

The Mirror Project: A Portrait of Urban Inequality
by
Nolen Phya
Bachelors of Arts in Political Science, Columbia University,

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master in City Planning
at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Authored by: Nolen Phya
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
May 15th, 2024

Certified by: Janelle Knox-Hayes,
Professor of Economic Geography and Planning,
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

Accepted by: J. Phillip Thompson
Professor of Political Science and Urban Planning, MCP
Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

Photography has historically played a vital role in highlighting urban inequality, as seen in the work of Jacob Riis documenting late 19th-century New York City. Today, amidst ongoing gentrification, traditional mapping methods often fall short in capturing the lived experiences of communities. To address this, my thesis proposes using photography to document contemporary urban inequality in New York City. By engaging native or local New Yorker photographers and providing them with free black-and-white film rolls, the project aims to create an authentic archive of images reflecting the realities of gentrification. This approach not only offers a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon but also serves as a catalyst for empathy, dialogue, and action among policymakers, activists, and the broader public. Ultimately, the project seeks to empower communities and contribute to more equitable urban development.

Thesis Supervisor: Janelle Knox-Hayes

Title: Professor of Economic Geography and Planning

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1. Introduction

In the discourse on urban inequality, visual communication has emerged as a powerful tool for understanding and addressing complex social issues. The work of photographers such as Jacob Riis, who documented the squalor and struggle of late 19th-century New York City, remains iconic in highlighting the realities of inequality. Riis's photographs not only captured the harsh living conditions but also played a crucial role in advocating for social reform, including the enactment of tenement laws¹.

Today, as cities continue to grapple with issues of inequality, particularly through processes like gentrification, there is a need for new approaches to understanding and addressing these challenges. Gentrification, characterized by the influx of higher-wealth residents into working-class neighborhoods, often leads to the displacement of longstanding residents and exacerbates socio-economic disparities. In New York City, gentrification has become a defining feature of urban life, reshaping neighborhoods I know well such as Fort Greene and Crown Heights, fueling segregation and displacement.

While traditional urban planning tools, such as mapping, have been used to visualize and analyze gentrification, they often fail to capture the lived experiences and complexities of the phenomenon. Mapping, with its top-down approach, can overlook crucial nuances, such as the human element and the ways in which people interact with and experience urban spaces. This gap in understanding calls for alternative means of visual communication that can offer a more nuanced and empathetic perspective on urban inequality.

Photography presents itself as a promising medium for exploring urban inequality, particularly because of its appeal as an artistic and creative medium. By capturing images that depict the changing demographics and architecture and more of neighborhoods undergoing gentrification, photographers can provide insights into the social,

¹ Jacob A. Riis. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 1890.

economic, and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. Moreover, photography has the potential to evoke emotional responses and spark conversations that go beyond traditional data-driven analyses.

Building on historical precedents, such as the Farm Security Administration's photography project of the 1930s, and drawing inspiration from participatory action research models, my thesis proposes to use photography as a means of documenting and understanding urban inequality in New York City. By engaging native New Yorker photographers and providing them with free black-and-white film rolls, I aim to create a diverse and authentic archive of images that capture the realities of gentrification from the perspectives of those directly impacted by it.

The resulting collection of photographs will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, and activists seeking to address urban issues of the 21st century in the present and the future. By centering the voices and experiences of New Yorkers, the project aims to inspire empathy, dialogue, and action within communities and among a broader audience, including artists, urban planners, journalists, and policymakers. The process documented here can also serve as a useful guide for other researchers interested in using participatory photography as a tool for their projects. While this project centered on New York City, replicating it in another city is entirely possible with the right conditions. In the same way this project contributes to the revival of film photography as a medium, it also contributes to the revival of its impact on our perception of the world.

In conclusion, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how photography can be utilized as a tool for social change and understanding in the context of urban inequality. By documenting the visual manifestations of displacement in New York City, the project aims to shed light on the complexities of the phenomenon and foster meaningful dialogue and action towards more equitable urban development.

2. Literature Review

The history of photography as a tool for catalyzing change in

cities is long and extensive. For New York City in particular, it's impossible to bring up the topic without mentioning photographer Jacob Riis and his book *How the Other Half Lives*. Released in 1890 during the gilded age in America, the book galvanized people and then politicians to understand the conditions faced by the urban poor of NYC at the time and take action. Using the novel at the time technology of photography, he was able to stimulate some of NYC's first tenement laws. My project takes a lot of spiritual inspiration from Jacob Riis as well as other visual researchers like Roy DeCarava², Lewis Hine³ and Helen Levitt's⁴.

A more contemporary photography project framework for my work to follow is the PhotoVoice framework. PhotoVoice was started from the academic work of Wang & Burris in 1997⁵. It has evolved into a larger methodology for researchers interested in asking questions and causing good trouble in society through photography.

My introduction to PhotoVoice and its application emerged from a lecture from Dr. Tawanna Dillahunt who had used the framework for their own project in Detroit⁶. Collaborating with mid-aged adults to seniors, the project required "everyday noticing" in negotiating and maintaining their intricate and interdependent relations with human, non-human animals, plants, spaces, and material things, through which a multi- plicity of meaning and senses of safety are produced and achieved. Everyday noticing, as simultaneously a survival skill and a more- than-human care act, is situated in residents' lived materialities, while also serving as a site for critiquing the reductive and exclu- sionary vision embedded in large-scale surveillance infrastructures. By proposing an epistemological shift from surveillance-as-safety to safety-through-noticing, the project also created space for the community to think on how to achieve those ends. My project will follow a similar trajectory by creating points of data that explains, critiques or comments on the forces creating the

² Kennedy, Randy. "Roy DeCarava, Harlem Insider Who Photographed Ordinary Life, Dies at 89." *The New York Times*, October 29, 2009, sec. Arts.

³ National Archives. "Teaching With Documents: Photographs of Lewis Hine: Documentation of Child Labor," August 15, 2016.

⁴ "Helen Levitt - Artists - Laurence Miller Gallery." Accessed May 8, 2024.

⁵ Wang C and Burris MA. "Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment." *Health Education Behavior*, June 24, 1997.

⁶ Alex Jiahong Lu et al. "Shifting from Surveillance-as-Safety to Safety-through-Noticing: A Photovoice Study with Eastside Detroit Residents," n.d.

current middle & low income affordability crisis in NYC while also providing space to think of solutions and alternatives.

3. Methodology

As a participatory photography study, there are a lot of moving parts and people to this project. To help clarify the process of organizing all the elements, you can refer to the timeline table below. The project can be broken down into 4 general stages:

1. *Workshop & Film Distribution*
2. *Field Work & Exploration*
3. *Development & Printing*
4. *Exhibition & Discussion*

MONTH	February	March	April	May
AGENDA ITEM	<p>Develop project concept and materials (mapping, website, printing resources, social copy and graphics)</p> <p>Launch website to recruit photographers</p> <p>Finalize selection of photographers</p>	<p>Host first workshop & meet up</p> <p>Collect any completed film rolls for processing (if they haven't been left at distribution site)</p> <p>Begin developing film that has been collected & creating prints at MIT</p>	<p>Host 2nd workshop & meet up</p> <p>Collect any completed film rolls for processing (if they haven't been left at distribution site)</p> <p>Continue developing film and making prints at MIT</p> <p>Finalize details for final community workshop & gallery session</p>	<p>Finalize written thesis document</p> <p>Prepare photographs for printing and placement in a book.</p> <p>Plan potential final community workshop & gallery session</p>

Table 1: Mirror Project Draft Timeline

The NYC Displacement Risk Index:

Source: NYC Department of City Planning and the Department of Housing, Preservation & Development

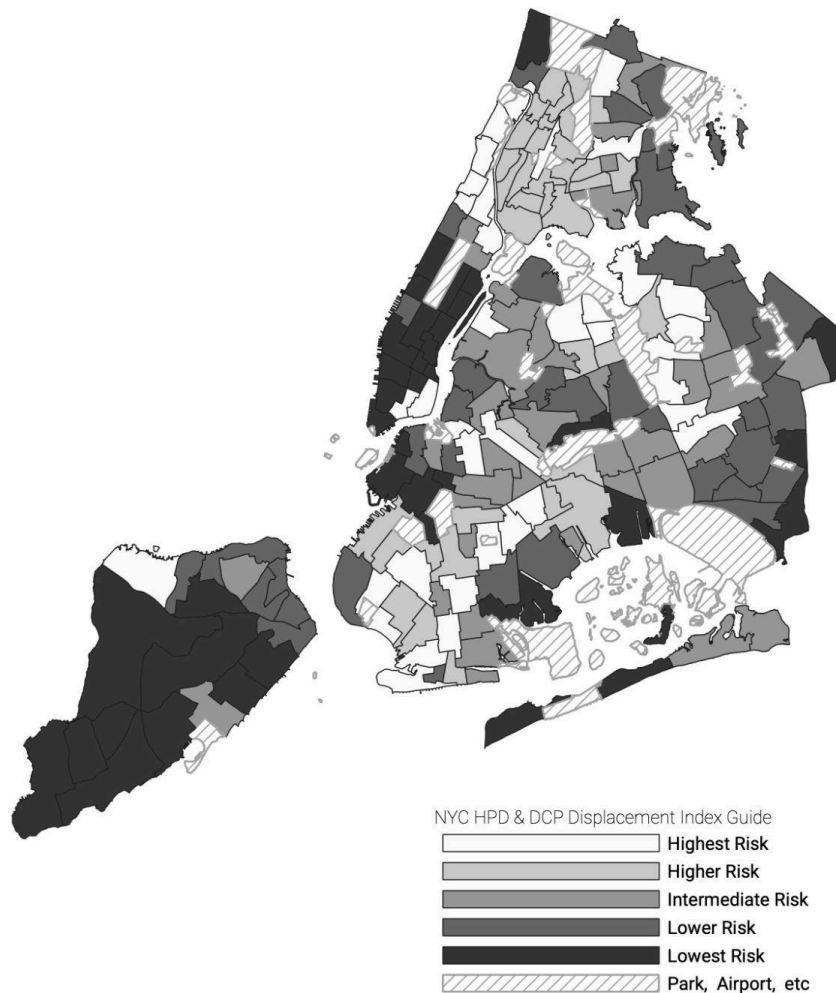


Figure 1.0: Map of the NYC Displacement Risk Index: Please note that my legend for the map differs from the official NYC legend in that the lighter shaded areas represent the highest risk and the darkest areas represent the lowest risk. This is an intentional choice to reverse the psychology that associates lower social and economic status with darkness. All other maps in this project follow the same style

3.1 Workshop & Film Distribution: In the 1st stage, the workshop stage, photographers were invited to gather for a formal introduction to the project and each other. To create an environment of collaboration not just among the co-researchers but also other existing creatives in the city, we tried a workshop introduction at Photodom NYC, a Black owned photography shop & studio located in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Photographers were recruited through word of mouth and Instagram, a popular place for photographers to share work. In total there were 11 photographers involved in the workshop.

At this point, a few key concepts were introduced, most importantly the maps that photographers would use to guide them in their work. The maps selected to guide this project come from NYC's Department of City Planning and Housing, Preservation & Development. These maps are part of the [Displacement Risk Map which is itself a subsidiary project of the Equitable Development Data Explorer](#)⁷.

Created through Local Law 78 of 2021 through the City Council, the map illustrates the level of displacement risk in different neighborhoods as compared to each other. Displacement refers to the involuntary movement of an individual or family from their home or neighborhood, whether as the result of eviction, unaffordable housing costs, or poor-quality housing. There are many factors that may contribute to residents' risk of displacement, though there is no standard methodology for how to measure it. Building on data points listed in Local Law 78 of 2021, DCP and HPD identified a complete set of data points and a methodology to combine the data points into an index based on research, precedents from other cities, and conversations with stakeholders. Three major subindexes make up the displacement index including population vulnerability, housing conditions and market pressure.

After being introduced to the map in 4x different ways (displacement, population vulnerability, housing conditions & market pressure) the photographers were tasked with making their own maps to either counter or confirm what the city has created. They had creative freedom to express this on blank maps of the NYC Neighborhood

⁷ NYC Department of City Planning and NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development. "NYC Displacement Risk Map." 2024.

Tabulation Areas used in the NYC Displacement Index. These maps were “hypotheses” that they then explore with the photographs (data points) they take in the field.

Initially in coming up with this project, I thought of making my own displacement index. However, after doing more research and seeing the map created by NYC HPD and DCP, I realized that the value of my research lies not in recreating what others have done in another way, but adding a fresh perspective and lens to that work. The analysis that this project will rely on will be very qualitative, largely because the main tool of analysis is the camera. However, at the same time, the volume of photos this project will produce can also be used for more detailed quantitative analysis.



Photographers making maps at Photodom for Workshop #1

3. 2 Field Work & Exploration: Once given film and instructions at the first workshop, participatory photographers were free to go wherever they wanted to collect data. To document results from the field in post production, photographers were instructed to take a photo with a smartphone of every location they shoot.

To train photographers on the process for the project, we went on a group photo walk around Cypress Hills/City Line, Brooklyn. The walk was a chance to discuss the urban planning concepts at the heart of the project as well as give feedback, instruction and assistance on any photography. The area was chosen as a photowalk location because of the area's high displacement risk and proximity to Photodom.

Photography is an invasive art. Much of what the photographer documents with their camera on the street is technically public, but it's also often the private moments people have in that space that make a good photograph. Balancing the need to gather research while respecting people's privacy is basic to all research, and photography is no different. As such, I used the well established PhotoVoice framework to guide photographers on the ethics of creating art in public spaces. Some key principles we went over included consent, choice and the ethics around photographing minors.

3. 3 Development & Printing: Once photographers finished shooting through a roll of film, they were instructed to drop off their photos in a shared google drive folder. From there I was able to collect photos and prepare them for any printing. To help guide my analysis and final presentation, I asked each photographer to pick out four photos for me to highlight. For each of these photos, I asked the researchers to write a 300 words or less description for each.

3. 4 Exhibition & Discussion: The last and final stage of the project involved presenting the work of the researchers in a way that links back to the original question of how photography can be used to better understand urban inequality. Letting the photos that the researchers capture sit in a document formatted in a traditional academic context is not the best way to present the work and experiment with using the medium to communicate to policymakers, planners, artists and other

professionals involved in the design of the built environment.

To that end, the presentation of the work beyond this document involves a web archive and photomap. The web archive is a useful way of looking at all the photos researchers captured during the project while the map is a useful way of examining that material with specific filters. These filters are limited but not exclusive to the researcher that took the photo, the neighborhood in which the photo was taken and overlapping data coming from the HPD/DCP Displacement Index Map visible in appendix section 7.1.

4. Mapping & Photography

Below are the names of the photographers recruited for this project that completed the research expectations plus a chart of their relative experience with the city and photography. Each photographer was introduced to the project through word of mouth or Instagram solicitation. Some of them are friends of myself, some of them are friends of friends I know in the creative world within NYC. Each of them were asked to fill out a short survey asking about their experience with photography and their relationship to New York City before being accepted into the project. I prioritized photographers from the area or who have been living in the city for a good number of years to ensure a perspective of locality was represented.

Name	Hometown?	Do you have a film camera currently?	Photography Experience?	Social Media?
Alexander Levers	NYC	Yes	1-3 years	anylogue
Andres Paulino	NYC	Yes	3-5 years	isandres66/
Tyler Simnick	Indianapolis	Yes	5-10 years	@tylersimnick
Shreya Sahai	Delhi	Yes	10+ years	@sahaiwithani

Table 2: Table of Responses from the Mirror Project Application Survey⁸

Because the only free component of this project was film, not cameras, every photographer involved in the project brought their own tool to the job. These ranged from high end SLRs to small but mighty point and

⁸ Nolen Phya. "Mirror Project Application Responses." Spreadsheet, n.d.

shoots. Generally every photographer had quite a bit of experience, but not necessarily in film, an intentional design to slow photographers down. The use of film photography was also intentional so that photographers could create images that look, feel and emulate the images of similar photographic survey efforts of the past. The idea behind this is to help put contemporary images in better conversation with what archival imagery of cities exists today. There is a dedicated effort to document cities through the use of panoramic technology like Google Street maps, but more often than not, the quality of the images from these sites pales in comparison to photographs from the 20th century to early 2000s. Despite being older, film often carries more detail and natural artistic quality than digital cameras. Besides the quality of film, we also used it because the negatives can be stored for quite a long time (1,000 years to be exact⁹), making them a powerful archival medium.



The Mirror Project photographers, minus a few faces.

On the following pages are the maps of each photographer's work as well as a sample of their most relevant work. Each photographer was asked to select three to four photographs to include in this document.

⁹ Kodak Digitizing. "How Long Do Photo Negatives Last?" Accessed May 8, 2024.

Mapping the Mirror Project:

Displacement Index:
NYC DCP & HPD

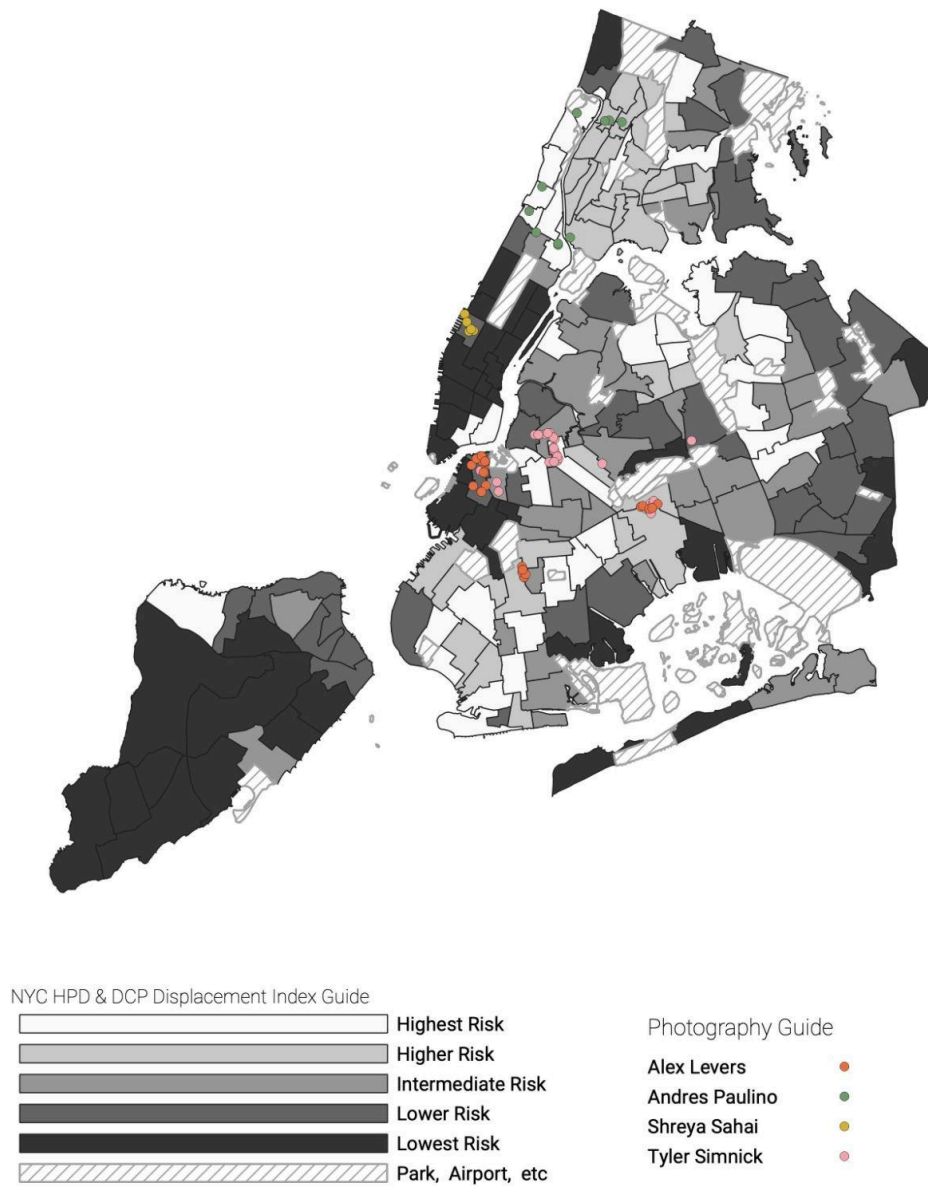
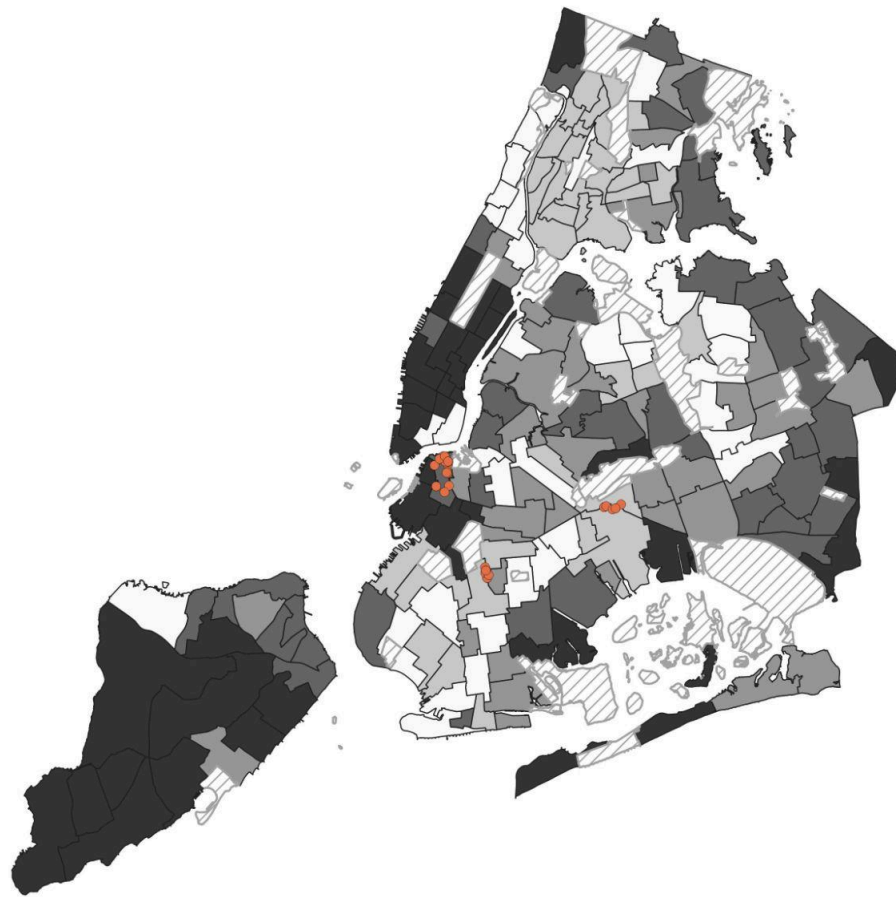


Figure 2: Mapping the Mirror Project - A Map of Photos Taken for the Project

Alex Levers: DUMBO & Flatbush

Displacement Index:
NYC DCP & HPD



Photography



NYC HPD & DCP Displacement Index Guide

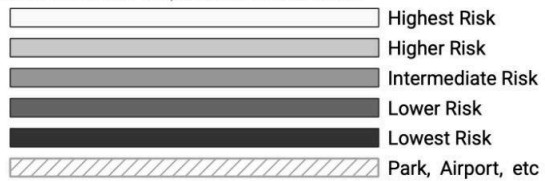
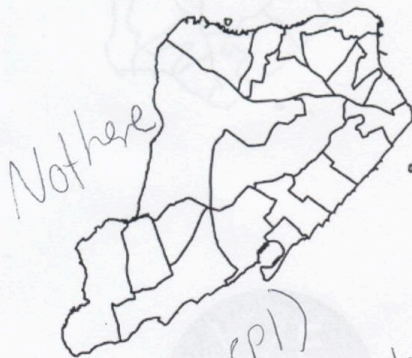


Figure 3.0: Mapping the Mirror Project - Alex Levers' Photographs



Alex L.



(Mafia (PI))
(Paper bag test as Key...?)

All The areas in BK
w/ west indians (Black & Latin)
Flatbush, Boro Park, 71st
Bedstuy, Crown heights

Figure 3.1: Alex Lever's Map of Displacement Risk

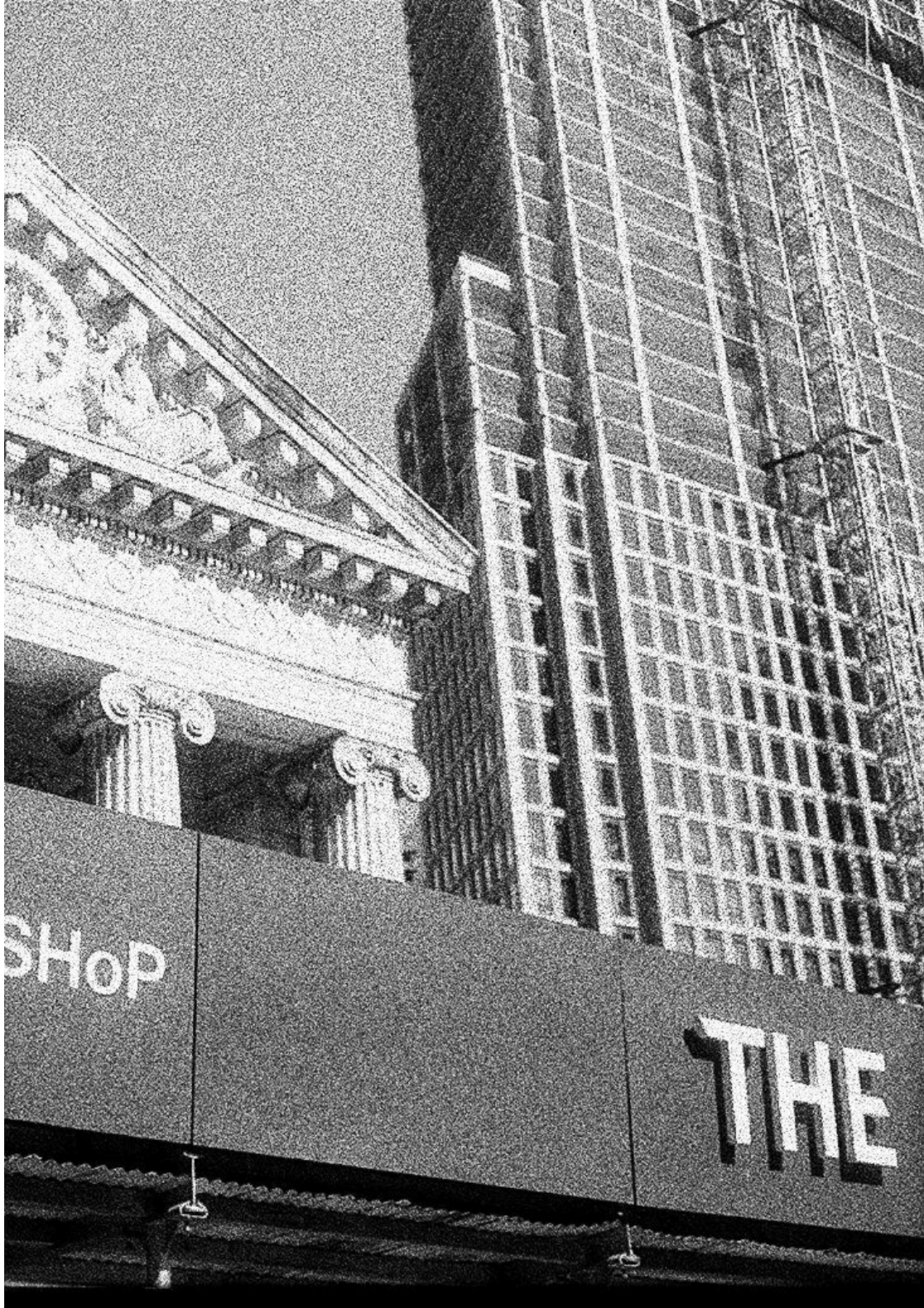


Figure 3.2: The Dime Savings Bank with new high rises in the back, Downtown Brooklyn: The Dime Savings Bank is one of the oldest buildings in downtown Brooklyn. Recently a developer bought its air rights to construct huge towers overhead.



Figure 3.3: Flatbush Reformed Church, Brooklyn: Flatbush Reformed Church is one of the oldest institutions in NYC. In the 1970s, white Jewish families fled Flatbush en masse, starting a Black Caribbean demographic switch.



Figure 3.4: Hard Hats, Gold & Tillary Street, Brooklyn: Staff for a development project wait on the street.



Figure 3.5: Big Dig, State St & Boerum Pl, Brooklyn: Construction equipment sits idle at development site

Andres Paulino: The Bronx & Harlem

Displacement Index:
NYC DCP & HPD

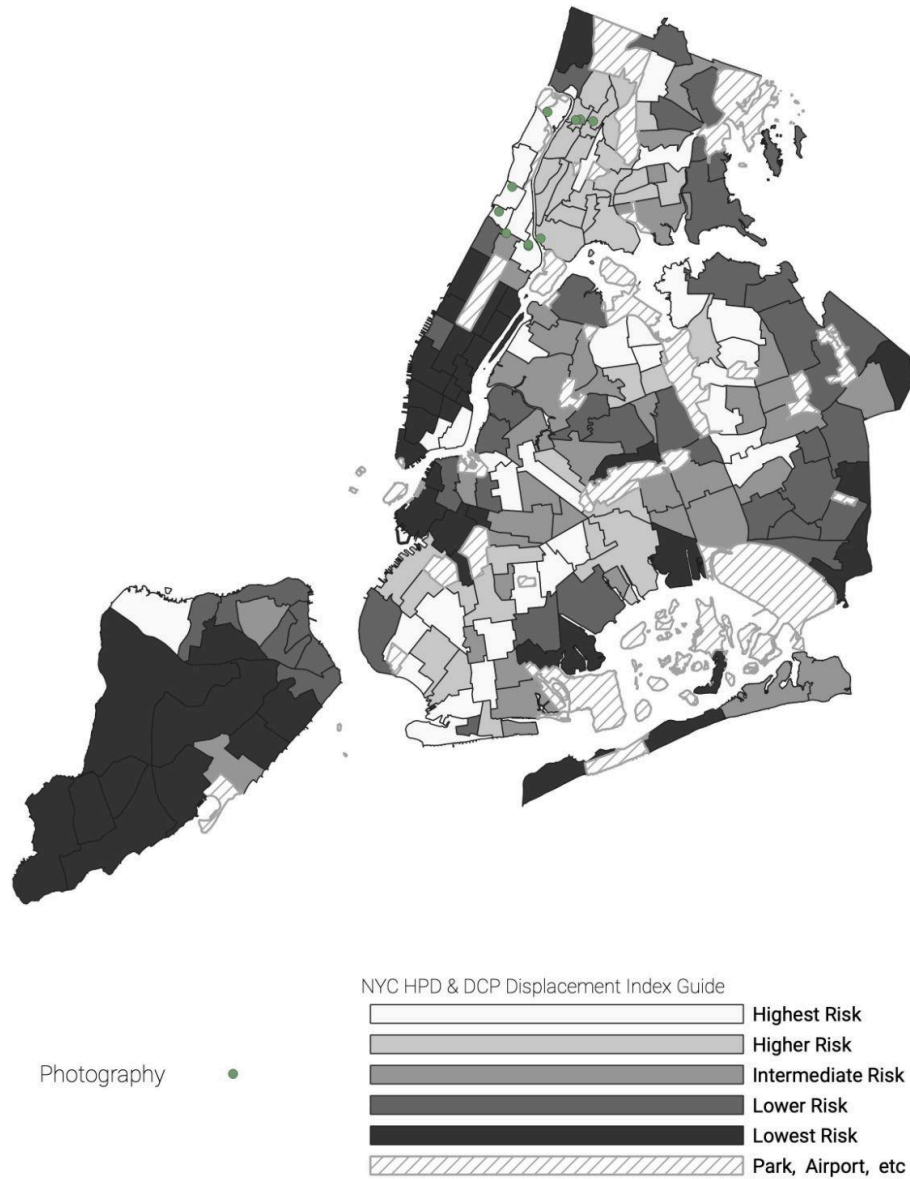


Figure 4.0: Mapping the Mirror Project - Andres Paulino's Photography

Andres Paulino

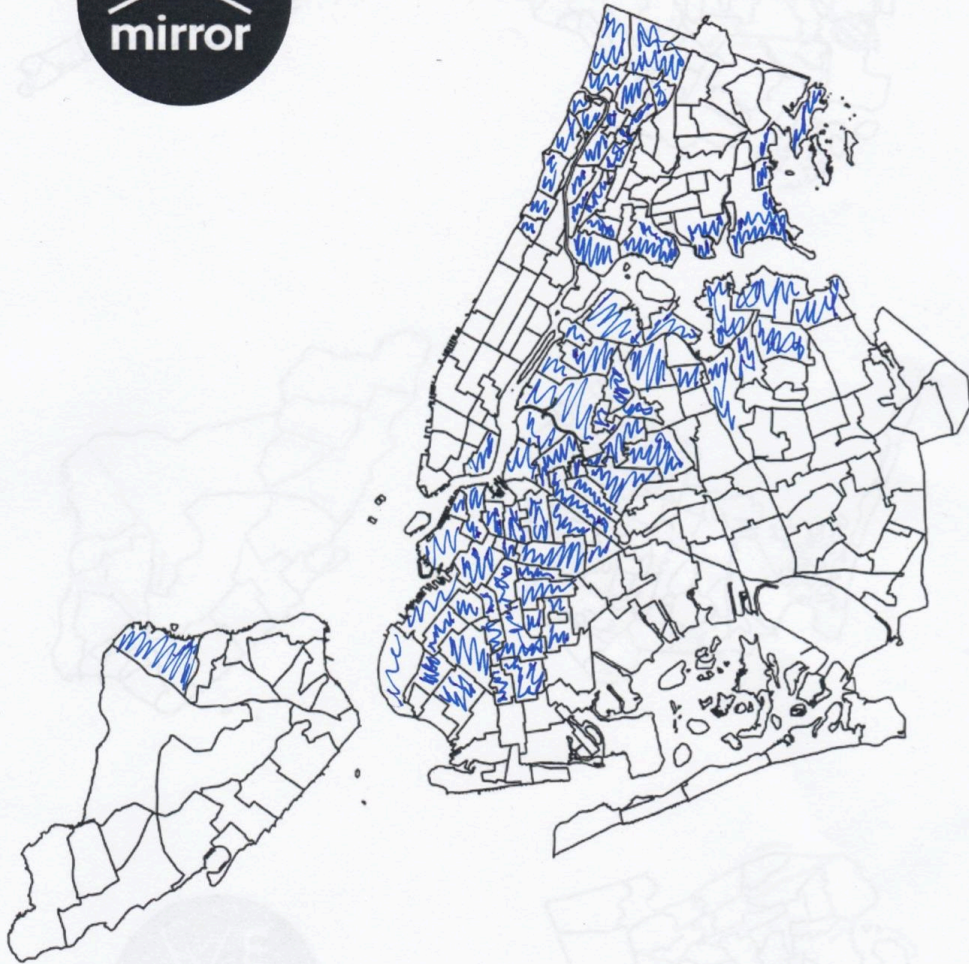


Figure 4.1: Andres Paulino's Map of Displacement Risk



Figure 4.2: 125th St & Lexington looking at the Taino Towers: East Harlem is often remarked to feel different than West Harlem due to the large concentration of subsidized housing. During the Robert Moses era, Black neighborhoods were intentionally packed with government projects.



Figure 4.3: Looking at the Apollo Theater looking at highrise development behind: The Apollo Theater is an iconic Black artistic space open for over 110 years continuously.



Figure 4.4: Looking South on the 125th 1 Train Platform: South of 125th Street and Broadway is Columbia University, one of the largest landowners and developers in the city.

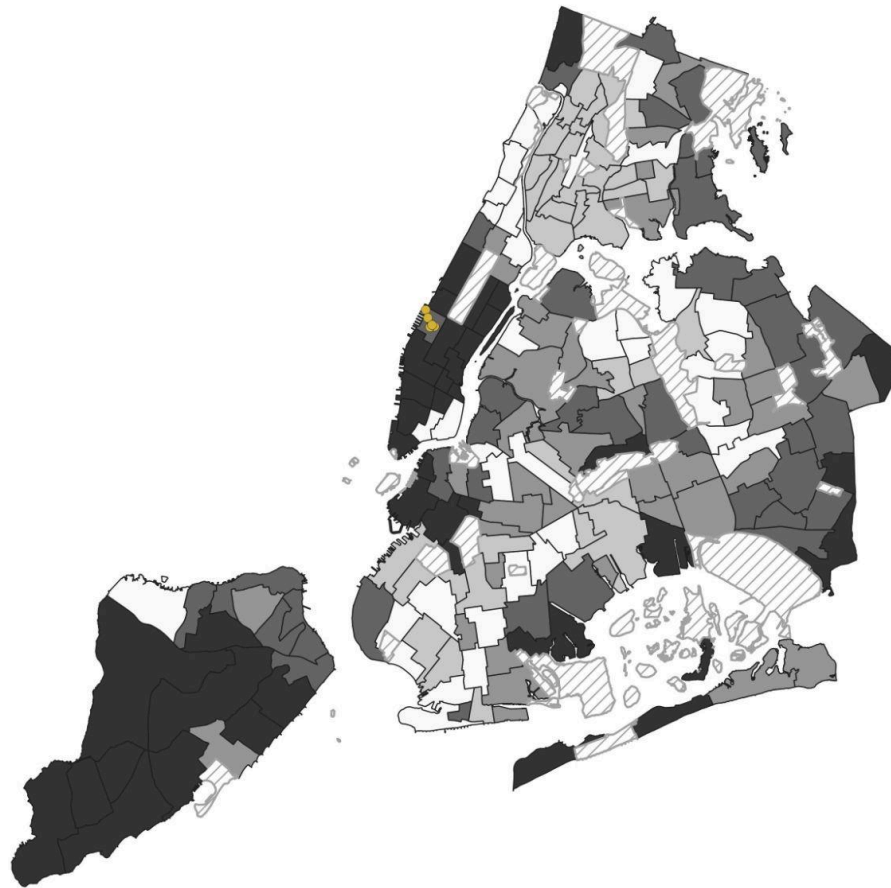


Figure 4.5: Fordham Road and Valentine Avenue: Fast food is nothing new to NYC, but oftentimes the growth of trendy chains like Chick-Fil-A can speak to the stages of gentrification.

Tyler Simnick

Bushwick to Williamsburg & More

Displacement Index:
NYC DCP & HPD



NYC HPD & DCP Displacement Index Guide

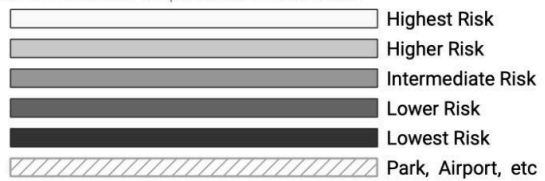


Figure 5.0: Tyler Simnick's Map of Displacement Risk

Tyler Simnick

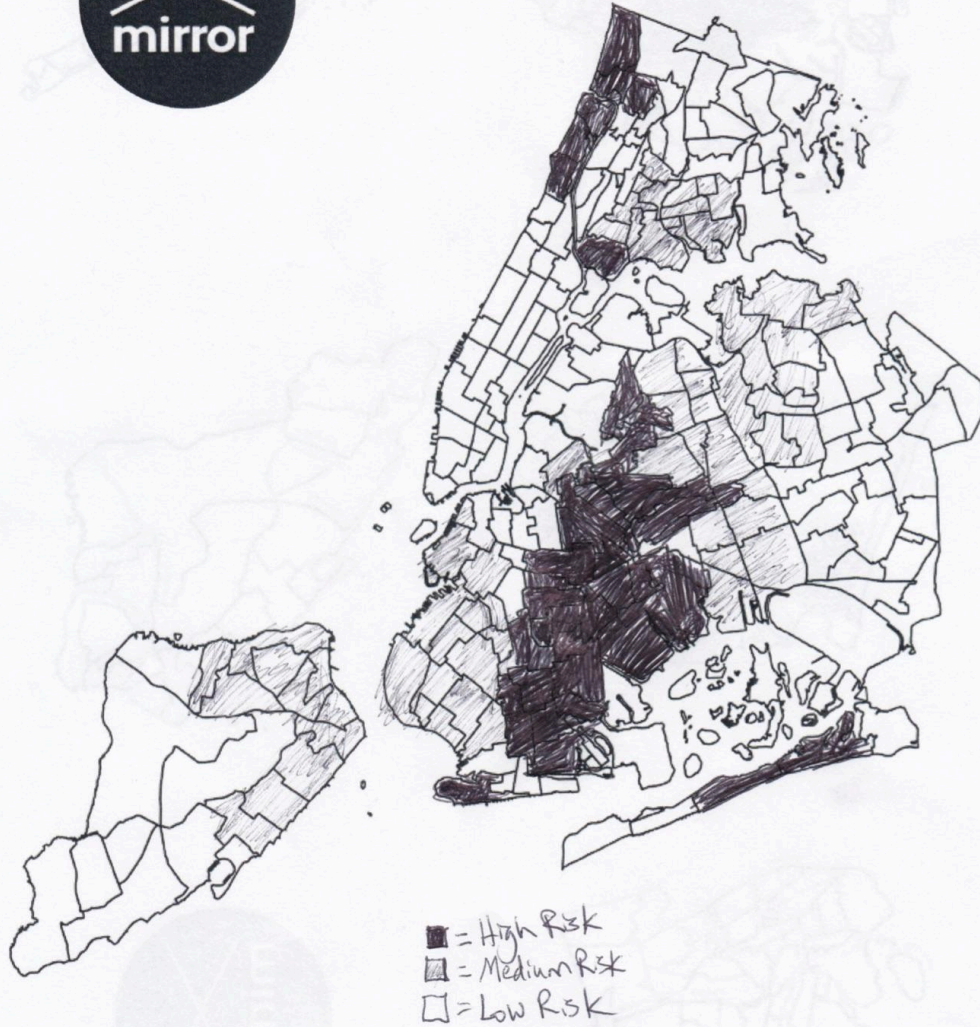


Figure 5.1: Tyler Simnick's Map of Displacement Risk



Figure 5.2: Tyler Simnick's Map of Displacement Risk (cont.)



Figure 5.3: Struggling Kellogg's Diner on Metropolitan Ave, Brooklyn: Kellogg's Diner had been operating in Brooklyn since 1973.



Figure 5.4: A new apartment complex on Bushwick and Metropolitan Ave, Brooklyn: Up until 2022 this site was an empty lot. Pre-2018 it was a Shell gas station.



Figure 5.5: Scozzari Bakery, a “prop” sign for a film production, Fort Greene: One of the oldest Black neighborhoods in the country, Fort Greene is also one of the most gentrified today.



Figure 5.6: Towing Lot, Liberty and Montauk Ave: Vehicle service shops & depots are common by Atlantic Avenue where this was taken. Atlantic Avenue is a major car thoroughfare widened by Robert Moses.

Shreya Sahai

Hell's Kitchen

Displacement Index:
NYC DCP & HPD

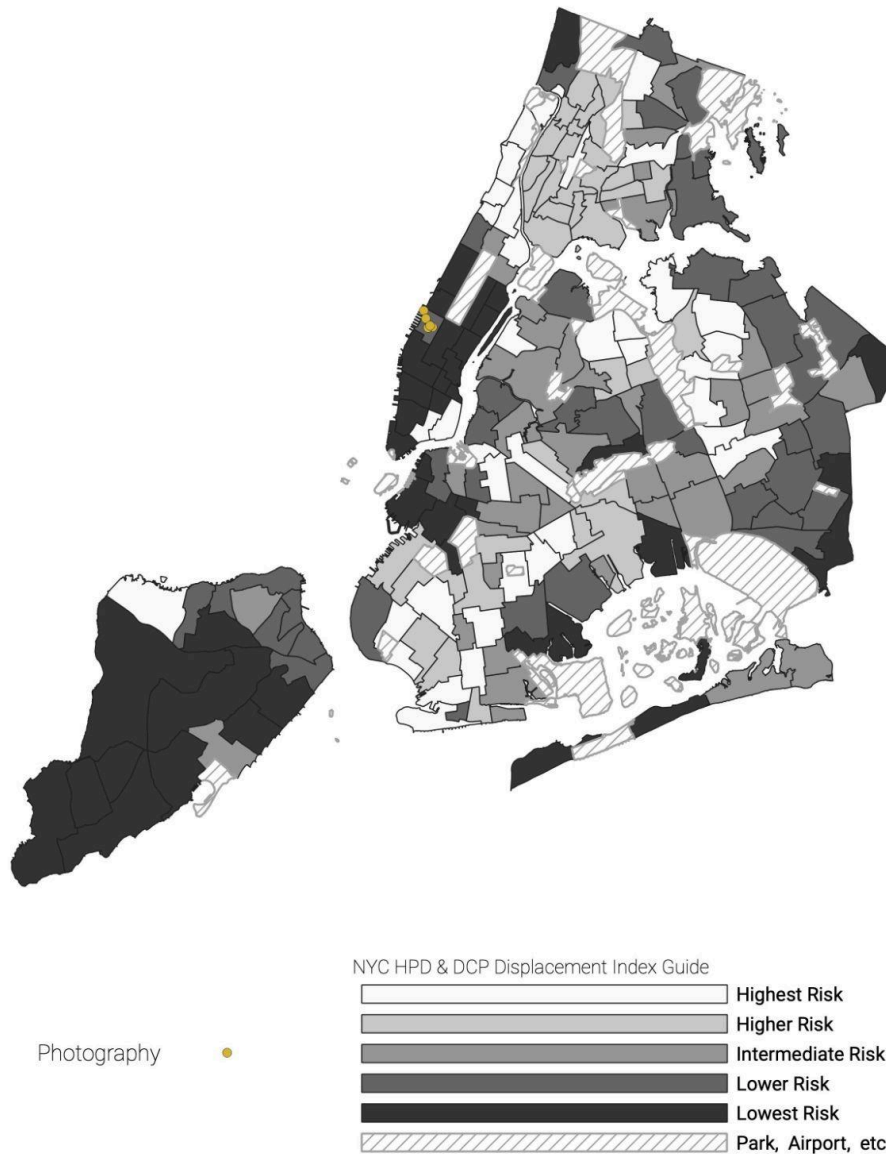


Figure 6.0: Mapping the Mirror Project - Shreya Sahai's Photography

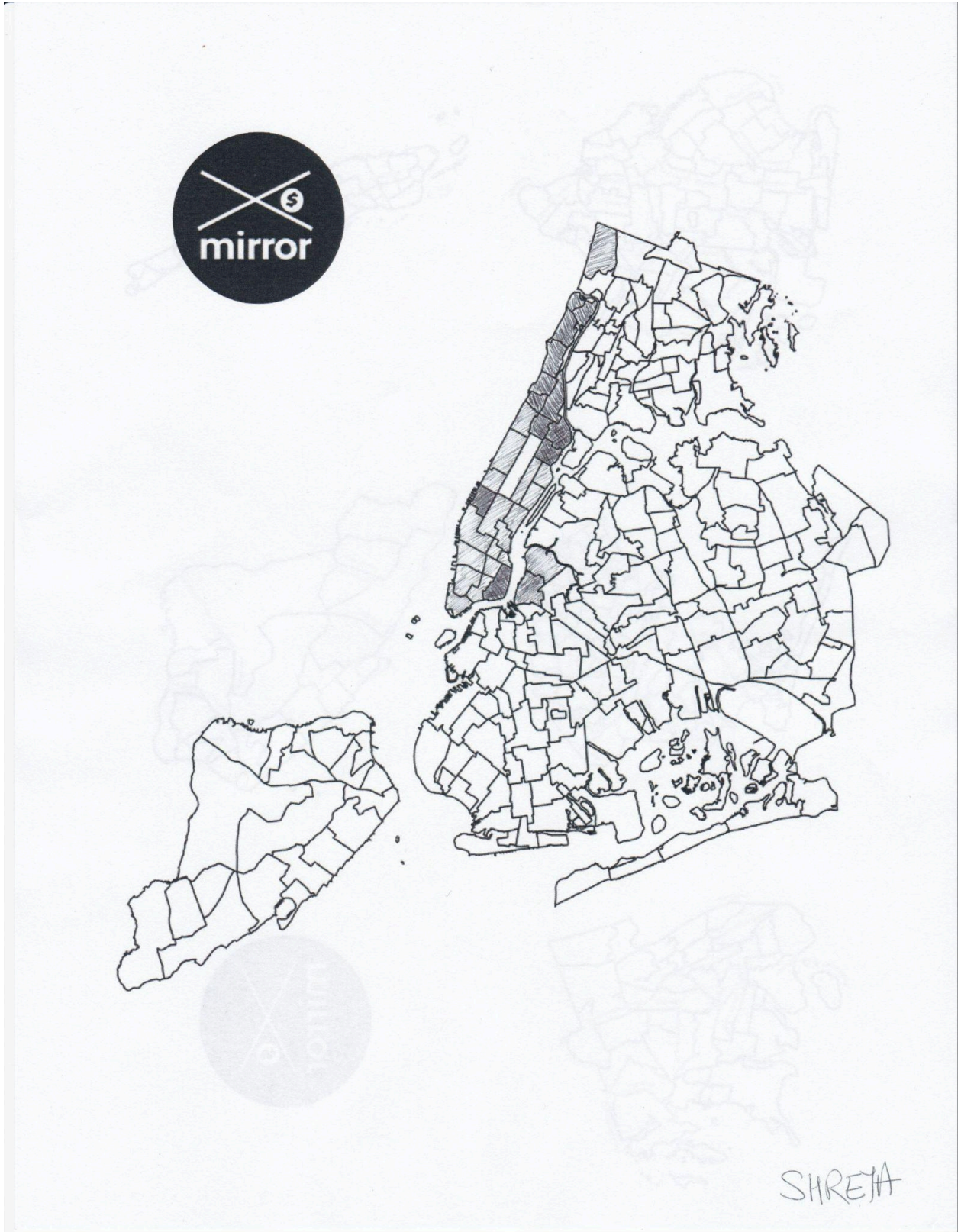


Figure 6.1: Shreya Sahai's Map of Displacement Risk



Figure 6.2: Jumpshot, Hell's Kitchen: Basketball courts are lifeblood for kids in a city where play space is often increasingly a premium to pay for.



Figure 6.3: Row homes with high rises in the distance, 49th St and 9th Ave: Hell's Kitchen is unique for its proximity to midtown Manhattan but lowrise feel.



Figure 6.4: Hell's Kitchen Park Basketball Courts: For a neighborhood so close to midtown Manhattan, Hell's Kitchen has quite a few recreational facilities.



Figure 6.5: Lamp Post, Pier 96 at Hudson River Park: Many of NYC's piers lay abandoned through the end of the 20th century. Redevelopment in the city has focused a lot on revitalizing these spaces.

5. Analysis & Discussion

Across the photographers there were a total of four photographers who managed to turn in 71 photographs to be geotagged in time for the project's spring closure. Among each photographer there was a general trend of sticking to a few areas around the city, a reflection of where they live, work and spend free time. Through each photographer a unique sense of exactly what "displacement" looks like in each neighborhood began to form that is visible in the work they produced. Below is a breakdown of each photographer's work as well as the context behind each.

5.1 Alex Levers:

Alex's approach to photography is heavily influenced by their origins as a native New Yorker. In their own words, here's what they've said about their relationship to the city:

I'm a native New Yorker. I was born in Flatbush, Brooklyn to two Jamaican parents. I grew up in Flatbush, and went to school on the Upper East Side - quite the contrast in wealth concentration. I've always been acutely aware of wealth imbalances in the city, but also that the levels of community and a sense of identity were also pretty different in the differing New York societies that I grew up in.

After going to high school and college in California, then coming back to the city and currently residing in Jersey city. I've got a pretty unique set of lenses through which I experience the city.

You can very clearly see how Alex's photography is framed via his native background by the areas he chooses to photograph; Alex mostly captured parts of Flatbush, Downtown Brooklyn and City Line/Cypress Hills.

His photography style is influenced by his use of 35mm SLR cameras and rangefinder point and shoots, as evidenced by his shots that capture details both of architecture but humans too. This is evidenced in the photo he took for figure 3.2 of the interior of Flatbush Reformed Church during a session in service. Although it's easy to think of

churches in Flatbush as mostly Black space, the Flatbush Reformed Church is actually one of the oldest churches in New York City, built to the order of Peter Stuyvesant, the first official mayor of the city in 1654¹⁰. This church is a reflection of how institutions remain in community despite demographic change. The photo Alex took is a particular snapshot, but another photo from 1949 shows another, whiter reality. Comparing these two photos, the photo Alex took suddenly emerges as a powerful marker of what community looks like amidst an ongoing demographic shift.



Figure 7.0: Girls in Sunday School Parade. Al Lambert for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1949¹¹

5.2 Andres Paulino:

¹⁰ Flatbush History. "The Dutch Reformed Church: OG Flatbush Landmark," January 20, 2020.

¹¹ Al Lambert and Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Girls in Sunday School Parade. 1949.

Andres' approach to photography is shaped by their life growing up in Uptown. In their application for the project, Andres described their relationship with the city as, "A native New Yorker that's witnessing the rampant gentrification of neighborhoods."

Something Andres looked at with their photography that was different from maybe other photographers was a focus on neighborhoods bordering a river or the ocean. This was evident in figure 3.1, the map he made for the first workshop of the project. *Figure 4.2, "125th St & Lexington looking at the Taino Towers"*, speaks to his perspective in the maps he made quite a bit. The area is currently undergoing heavy redevelopment, and you only need to look at old photos to tell. Less than years ago, the site was occupied by a Pathmark and Rainbow – both staples of affordable grocery shopping and clothing in places like New York City



Figure 7.1: The old Pathmark & Rainbow on 125th Street and Lexington.¹²

¹² Harlem World Magazine. "Harlem Developer Moves To Demolish The Former Pathmark." November 3, 2016.

However, due to shifting real estate pressures as well as a city approved rezoning of East Harlem in 2017¹³, the Pathmark and Rainbow were part of a redevelopment spree that saw the site bulldozed into its current state Andres captured.

After a failed plan to turn it into a corporate office tower, the developer that owns the property currently has shifted to turning the site into housing, some of which will be affordable. Despite this development, the lot that has been sitting empty for a few years no doubt represents the stress being placed on the community of East Harlem. Until very recently there were few grocery stores within a 5-10 minute walk within the 125th Street & Lex train stop, that is until a developer down the street on 3rd Avenue put up a building with a food bazaar. This tale of building turnover to demolition reflects how even with the promise of something better, community can suffer in the intermission. What if instead of letting the lot sit empty, the developer opened it up for a flea market place? This question and more are hypotheticals Andres photograph and the rest of his work embody.

5.3 Tyler Simnick

One of two non-native New Yorkers who were able to submit photos for the project, Tyler Simnick's approach to photography is shaped by his perspective of a "naturalized" New Yorker. In his own words, he describes his relationship with the city:

"I moved to NYC in the fall of 2016 to pursue a career in publishing and have been here ever since. I'm originally from Indianapolis, IN. I first lived in Crown Heights, one apartment by Franklin Avenue and another by Kingston Avenue. I watched the neighborhood change during my time there and was priced out of where I was. I now live in Ocean Hill and see similar things happening. My partner is a native New Yorker and my experience with her and her memories and observations of how the city has changed is also an inspiration. As someone who firmly falls into the transplant category, I'm interested in the ways gentrification tends to eat its own eventually. I also have a passion for documenting urban

¹³ "East Harlem Adopted Zoning Map." NYC Department of Planning, November 11, 2017.

environments, specifically those elements that help to define a sense of place against the growing trend of contemporary urban homogeneity. " One of Tyler's photos in particular, Figure 5.3, "*Struggling Kellogg's Diner on Metropolitan Ave* " reflects what he describes as gentrification eating "its own ". The photo depicts Kellogg's Diner, a late night food institution in Brooklyn for around 100 years¹⁴. Based on the mapping of Tyler's photographs, he took quite a few photos around this area in general which most would call Williamsburg. Diners are a staple of New York City culture and in the past were ubiquitous both in reality and in media (think *Seinfeld*). They're a key part of the fabric that makes up New York City's 24/7 culture.

In one of our workshops, Andres and Tyler reflected how interest in moving to a place like New York City is partly driven by what they described as the media's focus on diners, delis, destinations and more. Kellogs, which has been open since 1928, is a fine example of that. Up until 2022, the restaurant was a traditional Greek family diner, but now it's been bought and is being respun into a Tex-Mex bistro. Because of historic designations of the building itself, the facade won't be changing anytime soon while the food does. This switch up in the programming reflects a larger metaphor in the problem of gentrification in which the facade of the city remains the same but the the insides wither away.

5.4 Shreya Sahai

Shreya Sahai was the other non-native New Yorker involved in the project. As a result of that identity, they took a highly specific approach to their photography. They mostly trained their camera on where they knew best: Hell's Kitchen. This was reflected heavily already in their responses about their relationship with New York City. In their own words:

"I moved here from Delhi, India, in September 2021 for school.

I thought I was prepared for the city because 1. I am from a 'big city' and 2. I've grown up watching shows and movies set in NYC, but nothing

¹⁴ Luke Fortney. "Brooklyn's Iconic Kellogg's Diner Is Getting a Revival Under New Owners," November 28, 2023.

could have prepared me for this. On most days, life in the Big Apple seems like the culmination of scenes that don't make it into said shows and movies – waiting forever for the metro, expensive cabs, no price tags in too many stores and delis, random acts of connection and violence.

My first home was a women's hostel in Midtown. I figured it would be better to try to find a place in person because apartment-hunting online sitting in Delhi seemed like an impossible task – especially given the city's reputation. I had planned to shift during my winter break, but I ended up staying for about a year, when I was evicted. It was a matchbox-sized single occupancy room, but it was a gorgeous building on 34th street, it was Manhattan, I felt safe walking home at night, and it was 25 minutes from school.

I was devastated when I had to move, and right the beginning of my second year of school to boot. Despite my best efforts, I could not find anything in my meager unemployed international student budget that ticked all the aforementioned boxes, so I once again found myself at another women's hostel – this one in Hell's Kitchen. I wasn't happy about it. It was somehow both my last and only choice. I once again planned to move during my winter break, but I ended up doing my final long-term documentary photo project for school at the hostel. I then planned to move out after graduation, but I realized that I literally could not afford to move out until I got a job – and that's been a whole other nightmare.

It's not the worst life. I'm still working on my project. The connectivity is fantastic. There are cheap bars and restaurants all around us and a Target down the street. I love the neighborhood. The lack of freedom to host my friends or family or classmates or potential clients (as a photographer) still hurts, but not as much as the rent in this city. Once my lease expires, something tells me I'll find myself in front of yet another hostel.”

Shreya's photography mirrored her love of Hell's Kitchen through their exclusive focus on the neighborhood. They spent a lot of time documenting parks spaces, which you can see in Figure 6.2, “Jumpshot,

Hell's Kitchen" and Figure 6.4, "*Hell's Kitchen Park Basketball Courts*". The focus on features of the neighborhood like these speak maybe to what makes Hell's Kitchen such an attractive neighborhood to move to despite its proximity to the hostile highrises of midtown Manhattan.

As an individual reflecting on potential displacement themselves while involved in the project, Shreya's eye on the street is unique. Combined with the fact that they are the newest to the city out of all the photographers, their work got me interested in how this project could have played out had we been more specific about categorizing identity. This was intentionally not done here to let the photographs speak for themselves more than the artist, but a potential deviation of this project could compare what native New Yorkers see as themes of displacement versus newcomers.'

5.5 Overview

Overall there are three key themes that emerge from the photographs collected:

1. *Residential Exclusion*
2. *Cultural Commodification and Erasure*
3. *Structural Disinvestment and Deprivation*

Residential Exclusion speaks to the number of photographs I found that focused on feelings of exclusion from new development. To me this spoke heavily to what many call the failure of the Voluntary and Mandatory Inclusionary Housing policies that Mayors Bloomberg and DeDeblasio implemented during their terms.

Inclusionary zoning aims to encourage or require real estate developers to include lower-rent units in new housing. The Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH) program was presented to the public as a strategy to boost the supply of permanently affordable housing. The idea was that the costs of these below-market-rate units would be covered by capturing some of the increased economic value generated by

rezoning and directing it towards the city's housing objectives. However, in reality, this mechanism has seldom been effective.

Only 2,065 MIH affordable dwelling units have been approved in a city of 8.4 million residents, mostly reliant on substantial public subsidies.¹⁵

MIH replaced an earlier initiative—voluntary inclusionary housing (VIH)—which was significantly expanded by Michael Bloomberg, the predecessor of Mayor de Blasio.

Ultimately, the MIH program exposes a critical oversight—that inclusionary zoning is fundamentally voluntary. Developers will only pursue projects if they anticipate a minimum rate of return on their investment. To justify seeking a zoning change, developers require a substantial increase in density, as dedicating 25% or 30% of new development to affordable housing yields minimal profits. If property owners don't foresee success, they'll retain existing zoning and opt out of the MIH program.¹⁶

One could argue the city's zoning rules do not allow enough housing to be built at a density that solves the housing shortage and developers need for returns. More widespread rezoning is necessary to mitigate the housing shortage. In this context, many of the images photographers contributed speak to the exclusivity of recent development in the city.

Cultural Commodification and Erasure speaks to photographs that try to capture the way “authentic” culture and even the idea of New York City itself is gobbled up and spat out in a way that becomes inaccessible for the very people it previously revolved around.

This pattern speaks to a process that has really been playing out since the Dutch started heavily colonizing what would become the city. What's different in today's narratives are the actors, but fundamentally the issue of gentrification and displacement are

¹⁵ Eric Kober. “De Blasio's Mandatory Inclusionary Housing Program: What Is Wrong, and How It Can Be Made Right.” Accessed May 11, 2024.

¹⁶ *ibid*

directly interrelated to processes of colonization. People from the suburbs or other metropolitan areas move to New York City for a taste of the city life and all it has to offer – but by doing so they inadvertently raise the cost of survival for not just long-time locals but local businesses as well, eventually causing displacement of both. The displacement of small business is one of the key markers of gentrification as oftentimes these businesses exist to support a specific population or culture. Without the physical store, the culture can be erased and vice versa. The explanations for displacement of people and business are so complex and numerous that other urban photography projects have tried to cover the subject, offering a useful comparison for photos that speak to the theme in this project.

Take for example Karla and James Murraray, a husband and wife duo who have been documenting the life and death of mom-and-pop shops in New York City for over 20 years. Their first photobook was released in 2008 and more than 80% of the businesses in that book have disappeared.¹⁷

Although not as specific as James and Karla's work, the photographs that people like Tyler submitted were great examples of how the commercial landscape looks almost two decades after 2008.

Increasingly rare are actual businesses that support working class families and more and more present are businesses that cater to specific interests willing to pay a particular price as well as flat out imitations of the working class NYC culture marked up and sanitized as if it were a Disney Park attraction. Food is the easiest example of this (I think of Tyler's photo of Scozzari Bakery as an example) because so much of NYC's iconic food menu was developed for the working class in mind. Nowadays it's almost impossible to get a slice of pizza for less than \$2.50 and people actually will charge top dollar to sit down and eat a pizza in a sit down environment. Quite a change.

¹⁷ ELISSAVETA M. BRANDON. "New York City's Mom-and-Pop Shops Are Dying off. That's a Problem for All Cities." FastCompany. Accessed May 11, 2024.



Figure 7.2: M&G Diner, West 125th Street at Morningside Avenue, Harlem, 2007. James and Karla Murray

Structural Disinvestment and Deprivation groups together photos that demonstrate how a place is facing a chokehold on resources. The Displacement Index created by DCP and HPD probably best visualizes these gaps in resources. Deprivation of resources is often the precursor to gentrification, as it creates rent gaps in an area.

Rent gap is the difference between the potential value of the property and the current prices of housing. The prime location of urban housing paired with historical underinvestment and low rent prices make them attractive to young career professionals, developers, and investors looking to capitalize on the gap in property values¹⁸. These newcomers inevitably raise prices, causing displacement among existing lower income residents.

Oftentimes, disinvestment in neighborhoods has been caused by decades of policy choices over time. One of the most notable is redlining, the practice of preventing certain neighborhoods from accessing Home Owner

¹⁸ From Redlining to Gentrification: The Policy of the Past That Affects Health Outcomes Today." Accessed May 11, 2024.

Loan Corporation (HOLC) financing to buy a home that was widespread through the 1930s into the mid-20th century. This is such the case in cities like San Francisco, where 87% of neighborhoods in 2018 were redlined neighborhoods¹⁹.

Our photo walk along Atlantic Avenue around Cypress Hills and City Line was probably the best example of what deprivation in advance of gentrification can look like. The area was redlined and given a “D” grade in the 1930s by HOLC due to so called infiltration of “Jews” and “Italians”²⁰. Since then, the demographics of the area have changed to become almost 97.4% nonwhite, but the economic situation is similar in that 42% of the population is living beneath the federal poverty rate. Like many other redlined neighborhoods, people living in the area are highly vulnerable to air, water, and noise pollutants and other health problems as a result of industrial and transit facilities in the neighborhood²¹.

While a variety of factors ensure it may not be necessarily the most desirable neighborhood in the city at the moment, there are signs that as the industrial and transit facilities downsize or disappear, a new shape is taking form. Next to car washes and repair shops along the historically commercial Atlantic Avenue are large multi-story buildings capable of holding 100s of units. My favorite example is 2840 Atlantic Avenue, a former dairy factory being converted into a 14-story tower with 320 residential units, 12,000 square feet of ground-floor commercial space, and a new charter school²². This is no doubt partially due to a rezoning that happened in 2016²³. As more and more housing stock gets added to the neighborhood and the industrial sites decline, it’s increasingly easy to see how the neighborhood could grow a “rent gap” that eventually accelerates gentrification. Sandwiched between the J train and A train, the neighborhood is fairly adjacent to neighborhoods already undergoing gentrification like BedStuy or Bushwick. **6. Conclusion:**

¹⁹ The Legacy of Redlining, 2018.

²⁰ Mapping Inequality.” Accessed May 11, 2024

²¹ “From Redlining to Gentrification: The Policy of the Past That Affects Health Outcomes Today.” Accessed May 11, 2024

²² “Empire State Dairy Expansion Kicks Off at 2840 Atlantic Avenue in East New York, Brooklyn - New York YIMBY.” Accessed May 12, 2024.

²³ “East New York Community Planning Plan - DCP.” Accessed May 12, 2024.

The photographers' contributions to the project underscore the power of photography as a means of understanding and confronting urban inequality, as outlined in the introduction. Through their diverse perspectives and experiences, they offer nuanced insights into the complex dynamics of gentrification in New York City.

Alex Levers' focus on Flatbush, Downtown Brooklyn, and City Line/Cypress Hills reflects the enduring imbalances of wealth and community identity within the city, echoing the historical documentation of Jacob Riis.

Andres Paulino's emphasis on neighborhoods bordering rivers or the ocean highlights the rapid redevelopment and displacement occurring in East Harlem, illustrating the tangible effects of gentrification on local communities.

Tyler Simnick's documentation of Kellogg's Diner in Williamsburg serves as a poignant metaphor for the transformative impact of gentrification on New York City's cultural landscape, while Shreya Sahai's exclusive focus on Hell's Kitchen offers a glimpse into the vibrant community life amidst the challenges of displacement.

Collectively, these photographers' work serves as a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of urban inequality in New York City, echoing the historical precedents of Jacob Riis while offering contemporary insights into the ongoing struggles of gentrification.

By harnessing the visual language of photography, they not only document the changing urban landscape but also inspire empathy, dialogue, and action within the community, as envisioned in the thesis proposal.

Through their collective efforts, they illuminate the complexities of gentrification and the importance of preserving community identity in the face of urban transformation.

As it stands, there are still seven more photographers whose work has been processed and developed, but not geotagged to be included in this document. The absence of their work speaks to the difficulty in trying to coordinate a project like this involving volunteer photographers.

Despite the attempts to reduce barriers to access by covering film and development costs, time is ultimately the most important resource in this project. For others interested in a collaborative film photography project, setting up a smooth pipeline of film to digital scans is key. However, despite the absence of some work in this document, the hope is that the digital archives of this work can be transformed into a physical exhibit that speaks to the community of journalists, planners, policymakers and more mentioned at the beginning of the paper. In many ways this document serves as a template for a future medium that is more accessible for the public, such as a physical magazine or book.

7. Appendix

7. 1 Interactive Photo Map

This map is a useful resource to look at all the photos taken during the project from a high level perspective. Using geotag data from the project, we mapped each photo as a point on the map.

Underlying it all is the NYC Displacement Risk Index data visualized in tiles across the neighborhood tabulation areas used in the original map. The intention behind this is to create a way for anyone using the map to quickly visualize the displacement risk of a neighborhood and then look at photographic examples of what that means for that area.

7.2 Project Google Drive/Archive

For those interested in looking at the larger collection of photos made by ALL the photographers involved, this google drive contains an archive of all of those plus the digital photos taken to generate the geotags used in this project. Stored in this folder are also the scans of maps researchers made during our first workshop.

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