



**STACEY SUTTON**



*Assistant Professor, Urban  
Planning and Policy, UIC*

Dr. Sutton’s primary research areas include community economic development, economic democracy and cooperative enterprises, small business ecosystems, racialization of space and neighborhood change. She has explored the forms and functions of alternative development models and localism for strengthening economic democracy and increasing opportunities for marginalized communities.

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**SPATIAL INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE LOGIC OF  
SHOP SUCCESSION**

**Introduction**

How does the decline of Black-owned business in majority Black neighborhoods affect community cohesion and neighborhood change? How can economic development policies related to small business development support small and minority-owned businesses?

City planners, policymakers, and community advocates are often uncertain over how to align the development goals of economic growth and urban competitiveness with the desires of neighborhood residents and small business-owners for affordability, preservation, and sustainability. Whereas many cities have relied on corporate-led urban redevelopment projects such as big-box stores and supercenters that lead to the closure of community grocers, family-owned pharmacies, and other locally owned shops, many cities are exploring policies and initiatives aimed at preserving neighborhood character, which has received heavy support from “Main Street” preservationists and “buy-local” advocates. However, in predominantly African-American neighborhoods, the shuttering of local small businesses (often minority-owned) fails to animate preservationist policies or sustainable corridor planning. Instead, narratives of “urban decline” are used as a means to attract redevelopment projects, and often signal that previously “undesirable inner-city neighborhoods” are now prime areas for real estate investment.

The Fort Greene and Clinton Hill neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, which I refer to as “Greene Hill,” were once labeled the “Black Belt of Brooklyn” and contain a rich history of Black entrepreneurship dating back to the late 19th century. However, a recent report has noted that 30% of Black-owned businesses in New York City have disappeared over the last five years due to rapid gentrification. This project involved over sixty in-depth interviews with Black small business-owners, observational data, review of archives, and social and economic trend data to understand how Black small business-owners have created an economic and cultural enclave that resists and reverses disparaging perceptions and racialized meanings inscribed on the Green Hill neighborhood landscape as well as the challenges to this enclave amidst redevelopment planning and gentrification.

**Findings**

- While Black merchants establishing themselves in Greene Hill followed in the tradition of American capitalism, they were motivated by a collectivist desire rooted in racial pride and intentionally invested in place-making in Greene Hill although they had other options.
- The collective intentionality of Black merchants rebuked Greene Hill’s “Black ghetto” stigmatization and decades of systematic public and private sector disinvestment to establish the cultural and economic enclave that came to be known as “Black bohemia.”
- Contrary to assumptions of the autonomous, individualistic entrepreneur, Greene Hill’s Black merchants are embedded in a network of social, cultural, and economic relations.
- The regulatory tools and tactics of urban redevelopment such as rezoning, special districting, and Business Improvement Districts favor middle-class consumption but hasten small business closings with particularly negative effects on minority-owned businesses.

**Recommendations**

Policy makers and urban planners interested in resisting the ascendancy of neoliberal urban governance, curtailing the homogenization of commercial landscapes, and preserving neighborhood character should pay particular attention to racialized meanings of low-income inner-city neighborhoods. The notion that these are barren, blighted, and dangerous places create false narratives that promote the idea that the social and economic problems of the inner-city are rooted in isolation and can only be solved by outside or corporate interventions. Minority-owned small businesses like those of Greene Hill demonstrate that minority-owned small businesses are effective in creating and anchoring neighborhoods in communities of color. Policy makers and urban planners should foster strategies to preserve neighborhood shops rather than see these as a potential hindrance to development.