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“We're not in the business of housing:” Environmental gentrification and the nonprofitization of green infrastructure projects

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ABSTRACT

Environmental gentrification, or the influx of wealthy residents to historically disenfranchised neighborhoods due to new green spaces, is an increasingly common phenomenon around the globe. In particular, investments in large green infrastructure projects (LGIPs) such as New York's High Line have contributed to displacing long-term low-income residents. Many consider environmental gentrification to be an important environmental justice issue, but most of this research has focused on *distributional* justice; that is, quantifying whether LGIPs have indeed contributed to gentrifying neighborhoods around them. Limited work has focused on *procedural* justice in the context of environmental gentrification, or how planning processes can shape project outcomes. This is a particularly critical oversight because many LGIP planning processes are led by nonprofits, a governance model that has already raised important equity concerns in the context of planning and maintenance of smaller neighborhood parks. Yet less is known about the impacts of park nonprofits leading LGIPs. To address these gaps, we study the planning process of the 606, a rails-to-trails project located in Chicago, U.S. that contributed to environmental gentrification. Through interviews with key actors and a review of planning documents, we find that although delegation of leadership to park nonprofits has some benefits, a number of drawbacks also arise that might make gentrification a more likely outcome, namely the fragmentation of efforts to develop economically viable LGIPs while also preserving affordable housing. These findings suggest the need for cross-sectoral municipal planning efforts and for building more robust coalitions comprised of parks and housing nonprofits.

1. Introduction

On a sunny Saturday in June 2015, Chicago's 606 Trail opened with an official ribbon-cutting by Mayor Rahm Emanuel and representatives of multiple organizations involved in its development. The nearly three-mile, \$95 million bicycle and pedestrian path, once a disused elevated rail line, was the result of years of work by the City of Chicago, community organizations, and park and active transportation advocates who had supported this signature project connecting four neighborhoods. But less than a year later, in May 2016, hundreds of protesters marched along the trail to decry the massive increases in rents and other major changes to the character of the neighborhoods along the 606. Several more protests ensued, all demanding that the City adopt regulations to help long-time residents avoid displacement due to rent and property value increases.

The 606 had met the same fate as award-winning projects like New York's High Line, Atlanta's BeltLine, and Seoul's Gyeongui Line Forest Park, all of which turned disused infrastructure into vital green spaces

intended to increase the value of land and property in surrounding neighborhoods (Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Kwon, Joo, Han, & Park, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Smith, Duda, Lee, & Thompson, 2016). Although these projects are part of important urban sustainability initiatives that seek to make cities more livable, healthy, and resilient, many have also resulted in significant gentrification along these corridors and, often, regret by the very organizations that championed their establishment.

Large green infrastructure projects (LGIPs) such as urban parks, waterways, and active transportation corridors are intended to stimulate private development by connecting people to destinations and increasing local quality of life. LGIPs are different from smaller neighborhood green spaces in that they often link commerce, recreation, tourism, and real estate development to create signature projects in urban areas. Since many LGIPs include walking, bicycling, and other active transportation components, they frequently avail of transportation or infrastructure funding. In recent years, some scholars and activists have shown that, in contrast to most small park interventions,

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most LGIPs have led to environmental gentrification, or the influx of affluent residents to historically disadvantaged neighborhoods due to investments that improve environmental quality, which may result in the displacement of long-term low-income residents (Anguelovski, 2016; Checker, 2011; Curran & Hamilton, 2012, 2017; Dooling, 2009; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Smith et al., 2016).

Like others, we view environmental gentrification as an environmental justice (EJ) issue (Anguelovski, 2016; Checker, 2011; Gould & Lewis, 2017; Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). Environmental justice not only entails a fair distribution of environmental goods and bads (*distributive justice*), but it also should rely on fair and inclusive processes to achieve such outcomes (*procedural justice*). In addition, these processes should result in places where vulnerable people such as residents of color and immigrants feel welcome and safe (*interactional justice*; Boone, Buckley, Grove, & Sister, 2009; Kabisch & Haase, 2014; Low, 2013; Pearsall, 2010; Schlosberg, 2004; Walker, 2009). In other words, a holistic research agenda on environmental gentrification should examine the distribution of benefits and burdens from the development of a new LGIP, how the project came to be, and whether the resulting green space and surroundings provide quality experiences for long-marginalized residents.

But limited studies have investigated the LGIP planning processes that have fostered environmental gentrification (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall, 2017; Roy, 2015), and none have done so with a deliberate focus on environmental justice. Also, planning processes for LGIPs in the U.S. have often involved park-oriented environmental nonprofits that have played key advocacy, fundraising, and project coordination roles (Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall, 2017). Although the reliance on nonprofits for the provision of recreation services and park maintenance in the context of smaller neighborhood parks has raised equity concerns (Holifield & Williams, 2014; Joassart-Marcelli, Wolch, & Salim, 2011; Pincetl, 2003), we know considerably less about how concerns related to gentrification and displacement play out when nonprofits become the coordinators of much larger enterprises such as LGIPs. Given these gaps, we ask: *To what extent does the nature of planning processes for LGIPs, and in particular the use of park nonprofits as project managers, tend to produce unjust outcomes, namely the gentrification of surrounding neighborhoods?*

We conduct an in-depth case study (Yin, 2003) to uncover critical aspects in the planning process of one LGIP that resulted in significant gentrification of the surrounding areas – the 606 rails-to-trails project in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. Our analysis primarily focuses on uncovering issues of procedural justice in planning LGIPs, but it also sheds some light on interactional justice issues related to such projects (Kabisch & Haase, 2014; Low, 2013). Based on interviews with 16 key actors in the planning process, including members of nonprofits organizations and city officials, and a review of planning documents, we show that a reliance on park nonprofits, a popular approach in the U.S. and elsewhere, provides a compelling explanation for why so many of these projects result in gentrification. Although the nonprofitization of project management for LGIPs has some real benefits in terms of efficiency, this strategy can increase the chances of environmental gentrification due to the fragmentation of green space development and affordable housing goals, an overemphasis on the ecological and public health benefits of parks that can draw away attention from displacement concerns, and the reduced accountability of both public and non-state actors. These findings are particularly worrisome given that the public sector is increasingly devolving LGIP planning and management roles to park nonprofits that have no mandate to address critical housing concerns. In the context of neoliberal governance, we show that the use of environmentally-oriented nonprofits can provide cover for growth coalitions seeking to maximize development profits. Therefore, our findings highlight the need for more robust alliances of public and nonprofit actors that integrate the housing, environmental, and recreation sectors.

2. The conundrum of environmental gentrification

Access to environmental amenities is an issue of justice, as substantial disparities in green space provision have been found to exist between affluent White people and low-income communities of color around the world (Rigolon, 2016; Wolch et al., 2014). In recent years, environmental justice advocates have been fighting for green healthy spaces such as parks, trails, and open spaces in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Anguelovski, 2013, 2016; Wolch et al., 2014). And yet, especially in some highly publicized cases such as New York's High Line, investments in new green spaces have been so successful as to ultimately gentrify neighborhoods and even displace the communities these investments are intended to benefit (Anguelovski, 2016; Curran & Hamilton, 2017; Gould & Lewis, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017).

This is the conundrum of *green, environmental, or ecological gentrification*. A number of studies in the U.S., Spain, Germany, and South Korea have documented environmental gentrification as a result of LGIPs (Anguelovski, Connolly, Masip, & Pearsall, 2017; García & Mok, 2017; Gould & Lewis, 2017; Haase et al., 2017; Immergluck, 2009; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Kwon et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016). These scholars and others argue that environmental gentrification is not just an “unintended consequence” of poor planning; instead, public agencies with the support of the development community are deliberately establishing new green spaces in underserved areas with depressed property values in order to exploit rent gaps and attract well-heeled newcomers (Gould & Lewis, 2017; Immergluck, 2009; Loughran, 2014; Roy, 2015). Building on Molotch's (1976) urban growth machine theory and on work by Dilworth and Stokes (2013), Gould and Lewis (2017) refer to these partnerships as “green growth machines” in describing the deeply inscribed alliances between public agencies and the development community that aim to establish LGIPs in gentrification susceptible neighborhoods. Benefits accrue to both parties: Investments in new green spaces provide cities with capital through increased property tax revenues, and developers are able to charge substantial premiums for real estate located in close proximity to new green amenities (Gould & Lewis, 2017; Immergluck, 2009; Loughran, 2014).

Frequently using a discourse of sustainability and ecology to depoliticize planning processes and leave little room for dissent, green growth machine actors also often turn to park nonprofits for LGIP coordination and facilitation (Checker, 2011; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Loughran, 2014). For example, 13 of 18 projects (72%) in the *High Line Network* (2017), a collaborative of LGIPs in North America, are led by nonprofits, most of which are parks and conservation-focused organizations. Although the use of nonprofit organizations to develop, maintain, and operate LGIPs is most common in the U.S., several projects in other countries have also followed this private-public partnership model, including the Bentway, the West Toronto Railpath, and the planned Rail Deck Park in Toronto, Canada (City of Toronto, 2017; Friends of West Toronto Railpath, 2016; The Bentway Conservancy, 2018), and the Vauxhall Missing Link and the now defunct Garden Bridge in London, England (Jones & Somper, 2014; Khomami, 2017). In all of these cases, public agencies have devolved power to nonprofits relying on substantial private capital to deliver new green spaces, which some argue has made these nonprofits more responsive to private interests than the public good (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017).

Some scholars have used the lens of neoliberalism to make sense of this delegation of project leadership to the nonprofit sector (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Perkins, 2010; Roy, 2015). Neoliberalism is an approach to public governance that, in order to promote free-market capitalism, seeks to limit state regulations and reduce public spending for social services (Hackworth, 2006). Among other impacts, this approach has led to substantial cuts to public spending for parks and recreation facilities in the U.S. in the last few decades (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). With public park agencies facing

reduced capacity, the voluntary sector in the U.S. has stepped up to provide a variety of services including LGIP planning coordination, establishing smaller parks through community advocacy efforts, providing recreation services such as fitness courses and amateur sport leagues, and maintaining neighborhood green spaces (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Loughran, 2014; Perkins, 2010; Roy, 2015).

For some scholars, the proliferation of park nonprofits including conservancies, “Friends of” groups, and homeowner associations has raised equity concerns (Holifield & Williams, 2014; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). These have centered primarily on increased inequities in access to recreation opportunities (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011); the tendency for nonprofits to focus on individual parks rather than entire park systems, which leads to inequalities in park maintenance (Harnik & Martin, 2015; Holifield & Williams, 2014; Low, 2013); the limited accountability of nonprofits that manage and develop new “quasi-public” parks with regulations written by private citizens (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010; Rigolon & Németh, 2017); and the inclination of some park conservancies to “empower the empowered” by steering funds from park bonds into wealthy areas (Pincetl, 2003). Indeed, community-based nonprofits advocating for green space can be placed in difficult positions by city leaders who “obligate them to adopt a more consensual form of politics” by supporting them financially and giving them important advisory roles (Checker, 2011, p. 224). But, in practice, these concerns are often overshadowed by the real and perceived benefits that these nonprofits bring to planning processes, as the environmental amenities, health benefits, and increased commerce that new parks can bring are lauded by elected officials and constituents alike (Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016; Pincetl, 2003).

Although these issues have been well-documented when park nonprofits provide programming or maintenance for smaller neighborhood parks, we know very little about whether similar issues emerge when nonprofits coordinate the development of LGIPs or how they might foster environmental gentrification (but see Pearsall, 2017). This is particularly important because LGIPs by definition have a much greater impact than neighborhood parks as they purport to bring secondary benefits such as increased commerce, tourism, and active transportation infrastructure (see Loughran, 2014; Roy, 2015). In addition, the environmental gentrification scholarship focusing on urban green spaces has mostly exposed the negative *outcomes* of LGIPs – that is, exposing the displacement of vulnerable residents (Anguelovski et al., 2017; Immergluck & Balan, 2017) – but has provided less coverage of procedural justice concerns that emerge during planning processes for LGIPs (see Checker, 2011 for a discussion of procedural justice for small neighborhood green spaces). By understanding more about how these projects are planned, we can not only respond to calls for more holistic notions of environmental justice (Low, 2013; Schlosberg, 2004; Walker, 2009), but we also provide valuable information to undertake more just and inclusive planning processes for similar LGIPs in the future. As LGIPs led by park nonprofits become an increasingly popular technique for planners, policymakers, and community organizations, it is critical to understand some of the hidden consequences of such an approach.

3. Methods

We use a case study design to analyze critical aspects in the planning processes of the 606 (Yin, 2003). We first map green gentrification trends along the 606. We rely on a recent study that tracked property values along the 606, and we also conduct a geospatial analysis to understand changes in socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and housing affordability near the 606 in recent years (Smith et al., 2016). To do so, we use the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates at the Census tract level for the City of Chicago, Illinois (2006–2010 and 2012–2016 ACS; United States Census Bureau, 2017). We compare changes in four variables describing gentrification (median household income, percentage of people with a bachelor

Table 1
Organizations of interviewees.

Group	Name
Park and open space nonprofits	Active Transportation Alliance
	Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail (FBT)
	The Trust for Public Land (TPL)
	Friends of the Parks
	NeighborSpace
Affordable housing and environmental justice nonprofits	Openlands
	Bickerdike
	Latin United Community Housing Association (LUCHA)
	Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) ^a
	Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA)
	The Pilsen Alliance ^a
Public agencies	1st Ward Aldermanic Office
	City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD)

^a During our initial set of interviews, we were referred to groups working on housing affordability issues near the planned Paseo Trail. Upon speaking to these organizations, we realized that the Paseo was experiencing similar issues to those that emerged for the 606.

degree, median rent, and percentage of Non-Hispanic White residents) between Tracts bordering the 606, Tracts included in the four neighborhoods where the 606 is located, and values for the City of Chicago during the same period.

We also conduct interviews (in person or by phone) with 16 key actors in the planning processes of the 606 and other rails-to-trails projects in Chicago, including staff members of local nonprofit organizations, city planning agencies, and city council member offices (called Aldermen in Chicago). To recruit participants, we use a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. We reach out to members of nonprofits involved in planning the trail, including organizations that focus on advocacy, community outreach, and affordable housing. We also contact several Aldermen covering districts adjacent to the 606 and public planning agencies. In total, we contact 30 people working at 19 organizations, and 16 individuals from 13 agencies respond (53% participation). We stop approaching additional people when we reach theoretical saturation (Morse, 2004). The final sample of interviewees is diverse in terms of nonprofit sector and size, race and ethnicity, and sex (see Table 1).

Our interview questions differ based on the role of the agency and specific interviewee. We ask all participants for a description of the planning process for the 606 and about their organization's involvement in, and perceptions of, the processes. Other questions directed to nonprofits working on housing issues examine their initiatives to limit displacement and the biggest obstacles they encountered in contrasting environmental gentrification. To gather contextual information about the 606, we review planning documents that have influenced the project, proposed affordable housing policies intended to limit gentrification, and accounts of the project by local media. To compile this list of documents, we conduct a web search with a combination of keywords including “606,” “Bloomingdale Trail,” “Chicago,” “planning,” “gentrification,” “housing,” and “sustainability.”

We analyze these qualitative data through a combination of constant comparison analysis and theory-driven coding (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). This means that we examine interview transcripts and documents using both emerging and predetermined codes, which include concepts related to gentrification, park development, community organizing and engagement, affordable housing, power, and local politics. In this analysis, we mostly rely on voices of people most committed to fighting environmental gentrification, including affordable housing and park advocates concerned with equity issues. This leads to the development of a few themes that describe procedural

justice concerns related to LGIPs, including how the nonproliferation of the planning process contributed to environmental gentrification along the 606. Importantly, we use theories about environmental gentrification, environmental justice, and nonproliferation to contextualize our empirical findings, which leads to analytic generalization (Yin, 2003). The takeaways from this case study can help extend theory about how procedural justice issues play out in the context of environmental gentrification.

4. Chicago's rails-to-trails projects

With an estimated population of 2,704,958 residents in 2016, Chicago is the third largest city in the United States and the most populous in the Midwest region (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Chicago is located on the shores of Lake Michigan in the northeastern part of the state of Illinois, a geographic position that helped the city become an important center for transportation, trade, industry, and finance. The estimated racial and ethnic breakdown in 2016 included 33% Non-Hispanic White, 30% Hispanic or Latino, 29% Non-Hispanic Black, and other groups in smaller percentages (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Chicago's 2016 poverty rate was around 22%, a much higher percentage than the U.S.'s rate of 12.7% (United States Census Bureau, 2016). After decades of stagnant population, Chicago has lost around 5% of its population in the last eight years (United States Census Bureau, 2016).

We chose to study environmental gentrification in Chicago for a number of reasons. First, according to Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the city was proclaimed the Greenest City in America and his goal is to make Chicago “the greenest city in the world” (Emanuel, 2017). Under Emanuel's leadership, Chicago has met most goals included in Sustainable Chicago 2015, a short-term sustainability plan comprising indicators about jobs, energy, transportation, water, open space, waste, and climate change (City of Chicago, 2015). Second, much of the investment to make Chicago green has been channeled into the construction or renovation of a world-class park system, including several new rails-to-trails projects in various stages of completion, such as the 606, the 312 RiverRun Trail, the Englewood Line, the Major Taylor Trail, and the Paseo Trail. The 606 is showcased as one of the achievements of the city's sustainability plan (City of Chicago, 2015). Third, studying environmental gentrification in Chicago is appropriate due to the city's focus on neighborhood planning, which one would assume provides significant local control and leverage for community groups (Silver, 1985). Fourth, the city has experienced significant gentrification in the past 20 years, which is particularly visible in neighborhoods located northwest of downtown Chicago, an area targeted by former Mayor Richard M. Daley's neoliberal agenda in the 1990s (Sternberg & Anderson, 2014). Finally, we focus on the 606 because of the clear association between the project and the gentrification of nearby neighborhoods *and* because of the deep involvement of park nonprofits in its planning process (Smith et al., 2016).

5. The 606

The 606 itself originated from the communities surrounding it. In the City of Chicago's (1998) CitySpace Plan, several neighborhoods adjacent to the abandoned rail line were considered the most park-deprived in the city. In 2003, a group of residents formed a nonprofit organization called the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail (FBT, n.d.). In 2004 and 2005, the idea of building a trail along the abandoned Bloomingdale rail line was included in the Logan Square Open Space plan, the Logan Square Quality of Life Plan, and the Humboldt Park Quality of Life Plan, all of which were written by local equity-minded organizations (City of Chicago, 2004; LISC Chicago, 2005b). In all three of these plans, residents called for converting the rail line into a bicycle and pedestrian trail in order to “enhance aesthetics and exercise opportunities” and “create a major greenway and recreation facility for

residents [to] help address the neighborhoods' documented need for more open space” (LISC Chicago, 2005a, p. 20–21).

In 2010, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) signed a contract with the Chicago Park District to become the lead private partner of the project (The Trust for Public Land, 2010). The TPL is a large environmental nonprofit that aims to establish new green space in urban regions and to preserve natural open space for recreational and ecological purposes across the U.S. (The Trust for Public Land, 2018). In particular, the City and Chicago Park District delegated to the TPL a series of tasks including organizing fundraising efforts with private donors, conducting community outreach, acquiring land on behalf of the city, and coordinating more than 50 public and private agencies involved in the project (The Trust for Public Land, 2010).

In 2011, Mayor Emanuel was elected Mayor of Chicago and made a campaign pledge to complete the Bloomingdale Trail during his first term (Shevory, 2011). As the project gained momentum, the TPL led a robust community engagement process between 2011 and 2014, including activities to draft a final plan for the trail in 2013 (The Trust for Public Land, n.d.). At that time, the project was rebranded as “The 606,” a broader designation that would include the Bloomingdale Trail and six nearby access parks (The Trust for Public Land, n.d.). The TPL, city agencies, and partners helped secure \$95 million including a large federal grant and private donations, which allowed construction to begin in 2013. The 606 opened to the public in 2015 (The Trust for Public Land, n.d.).

Today, the 606 is a 2.7-mile network of green spaces that connects four diverse neighborhoods in Chicago's northwest side (see Fig. 1). The 606 replaced an abandoned elevated rail line just like New York City's iconic High Line (see Fig. 2). On the east side of the line, Wicker Park and Bucktown are relatively affluent White areas (\$94,386 and \$95,825 median household incomes; 66% and 73% Non-Hispanic White). To the west, Logan Square and Humboldt Park are lower-income majority-Latino neighborhoods experiencing advanced gentrification (\$59,216 and \$32,073 median household incomes; 47% and 52% Latino; data from the 2012–2016 ACS).

In the two years before and after the 606 opened, the neighborhoods surrounding the trail have seen a significant influx of capital. An interviewee reported that, before the trail's completion, open houses near the 606 were populated by “lackeys paid by North Shore millionaires to go find a few buildings they could flip.” This resulted in the loss of naturally occurring affordable rental units (buildings with two to four apartments), many of which have been demolished to make room for new single-family homes (Smith et al., 2016). Thus, several properties located near the 606 were downzoned – that is, they now include fewer residential units than before redevelopment – and the resulting shortage of housing units seems to have contributed to displacing low-income residents (Vance, 2017). Although we found no indication that the City of Chicago provided incentives to developers operating near the trail, our interviewees reported that the city has mostly let “the market” take care of housing dynamics and did not attempt to enact any concrete initiatives to curb displacement until 2016, one year after the trail opened.

Fig. 1 shows that many of the census tracts located near the 606 saw a large increase in median household income between 2010 and 2016. Table 2 confirms that Census tracts bordering the 606 had much larger increases in median household income, the percentage of Non-Hispanic White people, and median rent, compared to the average change in the neighborhoods crossed by the 606 and to citywide changes between 2010 and 2016. In addition, a recent study highlighted that property values near the 606 in the more ethnically diverse neighborhoods of Logan Square and Humboldt Park have increased much more than those in Wicker Park and Bucktown, which had gentrified several years before the trail opened (Smith et al., 2016). These quantitative analyses corroborate claims by several interviewees that although neighborhoods along the 606 had started to see gentrification in the 2000s, the trail's construction served to accelerate these trends, particularly in

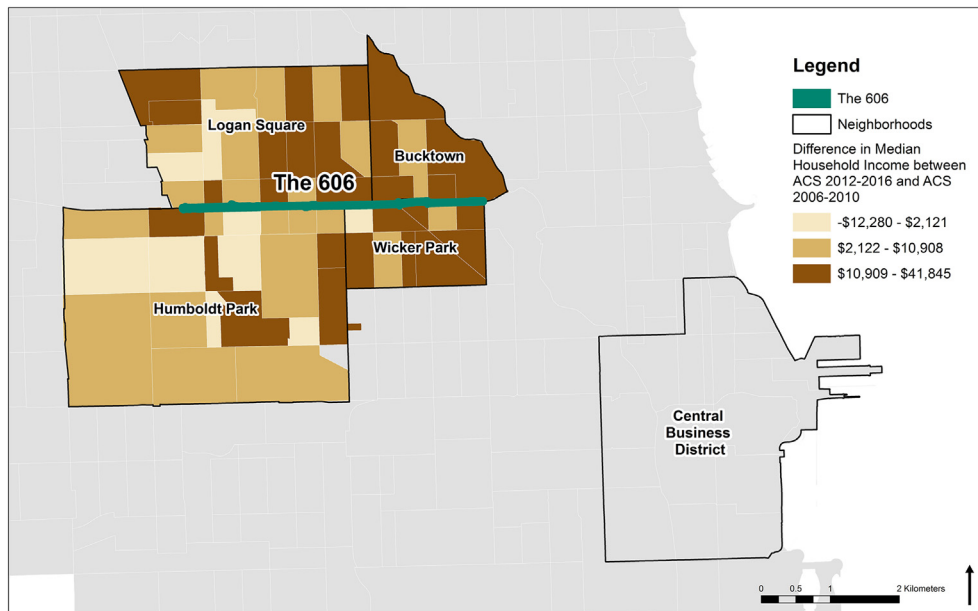


Fig. 1. The 606 and surrounding neighborhoods.

close proximity to the project itself.

6. Fragmentation, green-washing, and reduced accountability

A few key themes emerged from our data collection and analysis. We find that several features of the planning process of the 606, most notably the reliance on a park nonprofit for project coordination, contributed to fast-tracking environmental gentrification in surrounding communities. Relying on a park nonprofit to coordinate an LGIP, in this case, had benefits related to community outreach and fundraising due to the single-issue nature of the TPL's work, their track records with donors and foundations, and their capacity to engage communities more effectively than what public agencies can be capable

of. But we also find that such reliance can serve to fragment groups concerned with environmental improvement from those concerned with affordable housing provision and protection, can engender depoliticizing arguments that place attention on the sustainability and public health benefits of parks at the expense of housing and socio-economic questions, and can result in reduced accountability of both public agencies and non-state actors.

6.1. Project context

Before proceeding, we present more background about this planning process. It is important to note that the 606 was intended to address real, documented needs and deficiencies in access to parks and active



Fig. 2. View of the 606 in Logan Square.

Table 2
Change in demographic and housing variables between 2010 and 2016^a.

	Tracts bordering the 606 (average)	Neighborhoods along the 606 (average) ^b	City of Chicago (average)
Change in median household income	+\$14,682	+\$8422	+\$3557
Change in percent of people with a bachelor degree	+6.95%	+6.39%	+4.35%
Change in percent of Non-Hispanic White residents	+4.83%	+3.41%	+0.56%
Change in median gross rent	+\$201	+\$122	+\$102

^a Values calculated as follows: estimates from the 2012–2016 American Community Survey (ACS) minus estimates from the 2006–2010 ACS.

^b Average values for Tracts in Bucktown, Wicker Park, Logan Square, and Humboldt Park.

transportation routes, and that several community organizers interviewed felt that Mayor's office coopted these environmental justice efforts in order to deliver on his campaign promise to complete this signature project during his first term. As a Trust for Public Land (TPL) representative mentioned: “The Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) wrote the Bloomingdale Trail into the Quality of Life plan [in 2005]...They wanted it as much-needed green space – Logan Square is very park poor – and they wanted it as a place for people to have a chance to be healthy.” And a Logan Square community organizer and long-time resident lamented the paradox of environmental gentrification:

The irony is that we empowered community members in the 2000s in a Quality of Life plan for Logan Square...Research at the time showed that Logan Square had the lowest amounts of green space in the city. We had young people in our community going door-to-door to survey people and say ‘What issues are you concerned about and how can we address those?’ The irony today is that the families at the time said ‘Well there is an abandoned rail line down the street that has become a hub for crime and we feel unsafe. Can the city transform that into a green space for our families?’ We couldn't foresee at the time that today, in 2017, [the 606] would be the amenity that would actually be displacing us – something that we fought so hard for.

Although some groups felt that the 606 was coopted by the city, interviewees noted that the community engagement process led by the TPL was quite comprehensive and even won awards from the American Planning Association and the Boeing Foundation. Outreach activities included a three-day charrette and many other opportunities for residents to provide input about the park's function, design, and programming. Numerous interviewees noted that the TPL made attempts to engage the Spanish-speaking communities of Logan Square of Humboldt Park, but the impressions about whether such communities were given a true voice varied. Overall, approximately 40% of our interviewees perceived that the process failed to adequately engage long-term Latino residents and include their growing concerns about affordable housing; 40% saw the process as inclusive and fair, although those views were mostly expressed by the TPL members and city employees; and 20% of interviewees had mixed views about the planning process, as concerns emerged about “who was hearing the voices of brown and black people.”

6.2. Fragmentation between parks and housing sectors

A reliance on park nonprofits to coordinate a project of this scale increases the chances of fragmentation between efforts to develop parks and initiatives to preserve affordable housing. Although the TPL is increasingly concerned with park equity and environmental justice issues at the local and national level, as also shown by its recent campaign to provide walking access to parks to all Americans ([The Trust for Public Land, 2017](#)), the organization is simply not equipped to work on affordable housing or housing in general. Several members of the TPL's Chicago office talked about their inability to address this issue: “We are not in the business of housing; we are in the business of conservation and building parks. Housing is not what we do; that's not our mission.”

Community organizers who participated in the planning process for the 606 also acknowledged that “housing is not TPL's jurisdiction.” So when residents raised gentrification concerns, the TPL did not have much agency to address them, leaving housing advocates without any recourse. In the words of a community member: “You cannot come and build a 2.7-mile trail and throw your hands up in the air saying, ‘We're not in the business of affordable housing’” (reported by a TPL representative).

Several interviewees suggested that responding to gentrification threats in a timely manner is also difficult due to the fragmentation of park nonprofits and affordable housing groups. “There is no overarching coalition to deal with these issues; even our organizing is segregated,” said an affordable housing advocate. Compare this to the well-equipped and organized green growth machine as explained by an affordable housing developer:

The Mayor wanted the 606 developed. He was able to marshal the Trust for Public Land, some of the local Aldermen, and the federal government. So, on the one hand, there is this singular vision that can drive the process and has influence. On the other hand, the opposition is a bunch of people all over the place, with different opinions and different reasons.

Other actors in the process suggested that the fragmentation between parks and housing organizations might also be due ethnic/racial differences between these two worlds. Two interviewees working in park nonprofits reported that many of their board members are older, White environmentalists. “This is a big issue. They don't have any experience with parks and environmental justice, or about parks and gentrification.” These ethnic and cultural differences between parks groups and housing organizations are akin to well-documented tensions between environmentalists more concerned about ecology and urban environmental justice groups seeking to address environmental health issues affecting vulnerable populations ([Anguelovski & Martínez Alier, 2014](#); [Park & Pellow, 2011](#); [Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007](#)). Also, some constituents of nonprofits working on parks and active transportation simply want these organizations to remain within their sectoral boundaries. When the Active Transportation Alliance (a Chicago-based nonprofit) took a stand for affordable housing by supporting a proposed demolition fee for areas near the 606, they received backlash from their members, who advised them “to stick to biking, walking, and transit” (see [Simmons, 2017](#)).

Finally, fragmentation might not just be related to a reliance on nonprofits. A City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) interviewee told us, “We heard some claims about affordable housing but that wasn't really something that my division did...we weren't the mechanism to address that.” She continued: “The housing bureau [of DPD] was not involved in doing planning for housing around the 606. This idea that you were planning for all of these things at the same time [parks, transportation, housing], that was not happening.” This points to the longstanding failure of city planning agencies divided into departments of housing, parks and recreation, and transportation to connect the dots between critical environmental, health, and affordable challenges, divisions attributed predominantly to divergent mandates, funding sources, expertise, and professional traditions ([Ben-Joseph, 2005](#)).

Although some organizations such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston, Massachusetts have had success in demonstrating the critical ties between affordable housing and environmental justice in the context of smaller greening projects (see Anguelovski, 2014), the TPL has recognized that their singular focus on parks and conservation limits their ability to make a lasting impact when developing LGIPs. In the words of one of their staff members, “TPL is going to *have* to include housing by partnering with community housing partners,” and it has started to seek such partnerships in Chicago and elsewhere. For example, the TPL owns a property near the 606 that is slated to become a park, but they are currently unable to secure enough funding to develop it. A TPL representative ruminated, “Maybe we can slice part of this parcel off and turn it over to a group that works on affordable housing?” She continued, “It turns out that [an affordable housing developer] went to see one Alderman and pitched the idea. And he really loved it. So I thought, ‘Why don’t we just do it? Everyone gets a win.’”

This fragmentation of parks and housing sectors has emerged in the context of other LGIPs in the U.S. Among the numerous nonprofits supporting the development of LGIPs in the High Line Network, organizations such as The Friends of the High Line, the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership and the Friends of the Rail Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania have played key roles in the development processes of these projects (Bliss, 2017; Immergluck & Balan, 2017; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall, 2017). These nonprofits formed specifically to help the establishment of new LGIPs, but similar to the TPL in Chicago, they have had limited success in addressing critical housing issues related to their projects. Similar to our study, issues of fragmentation between park development and affordable housing preservation emerged for the establishment of the Rail Park in Philadelphia (Pearsall, 2017). The Friends of the Rail Park nonprofit did not see affordable housing as one of their responsibilities, citing a lack of expertise as one reason for choosing not to be involved in housing initiatives (Pearsall, 2017). At the same time, community groups representing long-term residents have sought to integrate affordable housing in the development of the park, but have had limited success so far (Pearsall, 2017).

Our findings, combined with recent work on “friends of” groups for LGIPs (Pearsall, 2017) and on community-based organizations such as the DSNI (Anguelovski, 2014), suggest that the fragmentation between parks and housing is particularly notable for nonprofits that work on LGIPs and for non-grassroots organizations that do not directly respond to a range of needs expressed by local communities.

6.3. “Greenness” and public health

In the case of the 606, the green growth machine used the popularity and the “apolitical” nature of sustainability and public health arguments to accelerate the planning process and push the project through with little resistance. The affordable housing advocates and organizers we interviewed reported that it is very difficult to combat new parks because of the perceived universal benefits of green amenities, particularly in traditionally-underserved communities: “Everyone wanted the 606...we all wanted it”. Thus, as another organizer noted, “It’s a tough argument to make to say ‘Don’t invest in our community and don’t create new amenities because that’s bad for our neighborhood.’” A representative from Chicago’s DPD summed up this conundrum: “The area is gentrifying so we shouldn’t make it nice? We shouldn’t build parks because then it will gentrify?”

As one TPL interviewee mentioned, the nonprofit was “moved by nothing but great intentions for health and conservation.” Yet these great intentions have created new, and perhaps tougher challenges for environmental justice groups fighting displacement because when gentrification near the 606 started they were put in a position of fighting against the environmental and health benefits for which they had long advocated. Indeed, numerous EJ groups around the globe have

used the benefits of urban green space for physical health, mental health, and community well-being to advocate for more parks in low-income communities of color (Anguelovski, 2013; García, Flores, & Chang, 2003; García & Mok, 2017).

In addition, Mayor Emanuel realized from the outset that “sustainability sells,” as urban greening projects such as new parks attract investors and contribute to job creation and increased revenues for the city. Although the impetus for the 606 as stated in the aforementioned neighborhood plans focused solely on the project’s public health and recreation benefits, a local park advocate argued that “Parks are primarily a revenue generator for [the Mayor’s office] these days. They’re not primarily an investment for people in communities that need green space. For the 606, the language was ‘This is going to raise property taxes in these communities and that’s a good thing because we need money.’”

Although the health benefits of the 606 were well touted, some interviewees suggest that long-term residents of color might reap fewer of those benefits compared to wealthier White newcomers. Several community organizers reported that some Latinos, families with children, and older residents perceive that they are not the intended users of the project, and therefore do not feel welcome there. Rather, they see the 606 as a place for newcomers. As explained by a community organizer in Logan Square: “Are parks really for us [people of color]? Because we know what parks have been like in our history—a gang territory. And then now [that the neighborhood is changing], people of color perceive that the park is for gentrifiers.” In fact, a recent study shows that trail users include a disproportionate number of people with high socioeconomic status (Zenk et al., 2015). Finally, several interviewees report that cyclists riding too fast limit trail use for families and older adults. As an affordable housing developer explained, “As a health and wellness outcome, you don’t see a lot of families with little kids out there because the bikes go too fast.” Thus, these interactional justice issues (Kabisch & Haase, 2014; Low, 2013) might limit the health benefits that the 606 can bring to some of the nearby residents.

These findings on the power of sustainability and public health initiatives corroborate that “greenwashing,” or the use of a sustainability discourse to push through what would otherwise be a controversial project, is increasingly used by green growth machine coalitions in many projects that have led to environmental gentrification (Checker, 2011; Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016). Indeed, Checker (2011) noted that the cooptation of EJ efforts to improve the health and well-being of marginalized groups is a form of “post-political governance” that erodes equity concerns from sustainability initiatives and, by doing so, limits the capacity of EJ groups to resist gentrification. In other words, by presenting urban greening projects as technocratic efforts that will improve health and environmental quality for all residents, the green growth machine de-politicizes planning processes and makes opposition to LGIPs virtually impossible (Checker, 2011; Gould & Lewis, 2017).

6.4. Reduced accountability

The reliance on park nonprofits to manage the development of LGIPs can also serve to limit the accountability of public actors and nonprofit organizations themselves. According to several interviewees, this may have been a deliberate strategy employed by the Mayor and his allies for the 606. Putting the nonprofit in charge allowed the Mayor’s office to deflect tough conversations about housing affordability and gentrification to the TPL. An affordable housing advocate explained this approach:

TPL was the face of the project; it was out there to take the hits. People talked about the Mayor occasionally, but there was rarely anybody there to answer for him. Instead, TPL was there. But when facing critiques, they could just say, “We’re a private entity. You can’t vote us out.”

Therefore, although the TPL was acting as an intermediary on the

project, with all decisions ultimately ratified by City government, they were the organization charged with community engagement and were perceived as the “face” of the project. Several other interviewees lamented the absence of public officials and municipal planning agencies during the community outreach process, and noted that the Mayor only showed up for “ribbon cutting photos and celebrate quick wins.”

Contracting with a park nonprofit also contributed to reduced accountability because nonprofits work on a project-by-project basis, and their work does not go beyond the scope of single projects and the timeframe it takes to complete such projects. In other words, groups like the TPL can carry out these projects very efficiently, particularly because they are able to focus on the project itself instead of the entire city, as public agencies are tasked with doing. As expressed by a DPD interviewee, “TPL was the public face because that’s the only project they had. That wasn’t the only project we had over here.” In addition, when project-oriented nonprofits are brought in from outside the jurisdiction to lead large projects like the 606, they can lack the capacity to address the impacts that those projects will bring to the broader city or region.

Similar concerns about limited accountability have emerged in the literature covering the role of nonprofits such as park conservancies, “Friends of” groups, and homeowner associations in programming and maintaining neighborhood parks (Harnik & Martin, 2015; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). For example, in the park conservancy model, a small group of residents managing a park is not subject to the same scrutiny as elected officials, and often do not have a strong understanding of the needs and desires of their own or surrounding communities (Harnik & Martin, 2015).

7. Conclusion

This study advances the environmental justice literature on environmental gentrification by exposing procedural justice issues in the planning of large green infrastructure projects (LGIPs). We show that elected officials and developers allied in neoliberal “green growth machines” have not only coopted environmental justice concerns and initiatives into economic development opportunities, but they have relied on park-oriented nonprofits to do so, which has raised the concerns listed above. A key finding emerging from our interviews is that putting a nonprofit agency that is “not in the business of housing” in charge of a redevelopment project ultimately created a situation wherein connections between park development and affordable housing were further fissured, and park planning and public health concerns took precedence over the gentrification concerns raised by many neighborhood advocates and local residents. By doing so, these growth machines use the well-intentioned values of sustainability and public health of park nonprofits to stimulate real estate development and ultimately facilitate environmental gentrification. Given the growth and durability of neoliberal governance in global cities (Hackworth, 2006), environmental justice advocates must expose such cooptation and promote more joined-up efforts across these currently fragmented sectors.

Our findings suggest many openings for equity-minded urban planners, elected officials, and nonprofits to proactively confront environmental gentrification. To challenge the fragmentation of parks and housing, planning processes for LGIPs need to be part of broader, holistic planning efforts that integrate investment in green space and active transportation with affordable housing initiatives, as Boston’s Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and others have attempted to do (Anguelovski, 2014). In fact, a number of nonprofits have formed coalitions that include groups working on parks as well as those working on housing issues, thus bridging historical divides between environmentalists and EJ advocates (see Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). For example, the Los Angeles Regional Open Space & Affordable Housing Collaborative (LA ROSAH, 2017), which counts the TPL as one of its member organizations, started with the primary goal of addressing

gentrification concerns related to the greening of the Los Angeles River. In an October 2017 forum hosted by LA ROSAH, Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust’s Executive Director Tamika Butler asked:

How many times have you heard: ‘We’re just a parks organization. We’re just a transit organization. We’re just a housing organization.’ I have to think about all of those things. And so when we have leaders running nonprofits who refuse to think about the intersection of all of these issues, I don’t think they’re doing their job. We won’t be able to solve the problems without tackling all these things.

Yet working across boundaries and combatting this fragmentation is exceedingly difficult in a growth-oriented paradigm because, she continued, “elected officials are trying to pit park advocates against affordable housing advocates so that we’re fighting each other for scarce resources.” She added that “because funders aren’t giving enough money to work together, funders are asking us to come with very narrow views of what we’re doing.”

Multi-sectoral nonprofits can successfully integrate efforts to green neighborhoods while preserving affordable housing. In Washington DC, a nonprofit named Building Bridges Across the River is leading the development of the 11th Street Bridge Park, a new green space that will connect wealthy, majority-White areas to low-income, majority-Black neighborhoods (Bliss, 2017; Bogle, Diby, & Burnstein, 2016). This nonprofit has explored several strategies to protect affordable housing on the lower-income side of the Anacostia River, such as establishing a community land trust, and have secured substantial investment from charitable organizations to implement such strategies (Bliss, 2017; Bogle et al., 2016). Nonetheless, it is too early to know whether these proactive initiatives can successfully limit gentrification; the park is not set to open until 2019.

While there is no panacea to address environmental gentrification, we demonstrate in this study that a stronger coordination between parks and housing is a key starting point and that the nonprofitization of planning processes might limit such coordination. In addition, municipal planning agencies must reassume a stronger role to integrate projects across sectors and prioritize policies that advocate for development without displacement.

Declaration of interests

None.

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