Gentrification has been one of the most controversial and problematic urban developments of the past fifty years. It has benefited cash-strapped central-city governments in need of wealthier taxpayers and higher assessed property values but has proved a bane to lower-income residents who can no longer afford the rent in their gentrifying neighborhoods and feel increasingly out of place among the invading hordes of young professionals. Nowhere has this dilemma of gain and loss been more evident than in New York City. During the 1970s commentators bemoaned New York’s impending bankruptcy and rampant housing abandonment; the South Bronx was a burned-out ruin eliciting comparisons with Berlin at the close of World War II. Thirty years later, reporters told of the transformation of once-empty shells into upscale town houses, of hyperinflated housing values, and of an unabated influx of the rich and hip to Gotham.

In The Lofts of SoHo and The Roots of Urban Renaissance, Aaron Shkuda and Brian D. Goldstein delve deeply into the recent history of Harlem. Although only seven miles apart on the small island of Manhattan, the two neighborhoods and their histories are quite different. Yet they are both part of the story of New York gentrification, and the authors ably describe their often difficult and complicated progress toward community revitalization.

In the 1950s, as Shkuda relates, SoHo was a district of aging factory lofts that accommodated small manufacturing concerns employing many minority workers. Its multistory late nineteenth-century buildings on narrow congested streets had become obsolete in an age of sprawling single-story industrial plants serviced by fleets of trucks. Although ill suited for modern manufacturing, SoHo’s large loft spaces and cheap rents attracted a growing number of artists, who converted the former factories into studios and residences. Their loft homes, however, violated New York City’s zoning ordinances and often failed to meet housing code requirements. Troubled by the loss of manufacturing jobs in the city, New York planners hoped to preserve the district as a site for industry. Yet in defiance of the authorities, the outlaw artists were transforming what some deemed an industrial slum into the new creative hub of one of the world’s great art capitals.

The artists who pioneered loft living not only defied zoning and housing codes but also fought proponents of urban renewal and highway construction. As the city shied away from urban renewal in the 1960s, a proposed middle-income housing project that would have cleared thirty-one acres of SoHo never advanced beyond the drawing board. The battle over the Lower Manhattan Expressway, a project powerfully promoted by Robert Moses, was more intense. The projected superhighway would have cut a swath through the heart of SoHo, a prospect that not only aroused the ire of the resident artists but also stirred the wrath of planning rebel Jane Jacobs. After many years of hot debate, the city shelved the scheme, leaving the physical fabric of the SoHo district intact.

The social fabric of the community, however, would not remain unchanged. Manufacturing concerns closed their doors, and minority workers no longer commuted to the lofts of SoHo. Instead, the influx of artists gave rise in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the opening of numerous art galleries. SoHo became the place both to produce art and to sell it. As such, the neighborhood attracted an increasing number of affluent visitors who patronized the galleries and enjoyed the bohemian environment of the increasingly fashionable art district. Other retailers and numerous restaurants opened to service the well-to-do visitors. Moreover, studio tours as well as newspaper and magazine articles about the artists’ homes introduced loft living to these outsiders. Attracted by the ample living spaces of the lofts, the proximity to their jobs in the Lower Manhattan financial district, and the hip ambience of an artistic community, nonartists with ample funds began moving into the neighborhood, accelerating the pace of gentrification. Boutique hotels followed. By 1980 SoHo was becoming the new “in” neighborhood of New York City.

Accompanying this transformation was a change in architectural fashion. Located just south of an urban renewal site of soaring middle-income apartment towers, Washington Square Village (built in the late 1950s and the 1960s), SoHo was the antithesis of this neighboring exemplar of modernist planning. It was a district of tightly packed five- to seven-story buildings with no open spaces other than narrow streets ill suited to the auto age. SoHo’s cast-iron façades boasted ornamental columns and capitals more appropriate to the reign of Queen Victoria than to the ages of Le Corbusier or Rem Koolhaas. Yet by the 1970s the architectural world had developed a new appreciation of these detailed façades. Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd enthusiastically invested in buildings that defied the modernist axiom of less is more. The interiors of the artists’ lofts were appropriately white walled and stark in the modernist mode, but the minimalist interiors were encased in exteriors from an earlier, less restrained age.

As Shkuda notes, SoHo thus preserved the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century past while rebelling against more recent mid-twentieth-century fashion. The district’s artists defied the planning and housing codes developed by twentieth-century reformers, creating an openly illegal community. They successfully thwarted the best-laid plans of urban renewal advocates and expert highway engineers. And they saved a built environment that clashed with orthodox modernism. The heirs of this legacy of defiance and insurrection were the wealthy Wall Streeters who occupied the district beginning in the 1980s. In the 1950s and 1960s, SoHo’s chief asset was...
its cheap spaces; forty years later it had become one of the most expensive areas in the city and the nation. Shkuda expertly describes this transformation, demonstrating the artists’ role as agents of urban revitalization.

Whereas Shkuda places artists at the center of the gentrification story, Goldstein identifies the roots of revival in the radical activism that emerged in Harlem during the 1960s. Like Shkuda’s artists, Goldstein’s radicals were fed up with urban renewal schemes, which had destroyed many older buildings and seemed to threaten the traditional fabric of the community. Urban renewal planners had constructed high-rise towers to accommodate thousands of low- and middle-income Harlemites, but outsiders had made the decisions about who would be housed and what would be cleared. Harlem had devolved into a colonial fiefdom governed by white city officials who seemed to believe that they had superior knowledge of what was good for the neighborhood.

Goldstein’s story begins in the 1960s, when young activist architects organized the Architects’ Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH) and began working with community groups to devise plans to improve low-income neighborhoods. Escalating dictation by downtown authorities, ARCH sought to democratize the planning process by including Harlem residents in decision making. Fueling the fervor of neighborhood activists were plans to clear a site in the heart of Harlem for construction of a twenty-three-story state office building. The older African American establishment viewed the new tower as a boon to the economically distressed neighborhood, but younger leaders deemed it one more example of white outsiders imposing their plans on the cultural capital of black America. During the summer of 1969, protesters occupied the contested site, blocking bulldozers and preventing construction. That autumn, police removed the occupiers and construction of the office building proceeded. The occupation, however, brought attention to demands for greater local control. Young black activists sought development by and for Harlem’s low-income residents and espoused a communitarian ideal that entailed community control and ownership of the neighborhood’s housing and businesses. The 1969 protest marked the high point of radical activism in Harlem. Over the following two decades, community development corporations took the lead in planning the neighborhood’s future. Financed by state and federal grants but led by some of the once-radical black activists, these corporations had a mixed record of achievement. An epidemic of housing abandonment swept through Harlem as well as other poor New York neighborhoods, leaving brownstones stripped of everything worth selling and occupied by an increasing number of crack cocaine addicts. Ignoring charges of conflict of interest, community corporation board members awarded lucrative contracts to themselves and benefited disproportionately from the public funds spent for development. Yet renovation of abandoned buildings by urban homesteaders offered some hope for the future and demonstrated the potential of self-help efforts by residents willing to paint walls and sand floors.

Goldstein identifies an economic upswing beginning in the 1990s. Community development corporations became increasingly devoted to bringing Harlem into the economic mainstream by attracting chain stores and providing shopping opportunities similar to those in more affluent neighborhoods. There was also a new emphasis on economic diversity as community leaders sought to lure middle-class residents to Harlem. Rather than remaining a lower-income community dedicated to the interests of lower-income blacks, Harlem was ideally to become a mixed neighborhood appealing to middle-class newcomers while still accommodating the poor. This initiative resulted in the first modern supermarket in central Harlem as well as two shopping malls with such national retailers as Marshalls, CVS, Old Navy, and the Disney Store. The primary goal no longer appeared to be the preservation of a distinctively African American community whose development reflected African American culture. Instead, Harlem was developing into a place more like everywhere else in the city and nation.

These changes aroused fears of impending gentrification and complaints about a loss of community identity. The Harlem of the early twenty-first century seemed to be moving ever further from the radical activist dreams of the 1960s. Whereas the crusaders of the 1960s sought independence from outsiders and fought integration into the nation’s white-dominated economy and lifestyle, Harlem’s leaders of the twenty-first century welcomed outside investors and more affluent new residents. Rather than embracing the lower-class communitarianism of the 1960s, the movers and shakers of the 2000s warmed to middle-class capitalism.

Goldstein recognizes, but does not emphasize, that some observers have exaggerated the pace of gentrification in Harlem. Although there were new businesses and some increase in residents with more money and lighter complexions, the neighborhood had not achieved the rags-to-riches transformation seen in SoHo. At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Harlem remained home to a large lower-income population. Central Harlem’s poverty rate, though lower than in 1980, remained considerably above the rates of New York City and the nation as a whole. Likewise, its median household income was well below the figures for the city and the United States. Harlem had changed, but it had not become an exclusive haven for New York’s gentry. A CVS and Marshalls signaled the advent of American normalcy, not the arrival of the rich and famous. Whereas Harlem celebrated the opening of a middle-class Pathmark supermarket, SoHo could boast of the first Dean & DeLuca, the upscale purveyor of foodstuffs for New York’s elite and those aspiring to be elite. The trajectories of Harlem and SoHo were not identical. By the early twenty-first century Harlem was not yet in the same class as SoHo.

Yet Shkuda’s and Goldstein’s accounts expose certain similarities in the development of the two communities. In both neighborhoods gut-wrenching displacement of existing tenants was less significant during the early stages of change than critics of gentrification have often implied. Prior to revitalization both SoHo and Harlem were emptying of their businesses and residents, which resulted in abandoned and untenable spaces. This loss of previous tenants in fact encouraged redevelopment. The exodus of SoHo’s manufacturers left ample inexpensive loft space for incoming artists. Similarly, pioneering gentrifiers in Harlem applied their sweat equity to abandoned tax-delinquent brownstones that had become city property. Between 1950 and
1990 Harlem’s population dropped more than 50 percent, a loss that heightened the imperative for revival. Apparently many Harlemites were not irrevocably attached to their lower-income, racially segregated community. Instead they readily departed, leaving Harlem for whoever wanted to succeed them. They did not need to be displaced. They were already gone.

Another characteristic common to both SoHo and Harlem was the revolt against government. SoHo’s artists achieved loft living by defying the law and saved their aged buildings by refusing to yield to the city’s highway and urban renewal planners. City hall was the enemy; SoHo’s pioneers made their own law. Harlem’s activists likewise rebelled against government leaders, demanding independence from the decisions of governors, mayors, and downtown bureaucrats. They solicited downtown money to realize their dream of a renewed community, but interference from outside authorities was not welcome. Harlem’s rebels illegally occupied the state office building site, and SoHo’s artists moved into factory lofts in defiance of the law. In both neighborhoods rebellion was at the root of gentrification. No metropolis in the United States had more plans, codes, and regulations and a larger army of bureaucrats to implement them than New York City, but ironically the city’s revival rested on a rejection of rules and a desire of neighborhood residents to act independently and chart their own destinies.

It is difficult, however, to draw far-reaching conclusions from Shkuda’s and Goldstein’s studies. Both are narrow local histories that describe in great detail the events that took place in specific and singular neighborhoods. Additional work is needed if we are to understand the phenomenon of gentrification more fully and broadly. Shkuda and Goldstein have exhaustively researched the emerging revitalization of SoHo and Harlem and have admirably illuminated the subject of urban gentrification with their in-depth local investigations. Their model studies should inspire others to explore the mysteries of neighborhood succession and chart the rise and fall of community fortunes in America’s inner cities.

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