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The Battle For Bushwick, And Beyond: Inside The Grassroots Movement To Reshape Urban Planning In New York City

By Chase Brush

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Capstone Fall '19

On a warm afternoon in late September, Nancy Torres and Pati Rodriguez stood beneath the M train overpass along Broadway Ave, on the border of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods of BedStuy and Bushwick. Around them had gathered nearly 100 activists, participants in the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network's third annual borough-wide protest. They had marched earlier that morning from downtown Brooklyn, carrying signs and calling out a litany of problems associated with the kind of drastic change and development that has swept through their communities in recent years: rising rents, luxury developments, tenant harassment, police brutality .

Torres and Rodriguez were there to call out those issues, but they also had a more specific message: to condemn a slated rezoning of Bushwick that would rewrite, for the first time in decades, the neighborhood's land use laws, or the rules that determined the size, scale, and application of buildings. Their message was reflected in the group's artwork , which included banners that read "Battle for Bushwick," posters that exclaimed "Bushwick No Se Vende," and picket signs, cut into the shape of hands with their middle fingers extended, that exclaimed "Rezone This!" Most visible among all that protest material, however, were the disembodied heads of the neighborhood's two council representatives, the rezoning's chief architects .

"To Council member Antonio Reynoso, and Council member Rafael Espinal, we want to reiterate to you, to say no to a rezoning of our neighborhoods," said Torres. "We're marching to tell you, to remind you that a rezoning will greatly impact and further displace longtime and low-income residents, as well as further accelerate the gentrification already impacting our neighborhoods. We are here, and we want to stay."

Torres and Rodriguez are both members of Mi Casa No Es Su Casa, an anti-gentrification and social justice activist group that has become one of the loudest voices in the ongoing fight over the future of Bushwick. Occupying some 300 square blocks in north Brooklyn, to the west of already gentrified Williamsburg, the neighborhood is one of the fastest-changing in the city — average rents have increased dramatically over the last 10 years, leading to mass displacement and a reshaping of the community's cultural and economic landscape. Officials hope to rectify that change with a rezoning, one of several planned neighborhood redevelopments under Mayor Bill De Blasio.

But Torres and Rodriguez contend that a rezoning of Bushwick could have the opposite effect, accelerating the development that is already occurring. And one example of that could be seen right here, under the M train overpass along Broadway's busy commercial corridor: according to the plan, buildings that currently stand at five and six stories on the Bushwick side could rise to 16 in some areas, potentially ushering in new apartment buildings, hotels, and trendy restaurants.

"Reynoso, Espinal, de Blasio, all y'all that are running for some other office right now," repeated Rodriguez. "Know that you are under scrutiny by our community. We see what you're doing, and we all understand that the way the rezoning process is actually illegitimate. That's why we are calling for a stop to all rezonings until we figure something else out."

"This is the battle for Bushwick," Rodriguez added. "This is the battle for New York City."

In communities all across New York City, a grassroots movement against city-led rezonings is afoot. In Sunset Park, residents are protesting a proposed rezoning of Industry City, a waterfront industrial site in south Brooklyn that developers hope to further expand with one hundred billion dollars-worth of new hotels, big box retail, and event space. In Inwood, activists have sued the city over its recent rezoning of Manhattan's northernmost neighborhood, which they argue was pushed through this summer without incorporating community concerns. And in Bushwick, groups like Mi Casa are fighting to stop their own rezoning, which they fear could further contribute to the displacement of longtime residents.

The battles represent a new front in the war against gentrification in New York City, which has intensified as an increasing number of high-income, highly-educated residents pour into a dwindling number of lower-income, working-class neighborhoods of color. According to a 2016 study by the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University (NYU), 15 out of the city's 55 neighborhoods are currently in a state of gentrification, meaning they've experienced rent growth higher than the city median over the last 20 years. In each case, the increase in rent prices — more than 50 percent in many areas, and over 70 percent in neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Greenpoint — has corresponded with an influx of wealthier, mostly whiter newcomers, whose numbers have bloomed as black and Latino populations plummet.

Rezoning has long been used as a tool to manage this kind of disruptive change. One of the most common ways of determining land use in the US, zoning is a central part of a city's planning process, allowing officials to suppress or promote development by rewriting the rules that define how big or small buildings can grow and what they can be used for. In some cases, rezonings have been used to limit new construction and preserve the character of neighborhoods undergoing rapid physical change, a strategy called downzoning; in others,

they've been used to rehabilitate industrial or depressed areas through new construction, encouraging taller, larger buildings— called upzoning.

But in recent years, both the fairness and effectiveness of rezonings have come under increasing scrutiny. It's a national debate, as a growing number of academics and progressive urban planners argue the ways in which rezonings, by inviting real estate developers to help dictate what a neighborhood will look like, are part of a fundamentally capitalist project. Sam Stein , a doctoral candidate in geography at the City University of New York, lays this relationship out in his recent book *Capital City*, in which he explains how rezonings can turn gentrification “from a neighborhood phenomenon of renovation and reinvention to a larger process of displacement, demolition and development.”

Of course, one of the main places this debate is playing out is in New York — the country's largest and densest urban center and a heart of real estate power. Communities have pushed back against rezonings for as long as the city has employed urban planning to control land use and manage growth, seeking a greater voice in a process that has traditionally lacked such input. Redevelopment battles were a major theme under former Mayor Mike Bloomberg, whose administration presided over a whopping 120 rezonings around the city, many of them downzonings meant to protect higher-income white communities like Park Slope.

They're also a major theme under de Blasio, a progressive Democrat who has used rezonings to advance his own particular policy agenda. After campaigning on a promise to end the rising inequality and “Tale of Two Cities” narrative that had taken root under his predecessor, de Blasio announced in 2014 his “Housing New York” agenda, which aims to create or preserve some 300,000 units of affordable housing throughout the city by 2030. To do that, he's targeted up to 15 neighborhoods for rezonings — eight of which, including places like East New York and Inwood, have already been approved, and at least three more of which, including Bushwick, Gowanus, and Southern Boulevard in the Bronx, are currently in the pipeline.

De Blasio has sought to frame his rezonings as a means to stem the effects of gentrification around the city, partly by securing affordable housing for residents most vulnerable to displacement. But critics say de Blasio's rezonings are no different than Bloomberg's — and may even be worse, considering the former has focused almost exclusively on lower-income communities of color for redevelopment.

The issues have spawned a chorus of anti-rezoning critics that is louder today — and arguably more diverse — than ever before. On an institutional level, politicians like Jumanee Williams, the city's newly elected public advocate, and powerful housing advocacy groups like Churches United For Fair Housing, have joined together in a campaign to call out the racial impact of rezonings, drawing on a growing body of research that illuminates how past plans led to displacement of minority residents around the city. In a study funded by CUFFH just last month, researchers found that Bloomberg's rezoning of both Park Slope in 2003 and the

Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront in 2005 triggered a mass exodus of working-class families of color from the areas, even as their overall populations, fed by an influx of new white residents, increased substantially.

On the grassroots level, however, the pushback against de Blasio's rezonings has been even more pronounced. In neighborhoods slated for rezonings across the city, groups like Mi Casa No Es Su Casa, Chinatown Art Brigade, Take Back The Bronx, Northern Manhattan is Not For Sale — the list goes on — are banding together to reject outright any city planning that would contribute to gentrification in their communities. And though this coalition may be smaller and less politically connected than the others, it represents a movement all its own — one younger and more radical, encompassing a huge cross-cut of colors and identities.

"It's brown-led. It's South Asian, it's Latinx, it's black folks that have been at the forefront of these struggles long before bigger groups got involved," said Imani Henry, an organizer with Equality for Flatbush and the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network, which have been working with groups like Mi Casa to fight rezonings across the borough. "We never asked for our neighborhoods to be rezoned."

Pati Rodriguez remembers when the first letters from developers began appearing in her family's mailbox, offering to buy the multi-story row house that her father had bought a decade earlier. It was around 2009, just as Bushwick began changing in more drastic ways than she'd noticed before. There was the trendy new coffee shop around the corner, as well as the slew of bars and restaurants that had cropped up further down the road, near the Jefferson L stop. There were the sleek new apartment buildings, which seemed to spring up overnight, replacing the older three- and four-story row houses, like her own, that had long characterized the neighborhood. And finally there was the street art: elaborate murals and graffiti that increasingly adorned the outside walls of these new businesses, attracting droves of out-of-town tourists on the weekends.

Rodriguez was an artist, too, and began collecting the letters, thinking she'd use them to make a statement on the changes. She was particularly concerned with the street art, which she noticed had become increasingly curated, in some cases even appearing as advertisements for local real estate companies or fashion brands. "Real estate folks know that that attracts a certain population of artists and hipsters, which is always the first population to come in before the business class and the whole place goes to shit," Rodriguez, who was born in Ecuador, said. "That's how you successfully gentrify an area."

Rodriguez's first idea was to turn the developer letters into a collage. But in 2014, while working as an immigrant rights organizer and serving as a member of Mayday Space, a radical community organizing center near her home, she was exposed to the work of NYC Light

Brigade, a social justice group born out of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The group specializes in making “light signs” — usually black boards emblazoned with LEDs that can be easily customized to display the slogans of a given movement.

Teaming up with several other Mayday Space members and residents around the neighborhood, Rodriguez began making light signs of her own. “Gentrification Is The New Colonialism,” “Not For Sale,” “No Me Mundo,” “No Me Displaces,” the first read. They hung the signs on homes throughout the neighborhood, an act which both allowed them to reclaim the art that was being used to gentrify the area as well as to show that the process is not just about new coffee shops and restaurants, but also the displacement of real people. “We wanted to take back the art for us,” Rodriguez explained. “Because Brooklyn has always had art. Brooklyn has always had culture, that’s why people come here, because we created that. And we want to remind people that we’re still here .”

Enter Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Illumination Against Gentrification, which began in 2014 with the light sign project. The group has since entrenched itself as a radical force against gentrification in the neighborhood, using guerrilla art and social media-driven grassroots organizing to stem the tide. They’ve staged dozens of protests around the neighborhood over the last few years, targeting everything from community officials and organizations to real estate companies and groups like the Bushwick Collective , the street art association that has helped produced the kind of murals that inspired Rodriguez’s activism. In June, Rodriguez and others staged a protest at the collective’s annual block party, during which they dropped DIY flags around the neighborhood proclaiming that the “Bushwick Collective Exploits Artists + Community” and “Artists Resist Becoming Weapons of Mass Displacement.”

In that way, Mi Casa’s work is typical of the kind of anti-gentrification activism that has emerged in neighborhoods undergoing dramatic social and physical change not just in NYC, but across the U.S. in recent years. In L.A., groups like Defend Boyle Heights have pioneered a particularly aggressive style of anti-gentrification protest, hoping to shame new art galleries and cafes into closing and literally chasing out unwelcome visitors from the largely Latinx community. More locally, groups Take Back the Bronx have used the tactics of guerrilla marketing to target local officials who they deem complicit in the community’s gentrification. Mi Casa members see themselves as carrying this flag as well: “We’re militant as fuck,” Rodriguez said. “Even in our art.”

But Mi Casa is also unique in the way it’s had to adapt its efforts to a new target : the rezoning. That fight began two years ago, when Bushwick’s community board, alongside its two city councilmembers, unveiled a redevelopment framework intended to address a host of gentrification-related issues in the neighborhood, from rising unaffordability to out-of-character development (known as the Bushwick Community Plan, or BCP). Six months later, the city responded with an official draft scope of its own, based loosely on the community plan but also more ambitious , calling for an increase in the height limit of buildings along major corridors, and

a decrease along residential side streets and midblocks (known as the Bushwick Neighborhood Plan, or BNP).

The plans, if there were to be any at all, couldn't have come sooner for Bushwick, which has undergone a transformation in recent years unlike any that had come before. Bushwick's history as a working-class neighborhood extends back to the late 1800s, when it was home to the highest concentration of breweries in the country. It remained an industrial hub into the mid 1900s, hosting large populations of Italians and Germans, until the city's urban manufacturing base collapsed and the area fell into a period of economic depression. Black and brown residents, priced out of the city's wealthier, whiter neighborhoods, replaced the Italians and Germans that fled, creating a vibrant community of diverse — though still largely blue-collar — culture.

But in recent years, that culture has been jeopardized, as a growing number of higher-income residents push housing costs up throughout the neighborhood. Though the area median income — now at \$48,000 — has increased over the last decade, it's still far below the citywide average of \$85,900 for a family of three, according to city data. And yet median rents have increased exponentially, rising 60 percent over the last 10 years, nearly double the citywide rate. Together the trends have contributed to the neighborhood's growing unaffordability, particularly for low-income renters: over half of Bushwick residents are rent burdened, while nearly a third are severely rent burdened, meaning they spend more than half their income on housing.

The trends are also complicated by the Bushwick's unique housing landscape, which is less accommodating of growth than neighboring communities. Though Bushwick does have large swaths of industrial space, the vast majority of its structures are older, smaller residential row houses, over half of which comprise fewer than six units, and over 80 percent of which were built before 1947. At the same time, over 90 percent of Bushwick residents are renters, and yet only 26 percent of households live in rent stabilized apartments.

The ultimate result of these conditions has been a gentrification crisis of growing proportions. Tenant harassment, evictions, and displacement are more common in Bushwick than almost anywhere else in the city, and the impacts of this displacement, like in Williamsburg a decade before, have been disproportionately racialized. According to a recent study by the National Institute for Latino Policy, Bushwick's Latino population — including, historically, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, but also more recent immigrants from Central and South America — shrank by 13 percent over the last 15 years, while its white population bloomed by a whopping 610 percent.

City officials and community leaders say a rezoning could alleviate some of this pressure by building more affordable housing to protect vulnerable residents. As in other rezonings around the city, at the heart of the Bushwick plan is the implementation of mandatory inclusionary housing (MIH), a more recent policy that requires developers who benefit from the zoning

changes to keep a certain number of new units “affordable” -- a metric that it defines in relation to the citywide Average Median Income, or AMI. In Bushwick, city officials project that out of the more than 5,000 new housing units created through the rezoning, close to 2,000 will fall under this category.

But critics of the rezoning plan, including Mi Casa members, argue that the city’s reliance on MIH misses a crucial point: that affordability defined in terms of citywide AMI does not equal affordability for longtime Bushwick residents. Under one MIH option included in the draft proposal, developers would have to set aside 25 percent of new units for households making an average of 60 percent AMI — or \$56,340 for a family of three. Rodriguez noted that Bushwick’s AMI is still less than that. “How is that affordable?” she asked. “That’s not affordable for any of us. So who is this housing for?”

Rodriguez and other Mi Casa members have also pointed out how significantly the community plan differs from the city’s own proposal. While the BCP, based on input from a wide crosscut of community residents, called for a moderate upzoning of transit corridors and a hard cap on midblock buildings, the BNP proposes higher density construction in those areas — allowing up to eight stories on commercial thruways like Knickerbocker and Central, and up to 16 in some areas along busier streets like Broadway and Wycoff. It also ignores one of the BCP’s highest priorities: the preservation of the neighborhood’s manufacturing spaces, which the BNP opts to convert to residential.

For Mi Casa members, the disparities between the plans underscore the city’s lack of real interest in community-led planning -- something the group had argued all along. “Mi Casa’s position has been, since the beginning: the city won’t listen,” said Ryan Roco, another Mi Casa spokesperson. “It’s ultimately not up to you, community board. You’re advisory. Nothing you say is legally binding. By going along with it, you’re giving the city license to come in, you’re literally inviting the city to come in and through a non-democratic process change the neighborhood overnight. Why would we take that?”

In the weeks following the plans’ releases, Mi Casa members have been busy airing their grievances through public protest. They’re a frequent voice of concern at community functions, where they’ve called on representatives to pull out of bad-faith negotiations with city officials; last month, they picketed an unannounced meeting of the BCP steering committee, where they passed out flyers and urged members to reject the city’s draft scope. They’ve worked to rile up opposition online, using social media to circulate photos and videos of their actions, and earlier this month started a Change.org petition to halt the rezoning, writing that such plans “do more harm than good in practice, acting as a crow bar that drives a wedge between communities and their homes.”

“From Downtown Brooklyn to Williamsburg to Long Island City, rezonings create billions in real estate value that never seems to translate to community benefits for those already there,” the petition reads. “Yes, Bushwick is a community that needs more low-income housing, where tenants are already experiencing tremendous amounts of code violations and harassment

because landlords are looking to cash in. But rezoning doesn't provide what our community needs and deserves.”

They've also become an insistent thorn-in-the-side of the neighborhood's council members, Espinal and Reynoso. A former organizer with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now who earlier this year announced he was running for borough president, Reynoso has been especially active in pushing the rezoning, and so has received the brunt of the group's fury — he frequently appears in DIY memes on their Facebook and Instagram pages, where he's called a “snake” and a “\$ellout.” In November, Rodriguez and other Mi Casa members crashed an Open Spaces Forum panel at the New York Law School where Reynoso was a speaker, demanding that he pull out of negotiations with the Department of City Planning . “You are selling out Bushwick to rich developers,” Rodriguez told Reynoso, as another member of the group stood nearby holding a cut-out sign of the councilman's face, his eyes covered in dollar signs. “We ask you to stop.”

Naturally, Mi Casa's actions have been met with criticism by many other groups working on the rezoning, who see their strategy as extreme and overly antagonistic. But Roco and Rodriguez stressed that they are not outright opposed to the plans. “It's not like we're not anti-development. We don't hate bike lanes. We're not some kind of primitivists trying to camp in a park,” Roco said. “But we want community control, we want direct democracy. And we don't think that's unreasonable .”

Mi Casa's battle for Bushwick encapsulates the divergence between the city's planning approach and community concerns, but it's far from the only neighborhood where those tensions are playing out. As neighborhood rezonings continue under de Blasio, residents across the city are realizing the similarities in their struggles — and joining together in solidarity.

Two months after the anti-gentrification march in Brooklyn, Rodriguez, Torres, and a host of other activists from groups across the city congregated inside the Equity Life Building in downtown Manhattan, just a short walk from Zuccotti Park. Clad in black clothing and carrying similar signs as from the September action , they stood beneath the vaulted white ceiling of the main lobby, calling for an end to the building's primary tenant, the Department of City Planning, the office responsible for managing zoning and land use across the city . “We are here to recognize the fight for our homes and the fight for our neighborhoods,” Rodriguez began. “Rezoning will not stop gentrification. It's gentrification on steroids.”

“Abolish the DCP,” she added.

“Fuck the DCP!” a chorus of other voices responded in kind.

As the crowd moved outside the building, and eventually down to the park, speakers from each group stopped to share their own stories of mismanagement and displacement by the DCP. Just

before Rodriguez, John J. Pena, a member of Take Back the Bronx, connected the office's work to a larger narrative of disenfranchisement and colonialism, a point echoed by other activists. Pena's group also finds itself in the throes of a fierce battle over a proposed rezoning of Southern Boulevard, which comes just a year after a controversial rezoning of Jerome Avenue as part of de Blasio's agenda.

"Hey DCP! We know where your offices are. You will no longer be able to pacify our communities into gentrification," Pena added, the bottom half of his face masked by a black bandana. "We are on stolen Lenape land. You will not steal and recycle these lands again from black and brown indigenous people of color."

Out on the sidewalk, Torres gave an impassioned statement on behalf of the Bushwick crew, decrying the city for "prioritizing profit over people — they're selling our community as a commodity to investors who have no interest in helping people and working-class families in Bushwick."

"Nobody wanted Bushwick when it was burning. Nobody wanted it when there was trash in the streets," Torres said, referring to the blackout of 1977, which sparked a wave of riots that devastated the neighborhood. "Black and brown families made Bushwick a home, a community at that time, when there was no federal funding coming. Now Reynoso and Espinal are spear-heading the rezoning efforts. The developers are coming in with the financial capital that we don't have, and buying up our neighborhood, our land."

Anna Ozbek, a member of Chinatown Art Brigade, was another speaker. Bullhorn in hand, she told of her neighborhood's own struggle with the city's planning process — only in this case, a struggle not to stop a rezoning, but to get the city to recognize the need for one in the first place. Almost 10 years ago, as Chinatown and the adjacent Lower East Side waterfront stared down the encroaching gentrification along its own borders, community leaders led by the Chinatown Working Group got together to formulate a rezoning plan of their own. But it was ultimately dismissed by de Blasio and the Department of City Planning, which called its scope "too expansive." The local community board eventually approved a more limited plan for Chinatown, though it has yet to be taken up by the city.

"So after these many years of work and planning and organizing, what do you think DCP did? Did they adopt this plan that would have protected our working-class immigrants and neighborhoods? No, of course not," Ozbek said. "They fucking did not. They said we're going to apply this plan only to the few blocks that tourists see as Chinatown, and we're going to leave everywhere else unprotected from development."

"Because they want the buildings, but they don't want our people. They want our food, but they don't want our people. And they want our tourism, but not our people," Ozbek added. "DCP doesn't give a fuck about us, and they don't give a fuck about our communities. They only push

these racist rezonings that serve millionaire developers and displace thousands of low-income New Yorkers. They are the turbo-engines of gentrification.”

The struggle for greater community control over land use decisions in New York City is not a new one. In the 1960s, following the city’s second comprehensive zoning resolution and amid a national urban renewal campaign in cities across the country, a grassroots movement for local land use determination gave birth to community boards, which now represent residents’ interests in 56 neighborhoods across five boroughs. Twenty years later, in 1989, a revision to the city’s charter gave the boards power to submit their own zoning recommendations to the planning commission, resulting in a rash of community plans in neighborhoods dealing with gentrification around the city.

Among that first wave of plans proffered in the wake of that change was one for Williamsburg and Greenpoint, two heavily industrial areas along the East River. The product of years of collaboration between community groups, the plan was meant to counter the significant changes reshaping the neighborhoods, as artists and other residents priced out of Manhattan began to relocate across the river. Among other priorities, it called for maintaining the mixture of residential and industrial uses along the waterfront, where much of the area’s industrial buildings were concentrated, as well as the construction of affordable housing throughout the neighborhood.

The plans were officially passed by city council and the Department of City Planning in 2001 — and yet when the city, under then-mayor Mike Bloomberg, opted to rezone the waterfront two years later, few of the community’s recommendations were honored. “They threw them out, and introduced their own rezoning plans that actually went in the opposite direction and that violated the basic principles that were in the community plan,” said Tom Angotti, a professor of urban affairs and planning at Hunter College who was a vocal critic of the rezoning at the time.

The Williamsburg rezoning has since become a cautionary tale for rezoning critics around the city, and in more ways than one. For many, it demonstrates clearly the role that rezonings can play in exacerbating gentrification, as the prospect of new construction in a community can invite even more speculative development, compounding its effects. That’s partly what happened in Williamsburg, where luxury residential highrises began cropping up in formerly industrial zones, causing rents to rise across the neighborhood. A 2015 study by Leo Goldberg found that rents had increased 69 percent in the 10 years following the rezoning, forcing the area’s Latino population to plummet by 27 percent, (its white population, meanwhile, increased by 44 percent).

But for other critics, including Angotti, the rezoning also showed how limited the community’s voice remains in the city’s planning process — and how much further activists will have to go in order to secure the kind of real, democratic control for which groups like Mi Casa are calling. “So the DCP, by coming up with its own zoning plan, it made it impossible to believe that

anyone at the DCP was capable of acknowledging community, unless it was what they and their developer friends wanted to begin with,” said Angotti, whose book, *Zoned Out!: Race Displacement And City Planning In New York City*, chronicles the neighborhood’s rezoning process.

That mistrust has carried into today’s rezonings under de Blasio, too. Despite the Democrat’s professed progressivism and commitment to affordable housing, Angotti said, de Blasio has approached his urban planning agenda in essentially the same way as Bloomberg, who relied heavily on rezonings and left most of the power in the hands of city planners to decide what they would look like. “Williamsburg was the model that has been followed consistently, including by the De Blasio administration,” Angotti said. “And a lot of people are disappointed with that, that when he had an opportunity to make a break, to do it different, he went along with the same approach to land use and zoning and community planning that the previous mayors had followed.”

Examples of this status-quo continuation — and the frustrations it’s caused — abound, Angotti said. There’s Chinatown, where the administration rejected the community’s efforts to get a comprehensive rezoning passed. There’s East New York, where many residents remain frustrated at the lack of community input a full year after the city approved the first of de Blasio’s rezonings there. There’s Inwood, the subject of the city’s latest rezoning, where community members have since filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn the plan, arguing the process failed to take into account their concerns.

And finally, there’s Bushwick, which Angotti added may represent the biggest affront of all. “The recent Bushwick Community plan was a real challenge that offered the DCP an opportunity to break with its history of dishonor with its community plans,” he said. “But instead they threw the whole thing away, saying ‘we’ll take this part or that part’ but basically presenting a plan that calls for much more development than the people want to see.”

For Angotti and other critics, the key to solving the city’s urban planning problems relies, ironically, in actually planning. Sam Stein, the doctoral candidate at CUNY, argued in a recent follow-up to his book’s publication in *Jacobin* that the problem with city planning today “is an overreliance on zoning — a tool ill-equipped to confront the private land and property markets — and the solution is a popular movement for anticapitalist urban planning and the decommodification of land and housing.” Angotti, who said the DCP is “misnamed” because it focuses so heavily on rezoning, also echoed that point, calling for a comprehensive and inclusive planning process that “addresses everything people are concerned about, from local services to open space to infrastructure and parks.”

“All of the things that people care about, and all of the problems that people face in their everyday life,” Angotti added. “Some method for regulating land use like zoning may be necessary, but by itself, it’s not good enough.”

In other words, it's the same solutions that militant and radical groups like Mi Casa are asking for. "We already know that the rezoning process is fucked, so why would we even waste our time and go through it with them?" asked Roco. "We need to abolish that process and figure out something else that gives back community control, because the process as it is right now, it takes away all community control."

As scrappy and fringe as groups like Mi Casa may seem compared to other, more mainstream organizations in NYC's rezoning fight, there is evidence that their particular brand of organizing may be having an impact. In August, following opposition from groups like the Chinatown Workers Alliance, a city judge ruled against the Two Bridges rezoning project, a massive development that would have dramatically raised the skyline along the Lower East Side and Chinatown waterfront. Three months later, in December, a Supreme Court judge ruled against the city's 2018 rezoning of Inwood, upholding the community's position and finding that de Blasio's administration "failed to take a hard look" at how the land use changes will impact the neighborhood.

"In the case of Inwood, we called for essentially a racial impact study in the environmental review, and the city said no, we don't have to do that," said Phil Simpson, an Inwood resident and attorney who worked with community activists in crafting the lawsuit there. "And to me, that's just totally disingenuous."

In Bushwick, Mi Casa's continued pressure on local community board members and officials has also resonated. Last week, Reynoso and Espinal sent a letter to de Blasio's office demanding that it study the community's plan, as opposed to its own draft scope, in any upcoming environmental review. That review would be the next step in the city's rezoning process, and a vital part — after its completion, the plan would enter the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, which allows for the public to comment and provide feedback on pending land use changes in the city.

"Bushwick represents an incredible opportunity for your administration to center community planning as a valuable tool in strengthening neighborhoods for the future," Espinal and Reynoso wrote. "Implementing the BCP would affirm that the city is a reliable partner in this work and that local government respects and values their experiences and needs."

And yet for Rodriguez and Roco, Mi Casa's job isn't over until the entire process is fundamentally changed. The group has recently turned its attention to the community itself, hoping to engage residents on a one-on-one basis with flyers and in-person outreach to teach them the flaws of the city's rezoning.

"We're going to continue to fight," Rodriguez said, "until it's Bushwick residents who have the final say about their community."