

# “The working classes derive fewer benefits from urban greening initiatives”

## Interview with

### Isabelle Anguelovski,

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Director of the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability.

## KEY POINTS

► **The European research project Green Locally Unwanted Land Uses (GreenLULUs) is analysing the social impact of urban greening projects on the neighbourhoods in which they take place. In the European and North American cities studied, the creation of parks and greenways generally led to middle and lower-income households having to leave regenerated areas. However, there are tools available to prevent this phenomenon.**

*La Santé en action: What are the objectives of the Green Locally Unwanted Land Uses (GreenLULUs) research project that you coordinated?*

*Isabelle Anguelovski:* We studied the effects of renaturing or greening programmes carried out in 30 cities in North America and Europe. We indexed and geolocated the new green spaces and nature restoration initiatives implemented between 1990 and 2017, whether these were community gardens, urban forests, small recreation or play areas, and so on. In parallel, we created a gentrification index<sup>1</sup> to characterise the social exclusion, displacement or eviction of disadvantaged populations. This index takes into account the level of education and income

of residents, as well as their ethnicity. Our research aims to measure how the creation of green spaces contributes to the gentrification of a city’s neighbourhoods. We wanted to find out if it was possible to isolate a “green variable”, independent of other variables such as a neighbourhood’s proximity to the city centre, public transport provision or property development. In the majority of medium-sized towns studied, we show that urban greening explains gentrification. In some cities, it is the main driving force, as in Nantes in France, Seattle and Atlanta in the United States and Vancouver in Canada. In others, such as Barcelona, property development and greening have together played a role in gentrification.

*S.A.: How is green gentrification flourishing?*

*I.A.:* In the case of Barcelona, for example, the development of tourism has been an accelerating factor. The city’s greening projects have seen several phases, including the “super-blocks”, formally and strategically launched during Ada Colau’s<sup>2</sup> first term in office. These are residential blocks where public spaces, mobility and vegetation have been conceived to provide residents with green spaces, pedestrianised streets and cycle paths. However, these islets have been taken over by hotel and rental property developments and appropriated by tourists. It’s a phenomenon that has been observed in southern European cities that are popular with visitors, such as Barcelona, Lisbon, Florence and Venice: tourist

accommodation, such as Airbnb-type flats (mostly owned by large international landlords), is concentrated in leafy districts, where residents no longer have the financial means to stay or move in. Since 2010, Nantes has been striving to become a high quality of life (HQL) urban community by cultivating an image that is both culturally and environmentally attractive. This positioning has attracted the working population of Paris and foreign tourists, leading to a surge in property prices. In Boston, in response to climate change, the East Boston coastline has been redeveloped with the creation of parks and the restoration of wetlands. However, luxury property developments have cropped up along this seafront, built on an elevated section. Behind them, homes for less well-off households remain in flood-prone areas.

*S.A.: Does urban greening necessarily lead to exclusion of middle-income or disadvantaged populations?*

*I.A.:* Not always, but it’s happening more and more in large cities because of the magnetic attraction of greenery. Today, we are seeing competition between cities, competitive urban planning to determine which will be the greenest and most attractive in terms of quality of life. Being positioned as a green town offering a high quality of life leads to speculation in the property market for luxury housing. Middle or low-income residents are forced to move to the outskirts, to neighbourhoods with more concrete and greater exposure to pollution. And the green spaces



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The Jardin Extrordinaire, a new public park in the city of Nantes, installed in a former quarry.

there are of poorer quality, as they are run-down or unsafe. This means that the working and lower middle classes derive fewer benefits from urban greening projects. What's more, they generally don't have the option of remote working or flexible working hours that would allow them to move away from the city to work in a more rural area. They often have to live near to their place of employment but in neighbourhoods that are less expensive, perhaps because they are close to a source of industrial pollution, for example. These areas are also more unpleasant to live in during heatwaves, as there is less vegetation so fewer cool areas. We have also observed that this social exclusion is coupled with cultural exclusion, meaning people feel like the new green spaces are not for them. In Boston, the seafront has now been taken over by the white population for jogging; the young people of the neighbourhood do not feel welcome to play different sports there. In the greened pedestrian zones, trendy cafés are springing up, serving vegetarian food and brunch, which are not part of the cultural habits of the long-standing residents. These are examples of "disruptive landscapes", as my colleague Margarita Triguero-Mas calls them, in which the original inhabitants no longer fit in and feel disconnected. In Barcelona, in the refurbished neighbourhood of Santa Caterina i Sant Pere, a survey we conducted among families at a

primary school showed that over 65% of people expressed dissatisfaction with public green spaces and play areas, or a feeling of not being welcome.

**S.A.: *How can cities be both green and fair?***

**J.A.:** The Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability has published a practical guide offering 50 urban planning tools to prevent green gentrification. In order to avoid exclusion, urban nature projects must be considered in conjunction with social and housing policies. Many of these tools are compatible with initiatives that promote access to affordable, quality housing, such as increasing public housing stock or the funds allocated to social landlords for building or improving the energy efficiency and landscaping of homes. Programmes to encourage the construction of housing accessible to low-income households are needed: developers should be allowed to increase housing density in a given area as long as they commit to setting aside part of it for social housing. Regulations could also require them to invest in public green spaces, which would help ensure sufficient budgets to finance new green spaces elsewhere in the city. The guide also highlights the housing transformation policies and cooperative housing models used in Germany and the Netherlands. We should also mention the most assertive policies

for a right to return aimed at Black populations who have been displaced from regenerated neighbourhoods; one example is in Portland, with the adoption of the North/Northeast Preference Policy, based on the construction or renovation of housing at affordable prices and reserved as a priority for people with generational ties to these areas. Rent controls are another option; these are used in Berlin and Washington. Fairness means avoiding gentrification, but also investing in the quality of life in more working-class and peripheral neighbourhoods. A public budget must be set aside for various greening projects. Green gentrification, driven by new infrastructure to combat climate change, is not irreversible. ■

Interview by Joëlle Maraschin, journalist.

1. The process by which the population of a working-class neighbourhood gives way to a more affluent social stratum. (Editor's note.)

2. Mayor of Barcelona between 2015 and 2023. (Editor's note.)

**For more information**

- E. Oscilowicz, I. Anguelovski, H. Cole, A. Cañizares (coordinators and editors.) *Policy and Planning Tools for Urban Green Justice*. Barcelona: Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability, 2021: 251 p. Online: <https://www.bcnej.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Toolkit-Urban-Green-Justice.pdf>
- 'Right to return' policy in Portland. Online: <https://habitatportlandregion.org/a-right-to-return/>