WORKS CITED


Gentrification Is Cool
New Urban Attitudes and the Demise of the Young American Dream

Gabe Friedman

You may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
You may find yourself in another part of the world
You may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
You may find yourself in a beautiful house with a beautiful wife
You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?
—Talking Heads, “Once in a Lifetime”

Over the holidays, I received a copy of David Byrne’s latest book, the part-memoir, part-philosophical treatise How Music Works. Byrne, the enigmatic former front man of the influential band Talking Heads, details his musical beginnings and career trajectory in the early chapters. His story reads like a quintessential, long-lost urban fairytale: He attended art school in Rhode Island in the early ’70s and then moved to New York City after graduating, without any concrete plans or goals. A painter offered him room and board at an apartment on Bond Street, right between the East and West Village neighborhoods, in exchange for help in renovating it. He then worked as an usher at a movie theater and was able to scrape by and work on songs with his bandmates.¹

Of course, the Greenwich Village of the 1970s was quite different from the gentrified, NYU-dominated Village of today. It was a center of art and culture (Byrne lived across the street from the infamous CBGB club), a melting pot of social and ethnic groups, and a maze

¹. Byrne 2012
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of mom-and-pop shops. It was grittier and not as chic, but it embodied the bohemian charm of the classic 20th-century American downtown.

This essay is not a lament for any lack of art and culture in New York City—Manhattan is still a world-class center and producer in this regard. But I would like to take note here of the slow process, in cities like New York, of the death of what I consider to be a part of the American Dream which is now seldom talked about: the opportunity for a young adult to temporarily live in a vibrant inner-city area without a substantial income. This problem is largely due to record shifts in cities’ demographics and increases in the price of living in formerly young areas. Today, living in an apartment in Greenwich Village would be impossible for the young David Byrne; it’s questionable whether he could even afford to live in the outskirts of New York City. A rental apartment on Bond Street costs at least 10 times more than it did in the ‘70s. The young American’s dream of moving into a city and taking time to find oneself, whether spiritually, creatively, or even financially, is now as much a relic of the past as an early Talking Heads record. I want to discuss the disconcerting consequences of this ‘development’ and the factors that drive it, since it exceeds the bounds of any socioeconomic process.

Today, New York and many other large American cities are undergoing what Alan Ehrenhalt calls a “demographic inversion.” This does not mean that these cities are simply seeing higher rates of gentrification, or an influx of high-income residents into previously low-income urban areas. Ehrenhalt, a prominent chronicler of cities and their continual transformation, has instead put his finger on a trend that points to a recent widespread shift in public opinion. City life, and especially inner-city life in places like Manhattan, has become extremely desirable again, especially to the upper-middle-class and the very wealthy. Living in the heart of the modern gentrified city is convenient, intellectually satisfying, and, most importantly, cool once more.

This may not seem strange at first, but history shows that it is. For most of the 20th century, the United States was characterized by rampant suburbanization. Scholar Kenneth Jackson describes in his seminal work The Crabgrass Frontier the factors behind this uniquely American development, which include the prevalence of the automobile, post-war housing policies, a national discourse which emphasized the importance of home ownership, and the general American preference for individualistic solitude over communal interaction. The middle and upper classes’ underlying fear of the perceived grit and crime of the inner city bound together several of these trends. (For example, the familiar term ‘white flight’ encapsulated the fear of ‘dangerous’ inner-city minorities, helping to spur the suburban migration.) From the mid-century mark until recently, the suburb was seen as the perfect escape from the city, as a symbolic haven of purity and success. The middle and upper classes abandoned the cultural tensions and industrial problems that 20th-century cities contained, and for decades suburbs grew much faster than urban areas.

Flash-forward to the 21st century: New York and other large American cities are cleaner, safer, greener, and more residential than ever. They are, for the most part, no longer home to noisy manufacturing centers and grimy tenements of underpaid workers. Technological advances have greatly transformed policing and public safety. New residential complexes dominate the architectural landscape. The result is Ehrenhalt’s “demographic inversion,” or a kind of white flight in reverse. Inner-city property values have skyrocketed, and poor and even solidly middle-class residents have been forced to the city outskirts and the suburbs. Of course, these challenges also face the young David Byrnes of the world: A young person without a steady, substantial income has little hope of living within a reasonable distance of the city center.

What are the problems with this ‘development’? Why shouldn’t young people continue to move from cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, to places like St. Louis or Portland? Isn’t it unfair to long for a period of relaxed ambition in today’s fast-paced world?

2. Ehrenhalt 2008

3. Jackson 1985
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A back-to-the-city gentrification of this scale will always lead to some displacement of lower-income residents. In other words, a lot of poor (and in this case, even middle-class) people who have lived in inner-city areas will be forced to leave and find new homes due to an increased cost-of-living. It is easy to point to higher rental prices or a swath of new expensive shops and businesses and declare that a neighborhood’s value has increased. Most of the time, gentrification does improve a neighborhood’s profit potential and value: It can transform stagnant areas into safer, cleaner, more attractive residential zones. However, in many cases the latent cost is the unfair cycle of displacement. Many displaced people are pushed out of tight-knit communities built on familiar culture and solidarity, where the struggles of poverty are mollified through the interaction and aid of friends and neighbors. Until a reasonable urban policy and public housing alternative is developed for these low- and middle-income city dwellers, it is unfair that they should be displaced the way they repeatedly are.

There is nothing stopping this residential inversion from spreading to other cities. The process has occurred first in places like Manhattan and Chicago simply because they are the largest and most desirable places to live in. Ehrenhalt uses Vancouver as an unexpected example. A large proportion of Vancouver’s residents live in a relatively small area in the direct center of the city. Ehrenhalt writes: “Downtown Vancouver is a forest of slender, green, condo skyscrapers, many of them with three-story townhouse units forming a kind of podium at the base…. A large proportion of the city’s 600,000 residents, especially those with money, want to live downtown.” The rampant pro-city sentiment is not confined to New York, and it is becoming similarly difficult for young people across the country to live in urban areas.

There are also troubling non-economic consequences to this 21st-century development. The first is not too surprising: Newly wealthy urbanites now yearn for the very ‘urban experience’ they have effectively pushed out. The young and artistic crowds (the main demographic of the group who formerly lived out the ‘Young American Dream’) play an underestimated role in shaping the character of a city, a claim for which New York City provides a prime example. In SoHo, the extremely gentrified region just west of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, real estate developers and landlords are currently giving artists low-cost housing deals to lure them back into the area, which was formerly an artistic hotbed. In the West Village, the Westbeth apartment complex has exclusively housed artists for over 40 years, keeping their rents low with help from non-profit foundations.

This effort to retain the young artistic demographic is a testament to what the group has meant to the city and those who lived around it. Most people tacitly enjoy having eccentric David Byrne-types walking around, producing art and lending a bit of creative color to what was formerly a hard, industrialized urban landscape. My mother, a graphic artist who lived a few blocks from David Byrne in the ’70s, often remarks how the young adults around her were excited and inspired by the cultural energy of the city, and that they tried their hand at anything that interested them. In the midst of all of the city’s problems and tensions, the young artistic types stood as reminders that the city could (and should) be a place of exploration and enjoyment.

This relation leads to the final problem that hyper-gentrification has revealed: The stage of relaxed intellectual and career-oriented exploration of which young city-dwellers used to take advantage is slowly being phased out of the social consciousness. Young people used to flock to cities because of the promise of varied and creative opportunities that would lead to collaboration, inspiration, or even a break between major phases of life. The era of the “Young American Dream”—the height of which was the ’60s and ’70s—represented a time before financial security and stability were of supreme importance. The expulsion of the young creative type shows that the con-

4. Powell and Spencer 2002
5. Ehrenhalt 2008
6. Clements 2010
7. Robledo 2010
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4. Powell and Spencer 2002
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temporary city is foremost a symbol of financial development rather than a means of development for its citizens.

I find this ‘development’ problematic because now more than ever, young adults are stressed and in need of self-exploration. The 2008 financial crisis has ushered in a new age of intensified financial anxiety for young adults. Americans aged 18–24 are currently experiencing their lowest employment rate in over 60 years. The pressure to find a well-paid opportunity in the thinning job market is forcing young adults to stay in school for as long as they can or settle for jobs that they never would have considered otherwise. This financial funneling only intensifies the need for young people to experience some time in their 20s during which financial security does not dominate their frame of mind. Stressed 22-year-olds become stressed adults; they may find some degree of economic peace and security, but they will never have learned the value and importance of true self-exploration. The ideal state is one in which as many people as possible have the opportunity to try several things and end up choosing a path that leads to a fulfilling life—not one in which career paths are accelerated and begun as soon as possible. The city used to be the perfect space for this crucial phase of modern existence, but without a significant shift in public policy and opinion, the American metropolis will continue to be shaped by its wealthy residents and not by those who defined its 20th-century identity.

It is important to note that policies have not always been helpful to the cause of the young adult and the lower-income city resident; in fact, this widespread urban movement has very identifiable roots in government policies. City and state governments have historically manipulated the real estate market by promoting “major infrastructural improvements” that only the wealthy can afford through code enforcement and zoning changes. Laws and ordinances that protect public housing are increasingly being struck down, and recent court activity has made it more difficult for the poor to stay in housing. Even the Department of Housing and Urban Development has shown uncharacteristic “anti-poor sentiment” since the 1970s, cloaking the demolition of affordable and public housing units under a veil of free market rhetoric. No single urban policy will be able to stem the tide of demographic-shifting gentrification, although greater emphasis on affordable housing reforms would help to diversify the urban landscape and give young adults some hope of regaining their footing in the distribution of city residency.

Ultimately, true American progress and innovation is grounded on and motivated by the hope of improving the next generation’s standard of living. The dissolution of the ‘Young American Dream’—the possibility to enjoy the city before one is settled into a career—is an example of a subtle decrease in the lower- to middle-class American’s quality of life. In a sense, the progress of the 21st century can be seen as innovative and profitable, but it can also be seen as benefiting a select few at the expense of many others. Returning to a state in which cities are diverse, affordable, and full of both creative and

8. Eichler 2012
9. Powell and Spencer 2002
10. Powell and Spencer: 2002. In 2002, for example, the Supreme Court ruled in HUD v. Rucker that “local housing authorities could evict tenants of public housing when household members or guests were in violation of anti-drug policies, even if the tenant was unaware of drug activity” (Powell 451).
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I’m allergic to shrimp, too.

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Notes on a Rookie

Rookie Mag and Feminism

Jordan Larson

A new figure of authority is born and she outclasses them all.
—Tiqqun, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl

The editor, director, plus I’m my own boss
So posh, nails fierce with the gold gloss
Which means nobody getting over me
I got the swag and it’s pumpin’ out my ovaries.
—Kreayshawn, “Gucci Gucci”

Rookie Mag was launched on September 1, 2011, with a letter from its then-15-year-old editor, Tavi Gevinson. The project, as she laid it out, was simple: Rookie was to be a website for teen girls, but not a guide on how to be a teen girl, not Teen Vogue, and not really something by Jane Pratt, either. Influenced by Sassy, Pratt’s ’90s-era magazine that redefined the possibilities for writing aimed at young girls, Gevinson has attempted to create a new kind of feminism—and feminist—in Rookie. Called “the future of journalism” by Lady Gaga, Gevinson had already accrued plenty of fame and cultural clout by the time she decided to found her own publication. She began blogging about fashion at the age of 11, and in two years her blog The Style Rookiety was receiving up to 50,000 visitors a day. Gevinson began attracting the attention of other fashion bloggers and designers, attending Fashion Weeks across the globe, and forging friendships with celebrities like Winona Ryder and Sofia Coppola. She caught the eye of