

A STORY OF HOMELESSNESS, SYNTHETIC MARIJUANA, AND ZOMBIES.

A SITE ANALYSIS BY DARIEN ORTIZ



PSYCHOLOGY 31150:
PSYCHOLOGIES OF
PEOPLE IN PLACE



A photograph of a city street intersection, likely in New York City, featuring a red semi-transparent overlay. In the background, a white building with a blue roof has signs for 'Pat' and 'Mark'. A green street sign for 'Lexington Av' is visible on the left. A bus with 'M100 EAST HARLEM THROUGH' is in the center. To the right, a yellow sign for 'PIZZA SLICES' is visible. The foreground shows a wet asphalt street with a manhole cover and a white square symbol in the bottom left corner.

THE SITE:

THE INTERSECTION OF 125TH STREET AND LEXINGTON AVE

WHY I CHOSE THIS SITE

I pass this intersection everyday on my commute to City College. For the past 3 years, I've witnessed things that both shock and intrigue me. I've seen people openly use and deal drugs, sex workers openly soliciting, and unconscious homeless people covering the sidewalk. I know that Harlem has experienced gentrification first hand. I see this on the bus, traveling down 125th street.

The presence of particular locations, such as Whole Foods and Starbucks, and the closing of the Pathmark indicate the change that has taken place. The contrast between 125th on Lexington and 125th on Malcolm X Boulevard is what drove me to choose this for my site analysis. In my research, I've learned the opening of the

Pathmark was supposed to spark change in the neighborhood. Profits were promised to return to the community. The streets can be described as they were 19 years ago, so what's the deal? What happened to the money that was supposed to be returned to the community? Why hasn't anything changed for the people of this area?

THE PATHMARK OF 125TH ST.

Built with private and public money by two black community groups, it is the first chain supermarket to open in Harlem in three decades and the first major commercial development completed in the neighborhood since the riots of the late 1960's. On Friday, Gov. George E. Pataki and other dignitaries will gather on the rooftop of the Pathmark to welcome the store.

In most communities, the opening of a grocery store would not be something to make a fuss over, much less invite the Governor to. But this Pathmark in this community is a very big deal -- because Harlem has been without a chain supermarket for so long, and because this one was delayed so long, in part by a bitter fight put up by owners of independent markets.

For many people in the neighborhood, who have often had to pay more for inferior quality or travel long distances to have the kind of choices that residents of other neighborhoods take for granted, the Pathmark became more than just a grocery store.

Source: "A Supermarket as a Spur for Change; New Harlem Pathmark Promises Competition and Convenience." Terry Prestin, New York Times (1999)



THE PATHMARK OF 125TH ST.

In 1991, the city requested proposals for building a market. When it became clear that the project could not be developed solely with private dollars, the city asked Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a national nonprofit organization known as LISC that assists local development corporations, to help find a community group with the wherewithal to get the market built and lease it to Pathmark. Profits would be plowed back into the community.

Source: "A Supermarket as a Spur for Change; New Harlem Pathmark Promises Competition and Convenience." Terry Prestin, New York Times (1999)

As I highlighted in my article snippets above, the Pathmark was supposed to spur change and pour profits back into the area, so my question is this: What happened to that promise? What are the reasons why this area is in the state it is?



PATHMARK

Just 19 years ago, the opening of Pathmark was supposed to spark change in this neighborhood. Many black residents rejoiced at being able to shop for produce locally. As expressed in the New York Times article by Terry Prestin, the residents of Harlem felt grateful for the option of having a local supermarket, something most of us take for granted. Carolyn Boyd, who works as a secretary said, "I'm just going crazy in here... Everything I need is right here." As Dorothy Reece puts it, "In Harlem, we always have to wait for everything, so we're used to that." (Prestin, 1999). It seems like people of this area feel the neglect placed upon them by the city. Not only the physical state of the area, but the psychological weathering and social injustices faced by the people make people feel less than they're worth. Something as ubiquitous as the street supermarket may not seem like a big deal but it took not only time but the initiatives of private and public groups to make it happen.

PATHMARK

The Pathmark wasn't the site I chose to analyze, but I use it as a focal point because of how prominent it is in the area. It's one of the first things people notice when they come here and I wasn't aware of its significance until I did research on the area. Currently, the Pathmark sits boarded up and closed down. I've included some Yelp reviews of the supermarket to provide a sense of the disrepair that the supermarket fell into down below. Additionally, I chose Pathmark because it provided an interesting contrast to 125th further down the street. The bus I take to CCNY traverses 125th, passing from the east side to the west side along the street, and it provides insight into a bigger picture -- Gentrification. Whole Foods, H&M, Starbucks, and some niche stores serve as markers that stick out on the historically commercial strip of 125th. There has been major development in Harlem over the past decade but areas like the corner of 125th and Lexington remain as they were about 20 years ago.

YELP REVIEWS

Yes, the store has fallen into disrepair with leaking ceilings covered with tarps and slightly dusty corners but the truth to the matter is this large supermarket that many shop at is closing. A major developer has bought the land and is planning on building a luxury high rise just as it is currently doing with the Lower East Side's former Pathmark location (which I used to frequent as well). Harlem is being developed and overpriced to push out the current neighborhood and attract the new yuppies who wouldn't think twice before spending \$5 on half a dozen brown eggs thinking they are better than white (eggs are all the same it's just the breed of chicken that makes the different color). I've seen the checkout lines dwindle from all being opened to just a handful and the reason is because many of the women working there are leaving or were "laid off" as the impending closure looms.

Ok, the only good thing of this place is the 24hrs open fact. The whole building is a nightmare, always full of drug addicts no matter the time of the day.

Is not a small or big corner around the building without urine or human feces, u can imagine the smell all the time if u r just lucky enough not to see that in live time.

I don't know why people say they have good prices, they are just average and you can find better deals and quality if you walk some blocks.

★★★★★ 2/12/2013

I was visiting friends in NYC and we stopped here for groceries. I'm an old white lady from Seattle. I have never seen anything like this in my life.

I'm giving it five stars for the WTF factor!

I saw a lady with four different hairdos on her one head, which was pretty cool. The elevator smelled like pee.

I said WOW a lot while we were there.

The store is beyond filthy!!!! Feces in the stairwell, urine in the elevator, the corner of Lex and 125th is full of drug addicts .But--they had some good sales, and parking for \$1.00--I liked that..... But--the store is closing! Building a luxury high rise on that corner---WhoTF is gonna live there? Methadone clinics, homeless shelters, really disgusting!

Can this place please shut down and be replaced by a Trader Joes?

For a major store that's supposed to feed the neighborhood, their selection of healthy items is very limited. Perishable produce is very poor quality. You'd at least hope the prices are good. Well, they charged me over \$5 for four potatoes, \$2 for one tomato, \$8 for a box of frozen dough, just to name a few examples.

Pretty brutal rip off given that the whole shopping experience is just as awful as the immediate vicinity of the store. Can't walk in or/and out without being asked for change and passing by several adults sleeping on the ground after hitting that vein hard.

Do we really need a bottle collection service on the most drug ridden corner in the city?

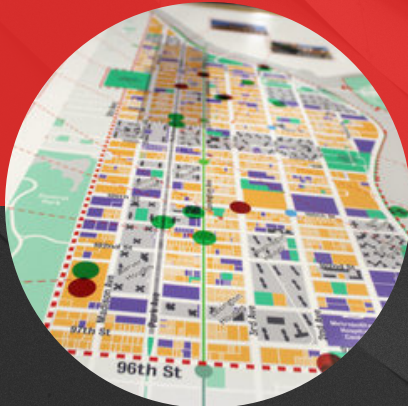
A BRIEF HISTORY OF HARLEM

- By 1920, Harlem becomes predominantly black
- Between 1920 and 1930, the black population continues to rise because of emigration from the West Indies and the southern states of the U.S. The white population declines as more move out of the neighborhood.
- Employment crisis of 1930s hit blacks hard, riots ravaged Harlem.
- During the 1950s, many landlords refused to sell/rent to black residents. At the same time, maintenance and poor conditions were prominent.
- The phenomenon of **blockbusting** was encouraged; speculators would buy buildings and sell them to black people. This was done publicly to cause alarm. In a panic, neighboring landlords would sell adjacent properties at low prices to the speculators, allowing them to acquire more properties for blacks to buy.
- High rents caused apartments to be stuffed with large numbers of people, which lead to a decrease in quality of life and living standards.
- For much of the 90s, these desperate conditions allow crime and drugs engulf the community.
- On a more positive note, organizations form or take notice of the conditions of these areas and provide mechanisms of change. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, Malcolm X's Nation of Islam, and even the Black Panther are just some of such groups.



Source: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society/politics-policy-people/sociology/brief-history-harlem>

MAIN THEMES



ZONING LAWS &
GENTRIFICATION



HOUSING &
HOMELESSNESS



DRUGS



DRUG PROMINENCE

Part of the reason I think this area remains in this state is due to the prevalence of drugs in the neighborhood.

As I mentioned in my timeline, the poor conditions faced by the black community led to the dominance of drug use; which in my opinion, has not gone away.

From what I've learned in my previous Psych courses, drug use and addiction are one of the hardest things to treat and have the highest rates of relapse. Treating addiction is hard enough, getting it out of the community seems like a taller order.

For my discussion on drugs, I'm going to focus on Synthetic Marijuana because it's something I've become aware of in the past 3 years. I've seen ads on the bus stops all over 125th and it arose during a time I am more familiar with.



K2 - SYNTHETIC MARIJUANA

The people here on this stretch of 125th Street in East Harlem may change, but the drug remains the same: K2, also called synthetic marijuana, a potent mix of herbs and chemicals that has become widely used among homeless people in New York City.

A joint of K2 goes for a dollar or two, far cheaper than food. Many bodegas on 125th Street sell it. A marijuana joint, by comparison, costs about \$5. Crowds of up to 80 or 100 homeless people come in on buses from a nearby shelter on Randalls Island, drawn by heroin recovery clinics nearby, and spend the day there under the influence of this cheaper narcotic. The block between Park and Lexington Avenues appears at times to be a street of zombies.

“This is a K2 nation out here,” one man says before walking away confused.

Source: Casey, N. (2015). K2, a Potent Drug, Casts a Shadow Over an East Harlem Block. New York Times.



WHAT HAS TO CHANGE?

As described above in Nicholas Casey's article on K2, the cost of the drug is often cheaper than food; it's also sold in the local bodegas. Access to the drug can't be any easier. As for a systematic way to get the drugs out of the community, I'm very unqualified for having a concrete answer. I know that the drug prevalence is a product of poverty and crime, which are two issues that are much larger than just this street. I can, however, look at solutions that have occurred (Casey, 2015).

According to another article by Nicholas Casey, the NYPD has conducted multiple drug raids in the area and throughout the city. The sting operation successfully busted manufacturers and distributors of the drug and essentially took the drug off the street. I think this was a good solution at getting **one** drug off the streets. I think as long as there is a profit to be made, people will bring drugs into the community. The raids also had an interesting impact on homelessness (Casey, 2015).



HOMELESSNESS

The homeless population of the area felt pressure by the NYPD following such drug raids. The homeless were rounded up and were forced out of the area. In my opinion this just reflects the displacement people suffer through gentrification; it's like an endless cycle. Moving people from one place to another is a band-aid fix, it doesn't address the overall problem. When it comes to homelessness, we need to look at why people are homeless and come up with long-term solutions.



WHY ARE PEOPLE HOMELESS? IS IT DISPLACEMENT VIA GENTRIFICATION?

In recent years, the New York City Council voted in favor of rezoning East Harlem. This new plan, which will increase density in the neighborhood by advancing housing and business development, places over \$50 million dollars into community investments like public housing. This public housing refers to Bill De Blasio's Affordable Housing Initiative.

"We will not be passive and silent as they move forward with a racist plan set on removing low-income Black and Brown families and not providing any housing alternatives. The proposal clearly serves the landlords and developers – big campaign donors to the City Council and the Mayor,"

- Marina Ortiz of East Harlem Preservation

Source: Krisel, B. (2017). Harlem Patch.



AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

"Housing is considered affordable when a household spends no more than one-third of its income on rent. Housing New York aims to create and preserve housing for people earning a wide range of incomes.


The median income for all cities across the country is defined each year by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The 2018 AMI for the New York City region is \$93,900 for a three-person family (100% AMI)."

Source: Housing Preservation & Development, NYC.gov



AS OF 2016, THE AMI OF HARLEM IS...

CENTRAL HARLEM PUMA, NY

 ADD COMPARISON

POPULATION

135,967

3.09% GROWTH

MEDIAN AGE

34.2

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

\$40,816

5.68% GROWTH

POVERTY RATE

28.7%

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES

61,831

5.68% GROWTH

MEDIAN PROPERTY VALUE

\$646,200

3.31% GROWTH



Source: <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/central-harlem-puma-ny/>

WHAT HAS TO CHANGE?

It's clear the people of Harlem won't be able to afford the so called "Affordable Housing". If De Blasio's initiative continues in this direction, many people will be forced out, not just the people of Harlem. A more prudent solution would be to localize the AMI requirement of Affordable Housing. I think the housing could actually be considered affordable when it isn't 2x the AMI. If the housing requirement used the neighborhood's AMI, instead of a citywide value, the housing would be available to a greater number of people; not only those who can afford it, but those who actually need it.

If public housing continues in this direction, I predict there will be an increase in the homeless population of New York City.

NOW, HOW CAN WE FIX THIS?

Based on the information I've found in my research of Harlem, I don't feel very optimistic about the future. With the new rezoning laws, gentrification will only continue. and displace the predominantly black community. The rate of homelessness in the area will only increase until these people are herded away by the NYPD and dropped off to be someone else's problem. The prevalence of drugs will remain until the area becomes gentrified and all the victims of drug abuse are forced out.

My words may seem cynical and reductive, but I'm trying to make a point. These issues are bigger and more complex than what they seem. The solutions I've seen so far are quick fixes and don't address the larger issues. Gentrification as a mechanism for change isn't even a solution, it just encompasses certain consequences that make things seem nicer. Greater police presence and the displacement of native groups make it seem like the neighborhood is becoming a better place to live, but it just hides the issues or move them someplace else. I wholly believe the issues stem from the pace at which we progress politically and how deeply engrained we are in capitalism. The quality of life for many of us continues to fall as the cost of living rises, and the best way to combat this, is to resist.

REFERENCES

Bonanos, C. (13 July 2017). From Alligator Shoes to Whole Foods: Watching One Harlem Corner Over 28 Years. New York Magazine.

Adams, M. H. (27 May 2016). The End of Black Harlem. The New York Times.

Alzate, J. Florentino N. Nichols, P. Gubernat, T. (2008) Rezoning Harlem. A Community Fights Against Gentrification. Harlem, New York. Film documentary.

Casey, N. & Baker, A. (23 September 2015). Homeless on East Harlem Street Feel Unwanted Pressure After Drug Raids. New York Times.

Casey, N. (2 September 2015). K2, a Potent Drug, Casts a Shadow Over an East Harlem Block. New York Times.

Krisel, B. (30 November 2017). East Harlem Rezoning Approved by City Council. Harlem Patch.

Pristin, T. (28 April 1999). A Supermarket as a Spur for Change; New Harlem Pathmark Promises Competition and Convenience. New York Times.

Schwarz, A. (24 April 2015). Potent 'Spice' Drug Fuels Rise in Visits to Emergency Room. New York Times.

The Open University. (10 June 2008). A brief history of Harlem.

Yelp, Pathmark of Harlem