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Mixed Feelings as Change Overtakes 125th St.

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#)

It isn't news that just two or three years ago, Harlem had a paucity of bank branches, grocery stores and other basic amenities, or that now that more affluent people have started to move there, upscale shops and restaurants have followed.

But change can have surprising results. While welcoming safer, cleaner streets, longtime residents have found themselves juggling conflicting emotions. And those who enjoyed a measure of stability in the old Harlem now long for the past — not necessarily because it was better but because it was what they knew.

“The majority of the stores, the 99-cent stores, they're gone,” said Gwen Walker, 55, a longtime resident of the General Grant Houses in West Harlem, giving one view. “The Laundromat on the corner is gone. The bodegas are gone. There's large delis now. What had been two for \$1 is now one for \$3. My neighbor is a beer drinker, and he drinks inexpensive beer, Old English or Colt 45 or Coors — you can't even buy that in the stores. The stores have imported beers from Germany. The foods being sold — feta cheese instead of sharp Cheddar cheese. That's a whole other world.”

Gentrification, it turns out, can have an odd psychological effect on those it occurs around. No one — almost no one — is wishing for a return of row upon row of boarded-up buildings or the summer mornings when lifeless bodies turned up in vestibules, or the evenings when every block seemed to have its own band of drug dealers and subordinate crackheads.

But residents say they do miss having a neighborhood with familiar faces to greet, familiar foods to eat, and no fear of being forced out of their homes.

It was Dr. Mindy Fullilove, a professor of clinical psychiatry and public health at [Columbia University](#), who called the feeling “root shock” because, she said, its effects are similar to what happens to uprooted plants. She describes it as “the pain of losing one's beloved neighborhood.”

The psychological hold Harlem has on African-Americans has endured even as the neighborhood's devolution became so complete that between about 1960 and 1990, Harlem had lost a third of its population and half of its housing stock.

In 1990, during the height of the crack epidemic, 261 people were murdered in the police precincts that cover Harlem. Last year, there were about 500 murders in the entire city.

Those who stayed during the worst years say they developed an even stronger psychological attachment to Harlem, its flaws not unlike their own. The perceived diminution of that neighborhood, caused in part by an influx of middle class people of all races, can feel like a loss of self, they say.

Ms. Walker, who has lived in the sprawling General Grant Houses, a public housing complex, on and off since

the 1950s, said she often sat talking with her neighbors about their changing surroundings, wondering whether any of them will be there in three to five years.

She said they speculated that by then, they will have been relocated to “a rural area in the Bronx” — even though a city housing project would seem to be safe from gentrification. “Change is good, and progress is inevitable,” she said. “But the feeling is, ‘What are we going to do? Where are we going to go?’”

During the past several months, Harlem residents have sought to slow the pace of change via lawsuits, protests, calls for economic boycotts, public denunciations of elected officials and town-hall-style meetings with names like “The State of Black Harlem.” A large march and rally that organizers say will be “against displacement and gentrification” is scheduled for the neighborhood on June 21.

Apprehension about gentrification has become a constant, and is now a common theme at Sunday church services and a standard topic of conversation in barber shops and beauty salons, on street corners, in bars, at public housing community rooms and among the doormen of the neighborhood’s new condominium buildings. This spring, there have been as many as three or four community meetings each week in which gentrification has been discussed — and roundly denounced.

Social service organizations in the neighborhood said that they have noted an uptick in clients complaining about insomnia and hypertension related to fears about losing their homes, even when there is no indication that they will be evicted.

To be sure, these emotions can be expressed in terms that sound extreme. An example came after street shootings wounded eight young people in the neighborhood on [Memorial Day](#).

“I was praying something like this would happen to keep them out,” Calvin Hunt, 45, a longtime resident with a drastic view, said of the newcomers the morning after the shootings. “When crack was happening, you could have bought these brownstones for \$1. Now they cost \$1 million.”

Then, last month, the City Council approved another significant change: the rezoning of 125th Street, Harlem’s central artery, to allow for high-rise office towers and some 2,100 new market-rate condominiums. About 70 small businesses might be closed and some residents displaced.

In East Harlem, East River Plaza, a \$300 million shopping mall anchored by Home Depot, is being built on the site of a long-abandoned wire factory. Two blocks away, glass-walled \$1 million condominiums are rising next to six-story tenement buildings.

Earlier this year, the average price for new condominium apartments in Harlem hit \$900,000, although average household income remains less than \$25,000.

The Rev. Dr. Charles A. Curtis, senior pastor of Mount Olivet Baptist Church, one of Harlem’s oldest black churches, said that people feel powerless when they see change that they believe is not intended to benefit them.

“There are great developments going on,” said Pastor Curtis. “You can see things in your sight, but they’re just out of reach.”