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URBS 101: Urban Life

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### A Final Reflection

My window is roughly two hundred feet above the ground and faces just slightly more south than east. The view is relatively unobstructed with no buildings in the immediate vicinity at the same height as my window, however, this is rapidly changing. A few months ago a tall, yellow crane was erected directly across the street. It is constantly moving to-and-fro throughout the day, a source of near-constant movement directly outside my window. If I look down, I can see an active construction site swarming with workers—they are creating a new building, 664 Pacific Street, that will house a new middle school and many new apartments. With each passing week, it grows taller, but it currently sits at roughly five stories. 664 Pacific Street, and the building my window is in, are part of the new and ongoing Pacific Park development I wrote about in my visual essay. It represents the constantly changing fabric of the city, and some of the annoyances that city dwellers face by living in urban areas.

The construction site begins working at 7:00 am sharp and is very loud even within my apartment. Although it eventually dies down around 5:00 pm, the constant noise is even more exasperating by the fact that almost all of the residents of my building are in their apartments all day long. The noise can be oppressive at times and makes it impossible to open windows for fresh air, and even difficult to conduct remote meetings and phone calls. Yesterday was the first day that construction at the site was active after a two-week closure by the developer over concerns of worker wellbeing as a result of COVID-19. Because 664 Pacific Street contains both

a new school and over 20% of the apartments will be affordable, it is exempt from the citywide construction shutdown. Where the neighborhood in previous days was quiet and peaceful, it is now faced with constant noise and activity.

While I look down at the hustle and bustle of the construction site, another movement catches my eye: a Long Island Rail Road train is exiting the portal to the tunnel from beneath Atlantic Avenue and entering the open-air Vanderbilt Yard. It slowly snakes its way east to its resting spot, just out of my view behind another building. This has become a rarity; in the days before the pandemic, it was normal to routinely hear horns as the trains entered and exited the yard throughout the day. After the morning rush and just before the evening commute many trains would be arriving or departing, one right after the other, so often that it was commonplace. In the era of the shutdown, however, they are far less frequent and Vanderbilt Yard remains well below capacity at all times of the day.

Vanderbilt Yard and, by extension, the Pacific Park construction site below my window, are examples of both property contradiction and capitalist-democracy contradiction. Vanderbilt Yard is a crucial piece of rail infrastructure required for Long Island Rail Road service to Atlantic Terminal and the entirety of the Atlantic Branch, as well as the branches that utilize Atlantic Terminal. Due to the yard's proximity to Downtown Brooklyn, Atlantic Terminal, and the recently constructed Barclays Center, it represents significant development potential despite the site's primary function as a rail yard. The Pacific Park development will cap this rail yard and build multiple mid-to-high rise building on top of it. However, to gain state and city approval, the project must meet affordable housing quotas. This requirement and the existing rail yard illustrate the contradictions described in the chapters of "Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State" by Sam Stein.

As the train slowly leaves my field of vision, my attention lands on the building that obscures the actual rail yard. This is the Newswalk Condominium, a luxury condo building that was converted from the former Daily News printing plant. The exterior of the building is clad with brick and concrete; the windows are huge, as is common for many old industrial manufacturing buildings. There are several terraces on the building: a very large terrace that contains trees and a playground that is used by all of the building's residents, as well as numerous smaller terraces that are private and only accessible to the individual owner of that particular condo's terrace. Today is one of the warmest and sunniest days of spring and there are people on every single terrace I can see.

In addition to the weather, this level of activity can in large part be attributed to the coronavirus pandemic. In a crisis that limits our ability to go outside and risk exposure to the disease, the individuals living in Newswalk can enjoy the outdoors while social distancing. These private outdoor spaces are largely available only to the wealthy; according to StreetEasy, a New York City area real estate listing website, the average sale price for a condo in the Newswalk Condominium is \$1,013,554. The average rental price for an apartment in the building is \$3,667. As is typical for many New York City lofts, the unit sizes are considerably larger than the typical shoebox apartment.

Although the lofts described in Sharon Zukin's "The Creation of a 'Loft Lifestyle'" are Manhattan-centric and focus on those in SoHo and lower Manhattan, the Newswalk Condominium is an example of the lasting phenomena of lofts as luxury residences. These luxury homes with private outdoor spaces are a far cry from the origins of lofts as homes of poor artists and the "living poor" she describes. Furthermore, as the pandemic drags on and access to public parks and other outdoor public spaces becomes increasingly restricted, we can see some

of the themes described in Julie Sze's "Noxious New York" chapter reflected here too. In our current COVID-19 environment, access to fresh air and light and the outdoors becomes something that only those with private terraces, balconies, and yards get to experience. Sze describes the effects of pollution on racial minorities as a result of zoning matters, due to the "reality that low-income and racial minority populations have always been overrepresented in what became designated by city agencies as non-residential districts" (Sze 45). Meanwhile, the Newwalk Condominium is a previously industrial building now filled with wealthy individuals who can afford a luxury loft home with private terraces. The contrast could not be starker even without considering COVID-19.

My window high above 6th Avenue in Brooklyn allows for plenty of light throughout the day. It gives me expansive views of Brooklyn and the hustle and bustle of the city at large. As I bring my reflection to a close, it is striking to me how this class has been able to change my perception of many city facets. Although I was largely skeptical of capitalism before this class, our early readings completely changed my understanding of its role in city-planning. It has further validated my feelings on neoliberalism and helped me understand the nuances of gentrification in ways that I previously failed to grasp. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis has served as a mechanism to better understand so many of the shortcomings of our lives and cities. I hope it can create an opportunity for substantial social change and better work-life balance for the American people, and I am glad that we were able to look at the pandemic in the context of our class.

## Works Cited

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