

YIMBY, White Privilege, and the Soul of Our Cities

By **Fernando Marti** -
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At a rally against statewide upzoning bill SB 827, counter protesting YIMBY Action members chanted over activists of color. Photo courtesy of Leslie Dreyer/Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco

“We’ve underbuilt housing for decades.” **YIMBY (Yes in My Back Yard) leaders** keep repeating this line. It’s become a mantra that now gets repeated at the highest levels, from a California **state legislative report** to a White House paper, to the point it’s become gospel. Never mind that if we dig into it, the facts are very different.

YIMBY leaders also have a compelling explanation for why we have supposedly “underbuilt” for decades. At fault is a combination of NIMBYs and rabid progressive activists.

Equity advocates are familiar with real NIMBYs, older white homeowners who often want to protect their property values by keeping others out. Off and on over the decades, many of us in the affordable housing movement have had to fight one version or another of NIMBY over exclusionary policies. I first encountered the term YIMBY when community organizers were fighting in support of affordable housing and in opposition to NIMBYs. The combination of those with NIMBY sentiments and real estate developers eager to create exclusive communities led progressives to fight for inclusionary housing, demanding that developers create mixed-income communities.

But according to the **YIMBY leaders**, now we equity advocates are the problem too, little different from the NIMBYs, rabid progressives who are too naïve or ideological to understand how the market really works. In this story line, in the name of fighting evictions and displacement, we progressives, we communities of color, we poor people and immigrants, we working-class queers stupidly don’t realize that luxury development now will eventually become the affordable housing of the future! (*Editor’s Note: Here’s a more nuanced look at that idea.*) It’s simple supply-and-demand they say, Econ 101, and we obviously didn’t go to college if we don’t understand that simple truth.

They say we foolish activists abuse environmental regulations and planning processes that allow for democratic participation to stop or slow development. So the answer to the problem is to do away with those pesky regulations, **limit public input**, and give up on any attempt to get real estate developers to mitigate their impacts on our neighborhoods.

Why Is This Such a Compelling Story?

There’s a crisis of housing affordability we are all feeling, one that no longer affects just poor and working-class families, but also hits the middle class, especially younger households. To be clear, it’s not that they cannot afford any housing at all, but that they cannot afford the housing they want.

Because for all this talk of needing to build new luxury developments, the base for this movement would rather live in our funky old neighborhoods—old Victorians in San Francisco’s Mission District or brownstones in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg. These are the places that decades of suburban white flight (the parents and grandparents of today’s millennials), bank redlining policies and racial exclusion, bad schools and urban decay left behind to us, the working classes, poor whites, Black, Brown, and Asian communities, and immigrants. A few decades ago people of their class and skin color would likely have crossed the street to avoid our disinvested, dangerous ‘hoods, but now, because of their newfound desire, rents for a two-bedroom have been driven up as high as \$4,500 a month and even higher.

This is what they want: to live in our neighborhoods, in our homes. But for many of these young arrivals there is a nagging awareness about the impacts they see all around them: the evictions, the overcrowding, the protests and quiet anger, the ongoing loss of the vitality of these communities that attracted them in the first place.

What better way to assuage their guilt than to turn it around and make it the fault of those very communities they are displacing? If “we” urban communities hadn’t “underbuilt” for decades, if we weren’t still protesting and demanding a voice in the development of our neighborhoods, why, all would be all right. If we now get evicted or if whole working-class communities get displaced, it must be our own fault.

This is the viciousness of the YIMBY argument: It tells people who want our homes that they deserve, by virtue of their whiteness and their status as part of a young college-educated elite, to get them.

And there lies the genius of this narrative. An agenda for building up the power base of the neoliberal right is not going to get too far in liberal beachheads like San Francisco or New York using the traditional Republican platform. It needs a new story that appeals to young millennials, and it has found it in the “pro-housing” language of the YIMBYs. But in the end, it’s pushing the same underlying principles: the way to a more efficient future is to destroy belief in regulation, public investment, and **democratic participation**, whether the arena is charter schools or health care or housing affordability.

But this story is as thin as the next market crash.

We know “we” did *not* underbuild for decades. It is we, in fact, who built these cities; we who stayed in these neighborhoods while their grandparents fled to racially exclusive suburbs; we who welcomed our brothers and sisters fleeing

from Jim Crow and NAFTA and death squads and queer bashing; we who created the urban cultures they so desire; we who continue to fight for cities that center people and homes and communities and culture and environment; we who had and still have the vision of a city that continues to change and evolve, but always, always, is built on democracy. Our vision includes *everyone*.

To continue to build this city for everyone will require new housing, yes, and will require new models to replace the suburban single-family model that collapsed in the financial crisis of 2008. But unless our vision is to introduce new **resegregated** urban regions with cities exclusively for the rich, and the poor displaced to the suburban peripheries, we will have to work together on an agenda that is the antithesis of the neoliberal deregulatory worldview espoused by much of the YIMBY leadership. We must embrace market regulation, dedicated revenues for and deep public investment in affordable housing, and true **democratic participation**.

For a wider discussion of the range of ideas and policies espoused under the term YIMBY, see "YIMBY: Friend, Foe, or Chaos Agent?"

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