

# Bike Lanes and Gentrification

## *New York City's Shades of Green*

*By Samuel Stein*

**G**ENTRIFICATION is a critical part of New York City's landscape. Does the new wave of bike lanes in the city feed the pressures displacing working-class communities of color, as many bike lane opponents charge, or is this a diversion from the more serious problems of transportation injustice? What should bicycle advocates and the city's transportation agency do in this highly charged situation?

This debate reveals a basic misunderstanding of how gentrification works, and also a problem with the City's implementation of its bicycle network: bicycle planning in New York City currently reflects and amplifies citywide transportation injustices. A retooling of the program around the needs of working-class cyclists, however, could produce dramatically different results.

### **How Gentrification Happens**

Gentrification is often defined using "production" and "consumption" explanations for neighborhood change. Production theories look at the creation of

"rent gaps," "value gaps" or "functional gaps" in urban housing markets. These "gap theories" argue that gentrification occurs when landlords see a significant difference between the income they earn from their properties when occupied by low-income tenants or small businesses and the income they could be generating if they rented to richer tenants, sold the building to real estate speculators or converted their spaces to more lucrative uses. These changes are sometimes encouraged by local government through zoning and land use changes, relaxation of laws protecting tenants and capital investments targeted at people wealthier than the current neighborhood residents.

Consumption theories look at what attracts middle- and high-income people to working-class neighborhoods over their upscale urban and suburban alternatives. Generally, these theories speak of the unique appeals of inner city spaces, including attractive architecture and lively streetscapes, shorter commutes, cosmopolitan politics and the availability of arts, entertainment and specialized retail. For some, the presence of bicycle infrastructure and safe streets is one such motivation for choosing to live in a gentrifying neighborhood.

Today, cities like New York are competing with other global cities around the world to attract international capital and investment. One of the explicit goals of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's long-term sustainability plan, PlaNYC 2030, is to compete with global cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, London and Shanghai on the basis of livability. Common capital attraction strategies around livability include rezoning to enable high-end construction, developing entertainment districts, encouraging high-end consumption markets

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(artisanal food and alcohol and specialty retail) and creating recreational open spaces. Another key strategy for creating capital-friendly urban environments is reducing traffic congestion and promoting forward-looking environmental consciousness by encouraging alternative modes of transportation. In this sense, the Department of Transportation's (DOT) work, while much broader in scope and intention, fits into a larger, citywide competitive strategy to attract and retain global capital.

### A Perfect Storm of Class Conflict

In public forums and press accounts, opposition to DOT's bicycle program has grown. While streetscape changes remain popular citywide, some people see the installation of new bike lanes as a sign that they are losing control over their neighborhoods. This conflict is a perfect storm of class relations. As the city is gentrifying and long-time New Yorkers fear for the stability of their neighborhoods, many perceive cyclists to belong to one of two "threatening" classes: people who are richer than them (white yuppies in spandex, white-collar workers on folding bikes) or people who are poorer than them (working cyclists, immigrants, people of color, punks).

The self-identified middle class is furious with the City for seeming to help everyone around them, while supposedly ignoring car- and transit-oriented needs outside of downtown Manhattan. While these residents fear losing their neighborhoods to gentrification, their anger also reflects resentment towards people of color and social outsiders, whom they imagine the city prioritizes before the white middle class.

Many middle-class car owners in New York City see the automobile as a symbol of their rise out of the working class and may resent DOT's efforts to slow traffic and reduce free on-street parking. Among people living outside of Manhattan, there is also a long-simmering resentment over the way public transit serves the central business district but not their own needs for local or cross-borough trips. Recent cuts to bus service have been particularly hard on

those residents who live further from subway lines. These bus riders are witnessing simultaneous cuts to the bus network on which they rely, and an expansion of a cycling network that feels alien to their needs.

But this vision of cycling by middle-class car owners ignores many inconvenient truths:

- bike ridership is representative of all strata of New York City society;
- street infrastructure improvements often improve safety and public spaces for all New Yorkers, not just those who cycle;
- bicycling has been an important part of New Yorkers' commuting patterns since the nineteenth century;
- the cost of instituting bike lanes pales in comparison to the cost of running a transit system or maintaining car-oriented infrastructure; and
- the City is most definitely *not* prioritizing the needs of low-income people of color over the white middle class.



Caption:



It is unclear how large a segment of New York's population actually believes that bike lanes are a threat to their class status, but those who do appear to be highly mobilized in the current political moment.

### **Bike Lanes and Real Estate**

DOT does not create bicycle infrastructure in order to raise property values. Building owners and developers, however, have learned that the city's streetscape improvements can create more attractive spaces, and the presence of bicycle infrastructure near a development can be a selling point for affluent young newcomers. New luxury towers in such neighborhoods as the Lower East Side, Williamsburg and downtown Brooklyn tout bicycle-friendly buildings and the presence of nearby cycling infrastructure in advertisements geared towards "hipsters." Meanwhile, Times Square experienced the largest retail rent hikes in the city—over 71 percent—coinciding with DOT's installation of a pedestrian plaza in Times Square. The Hudson River Park Trust has observed that the presence of the extended bike lane along the river has increased neighboring property values by approximately 20 percent. Richard Florida, an advocate for the so-called "creative class," has publicly commended DOT's bicycle infrastructure improvements as a tool to attract young, highly paid professionals into the city.

These examples show that bicycle infrastructure can serve elite interests and correspond with the gentrification of neighborhoods. By no means, however, should this correlation be interpreted as sole causation, or as inevitable. Streets like Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn have received a great deal of attention from DOT's bicycle program, and yet these infrastructure improvements have not brought on the immediate gentrification of south Brooklyn neighborhoods. The class implications of bicycle infrastructure are therefore highly contingent on its siting and design, as well as the process through which it is planned and implemented.

### **Urban Design for Whom?**

DOT is tasked with designing infrastructure that benefits all New Yorkers. At the same time, the agency

recognizes that its bicycle and street redesign programs play a large part in the City's strategy to attract global capital. At a recent forum on cycling and real estate strategies, DOT Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan reminded her audience that "capital can locate anywhere, so it's extremely important that we create safe, attractive spaces where people want to be."

The siting and design of street changes often implies the type of user the city expects to benefit from a project. DOT's bicycle infrastructure, while present around the city, is densest around the city's most gentrified areas: downtown Manhattan and northwestern Brooklyn. There are a number of good reasons for this: these areas are two of the biggest employment centers in the city; they are home to cycling-friendly community districts; and they are the site of many transit interconnections. New York's young professionals and artists—generally able-bodied people with liberal attitudes towards the environment and without both ample savings to spend on cars and gasoline and long-term attachments to New York City's street form—helped spur the rise of cycling in the city, and are the group most publicly associated with the city's gentrification. Focusing on these neighborhoods, however, reinforces the impression that gentrification follows bike planning, and vice versa. More importantly, it results in a failure to provide much needed safe routes in high-cycling, low-infrastructure working-class neighborhoods like Flushing, Queens and Pelham Bay, Bronx.

DOT's siting choices have created enduring impediments towards extending the network and building broader community support. Long-term residents are alienated by capital investments that appear to arrive only after their neighborhood has been gentrified. This can be especially true in neighborhoods where residents have long biked but have not seen street improvements targeting their needs until now. Gentrification can also displace low-income workers and recent immigrants, who often rely on cycling as a free mode of transit or as a part of their jobs (i.e., working cyclists). Key potential beneficiaries of DOT's streetscape improvements are therefore missing from the neighborhoods where much of the building is taking place. As a result, there is a contradiction between where DOT is choosing to build bike infrastructure and where the need is highest.

Cycling infrastructure built for working-class and immigrant riders might take various forms.

These could include, but are not limited to:

- connecting working-class residential neighborhoods to local job centers, rather than the downtown central business district;
- making travel to the subway safer and faster, especially in areas suffering from bus service cutbacks;
- creating connections between nearby neighborhoods that are not adequately served by mass transit (such as connecting north Queens to the south Bronx);
- providing bike share opportunities in neighborhoods where owning a bicycle is impractical or unaffordable; and
- creating lanes that mirror the routes taken by commercial cyclists in the outer boroughs.



These modest steps would demonstrate a commitment on the part of the DOT to addressing the city's transportation injustices.

## Infrastructure for the Underserved

In recent years, gentrification and class displacement have changed New York for the richer and the whiter. Like all citywide policies, DOT's bicycle program is occurring in this polarizing political context. This inescapable fact colors both DOT's program and the public's mixed reaction to it. By focusing construction on the most intense flashpoints of gentrification, the bicycle network reflects and reproduces the city's transportation injustices in terms of class, race and geographic isolation. This does not prove that bike lanes cause gentrification; instead, it points to the importance of needs-based infrastructure construction. High-need areas, where working-class people bicycle every day under increasingly dangerous conditions, have not received the same level of attention as richer parts of the city. DOT and other city agencies need to reframe their priorities in order to serve those most vulnerable to gentrification, rather than those who profit from it. **P<sup>2</sup>**

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