Countering Gentrification in Tāmaki Makarau: Towards a Framework for Urban Environmental Justice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief argues for urban policies that actively aim to end gentrification.

Gentrification is intimately tied to state-led processes of urban renewal. Though historically understood as the displacement of low-income households as an unfortunate byproduct of socio-economic and demographic neighbourhood change, contemporary gentrification is constituted by profit-driven investment decisions that erase undervalued neighbourhoods and their communities in the name of urban renewal (variously referred to as redevelopment, regeneration, renaissance, or revitalisation).

These processes of gentrification fundamentally contribute to environmental injustice. At the same time as creating 'zones of abundance', neighbourhood regeneration projects simultaneously (re-)create 'zones of neglect and sacrifice', which are burdened with environmental risks. As low-income and ethnic minority households are more likely to either reside in or to be displaced into these neighbourhoods, they are disproportionately exposed to environmental risk factors.

Moreover, gentrification enables and legitimises the exclusion of marginalised communities in multiple ways: 1) it devalues existing places and their residents in favour of regeneration, 2) it displaces longtime residents from regenerated neighbourhoods because of increasing property values, and/or 3) it alienates longtime residents as neighbourhood aesthetics, amenities and services change and become unaffordable and/or irrelevant.

As gentrification contributes to low-income households' experiences of precarity and severs community ties and place attachments, it generates significant costs to personal and community health and wellbeing as well as social cohesion. The recommendations articulated in this brief emphasise the importance of transformative policy solutions that actively counter gentrification. These include:

- Equitable investment in urban infrastructure
- Prioritising affordable housing
- Ensuring accessible transportation
- Empowering local communities
- Implementing a Te Tiriti o Waitangi approach to policy development

INTRODUCTION

The *WERO Environmental Racism Project* is one of the first comprehensive research projects examining environmental racism and racialisation in Aotearoa New Zealand specifically focusing on impacts for low-income, racialised communities. Conducted as part of the WERO Working to End Racial Oppression research programme, we examined the drivers that lead to ethnic communities being inequitably exposed to environmental risks in otherwise culturally diverse neighbourhoods. To this end, we carried out empirical research including resident surveys, resident and key informant interviews and focus groups, observations in public spaces, as well as the monitoring of air quality (CO_2) and the temperature and humidity of select apartments in the city centre. The research was conducted in Auckland's City Centre and neighbourhood of Avondale. These are two of the most diverse metropolitan areas in New Zealand, and each has a neighbourhood deprivation score of greater than 5.[1] Parts of both neighbourhoods exhibit significant exposure to environmental risk factors, such as air and noise pollution from road traffic and urban activities including construction, and significant changes to the environmental landscape. They also experience limited opportunities to environmental benefits, including access to green space, community spaces, and supermarkets/amenities.

This study addresses a research gap in terms of engaging with environmental injustice in Aotearoa New Zealand, a field which has received significant attention in countries such as the USA, Australia and Canada. Further, this research critically analyses how environmental inequality is fuelled by and intersects with social, economic, and racial inequalities. Such factors, resulting in the disproportionate exposure of already marginalised communities to environmental risks, have often remained hidden.

Based on this research and the work of Teelucksingh (2007), we have developed the *Environmental Racialisation Framework*, which offers a typology of processes that – often in intersection with each other – create or reproduce environmental injustices that are disproportionately borne by low-income and ethnic minority households (Edwards et al., 2025). The *Environmental Racialisation Framework* serves as an analytical tool which researchers as well community organisations and policy makers can use to evaluate existing policies and inform policy development to uncover the complex social, economic and historical factors that influence environmental inequality and create transformative practices, policies and laws that eliminate environmental inequalities.

In this brief, we focus on **gentrification** as a key dimension of environmental injustice that disproportionately burdens low-income and racialised communities in New Zealand cities. While gentrification was not a key focus of this research at the outset, it emerged as an important element of environmental injustice. We use an adapted version of the *Environmental Racialisation Framework* to pinpoint *how* gentrification creates environmental harm for racialised communities and illustrate these with examples from our research in Auckland's city centre and the neighbourhood of Avondale. We conclude this brief with a call and recommendations for urban policy action that not only mitigates the consequences of gentrification but actively counters the very processes that constitute gentrification.

ENVIRONMENTAL (IN)JUSTICE

The concept and visions of **environmental justice** are deeply entwined with considerations of **racism**. The environmental justice movement emerged in response to the perceived colour-blindness of environmentalism. Civil rights movements stressed the racialised inequities in who is burdened with – or conversely protected from – environmental risk and harm. As Juskus (2023) has argued, anti-racism is therefore integral to environmental justice. Internationally, the Canadian *National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Act* is a key example of legislation that recognises and aims to "assess, prevent and address environmental racism and to advance environmental justice" (Government of

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Canada, 2025). The Act explicitly states that "racial discrimination in the development of environmental policy would constitute environmental racism" (Government of Canada, 2025).

While the term environmental racism is most commonly used to describe the active and intentional processes leading to racial inequities in people's exposure to environmental risk and harm, we promote the term environmental racialisation to emphasise the often unintentional and seemingly colourblind policy actions that lead to racialised inequities and outcomes.

ENVIRONMENTAL (IN)JUSTICE & GENTRIFICATION

Gentrification is routinely equated with the unfortunate but seemingly unavoidable outcome of displacing low-income and racialised households from neighbourhoods that undergo revitalisation and a subsequent increase in property values typically followed by an influx of higher-income earners (Curran & Kern, 2023). This understanding of *gentrification as displacement* was largely suitable for historic waves of demographic neighbourhood change driven by middle-class households moving into low-income neighbourhoods (Glass, 1964; Lees, Slater & Wyly, 2008) but it is inadequate for understanding contemporary state-led neighbourhood change.

Displacement is only one element of contemporary gentrification. Rather, in its contemporary form, *gentrification is synonymous with redevelopment*. As Hackworth (2002, p. 815) noted, gentrification is "the production of space for progressively more affluent users". Informed by urban growth agendas (Boston, 2021), the state-led redevelopment of urban areas slated for 'improvements' – variously captured by terms such as regeneration, revitalisation, or renewal – constitute gentrification because gentrification stakeholders (government, developers, businesses, etc.) unilaterally decide which areas to invest or disinvest in. These decisions are driven by profit motives with little regard for or consultation with existing residents. Following Jenkins (2025), the key element of gentrification is therefore not displacement but domination. Raising questions about "*for whom, against whom*, and *who decides*" (Slater, 2021, p. 55, emphasis original), such state-led renewal signals that gentrification is not an unfortunate byproduct but a defining feature of urban policies (Lees, 2022).

Gentrification is a key contributor to environmental injustice because it burdens low-income communities of colour with environmental risks and harm while benefitting and protecting higher-income white majority households. Using an adapted version of the *Environmental Racialisation Framework* that centres gentrification (Figure 1), we highlight how it creates and reinforces environmental injustice.

Figure 1: Environmental Racialisation Framework with a focus on gentrification

Gentrification, as defined above, creates **zones of abundance** (Juskus, 2023). These are the neighbourhoods, which upon completed revitalisation feature 'improved' housing, transport, business activity, as well as public and green spaces for its residents and visitors to enjoy.

Creating such zones of abundance invariably entails the parallel creation of **zones of sacrifice** and **zones of neglect.** This happens in multiple ways.

1. As areas that have experienced sustained disinvestment, zones of neglect are most frequently slated for regeneration, because historic disinvestment means a substantial 'rent gap'[2] makes development most profitable. In these cases, *zones of neglect become zones of abundance.*

2. Zones of abundance and zones of neglect coexist – often in proximity – *because of conscious investment decisions.* While some areas are valued and prioritised, others continue to be neglected and can therefore also be characterised as zones of sacrifice. This can also play out at smaller scales within a neighbourhood, where some parts are revitalised, while other parts are neglected and allowed to deteriorate.

3. Creating zones of abundance often also entails creating zones of sacrifice, as "places that disproportionately bear the environmental harms our economies produce" (Juskus, 2023, p. 4). A realistic scenario involves disposing of elements that do not fit the vision of abundance from the place being revitalised to another area. Often, these elements are polluting industries and environmentally harmful materials which are moved to an existing zone of neglect, turning the latter into a zone of sacrifice.

This uneven production of urban spaces inevitably reproduces classed and racialised inequities. For one, processes of regeneration erase original – and most often low-income, ethnic minority – neighbourhoods and with them the identities and place attachments of their residents. Such erasure of existing places is underpinned by economistic 'highest and best use' arguments and by classed and racialised assumptions about what makes a 'good' neighbourhood. In settler colonial societies, such as Aotearoa New Zealand, such assumptions are also reminiscent of settler colonial logics of what constitutes productive and valuable land use (Byrns & Berbary, 2022).

Secondly, while urban renewal (aka gentrification) is frequently framed as beneficial for all residents, these benefits exclusively accrue to newcomers and are indeed designed with them in mind (Hackworth, 2002; Stein, 2019; Terruhn, 2019). This means that **inclusion** is extended to more affluent newcomers, rather than to existing inhabitants. Indeed, the latter are frequently **excluded**, either through **displacement** or **alienation**. As the prices for both real estate and improved amenities increase, original inhabitants or their children are often forced to leave the area. Most often, they are **displaced** back into zones of neglect and/or sacrifice, where housing is more affordable. Given that zones of neglect and sacrifice are more likely to harbour environmental harms, such displacement, then, constitutes a form of environmental racism because "low-income and minority populations [...] are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices that more affluent people can avoid" (Lerner cited in Juskus, 2023, p. 11).

If longtime residents stay, they may feel **alienated** from the surrounding neighbourhood, which now caters to its higher-income clientele (Shaw and Hagemans, 2015) with unaffordable and/or "culturally irrelevant" amenities (Davis et al., 2023, p. 298). Research has also shown that low-income and especially public housing residents in gentrified neighbourhoods are perceived not to conform to the image of "safety, order and creativity" (Zukeran et al., 2024, p. 166) and therefore face being "excluded, marginalized, and surveilled" (Tuttle and Huante 2023, p. 68) by their new neighbours. Davis et al. (2023, p. 289) catalogue the multiple manifestations of alienation as "(1) confronting changing neighborhood norms, (2) 'othering,' (3) losing social connections, (4) encroaching, and (5) witnessing the erasure of what was".

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2   The 'rent gap', as first theorised by Neil Smith (1979), refers to the gap between a site's actual value and its potential value to be achieved at 'best use'. A greater rent gap entails an increased likelihood of redevelopment/gentrification. Prolonged disinvestment can therefore increase the rent gap.

While the right to stay put (or remain) has been articulated as a key argument in countering displacement (see Kern & Kovesi, 2018), it must be noted that immobility can be a result of **housing entrapment**. This means that some people are forced to remain in the gentrified neighbourhood despite feeling alienated from their surroundings. For instance, low-income residents may find few alternative housing options and the cost of moving may be prohibitive. Similarly, public housing residents who have little say about where they live may find themselves entrapped in gentrifying neighbourhoods. This is especially the case where large public housing estates are redeveloped into mixed neighbourhoods with greater shares of market housing (see Terruhn, 2019). Given that mixed communities have become a dominant paradigm in urban planning, entrapment and alienation may become more frequent experiences.

Gentrification is frequently portrayed as an issue of class, or socio-economic status but, as much international research has shown, it is inherently linked to race and ethnicity (Dantzler, 2021; Fallon, 2021; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022). Locally, previous (Terruhn & Ye, 2021) as well as our own research in Avondale demonstrate the intersections between race and class in gentrification. Historically, unequal relationships have channelled and captured ethnic communities in particular spaces, leading to disproportionate concentrations of racialised disadvantage and poverty, as well as advantage and affluence. In Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, for example, Māori and Pacific households were displaced from the inner-city neighbourhood of Ponsonby to South and West Auckland and remain largely locked out of other areas (Salesa, 2017). More recently, the state-led regeneration of Glen Innes displaced many of the neighbourhood's low-income Māori and Pacific residents (Gordon et al., 2017), though their post-displacement movements have been difficult to track.

At the same time as Indigenous, racialised and low-income communities are excluded, displaced and alienated, gentrification stakeholders routinely employ place branding that emphasises and sells the area's cultural diversity to newcomers. As a result, markers of cultural diversity shift from being "symbols of ownership and belonging" into mere place-branding icons (Tuttle and Huante, 2023). In Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Māori and Pacific cultural markers are routinely deployed to market the city without acknowledging that Māori and Pacific Auckland residents disproportionately experience housing precarity and neighbourhood deprivation (Terruhn, 2020).

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON GENTRIFICATION IN THE AUCKLAND CITY CENTRE AND AVONDALE

Both the Auckland City Centre and Avondale have been undergoing major state-led redevelopments and 'revitalisation' over the previous decade, one guided by the City Centre Masterplan (its 2012 original and 2020 refresh), the other by the 2017 Avondale High Level Project Plan.

Zones of abundance, neglect and sacrifice

In the Auckland City Centre, especially the waterfront (including the Britomart, Commercial Bay, Viaduct, and Wynyard Quarter areas) has received notable investment in the built space. These areas now boast restaurants, bars, and designer boutiques. Notably, these are areas that are frequented by tourists, office workers, and residents of nearby affluent suburbs.

At the same time, the outer perimeters of the City Centre (such as Beach Road and Hobson/Nelson St), which house larger numbers of inner-city residents exhibit clear signs of underinvestment. There are few green spaces, amenities and commercial outlets, while vacant lots abound. These areas are largely populated by public housing residents, students and recent migrants. As Edwards et al. (2025, p. 17) have argued, many of these residents are a captured market, meaning "there is little incentive for landlords to invest in the upkeep of these dwellings or, indeed, even the surrounding neighbourhood and streets".
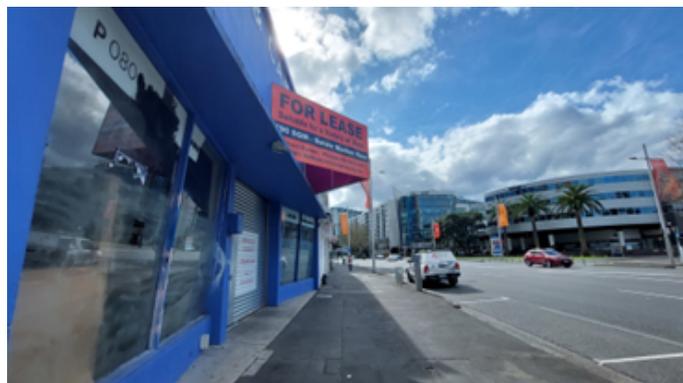
Images: Beach Rd (City Centre) vacant lots to lease.

Underinvestment in these communities is not intentionally targeting these racialised spaces, but the result of prioritisation within past and current development plans, as illustrated in these quotes from Auckland Council key informants:

> "In the city centre there's been a deliberately planned pattern of development. So, if you look at it from what's been done to date you'd say no it's not equitable, but that doesn't mean that it won't be, so *it's not that areas are neglected per se it's just that there is a deliberate move to kind of do the waterfront and Wynyard Quarter*, that's been a twenty-year plan to make that a great place." (emphasis added)

> "I don't see it as inequitable investment. In the city centre it's very much up to- we sat at council doing unitary plans so what the planning rules are and then *it's up to the private developers where they think they can get money*. And our role at council is to support around the fringes of that." (emphasis added)

The West Auckland neighbourhood of Avondale can be characterised as a zone of neglect that has experienced sustained underinvestment. A derelict (leaky and mouldy) community centre, and large vacant parking lot in the middle of its high street were some signs of underinvestment. While Avondale ranks high on the index of multiple deprivation, it is home to a strong community of ethnically diverse and mostly low-income households.

In 2017, Eke Panuku (now Auckland Urban Development Office) identified a "major opportunity to revitalise and intensify" the neighbourhood. Intensifying the neighbourhood with the extensive addition of both market rate and public housing,

Avondale's population is projected to grow by 8,000 people. Demographic change seems certain. While newcomers may include "existing locals seeking low maintenance new build dwellings designed to suit their life stage, Aucklanders priced out of their current suburb as well as those from cheaper suburbs aspiring to the amenity and lifestyle of the area" (Kāinga Ora, 2020), projections suggest that "over half of future housing supply in Avondale will be the apartment typology" (Kāinga Ora, 2020). As these are mostly smaller, they will be largely unsuitable for Māori and Pacific households.

While new amenities will include a new library and state-of-the-art community hub, Avondale stands to lose current community spaces. As reported in various media articles this year (e.g., Killick, 2025; Long, 2025), locals have voiced concern about the proposed sale of the neighbourhood's racecourse – a site of local sporting events and longstanding popular Sunday market – to make way for new housing. As such, parts of Avondale can be characterised as a zone of sacrifice to accommodate population growth.

Community advocates emphasised that these **state-led developments benefit newcomers** and other regions rather than longtime residents and the local community they constitute:

> "The gentrification thing … is an area of concern with the redevelopment of things because [...] you're going to acquire and/ or dispose of public land to stimulate development and you say it's for the benefit of Avondale. That's bullshit unless you've actually got a plan to benefit Avondale. If you were going to do that, then my suggestion would be you should make these priority available to people that whakapapa or

connect back to Avondale that they should be supported with pathways into home ownership. Because if you're just building these things and you say it's for the benefit of Avondale then when people go and buy them if they're not from Avondale then how does that benefit Avondale? [...] And then if you're Eke Panuku you make the argument that bringing more residents into the town centre means more patronage for the shops so the businesses benefit, but most business owners here don't live here and as part of Eke Panuku's 'regeneration' there's no deliberate support for locals to own these businesses.... So, yeah we might have hundreds more people living in the town centre meaning hundreds more potential customers, but where does that money go? Out of our community."

Displacement and alienation

In our research, community advocates in Avondale and parts of the City Centre specifically voiced concern about the impact of more affluent newcomers on social cohesion and the relevance of changing neighbourhood aesthetics for long-term residents. Echoing resident concerns recorded in earlier research (Terruhn & Ye, 2019), interviewees emphasised that demographic change may result in siloing as newcomers are feared to have little desire to interact with low-income and especially public housing residents:

> "I think that people that have spent 1 million or 2 million dollars to buy a home here, they could live here their whole lives without meeting anybody from a state house on Avondale Road that has been here since the 60s."

They also noted marked shifts in aesthetics and consumption and stressed that these new spaces are not only unsuitable for long-term residents, many of whom are from low-income Māori, Pacific and Asian communities, but also impact on their ability to access essential goods and services as illustrated in the quotes below:

> "I can see Avondale being gentrified. I can see that as the population is shifting and I've already seen that in Sandringham [...] you've got all these posh little eateries

and posh whatever. Things that middle class folk like. I can see when there's more people move in, the shops are slowly going to start changing."

> "With our social housing residents, if K Road [in Auckland City Centre] was to gentrify to a certain level and it's just florists now and bridal shops and f* [expletive used by participant] Tesla and cakeries and these types of places, and cafes and bars and eateries - If it's just those places, where can you be comfortable? Where can you even go to get your basic needs and services met? You know, if the Lim Chhour supermarket on K Road, the Chinese supermarket is now Farro Fresh [an upper end grocery store] in the future and everything's more expensive than the market, where do you go get your groceries?"

For another key informant, a demographic shift might also obscure the needs of existing low-income residents:

> "There's always going to be people struggling here but it's almost another excuse. Once it becomes gentrified, there's a way for Council to say there's nothing to do here because with a certain class of people coming in, they may have greater ability be less needy."

Key informants highlighted that land owned by local community groups (such as faith-based organisations) was a safeguard against gentrification but there was no consensus over whether public housing would ultimately be a barrier to gentrification.

> "Churches own quite a bit of land and that's what would make it difficult for that area to be completely gentrified. There are some community-oriented groups that own land and buildings. As long as they stay on, the kaupapa will always ensure that certain communities are catered for."

> "There is a lot of private development, but there is so much public housing development that I think we will actually remain very diverse in terms of income, ethnicity, lived experience, whatever."

"Just because something is state housing, it's not a guarantee. Kāinga Ora is also getting into partnerships with other developers and everything else and so they're after a profit. It's not just a community thing."

These quotes exemplify the threat of profit motives, the role of community ownership and a sense that local communities must resist gentrification.

TRANSFORMATIVE POLICY SOLUTIONS

Based on our research, we echo scholars who emphasise government responsibility to counter gentrification that alienates low-income as well as racialised long-term residents who have established links to the neighbourhood (Dawkins, 2023; Jenkins, 2025; Slater, 2021). As Jenkins (2024, p. 191) has argued, it is not enough to address displacement and its associated harms. Instead, fighting gentrification itself must be an explicit policy goal for municipal and central governments. This means disabling the legislative processes that facilitate gentrification.

As seen through the voices of our community advocates/key informants, only a long-term approach and multiple strategies can counter the reproduction of classed and racialised inequities as laid out in the Gentrification Framework:

Equitable investment in urban infrastructure

Slater (2006; 2021) argues that the discourse of having to choose between sustained disinvestment and gentrification or between 'blight' and 'abundance' is a false dichotomy. Instead, we need to be cognisant of the relationship between the two. Ending gentrification enables us to protect and provide for neighbourhoods more equitably to ensure all places and their residents are well looked after.

- *Equitably provide for all urban neighbourhoods*: Instead of prioritising and earmarking some neighbourhoods or parts of them for wholesale change that favours private developers and the influx of more affluent residents, ensure ongoing "adequate provisioning of all urban neighborhoods" (Curran & Kern, 2023, p. 1). This

means sustained investment in the maintenance of neighbourhoods.

- *Prevent the erasure of existing neighbourhoods*: Preservation is often reserved for affluent neighbourhoods and 'heritage protection' while zones of neglect are not considered worthy of preservation. The "adequate provisioning" (Curran & Kern) approach allows us to shift support to long-term residents rather than private developers and affluent newcomers and avoids the cultural and social displacement of lower-income, racialised resident communities (Davis et al., 2023).

- *Protect local businesses*: The European Council (2020) recommends "affordable business rents and rates" to ensure existing local businesses are not displaced. Retaining existing businesses ensures that revenue stays in the community and that longtime residents remain catered for rather than being excluded and alienated from pricier and culturally inadequate places of consumption.

- *Anchor institutional engagement*: Engage universities, hospitals, and other major institutions to invest in local hiring, procurement, and community services.

Prioritising affordable housing

Adequate provision of genuinely affordable housing recognises people's right to belong and to remain. To counter the displacement and housing entrapment of low-income residents, governments must prioritise housing need rather than investor demand and rent gaps.

- *Increase public housing supply*: strengthening the supply of public housing across neighbourhoods,

- *Introduce rent regulation:* private renting is becoming a long-term tenure for a growing share of the population, yet the Private Rental Sector remains underregulated and a site of inherent precarity for renters,

- *Introduce capital gains tax*: to disincentivise housing speculation, a capital gains tax on investment properties.

Ensuring accessible transportation

Accessible – that is, frequent, reliable and affordable – public transport enables citizens to participate more fully in urban life. At the same time, it is important to avoid "transit-induced gentrification" which sees public transport improvements spur rezoning, private investment and subsequent increases in property values near new transport lines and in nearby neighbourhoods (e.g., Bardaka, 2023).

The above-listed recommendations for prioritising equitable provisioning and affordable housing can contribute to ensuring that public transport developments do not contribute to gentrification.

Empowering local communities

Empowering local communities requires inclusive engagement with residents beyond consultation by giving power, resources and ownership to local communities. Empowering local communities may therefore include:

- "Collective ownership initiatives such as community land trusts, mutual housing associations, and limited-equity housing cooperatives" (de Fillipi cited in Slater, 2021, p.54),
- Directing money from land sales back to the community (e.g., Avondale racecourse, as discussed above),
- Supporting local businesses through affordable commercial leases and rates,
- Crediting local knowledge through listening to and learning from resistance to gentrification (Curran and Kern, 2023; Slater, 2021).

Implementing a Te Tiriti o Waitangi approach to policy review and development

Creating better participatory practices must centrally involve engagement with mana whenua and a Te Tiriti o Waitangi approach to policy review and development. This would entail, among others, working with iwi/mana whenua to recognise traditional stories of place and settlement practices, identify suitable places for development of intensified housing, honour Māori culture and tikanga in architecture and urbanisation, safeguard against displacement, nurture community services and networks to protect against alienation, and ensure the redistribution of resources to the community and iwi.

CONCLUSION

The Auckland City Centre and Avondale neighbourhood serve as examples of a multitude of neighbourhoods in cities in New Zealand and internationally where "space is being transformed for more affluent users" (Hackworth, 2002, p. 839). Such transformations, led by private investment, reproduce inequities that displace, exclude, and alienate low-income and racialised households from revitalised spaces.

The inherent relation between creating zones of abundance and zones of sacrifice and neglect and the implications for low-income, often racialised urban dwellers, require us to "rethink who and what the city is for" (Curran & Kern, 2023, p. 1) and how we can create more equitable and just urban futures. Working towards urban environmental justice specifically requires us to apply an anti-racist lens in policy development and urban planning to ensure equitable outcomes for racialised and migrant populations.

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