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The Silent Residential Gentrification of Chinatown

For the past few years New York City has been one of the most popular destination spots for immigrants to live and work. Specifically, over the past few years there has been an increase of Asian Americans coming into New York City and fulfilling the labor work for many low income jobs. Ever since the Chinese Exclusion Act Ban was lifted from the 1960s, Asians were able to enter the United States and create a community for their own, Chinatown. Chinatown has made itself a reputation for being the neighborhood to house long time immigrants and welcome new immigrants into the country to give everyone a place to work and live. It is evident the community is filled with vibrant culture brought by waves of immigrants. At first glance, the immense amount of Asian businesses and culture may make many believe that the neighborhood is immune to gentrification. However, as new development arises in the area, residents are noticing that the property value of Chinatown is rising and becoming a neighborhood that is housing more affluent members. Therefore, despite the thought that Chinatown is immune to gentrification, the current zoning laws that allow for unregulated development have caused the displacement of long time immigrant families and decreased affordable housing for newer immigrants in order to attract wealthier residents to occupy the neighborhood.

To help New York City's economy, an unregulated zoning plan was created in Chinatown to promote private development, which caused the residential gentrification of the neighborhood. Through the method of zoning, local governments have the power to influence the development of plots of land which will shape the community. After the events of 9/11, New York City needed to create changes to help revive the damaged economy. Ever since Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002, his campaign

implemented more than 100 rezoning plans for over 20% of the city's land. Lower income neighborhoods such as Chinatown, have seen significant increases in upzoning, to allow for "pro-business economic development agenda" (Laskow). According to the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), to do this, the zoning plan allows for developers to create projects such as "luxury condominiums, boutique hotels, trendy restaurants, and expensive stores, altering the urban character" in order to attract tourists and wealthier residents. The introduction of these new developments will inevitably increase the property value of the neighborhood. While that may not seem like a problem, the mayor's plan for rezoning outlines no protection of current residents against gentrification nor does it implement regulations on the amount of private developments that can be built. It is evident that the City's economic development plan is to create communities that cater to wealthier individuals. This comes at the expense of lower income residents that have resided in rezoned neighborhoods for a long time. Thus, in order to boost the economy, the city created zoning policies to attract wealthier individuals that will displace its existing residents.

Therefore, due to this rezoning in Chinatown, long time residents have seen an increase in landlord harassment in an attempt to kick them out to raise rent in rent stabilized apartments. As zoning allows for the neighborhood to open up trendy restaurants, shopping centers, and establish the area as a tourist attraction, many wealthier residents have taken an interest in the neighborhood. However, many Chinatown tenement buildings are occupied by residents that are elderly immigrant families that have been able to stay in their apartments due to them being rent stabilized. When a building is rent stabilized, it allows for residents to not worry about dramatic increases in rent and allows them to renew their leases. Since this is the case for many buildings, landlords have resorted to creating housing violations to decrease the "quality of life" to displace these families and make space for those who can pay market rate prices. The CAA AV surveyed many tenants to see how landlords have done so and found that 71% of Chinatown residents have faced "violations [that] include little or no heat, little or no hot water, lack of running water, leaking pipes, collapsing ceilings, exposed wires and leaking gas." Since rezoning was

created to attract wealthier residents and not include housing protections, tenants have to bear with bad living conditions that jeopardize their security and safety. This forces older immigrants to move out because they are unable to live in unhealthy environments. Other forms of harassments also include buyouts, not providing new leases, or simply rejecting to collect rent. However once these tenants leave, landlords would then make the necessary repairs to attract people to the building. Rezoning creates an atmosphere where landlords are in a rush to force people out. Without implementing policies to protect those from landlord harassment, people are forced to move out of their community.

Furthermore, while older immigrants are being forced out of their rent stabilized apartments, the younger generation of immigrants are noticing a lack of places to rent due to the increase of condominiums and skewed affordable housing prices. For newer immigrants, it is harder to obtain a rent stabilized building like older immigrants have obtained because the city and landlords have decreased the amount offered. By not living in a rent stabilized building, rent will inevitably increase dramatically for tenants. Thus, they are left to choose from luxury buildings and “supposed” affordable housing units. Unfortunately, both options are unaffordable. The median family income of Chinatown is around \$40,000 while luxury buildings are being sold for over \$1 million (Ngu). The price of these buildings over the past couple of years are only increasing, signifying that the housing market in Chinatown is only getting stronger. Consequently, this means there is less space for lower income individuals to live in. However, many would argue that there are designated affordable housing units for those who can not afford luxury building. Affordable housing takes into account New York City’s Area Median Income (AMI) which includes wealthy suburbs into the mix of small local communities. Therefore, as the CAAAV states, “The current AMI for a family of four in New York is \$78,300.32 ... This skewed median income is then used to determine the income limits for families qualifying for “affordable housing”. Thus, when keeping in mind of the median income of a family of four in Chinatown, these housing units are far from affordable. Instead, outside middle and high income residents come and occupy these housing instead. For immigrants that were unable to get rent stabilized apartments, the increasing property value of the

neighborhood is pushing out residents that were once able to afford the neighborhood. Hence, the current zoning plan offers no affordable housing to the lower income individuals of Chinatown, which mostly targets younger immigrants.

The Chinatown neighborhood that was made up of working class immigrants is slowly disappearing. The silent residential displacement is affecting lower income individuals to make space for wealthier residents in order to boost the economy of New York City. Chinatown's main purpose was to be a community for immigrants to come and live comfortably. However, the increasing property value and corporate greed is diminishing this core value. These immigrants will have a difficult time finding a new community that will give them the same opportunities as Chinatown once gave. New policies need to be enacted to ensure that those who deserve to live in the community do not get displaced. For that reason, it is important to not keep a blind eye on the struggles residents have faced despite the success of the neighborhood economically and culturally.

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