



LESSON PLAN

# Relocating Residents: The Impact of Housing on Community



RELATED FILM

**Even the Walls**

BY SAMAN MAYDANI AND SARAH KUCK



## Relocating Residents: The Impact of Housing on Community

### Key Idea

Architecture and neighborhood design have consequences on human activity and relationships. Redesigning public housing has a significant impact on residents who have lived, in some cases for generations, within specific architectural and human systems.

### Background

Across the United States, low-income, urban neighborhoods are being redeveloped to benefit middle-class and upper-class housing, business, and cultural interests. The results can be seen as “positive” with updated buildings, improved transportation, reduced crime, more robust economies, and new parks and other amenities. But often, individuals, families, and entire neighborhoods are displaced or destroyed in this process, commonly known as “gentrification.” Merriam-Webster defines gentrification as “the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents.” Gentrification is taking place in many major American cities, with the biggest impacts made between 2000 and 2010 in Portland, Oregon; Washington, D.C.; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Seattle, Washington. In those cities, 50% or more of lower-income areas have been gentrified.\*

First built in 1941, the 30-acre Yesler Terrace, located in downtown Seattle, was Washington’s first subsidized housing development as well as the country’s first racially integrated public development. In 2013, the Seattle Housing Authority began a far-reaching redevelopment plan that would do away with 561 units and rebuild the site with approximately 5,000 housing units of which 1,800 will be subsidized for both low- and moderate-income residents. The plan also includes parks, a walking loop, community gardens, and improved connections to local neighborhoods, environmentally sensitive housing units, and business and office space.\*\*

The Seattle Housing Authority has guaranteed that all current Yesler Terrace residents, in 2016, have the opportunity to move into the new development; however, residents face temporary dislocation during construction. Critics of the redevelopment note that such dislocation will disrupt the lives of vulnerable residents, including education, healthcare



**Film:** 27 minutes

**Class:** 60 minutes

### SUBJECT AREAS

#### HIGH SCHOOL

- English Language Arts
- Geography
- Modern World Studies
- Sociology

#### COLLEGE

- English
- Geography
- Economics
- History
- Sociology

### THEMES

- Connection to home
- Consequences of development
- Community

### MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

### PREPARATION

- None



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access, and other services.\*\*\* The short film, *Even the Walls*, co-directed by Saman Maydani and Sarah Kuck, depicts residents of Yesler Terrace as the demolition begins, exploring their thoughts and feelings about relocation. While some residents look forward to new and updated housing, others resist the change, and most lament the loss of a neighborhood that has been their home and refuge—in some cases, for generations.

\*Mike Maciag, "[Gentrification in America Report](#)." *Governing Magazine*, February, 2014.

\*\*"[Yesler Terrace](#)." Seattle Housing Authority.

\*\*\*"[Yesler Terrace Gentrification](#)." Urban Youth Justice blog, 2012.

### Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. D2.Geo.2.9-12. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Geo.5.9-12. Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.



### Lesson

#### SETTING THE STAGE

Explain to students that they will view *Even the Walls*, a short film about a low-income housing project, Yesler Terrace, in downtown Seattle. The Seattle Housing Authority is tearing down the site in order to create a larger, mixed-income neighborhood with both residential and business spaces. Explain that the filmmakers explore the human connections that are created within the Yesler Terrace neighborhood.

Read this quote from Saman Maydani, one of the filmmakers, aloud or write it on the board:

*Being in a space that allows for neighborhood connections, like seeing your neighbors, interacting with the children, watching each others backs and properties—these things all increase feelings of safety and ownership in a space. And these are our natural human inclinations, if our environments support us.*

Ask students to think about where they live. What are some of the physical characteristics of their housing communities? Do students live in houses or apartments? Do they live in an urban or rural area? Ask students how the design of housing might support neighbors by encouraging them to engage with others. (Some answers could include: Porches facing other apartments or houses, wide hallways or community areas—such as lobbies in apartment buildings—shared parks, playgrounds, or other outdoor spaces, laundromats, restaurants, and shops.)

Ask students if there is a design feature from this list that they would like to see as part of their neighborhood to encourage a stronger sense of community? If so, what would that be? Why?

#### ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Before watching the film, ask students to take note of how Yesler Terrace residents feel about the changes and the possible relocation. Students can consider the following questions while watching the film: What are some of the residents' comments about the forthcoming change? What might residents miss as the walls are torn down? What are some expectations about the future of the new Yesler Terrace?



### Delving Deeper

After viewing the film, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Make a list of the physical characteristics of Yesler Terrace, as depicted in the film. What materials are the housing units built from? What are signs of its age and disrepair? Describe the outside spaces in the neighborhood.
- Describe what the future Yesler Terrace would look like, with evidence from the film, as described by residents. (Some answers include: Mid or high-rise apartments; newer; updated design; indoor pools.)
- Based on observations from the film, what do residents find positive about living at Yesler Terrace? What are some of the challenges or difficulties they experience?
- Residents interviewed in the film come from a variety of backgrounds. Describe some of the residents' ethnicities and nationalities. (Answers include: Iraqi, Native American, African American, Asian, and Sudanese.) Do you think the diversity of residents in Yesler Terrace contribute to a more dynamic neighborhood? If so, how?
- Selaay says, "Growing up in Yesler, you really see what a community is." What do you think he means by this? List examples of what a community is, from his perspective in the film. How would you define community in your own life? Are there similarities between your own definition and what you feel Selaay means?
- One Yesler resident explains that the simple fact of high-rise living, which is part of the future of Yesler Terrace, will destroy the current sense of community. Using the film as evidence, why do you think this might be? (Some answers include: Porches and private yards will disappear. You will not be able to simply sit and see your neighbors pass by.)



### Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. [West Side Stories](#) is a project of Youth Radio Interactive, based out of West Oakland. The project is composed of youth who collaborate to document gentrification in West Oakland. Visit the website and click on one of the short audio interviews, which explore residents' lives and perspectives, capturing the changes in Oakland. Once you have listened to an audio interview, think about one of the characters in *Even the Walls* and write a short paragraph describing his/her story in first person, from his/her point of view. Use the following questions as motivation for your paragraph: How long have you been a resident of Yesler Terrace and what are the most significant changes you've witnessed that has impacted your life and community? (As an alternative, students can take this question home for homework and interview a family member or neighbor and write about changes to their own neighborhood or community.) (CCSS.ELA.W.9-10.3 and W.11-12.3)
2. In the film, Selaay says, "They're stomping out all the ties we have with each other. That's where the problem and the powerlessness is." What do you think Selaay means by this statement? Write a paragraph and explain how one might be empowered by ties, or connections, to other people, like one's neighbors. How might losing the ties to one's neighbors create a sense of powerlessness? Or, how might losing the connections to friends or family create a sense of powerlessness? (C3.D2.Geo.5.9-12)
3. Many urban neighborhoods in the United States are undergoing major development changes, like Yesler Terrace. This article, "[The End of Black Harlem](#)," in *The New York Times* documents the changes to Harlem, New York due to gentrification. Read the first few paragraphs. The Times asked readers to share their images of Harlem through Instagram using the hashtag [#MyHarlemNYT](#). Photos include buildings, shops, food, skylines, and residents enjoying life. If you were to



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take a photograph to document your neighborhood, what would you document? Write a paragraph and use specific details to describe the image you would capture. Ask students to read their paragraphs aloud in class. (As an alternative, assign this for a homework assignment. Students would go home and take a photograph, using a camera or smartphone. They can print a copy at home or school and bring it to class the next day. In addition to the photograph, students would also write a paragraph describing the image to read aloud in class.)  
(C3.D2.Geo.2.9-12)

### Resources

Benjamin Grant, "[Flag Wars: What is Gentrification?](#)" PBS.

Bob Young, "[Some question if Yesler spirit will live on after redevelopment.](#)" *The Seattle Times*, October 31, 2015.

"[Evolving Voices: A Conversation with Saman Maydani and Sarah Kuck.](#)" Vignettes, May 21, 2015.

Michael Henry Adams, "[The End of Black Harlem.](#)" *The New York Times*, May 27, 2016.