

TEMPLE TOWN: GENTRIFICATION IN NORTH PHILADELPHIA

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History 2001: The Historian's Craft

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Temple University is located right in the heart of North Philadelphia. It's a well-established public university that has a history spanning back over a century with deep roots in the community. Due to Temple's integration with the city of Philadelphia, the history of both are very intertwined, and one point of constant intersection is gentrification. In an article about gentrification from *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, Dylan Gottlieb defines gentrification as a phenomenon of "a process where affluent individuals settled in lower-income areas."¹ While gentrification does bring in higher-income residents and enables the broadening of the tax base, it comes at the expense of "social disruption and the displacement of existing residents."² Due to the population of Philadelphia being majority black, this change was not a welcome one for a large portion of Philadelphia residents. The gentrification of the area surrounding Temple University, which I'll be referring to as "Temple Town," has been the subject of scrutiny over the past 70 years and has greatly impacted race relations in the neighborhood.

The process of gentrification can be traced back to the 1950s, in a rapidly suburbanizing, post-World War II America. After the suburbs became the home of a wealthy, primarily white populace, "the stage had been set for gentrification in Greater Philadelphia," with Center City being reimagined as "an attractive residential zone."³ The mindset of revitalization taken wasn't limited to Center City, though. The city as a whole needed to attract higher-income residents to move into the city rather than the suburbs in order to keep up with the rapidly evolving post-war economy, so attempts to renovate areas all across Philadelphia occurred during the mid-twentieth century.

¹ Dylan Gottlieb. "Gentrification." Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia. Rutgers University, 2014 <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/gentrification/>.

² Dylan Gottlieb. "Gentrification."

³ Dylan Gottlieb. "Gentrification."

The area around Temple was, and still is, one area that has been subject to larger forces' plans for gentrification. In the 1960s, Temple University devised a plan that explicitly "involved displacing a number of people in a predominantly black, low-income neighborhood" as a part of their expansion initiative.⁴ The predominantly black North Philly community had an extremely negative reaction to this, as they didn't want to be pushed out of the place that they called home. Black students at Temple were vocal in their disapproval in regards to this expansion, and openly called out the plan's racist nature through news articles, protests, and even in some sit-ins led by the Steering Committee for Black Students (SCBS) after the university refused to commit to gaining the local black community's approval before any future expansions.⁵ Leaders of the SCBS managed to get an expansion committee formed that consisted of affected parties (Temple employees, local residents, and representatives from the government), but the committee was unable to reach a consensus. Governor Raymond Shafter stepped in, implementing a plan that limited Temple's expansion but still displaced some residents.⁶ The failure to reach a compromise illustrates how deeply the relationship between the university and the surrounding community has been strained, and that relationship only continued to worsen as Temple became a larger and larger part of the North Philadelphia community.

Temple's overtly racist plan to actively gentrify North Philadelphia was not a unique phenomenon in the city: the area around University City befell a similar fate. Both Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania took over multiple predominantly black neighborhoods in West Philadelphia back in the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ As of 2014, University City

⁴ Beth A. Twiss Houting "Temple University and Gentrification in the Late 1960s." Historical Society of Pennsylvania, November 2, 2018.

<https://hsp.org/blogs/fondly-pennsylvania/temple-university-and-gentrification-late-1960s>.

⁵ Beth A. Twiss Houting "Temple University and Gentrification in the Late 1960s."

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“has experienced a particularly acute drop in affordable housing due to high rates of gentrification spurred in large part by the universities.”⁸ In fact, over the past 50 years, areas like Fishtown and Brewerytown, which haven’t always been known as the most reputable areas, have become hotspots of gentrification. Millennials moving to the city could afford rent in these neighborhoods. Their presence resulted in renewed interest from businesses and investors in the neighborhood, pushing rent prices higher and driving out the original population. Property values in certain areas began to rise, and communities were bought out in favor of new developments. The Pew Charitable Trusts published a report that found “home prices rose the most (more than 1,000 percent in one tract) in gentrified areas where there had been relatively high numbers of investor-owned and vacant properties in 2000 and where many of the neighborhoods’ housing units have been built in the years since: the old industrial and working-class African-American tracts.”⁹ Their findings suggest that gentrification has raised the price of housing in many majority African-American neighborhoods, which benefitted tax revenue to the city and the improvement of infrastructure, but came at the expense of the community that was already there.

The story of Temple Town is one such story of gentrification that spans into the 21st century. Over the past 50 years, Temple has shifted from being primarily a commuter school (or as a parent described to me as I gave a tour to their prospective student, a “suitcase school”) made up of students who didn’t live on or near campus, to a more residential school. This shift has caused the university to expand its on-campus housing and build more residential halls. Private developers not affiliated with Temple have also seized “the opportunity to turn deteriorating, abandoned buildings into student housing, greatly increasing the original property

⁸ Beth A. Twiss Houting “Temple University and Gentrification in the Late 1960s.”

⁹ “Philadelphia’s Changing Neighborhoods.” The Pew Charitable Trusts, May 2016.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2016/05/philadelphias-changing-neighborhoods>.

value and price in the area,” ignoring the interests of the full-time, permanent residents.¹⁰ As the university has continued to grow, the student population that lives directly off-campus has alongside it, which has resulted in a significant amount of public property being bought out by private developers to be transformed into more expensive housing for students.

Temple’s plans to actively gentrify the neighborhood continue even into the 2010s. The blatant example is the university’s plan to construct a “multipurpose facility that includes a football stadium” on the land that Temple owns next to main campus.¹¹ The main reasoning behind this being that Temple University doesn’t have its own football stadium and instead uses the Lincoln Financial Field for football games. The construction of such a massive facility would require a very large area surrounded by residential housing to be converted into a stadium, which would be a huge disruption to the local community. The plan to construct a stadium was met by large resistance from both the community and students, primarily led by a group called the “Stadium Stompers” who are “an activist group made up of North Philadelphia residents, students and faculty who oppose the potential building of an on-campus stadium.”¹² The proposed 35,000 seat stadium would be right in the middle of North Philadelphia and would force many residents to live in the shadow of this giant facility that is seen by some as more of a ploy to attract prospective students than really provide any benefit to the current student population and community.¹³ The Stadium Stompers relentless opposition to the project resulted

¹⁰ Emily Rolen. “After history of tensions, a surge in gentrification.” The Temple News, April 2014. <https://temple-news.com/history-tensions-surge-gentrification/>

¹¹ “Multipurpose Facility/Stadium.” Temple University, 2018. <https://www.temple.edu/about/campus-development/multipurpose-facilitystadium#project-history>.

¹² Gillian McGoldrick. "Analysis: Who are the Stadium Stompers?" The Temple News, October 2017. <https://temple-news.com/analysis-stadium-stompers/>

¹³ The Inquirer Editorial Board. "Why opponents of a Temple football stadium are fighting so hard." The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 2018. <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/commentary/why-opponents-of-a-temple-football-stadium-are-fighting-so-hard-editorial-20180308.html>

in the university deciding to not move forward with the project (as of late 2018). Not only was this a victory by local residents, but the university also acknowledged the issues inherent with such a large development project that would have a tremendous impact on the community.

Gentrification is far from being a cut and dry topic. While it does improve the conditions of an area, raise property value, and provide additional tax revenue to the city that allows for progress, it also pushes out the local residents that make a community what it is. The gentrification caused by Temple University has additional layers of nuance added because of its nature as an educational institution: it has a responsibility to its student body to do whatever it can to improve itself and expand, but sometimes in attempting to do so, it oversteps boundaries at the expense of the community that it's supposed to serve and support. The history of Temple Town shows us how gentrification affects race relations and cannot simply be viewed as making an area either better or worse in both a historical and contemporary context. It is a complex process that needs to be carefully historicized and be evaluated in a scale of full color, rather than just black or white to capture all the particulars.

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