

Gentrification in Comics and Graphic Novels

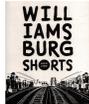
Featuring

"Good ol' Steven M. Schnell"

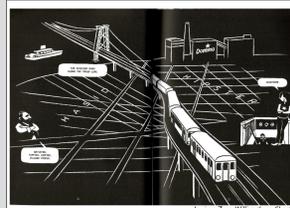
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Oh, hey there! Thanks for coming by my poster! You're probably wondering - what does gentrification have to do with comics? I wondered the same thing - while working on a larger project about place and comics, I noticed that gentrification kept coming up, again and again, sometimes as subtext, sometimes even as major storylines. But why?



Maybe the ground-level view that many cartoonists have - as part of the not-wealthy creative class who are often part of earlier waves of gentrification, looking for cheap rents and a stimulating environment, and who in turn often themselves get priced out of their homes?



Many of these stories are set in New York City, ground zero for an accelerating form of hyper-gentrification that has been displacing communities and obliterating neighborhoods. And comics creators have worked to bear witness in various ways to the destructive impacts on place caused by the quest for profit in a system that treats place as a commodity, and not as a home.



One of my first unexpected encounters with gentrification in comics came in G. Willow Wilson's Marvel Comics series *Ms. Marvel*, about a Pakistani-American girl from Jersey City that suddenly finds herself a superhero. Jersey City is experiencing a gentrification boom, driven by a development group called Hope Yards Development/Relocation Association**.



** Hey Marvel faithful! The acronym tells you all you need to know! - Smilin' Steve



The developers use *Ms. Marvel*'s image to promote "cleaning up" the city to rid it of "undesirables" to discredit her. It works; we also see tensions explode as the community is overrun by white, latte-sipping...wait, what's with the pink eyes?***



***Caused by mind-controlling nanobot-released nanobots provided by the developers...match - Scholarly Steve

Gentrification has gripped many cities in real life, including Jersey City, and has often priced immigrants and brown-skinned minorities out of neighborhoods where they have lived for decades, with little thought given to their communities. Kamala Khan is a major first - a Muslim-American, Pakistani-American superhero, and she sticks up for the place that she loves in the face of outside destruction.



But Wilson is also commenting on the insidiousness of this destruction, because, even without nanobots, so many just unthinkingly accept it. Who can argue with "revitalization" and "progress", after all? We've internalized these ideas so much that no nanobots are needed.



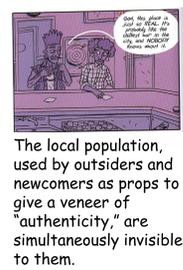
Btm Frdrs, by Ezra Clayton Daniels and Ben Passamore, takes a similarly symbolic approach to gentrification, in a genre that I didn't know existed: **GENTRIFICATION HORROR!**



Darla, a recent art school grad funded by her parents, moves to the South Side of Chicago (where she has family roots) in search of cheaper rents. She moves into an odd old industrial building that has been converted into apartments.



An older long-time resident gets evicted as the landlord seeks to increase the cachet of his becoming-trendy neighborhood. She's quite philosophical about it all.



Everyone has a part to play in the neighborhood's remaking, even though nobody sees themselves as blameworthy. Race, class, privilege, and belonging all figure into the narrative.



Turns out (spoiler alert), the building has at its heart a living monster, who feeds on the residents and their waste. It requires a human to operate it, but its operator can not fully control it. It's a monster driven by an insatiable hunger...



...and it's always looking for a new home...



Let's depart the land of metaphor now... Luciano Zago, a Swiss-born graphic designer who has lived in Williamsburg for 23 years, saw it transition from working-class neighborhood to hipster enclave to zone of luxury and wealth. Zago documents this change, attempting to capture some of the history and diverse cultures of the area...



He documents the beginnings of the outflow of creative types across the river from the East Village as an Old Testament tale, also capturing the obviousness the new population often had for the existing people of the neighborhood, and the tensions that emerged.



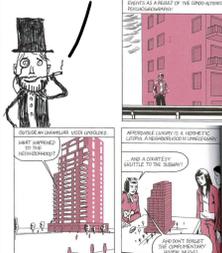
Now a new wave of gentrification is underway, with the conversion of the Domino Sugar plant, shut down after a brutal strike in 1999-2001, into condos. Zago depicts the community that used to exist around the plant, one that was gutted by the failure of the strike. Here and elsewhere, he wants to provide (as the back cover puts it) "conclusive proof that Williamsburg existed prior to the early aughts."



The erasure that Zago is working against is also the main theme of Tom Kaczynski's short comic "976 Square Feet", which addresses the deranging effects that gentrification can have as it is inflicted on neighborhoods. A couple moves back to the city after a stint in suburbia, and is faced with a new, mysterious project, a condo being built by a reclusive billionaire.



The condo project has psychological effects as the lived, day-to-day neighborhood gets replaced in people's minds by realtor-speak and luxury branding, utterly disconnected from the actual place.



...and the obliteration of the old neighborhood by "geographical amnesia" - not only is it gone, people forget that it ever existed.



The final two cartoonists we're looking at both address this geographical amnesia. In Ben Katchor's long-running strip "Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer", the main character's job is to go around documenting buildings and other spots.



Of all the works here, Katchor's is the hardest to capture in such a small space - his work acts through accretion. Any single strip seems, well, kinda head-scratching. But taken together, what emerges is elegiac reportage on a vanishing world, one that is threatened by hyper-development.



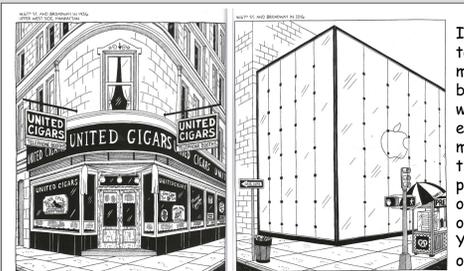
The thing is, most of the places are completely made up! And the other thing is: it doesn't matter! Katchor's work is about gentrification by not being about gentrification at all. It's about the New York of immigrant strivers and small entrepreneurs and somehow-still-there businesses, not absentee oligarchs. It's a New York of fine-grained historic character.



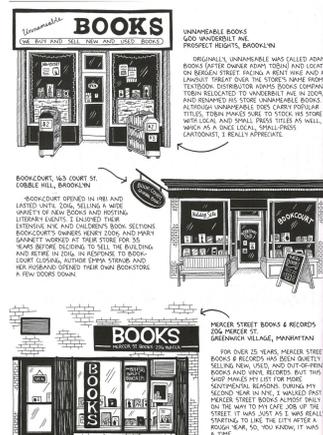
Katchor's core aesthetic is, I think, summed up in a strip called "The Committee For Architectural Neglect":



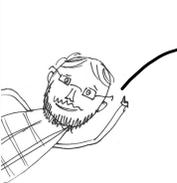
Julia Wertz, meanwhile, lived in Brooklyn for a decade, before being evicted so her landlord could charge more rent. *Tenements, Towers, and Trash*, a long love letter to New York based on years of exploring and detailed drawing. She gives us an unconventional history of the city through its buildings, then and now.



It's hard not to feel that much has been lost when examining many of these pairings. In others, the older New York hangs on.



Like Katchor, Wertz rarely directly writes about gentrification, though she does acknowledge her role in it when she moved to Brooklyn in search of cheap rent. But underlying her work is the same sort of love of the richness of the city, the unique neighborhoods, businesses, and buildings that are being corporatified and condo-ed into oblivion. It's a love letter, but also a warning.



Change is inevitable, but it needn't be oblivious to what exists. Current waves of gentrification are destructive of place and community. Cartoonists have been in a great position to witness this first-hand, and in their own diverse ways, are fighting for community, for place, and against geographical amnesia. Keep up the fight, because once the luxury condos arrive, it's too late!

Looks like I'm out of space - thanks for stopping by!