left feeling like pawns in someone else's game.

## CONCLUSION

The array of symbols shown in the empirical section of this paper represents urban phenomena that deserve more scrutiny. We believe that the theoretical framework of racial banishment and apartheid offers an opportunity to reflect on more effective urban planning interventions capable of engaging in complex urban contexts. Refugees and immigrants living in gateway cities like Chelsea are more than temporary residents; they constitute the fabric of urban community life. While this paper focuses on Chelsea, our final reflections may be relevant to other gateway cities undergoing similar planning phenomena, which have catalyzed and been catalyzed by rapid change.

Symbols of everyday life, symbols of the material appearance of things, and perceptual/sensory symbols were conceptualized by analyzing the words shared with us by Chelsea residents. These symbols point to an ongoing transformation of the City of Chelsea that, while conducted under the banner of transparency and participation, overlooks the deep fears of the most underserved residents of the city. Such symbols are, in fact, not necessarily explicit or acknowledged in the public discourse, let alone in official planning processes and outcomes. They are subtle and merit research attention to unpack their origin, existence, and endurance over time in relation to urban policymaking. Mirroring our theoretical framework, we see these symbols as indicators of “creeping apartheid<sup>20</sup>” or “racial banishment,<sup>21</sup>” which need to be brought to the foreground when articulating innovative forms of counter-planning endeavors.

Such endeavors would require new ways to engage racialized bodies in collective actions, counterbalancing mainstream planning practices.<sup>22</sup> This horizon of work challenges the ongoing enthusiasm over academic scholarship aiming to empathetically support existing antiracist social movements. Instead, it suggests that a mutual transformative relation between researchers and racialized bodies should be at the core of any antiracist academic enterprise to build movements toward change. Such a movement would aim at revamping an eclipsed US progressive planning tradition, which has historically combined forms of libertarian pedagogy, social mobilization, and the construction of post-modern epistemologies to shape intentional and collective actions for empowerment.<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Ananya Roy, "Racial Banishment," in *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*, ed. Antipode Editorial Collective et al. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), 229.
- <sup>3</sup> Ruth L. Glass, *London: Aspects of Change, Vol. 3* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964).
- <sup>4</sup> Lance Freeman, *There Goes the Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Davidoff and Linda Davidoff, "Opening the Suburbs: Toward Inclusionary Land Use Controls," *Syracuse Law Review* 22, no. 2 (1970): 509, doi: 10.2307/213546.
- <sup>6</sup> Oren Yiftachel, "Theoretical Notes on 'Gray Cities': The Coming of Urban Apartheid?" *Planning Theory* 8, no. 1 (2009): 88, doi: 10.1177/1473095208099
- <sup>7</sup> Yiftachel, 94.
- <sup>8</sup> Ananya Roy, "Dis/Possessive Collectivism: Property and Personhood at City's End," *Geoforum* 80 (2017): A8, 10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.12.012.
- <sup>9</sup> Jennifer R. Rice et al. "Against Climate Apartheid: Confronting the Persistent Legacies of Expendability for Climate Justice," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5, no. 2 (2022): 629, 10.1177/2514848621999286.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the following works: Erin McElroy, "DIS / POSSESSORY DATA POLITICS: From Tenant Screening to Anti-Eviction Organizing," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 47, no. 1 (2023): 54-70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.1315>; Ananya Roy, "Emergency Urbanism," in *The Long Year: A 2020 Reader*, ed. Thomas J. Sugrue and Caitlin Zaloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
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- <sup>12</sup> Susan Podziba, "Collaborative Civic Design in Chelsea, Massachusetts," in *Planning in the Face of Conflict: The Surprising Possibilities of Facilitative Leadership*, ed. John Forester (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2013), 177.
- <sup>13</sup> Justin B. Hollander and Jessica Soule, "Stakeholder Preferences on a Working Waterfront: Quality of Life, Land Uses and Planning Processes in Chelsea, Massachusetts," in *Handbook of Community Well-Being Research*, ed. Rhonda Phillips and Cecilia Wong (Berlin: Springer, 2017), 340, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0878-2\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0878-2_18).
- <sup>14</sup> Fabián Torres-Ardila, Daniela Bravo, and Franklin Ortiz, "Increasing Latino Participation Rates in the 2020 Census in Chelsea, MA," (Boston: Gastón Institute Publications, 2020), 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Helen V. S. Cole et al. "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Power and Privilege, Gentrification, and Urban Environmental Justice in the Global North," *Cities and Health* 5, (2021): S72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2020.1785176>
- <sup>16</sup> Victor Turner, "Symbolic Studies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (1975): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.04.100175.001045>.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with key informant #28, Latina mother, Chelsea, MA, September 23, 2022.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with key informant #29, Latina resident, Chelsea, MA, September 24, 2022.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with key informant #20, Latino resident, Chelsea, MA, August 25, 2022.
- <sup>20</sup> Oren Yiftachel, "Theoretical Notes on Gray Cities': The Coming of Urban Apartheid?" *Planning Theory* 8, no. 1 (2009): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095208099300>.
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