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Introduction

In the beginning of Sophocles' play *Oedipus at Colonus* the antihero has left Thebes, with his daughter Antigone as a guide. He is blind, disgraced, and exhausted from a life of regicide, incest, and governing a city beset by plague. On their journey the miserable pair rest on a rock in the village of Colonus. When the local population finds out their identity, they immediately try to expel them: their very proximity is a curse. The people of Colonus sympathize with the father and daughter but fear they will pollute the city, driving down its appeal to those from nearby Athens. The chorus warns:

Evil, methinks, and long
Thy pilgrimage on earth.
Yet add not curse to curse and wrong to wrong.
I warn thee, trespass not
Within this hallowed spot . . . ¹

Who and what we live beside is a perennial problem. Most people in the United States (or ancient Greece for that matter) have invested the majority of their assets in their home. It is the main source of use and exchange value in our lives.² The citizens of Colonus do not hate Oedipus and Antigone; in fact they feel sorry for them. They just want the problem to go somewhere else and not to besmirch the reputation of their village.

The tendency for people to insist that disagreeable land uses be moved away from them, known as Not in My Backyard (NIMBY), is timeless: few have ever wanted to live next to a crematorium, waste-processing plant,

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or prison.³ While many deride NIMBYs as curmudgeonly, elitist, and even racist, examples of this behavior are everywhere: from community activists banning together to prevent fracking to a suburban homeowner taking a stance against an unmown lawn.⁴ The term has come to define the contemporary American city both as a critique of America's obsession with private property and, more troublingly, as a sign of racial and economic polarization.⁵ Wealthier communities offload waste incinerators to poorer neighborhoods, creating higher asthma rates. Methadone clinics, homeless shelters, and public housing are pushed from the city center. Places with single-family homes resist apartment buildings in order to minimize traffic or, more perniciously, to avoid living among those with less means.

As American cities became less dense in the 1960s and 1970s, new communities not only blocked undesirable land uses through planning codes and zoning but they also hoarded resources.⁶ Tax dollars that were once shared throughout a metropolitan region are now kept within specific suburbs to exclusively fund their schools, roads, and community centers.⁷ Much of the uniquely American nature of NIMBYism also comes from resistance to racial integration of US cities in the 1970s,⁸ when white flight was the prevalent migration pattern and spatial exclusion through real estate prices replaced the outright segregation of redlining and restricted covenants.

Today, NIMBYism has become a dirty word not just for its parochialism but for its anti-urbanism. NIMBYs often resist mass transit, higher-density residential neighborhoods, and anything else that disturbs the ideal of wide streets with single-family homes. Even in rapidly growing places such as Brooklyn, Austin, Denver, and Seattle, many residents hate the idea of adding more people, building structures higher than two stories, or funding public transit. The mismatch between growth and self-interest is exacerbated by the fact that most American cities have a small downtown that immediately gives way to blocks of bungalows, townhouses, and ranch homes rather than more efficient apartment buildings. Those who live in these neighborhoods are blessed with quick access to central shopping and entertainment districts, coupled with the spaciousness of suburban floor plans. This middle zone of cities is now treasured for its character—much of it is former “streetcar suburbs” connected by tram in the early twentieth century for elites who built craftsman bungalows, stone gothic-revival mini-mansions, and elegant cocoa-colored brownstones. Places like Park Slope in Brooklyn; Berkeley, California; Shaker Heights in Cleveland; or Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh: these neighborhoods, whether historic or not, are no longer suburbs as such but rather bucolic hamlets of wealth within

the hearts of cities. Most of them would like to stay that way, with residents resisting even minor plans for new housing that would bring more people and, potentially, greater socioeconomic diversity.⁹

For the most part, residents would rather not let newcomers into their neighborhoods for fear of parking shortages, overcrowded schools, messy construction projects, and, more vaguely, the destruction of “community character.” But they have been coming anyway. New residents pour into cities where jobs are abundant and the quality of life is good. This has put a strain on urban housing markets, creating a boom in both construction of new buildings and the gentrification of old ones. Yet, many cities limit density to single-family homes, often due to the pressure of longtime residents who act out of NIMBY sentiments. With average rent prices at \$3,500 in San Francisco and nearly that in many other cities, housing justice movements have taken on a new urgency, with some urbanists even declaring a “global housing crisis.”¹⁰ In every American city of one million people or more, nearly half of renters pay over 30 percent of their salary for housing. The number of renters has also gone up nationally by nine million in the past decade: the largest increase ever.¹¹ Even those who consider themselves securely in the middle class have found that they are struggling to pay rent and that homeownership is a distant dream. Interruptions in monthly wages due to the coronavirus pandemic made the situation of renters even more precarious, with millions on the brink of eviction.¹² In July 2021, one in seven American renters were still not up to date on their payments: frequently kept in their homes only because of eviction moratoriums.¹³

This book explores one particular movement: Yes in My Backyard (YIMBY), led by activists who seek to make cities more dense and to “build their way” to housing affordability. These groups have taken off in dozens of cities with large and active membership in places like Boulder, Austin, San Francisco, Boston, and Seattle as well as international offshoots in London, Vancouver, and Brisbane. Many of the groups not only campaign for new zoning rules, higher density, and better public transit but also field their own candidates for local and state office, and they have won important legislative battles in California and Colorado. While YIMBYism has become a crucial issue in Democratic Party politics in major cities such as San Francisco, Denver, and Portland, YIMBYs see themselves as nonideological coalitions that want to address urban housing shortages immediately, mostly by allowing more and larger buildings to go up with as little red tape as possible.

YIMBYs, who also refer to themselves as density activists, embrace cities in a more abstract way, by saying “yes” to bustling spaces that look and feel

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truly urban, often in contrast to the more sedate and spread-out American cities of the past. Many homeowners discuss apartment buildings as foreign modes of living, alluding particularly to Hong Kong as the ultimate caricature of vast skyscraper canyons creating an overcrowded cacophonous maze; or they voice fears that towers will suddenly collapse in the same tragic but uncommon manner as the Surfside condominium in Miami in 2021.¹⁴ In contrast, YIMBYs often look toward Asian and European urbanism approvingly, maintaining that new development can create spaces brimming with life. YIMBYs employ many commonly shared approaches—adjusting zoning rules, finding solutions that use affordability mandates but also prioritize market-rate housing, representing renters rather than owners—but they are characterized by no value so much as their belief in the dignity and livability of the apartment building. If their movement were focused solely on design, it would be called “verticalism.”

Increased density can take cars off the road and spur the construction of more public spaces, YIMBYs maintain, while insisting that the scale of new buildings can be moderated. They argue that multifunctional central neighborhoods that mix shopping, work, and entertainment into residential real estate are fruitful for creating social and business relationships that bring people together fortuitously; particularly at a time when Americans are drifting apart and hunkering down in homogenous political and cultural spheres. As the urban sociologist Louis Wirth noted in 1938: “density thus reinforces the effect of numbers in diversifying men and their activities and in increasing the complexity of the social structure.”¹⁵ YIMBYs embrace this sentiment, arguing that the social complexity that comes with density—despite a long history of anti-urbanism in the United States that associates living closer together with poverty, crime, and ill health—builds creativity, social synergy, and cosmopolitanism.

The YIMBY movement was founded in San Francisco in 2013 by disgruntled millennials alarmed by rising rent prices. Sonja Trauss, one of the first members and a national leader of the movement, was a math teacher who began showing up to zoning and council meetings in which new housing was under review. She found that even modest apartment buildings of two or three stories under planning review were vehemently criticized by neighbors for such problems as casting shadows and being “out of character.” She saw many plans quashed or held up indefinitely. For her and likeminded young people who could only afford to live in apartments, this assault on new growth was irksome. Many of those speaking out passionately against development were older left-wing environmentalists with a hippie aesthetic

and purportedly radical politics. They hoped to preserve a city of poets, misfits, and rebels. Yet, Trauss and her cohort do not see *that* city when they look around Oakland, Berkeley, or San Francisco. Instead, they see a three-caste social system in which each group studiously avoids the others: older homeowners who live in rent-stabilized apartments or, more likely, homes that had been affordable but now are worth millions; younger tech workers who can afford \$4,000 in monthly rent or maybe even place a down payment on a home; and the support class of service workers who struggle mightily: everyone from cleaners and fast-food workers to nurses, teachers, and public sector employees. Increasingly, even middle-class urbanites are flung to the edges of the city. In this outer suburban ring, growth is still happening on cheap land (mostly in sprawling subdivisions) but it is badly connected to city jobs, forcing those at the bottom of the income divide to become super-commuters—sitting in traffic for two-hour stretches or boarding buses and trains before dawn to get to their workplace.

San Francisco's homes are six times more expensive than the national average.¹⁶ From 2010 to 2019, the city's population grew by 80,000 while only 29,000 homes were built.¹⁷ While "density bonuses" (allowing more apartments on a site in exchange for developer support of local amenities) are sometimes available in the Bay Area, the major problem is zoning: most neighborhoods only allow single-family homes and, when apartments are permitted, there is a lengthy design, community, and environmental review process. This single-family "fundamentalism" is what YIMBY activists fight against: both at the level of planning reform and at community meetings where they attempt to win over residents saying "no" to growth. After attending planning meetings, activist Sonja Trauss quickly set up the tongue-in-cheek-named BARF (Bay Area Renters Federation) in order to propose a simple economic solution to making housing prices more affordable: by increasing supply. Those who were truly concerned with the city's transformation into an unaffordable enclave of tech billionaires and their millionaire employees should rally around this idea if they hoped to maintain even a modicum of economic diversity, Trauss and the nascent YIMBY membership of BARF argued.

The first meetings for Trauss and her associates were held in bars and cafés: young people gathered around brainstorming ideas about how to shift the ideological debate from "real estate development ruins the city" to "controlled growth moderates prices and allows for new residents to contribute to existing communities." The idea was to show up to meetings that were dominated by homeowners saying "no, no, no" to every proposal and

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have them finally say “yes” to something. The members of BARF—young, educated, and middle class—would also become a filter for projects that would increase density, socioeconomic diversity, and transport-oriented development. They would be a kind of secondary planning commission, cheerleading growth but also pushing for design and affordability mandates in every new project. They embraced the architectural philosophy of New Urbanism, first advocated for fifty years ago—to make cities denser and livelier with more people walking and living close together. YIMBYs frame these ideas in ways that younger people can understand: through speeches to local councils about housing precarity; simple slogans about density and growth bandied around over happy hour drinks; and, perhaps most importantly, endless internet memes about the selfishness and small-mindedness of NIMBY homeowners.

The YIMBY message quickly caught on: with urban newcomers in the Bay Area, with politicians who had been foiled in their attempts to build affordable housing in the past, with developers exasperated by red tape (who courted the groups for specific projects), and—more problematically—with tech bosses looking to house their workforce (who became major donors). In just five years, the movement that began during a public comment session in San Francisco had international branches, well-attended conferences, and California state senators who identified almost exclusively with the cause. More importantly, it had redirected the public conversation around growth from “go somewhere else” to “growth is inevitable, so how can we make it better, fairer, and more sustainable.”

The YIMBY movement has created a novel but problematic coalition of activists who want to make American cities denser: they borrow much from anti-gentrification housing movements, but they view their constituents as middle-class market-rate renters; and they advocate for all new development, not just affordable housing for low-income people, a concept they call “build more of everything.” YIMBY groups are also strongly supported by developers and real estate agents who see their platform as a valuable grassroots defense of the construction industry that changes the public perception of developers from rapacious to civic-minded. At the same time, density is also supported by many environmentalists who maintain that living closer together is more sustainable,¹⁸ subscribing to the philosophy that extensive land use must be curtailed to prevent erosion and to fortify cities against sea rise, urban water shortages, and wildfires.¹⁹

This book analyzes the substantial criticism of YIMBYism from anti-gentrification progressives who argue that YIMBY groups are merely social

justice shells concealing property interests. It also shows how density activists have successfully reframed urban growth as a progressive goal for creating more equitable and sustainable cities. They often use generational rather than class terms, portraying themselves as lobbyists for rent-paying millennials who want to live a more urban life than their parents' generation. In using this framing, they activate an age divide regarding opinions of suburbia (safe and stable versus deadening and environmentally harmful) while also acknowledging the income gap created by the 2008 financial crisis: many millennials, who are well into their thirties, are nowhere near able to buy a home. YIMBYs seek a middle ground between housing justice activists and "build, baby, build" condominium developers, and they paint the true enemy as established homeowners who, they argue, have fortuitously bought into ascendant property markets only to drive out newcomers. Their answer is the wholesale densification of American cities by adding more housing stock to wealthy and desirable areas that have thus far blocked construction of new homes and, particularly, of apartment buildings.

Densification and Urban Sociology: Strangers, Danger, and the Thrill of Bustling Spaces

In 1884, when New York's Lower East Side was one of the most densely populated places in the world, the *New York Times* published a story titled "Slumming in This Town" describing how a fashionable London trend had reached the New World and how ladies and gentlemen could entertain themselves by sightseeing on the Bowery.²⁰ Unlike the concern shown by Progressive Era reformers, who visited the same neighborhood with a sense of opprobrium and pity, these slumming uptown gentry were fascinated by streets teeming with life. They were tired of flânerie in the staid precincts of lower Fifth Avenue and sought out a more vibrant street scene, which they found in the mix of tenements and pushcart hawkers selling *schmattas*, potatoes, herring, and everything in between. Though density was associated with urban deviance, it was interesting to look at.

Urban sociologists have long been fascinated by categorizing the city as an evolving form whose physical attributes serve distinct demographic groups. Where one lives can make socioeconomic betterment possible—or unlikely. Proponents of the Chicago school of urban sociology, most active in the 1920s, used the urban boom they saw around them to describe processes of racial and ethnic segmentation, economic stratification, and community cohesion. Urban sociologists of the time were particularly interested

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in how immigrants moved to dense precincts and, after a period of struggle, were able to advance to better jobs and housing conditions on the periphery of the city. Sociologists like Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth, and Jane Addams described the process of succession in which impoverished migrants eventually left the teeming heart of the city—overcrowded with tenements and multifamily or intergenerational living—for transitional zones and, if they were lucky, to the new suburbs built along rail lines. These scholars sought not just to demarcate a typology of urban zones but to elevate sociology as a discipline. They described urban development as a pseudo-biological process: “[U]rban growth [may be thought of] as a resultant of organization and disorganization analogous to the anabolic and catabolic processes of metabolism in the body,” Park and Burgess proposed in their seminal 1925 text *The City*.²¹

Throughout the early twentieth century, density was bemoaned as a necessary agglomeration of people and resources that allowed for metropolises to function but was also a primary factor in widespread ill health, crime, and social “deviance.”²² Being packed into neighborhoods cheek by jowl did not create new kinds of allegiances and affinities at first. Rather, as Louis Wirth put it: “The close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation.”²³ In short, people thrust together, striving to get by, often decided to look away from each other in order to preserve a modicum of privacy. They concentrated on their own advancement rather than finding solidarity with those different from them. Yet, this thinking also undersells the success of dense immigrant-filled prewar neighborhoods. Wards made up almost entirely of migrants in Chicago, New York, and Boston may have been slums, but they offered exceptional mobility through education and work opportunities (although it should be noted this only applied to immigrants of European extraction). A sense of urban ennui went hand in hand with “mutual exploitation” as Wirth suggested, but there were also campaigns for more responsible landlords, worker safety, and higher wages.²⁴ Eventually, density and the mixing of urban cultures produced interethnic and mixed-race marriages, civic cooperation in the government and nonprofits, labor mobilization, and even the fusion restaurants of today’s Lower East Side, where tourists no longer go to gawk at poverty but to eat kosher pickles, gelato, and *xiao long bao* (sometimes all in the same afternoon).

As postwar urban sociologists and city planners began to drift away from the Chicago school’s model of community studies using concentrated

ethnographic portraits of a single neighborhood, they focused more on outward growth and polycentrism as an expression of the future. American cities are, after all, a physical manifestation of capitalism dependent on growth, as Joseph Schumpeter maintained: without expansion or inward renewal, the system atrophies. Already by the 1920s, Park and Burgess had noticed that “[e]ven more significant than the increasing density of urban population is its correlative tendency to overflow, and so to extend over wider areas, and to incorporate these areas into a larger communal life.”²⁵ New theories of urbanization that emphasized regions, connectivity, and limitless growth would come to define the American urban experience and, in doing so, would cast high-density life as something antiquated, dangerous, and unseemly.

In the popular imagination of post-World War II America, concentrated street life was associated with the past: sometimes it was romanticized for movies about bootstrapping immigrants, but mostly it was maligned as a primitive state of being. Not only were urban spaces degraded as dangerous and dirty, but many observers saw their sense of community intimacy and public street life on stoops, rooftops, and stairwells as a forced closeness that disguised inner discomfort. By mid-century, with the rapid growth of suburbs, most Americans would agree with the theorist Georg Simmel, who wrote in 1903 that in cities, “the bodily proximity and narrowness of space makes the mental distance only the more visible. It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom if, under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd.”²⁶

Yet, suburbia was not the solution. As suburbia became a fact of American life in the 1960s, many who were raised there began to locate a particular brand of dejection in the dispersed built environment. It may have had luster, but it seemed to lack substance: there was nothing to walk to, the uniformity of the housing stock bespoke a wider cultural problem of conformism, and despite the tree-lined streets, green areas were often paved over, creating less fresh air than advertised. The architecture critic Jane Jacobs was the first to express high-density nostalgia in her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in which she lamented the gradual loss of the “sidewalk ballet” of neighborhoods such as her home, New York City’s Greenwich Village.²⁷ Tied up in this appraisal of suburbia’s defects was an attempt to rehabilitate walkable central neighborhoods that were seen in the 1960s as antiquated at best and as dilapidated at worst (indeed, the book was very much a reaction to proposals to raze a large segment of Greenwich Village in the name of slum clearance).

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Along with the portrait of choreographed daily comings and goings of West Villagers that Jacobs romanticized, there was a larger hope to re-create socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods with small businesses and localized governance (even to the point of left-wing libertarianism, arguably).²⁸ This dream was based on older cities with compact streets mixing commercial and residential zoning. Examining the winding heterogeneous laneways of Europe—in contrast to the straight lines of ascendant North American modernism—Jacobs saw diversity in density. From population to building style to economic function, she sought to create a city that transformed each step one took through it, rather than places dominated by monofunctional land use for miles on end. In time, this formulation would be taken up not only for its social goals of neighborliness and coexistence but also for the broader objectives of immigrant integration, small business incubation, and alternative transportation for sustainability goals.

Jane Jacobs and the density that she cherished went, in a matter of twenty years, from an outsider critique of the hubris of urban planning to a foundational tenet of planning schools.²⁹ The philosophy of New Urbanism, made popular in the 1980s and 1990s, was a refocusing of urban design on building dynamic public spaces that maximized interactions between residents.³⁰ This meant smaller shops that were accessible by foot (or at least better integrated with the streets around them rather than surrounded by a sea of parking), more green spaces, and a far-reaching overhaul of zoning to mix commercial and residential functions whenever possible. New Urbanism was enthusiastically heralded by urban planners as a more sustainable way to build cities that returned to pre-automotive times with bustling street life, while community leaders praised the movement for its sociable and democratic qualities: bringing people back out to the urban agoras.³¹ The problem was that New Urbanism remained largely confined within the walls of architecture schools: a kind of on-paper architecture³² that was ignored by real estate developers who were busy quickly erecting identical single-family homes on greenfield exurban sites far from stores and mass transit. Indeed, as the United States continued to sprawl in the 1990s with no sign of densification—or of mass transit investment or mixed-use development—some critics began to see the New Urbanist philosophy as a mere design shell to be slapped onto strip malls and suburban neighborhoods: an easy way to claim innovation by adding a bench and calling it a plaza, or putting a few colorfully painted townhouses into a subdivision and calling it “urban.”³³

Despite the fact that lip service to New Urbanism has been de rigueur for a quarter century within city government, the planning and architecture professions, and major national development firms, little has been done to

move in this direction. City zoning laws are a big factor in these decisions that play a larger role than consumer preferences alone. As of 2019, Arlington, Texas, was zoned 89 percent for detached single-family homes; more compact Chicago was not much denser at 79 percent, showing that this housing form is not just de facto in American cities but legally mandated.³⁴ Density and apartments have become much more popular in gentrifying urban areas but this has not forced a systematic shift in the way that new buildings are designed. Instead, it has put more pressure on existing prewar neighborhoods with attractive street life and access to public transport. For those who appreciate the appeal of urban life, the past twenty-five years have been a profound disappointment: many people have embraced walkability, smaller homes, and vibrant streets but government has done almost nothing to incentivize this form of growth. Premium neighborhoods like Capitol Hill in Seattle or Dupont Circle in Washington, DC, grow more and more expensive. The affordable option continues to be far flung and monotonous suburbs, consternating those who would like to live the New Urbanist dream but are thwarted by the reality of housing costs.

Out of this history of stymied densification came the YIMBY movement: people steeped in knowledge about New Urbanism with a copy of the *Death and Life of Great American Cities* on their bedside table. These highly educated activists offer a marketing push to translate planning jargon, including New Urbanism, to a larger public. They focus on changing zoning codes to allow densification in places that have already experienced considerable gentrification. They seek to re-create the natural density of inner-city neighborhoods that was often diminished by 1960s slum clearance programs that bulldozed low-income houses and apartments to make way for high-rises. YIMBY activists are in a peculiar position: they assure wealthier homeowners that new construction will not create the unbearable, insalubrious density of the past, and they also assuage the fears of low-income residents that new housing will not further intensify gentrification and displacement.

The Gospel of Supply

The YIMBY movement has been criticized by many progressive housing advocates for its perceived free-market fundamentalism. It is, in the words of a longtime Seattle organizer: “just another way for centrist politicians to say that the public option is not on the table.” For those involved in social movements that defend or seek to build more public housing, YIMBYism is a poor substitute. More problematically, it besmirches the reputation of state-run accommodation, adding to a long history of divestment and

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demonization of the sector.³⁵ YIMBY activists usually describe themselves as embracing a multiplicity of approaches. They maintain that even though their voice is often the loudest on plans to build market-rate housing, they push for affordability within those projects. YIMBYs also profess support for tax increases to build more public housing, or for more novel measures such as co-ops or community land trusts. Their overriding argument is two-fold: public housing will never be built in sufficient quantities to solve the housing crisis in places like San Francisco, and increasing supply broadly will provide an expanded marketplace, bringing down prices for everyone.

This tide-that-lifts-all-boats argument of housing supply is not the focus of this book, but as a central argument of the YIMBY movement it is worth looking at in more detail to better show how density activists have reframed the housing affordability debate. Some more fringe elements of the movement are truly wedded to the idea that regulatory mechanisms—that often rely on considerable public participation—are the problem: if free markets reigned supreme then supply would immediately address demand. They go further to suggest that the affordability crisis is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to urban planning; everyone would be better served with more freedom and greater respect for private property, they maintain.³⁶ This group is an extreme minority of those whom I interviewed and of the conversations happening online among YIMBY activists. Rather, most YIMBYs recognize that urban housing markets are not made up of fragmented and isolated subgroups (subsidized, public, luxury, etc.) but contained within one overarching system. Thus, any infusion of new apartments broadens choices, driving down prices, keeping wealthier people out of socioeconomically transitioning areas, and lowering the cost of older units to greater levels of affordability in middle-class neighborhoods.

The housing economics that YIMBYism rests upon is a contested field that has, in the past decade, become even more heated with the growth of “supply skepticism.”³⁷ This theory argues that new housing has the potential to actually increase suppressed demand, particularly in neighborhoods at risk of gentrification where displacement is already a problem. It also disputes the idea that there is a trickle-down effect when it comes to affordability, asserting that new units are likely to be at the luxury end of the market to maximize developer profits, having little to no impact on those struggling to pay rent.³⁸ Scholars holding this view are quick to dispute the efficacy of “filtering”: the concept that articulates how markets supply low-income housing through the aging-out of older homes from middle-class segments of the market (and why luxury builds eventually produce more affordability lower down the real estate food chain).³⁹ These housing experts bolster the

growing concern over development not just from homeowners but also from renters seeking to avoid increases in their monthly payments.⁴⁰ However, there is still considerable evidence that the laws of supply and demand are not broken, just frustratingly slow.

Much of the existing data shows that adding to any part of the housing market, including the higher-priced segments, eventually lowers costs.⁴¹ Most studies in this field have shown that expanding supply slowly decreases costs for all sectors of the market. One New York City study showed that every 10 percent increase in market-rate housing in a given neighborhood would result in a 1 percent reduction in rental prices:⁴² a supply effect but not one that gives much optimism to public policy officials tasked with solving the affordability crisis. However, this does not take into account the fact that many new projects, including in New York, have inclusionary zoning mandates that require affordable units within all new projects. Other cities with more available land can also have positive effects from “gentle” upzoning through new building codes that allow multiple units on a single lot: this can range from townhouses to accessory dwelling units above garages or in backyards.⁴³ These more suburban fixes can have the benefit of increasing housing stock while moderating the pace of development and the attendant effects of neighborhood gentrification.

All signs show that, currently, state-funded options alone cannot solve the United States’ tremendous affordability crisis because of the incapacity for local and national governments to attain financing, organize construction, and, most importantly, secure public support. There is a huge gap between the desire of housing activists to launch radically expanded public housing programs and the will within state and federal government to find the money to do so. Ideologically, the United States, unlike Singapore or Sweden, is not bullish on public housing, given the history of slow completion on a relatively small scale with lackluster upkeep.⁴⁴ This presents a severe challenge to the amount of housing that is kept permanently affordable and has caused anti-gentrification activists to demand new sustainably built public housing as the major solution to the affordability crisis. A number of novel approaches have emerged since the 2008 crisis that would replace the “projects” of the 1960s with community land trusts, nonprofit housing, or a federal social housing authority tasked with purchasing bad assets and de-privatizing them.⁴⁵ Yet, YIMBY activists prefer to concentrate on supply only, without indicating what kind of housing will be prioritized. The majority are deeply skeptical that states like California will find the political capital to push through a purely “public option” for housing.

At the same time that YIMBYs advocate for a simple supply solution and point at statistics showing a slowdown in housing construction in desirable cities, they also ignore larger trends of housing market financialization that have occurred in the past two decades.⁴⁶ Growth is no longer simply a matter of providing new homes to people in need of rental housing but can serve platform-based tourist services (like Airbnb), “ghost tenants” who purchase units as a safe-deposit box for cash from abroad but reside elsewhere, or simply large financial firms that increasingly speculate in new apartments via real estate investment trusts (REITs).⁴⁷ This makes the question of *supply for whom* more important. Despite these changes, YIMBYs have trained their sights on a single achievable goal: repeal of single-family zoning across the country to increase the ability to build. The consistency and simplicity of this point is one of their major innovations and what has distinguished them from previous housing affordability activists.

The mainstream economics confirmation of YIMBY activists’ main argument (supply) is not necessarily a slam dunk for their cause, especially not in cities like San Francisco where they are most active. The argument that for-profit developers need a relaxation of single-family home restrictions to build (primarily) apartments is not an attractive one. Indeed, the immiseration of the unhoused and the gargantuan struggles of working-class people to make rent in places like the Bay Area seems to have opened possibilities for much more radical solutions to the affordable housing crisis. These options, sometimes lumped into sustainability proposals under the banner of the Green New Deal, have attracted millions of people to support a new role for the government in building and maintaining housing, akin to Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts during the Great Depression. Especially with the economic and public health devastation wreaked by the coronavirus pandemic, many in the housing activism space contend that now is the time for bold solutions, unlike YIMBYs who believe opening the spigot of supply would remove the biggest obstacle and go a long way in solving the crisis. This book traces the tension between YIMBYs and more radical housing movements that maintain that the time for measured steps and market-based solutions to housing affordability is well and truly over.⁴⁸

No Room for Neighborliness in the Struggle for Housing Affordability

In 2018 the YIMBY movement held its third national conference, called YIMBY Town, in Boston. It was hosted by a community college in the majority Black and Latino neighborhood of Roxbury and was well attended.

YIMBYs from around the United States mingled to talk urban planning and densification. Yet, by 2018, the frayed relationship between YIMBYs and other housing activist groups was well known. Some Boston activists had even publicly denounced the organizers' choice to host their conference in a neighborhood in the process of gentrification. For them, the gospel of "build more of everything" was completely off-key for people struggling to stay in their homes. Low-income people in the Roxbury neighborhood did not want to see more housing because they associated growth with getting priced out.

During the last speech of the conference, the main event was moved from a theater space to a gymnasium farther into the building's interior because organizers expected some "disruptions." As the speech was underway, a loud noise came from down the hallway as nearly a hundred protesters wearing bright yellow shirts with drums, kazoos, vuvuzelas, and giant signs decrying displacement stormed toward the gym. Organizers attempted to stop their march on the keynote speech without success. The protestors flooded into the gym and immediately walked to the front of the room as the audience fell into a hushed silence (aside from the click of mobile phone cameras to document the intruders). Members of progressive Boston housing groups—Right to the City, Dorchester Not for Sale, City Life/Vida Urbana, and others—stood at the front of the room with their banners facing the crowd in a pose meant to elicit shame and chanted, "We've got the power." The conference crashers had a brass band and a bullhorn, but the YIMBYs quickly gave them the microphone in a first act of capitulation. People in the audience politely clapped.

The standoff at the national conference was punctuated by a mini teach-in about gentrification from activists who were largely people of color (the YIMBY meeting was also diverse, which mitigated the white-interloper feeling that the movement is often accused of). One woman admonished the crowd: "You don't walk into a neighborhood without asking the people who live there." Later, one of the activists told the *Boston Globe* the gist of their concerns:

We keep being told the solution of "build, build, build" will trickle down to affordable housing in the most-impacted communities. But we don't have any proof of it. . . . We have complete proof of the opposite, which is that our folks get displaced and cannot afford the rents. It's hard to trust and support a movement that is not working for our communities.⁴⁹

The major grievance was that building more was exactly what local activists had been trying to stop for years in order to *maintain* affordability. Furthermore, the people who advocated for the opposite were largely outsiders

with a middle-class solution that seemed suspiciously geared toward their middle-class interests. As the conference crashers left, the audience erupted in loud applause. Later, the organizers released a statement in solidarity with the groups that disrupted them. Seemingly they decided the unplanned interruption was the best possible closing.

This showdown is at the heart of this book: those seeking market-rate densification of cities wish to simply join existing housing advocates as a different but complementary “flavor” of activism. YIMBYs believe this is possible; anti-gentrification groups do not. The former see themselves as expanding the struggle; the latter think the new focus is missing the crucial goal: helping those in the most need. The conflict between the two groups also shows a wider gulf within urban management and US politics more broadly: the centrist position is no longer a popular one. YIMBYs pride themselves on solving problems through compromise and incrementalism. That is a hard sell in American cities, which, at the moment, are riven with economic inequality, racial tension, and infrastructural neglect. This book shows how density activists frame urban issues and how they aim to rekindle neighborliness and the ethos of living together, and it interrogates their successes and failures in rousing a new political coalition of renters.

Structure of the Book

San Francisco—with its meteoric rent prices and booming tech economy—is ground zero for YIMBYism. The problem of housing affordability has jumped scale from a working-class issue to a middle-class one. The first chapter of the book examines how San Francisco has resisted building housing at the same rate as similar-sized cities. In 2014, YIMBY organizers began to demand immediate growth and densification and then exported this idea to other cities using conferences, slickly designed websites, podcasts, and toolkits for dealing with zoning boards. The chapter shows how the movement began as a standoff with an older generation of culturally Left former-hippie homeowners in San Francisco and Berkeley who opposed growth, splitting progressives on neighborhood issues. Last, it analyzes how YIMBYs lauded the work of anti-gentrification activists in the Mission District and Oakland but also sought to keep their own efforts separate and confined to middle-class participants, attracting the ire of tenants’ organizations that felt that middle-class (disproportionately white) housing groups should act in solidarity with working-class people of color rather than in their own interest.

As cities have both expanded and re-densified in the early twenty-first century, the ethos of NIMBYism has become harder to maintain. Often, people with NIMBY incentives are part of the baby-boom generation who grew up in suburbia (and see it as the quintessential model for cities because it structured their childhoods) and are now homeowners with valuable assets that could be adversely impacted by higher density. Conversely, density activists are mostly millennials (under age forty) who struggle to afford high rents and are locked out of the housing market. The second chapter examines interview data with YIMBY activists (most of whom are millennials) as well as a small sample of homeowners (all of whom are over age fifty), in order to contrast competing generational visions of how dense American cities should be.

Those who fight to keep away development often do so to protect values seen as inherently progressive, such as preservation of historic architecture, conservation of parks and open space, and protection of communities from displacement and gentrification. Yet, YIMBYs dislike the nexus of altruism and self-interest. They maintain that those with a Not in My Backyard mentality are frequently affluent progressives who bemoan gentrification but also have zero tolerance for growth, fueling housing shortages and a high rent burden for working-class families. The second chapter concludes by asking if YIMBYism is indeed a sea change in how a new generation is thinking about cities and, if successful, whether the movement's plans would drastically change the look and feel of sprawling American cities to be more vertical and urban.⁵⁰

Boulder, Colorado, is sometimes known as the “People’s Republic of Boulder” or the town “wedged between the Rocky Mountains and reality” for its massive network of hiking trails protected by a 1967 law creating an urban greenbelt to limit growth. Even with the constraint of the greenbelt, Boulder has not significantly densified despite a growing tech economy bringing new workers and the constant pressure of a student population of over 30,000. Since 2013, YIMBY groups have successfully lobbied against several ballot initiatives to limit growth, pushing back against anti-development residents who feel that more downtown apartments will ruin Boulder’s unique character. Chapter 3 analyzes how YIMBY groups navigate environmentalist objections to development:⁵¹ often arguing for growth using the rationale that real urban greening only occurs when dense walkable urban cores are created (a feature lacking from many American cities). It also contains a historical section on Ebenezer Howard’s ideal of the “garden city.” This framework was successfully implemented in Boulder

to establish protected public lands,⁵² but without proper urban density, the model has been ineffective in controlling sprawl.

The capital of Texas has a much-repeated mantra: “Keep Austin Weird.” Emblazoned on t-shirts and hissed at planning board meetings, it is invoked to guard against some of the most rapid population growth in the United States.⁵³ Chapter 4 shows how YIMBYs in Austin, who originally organized around expanding rail transit, began taking on anti-growth residents and sparked a war over urban authenticity.⁵⁴ Density activists see extensive construction as a means to stave off higher prices while continuing to attract new residents and preserving the “weird” spirit. Drawing on urban arts economy literature, the chapter shows why many YIMBY activists see themselves as the original Austin creatives, whose efforts in the arts and hospitality economies put the city on the national radar but who may now be victims of their own success because of rising prices.

The YIMBY movement has caught on in a range of global cities, including three groups in Australia, nine in the United Kingdom, and three in Sweden. These groups argue that urban life is no longer a cultural choice but the only path to upward mobility. The last chapter of the book broadly considers how YIMBYism transcended its American origins and found a global audience, and why this framing of housing affordability is novel in a range of international contexts. Drawing on examples from the United Kingdom and Australia, it considers how the movement has supplied a language of growth and densification that has been picked up in other Anglophone countries, even those without a strong history of NIMBY objections to apartment construction.

The book concludes by considering the future of YIMBYism and whether the fragile coalition of housing-growth advocates assembled in the past ten years can hold together and present a unified and appealing political platform for millennial voters. It also analyzes the immense challenges to high-density urban life brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, examining whether apartment living can maintain its appeal in an era of widespread epidemiological fear.

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