Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 4:
A Right to the City

[INTRO MUSIC]

Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Aysha Nunes: We used to be a chocolate city but now we're at 49 percent. It's crazy to think that the destruction of this beautiful piece of black history was all caused by the city unfairly raising the rent. Historic neighborhoods, getting torn down and rebuilt as a high rise with a pent and unfortunately, not a lot of those people moving in look like me or any of friends. The prices of living here are rising so fast it's impossible to even beat. They're pushing out the families that have lived here for decades, pretty much by the week. Destruction of supermarkets, libraries, churches, and small corner stores just so that they can send the folks in and build overprice condos and starbucks Galore.

TC: You just heard 18-year-old Aysha Nunes tell the story of neighborhoods in Washington, D.C....but it could easily apply to dozens of other cities in America.

TC: She read the poem at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum. And that reading is kind of a perfect example of why the museum says it is "of, for and by the people."

TC: Because Aysha is one of eleven teens from the area who's in a writing workshop at the museum. She spent part of her summer immersed in an exhibition about neighborhood change in her city: Washington, D.C. It's affectionately been called "chocolate city" by many African American residents, though noticeably less so since it lost its African American majority almost 10 years ago.

TC: If you live in or near a city, you might have seen the pattern Aysha describes yourself. A house or building is neglected. Condos are built in its place. A Starbucks or Whole Foods open up down the block. Wealthier people start moving in. Housing costs rise.

TC: In some cases, long-time residents say the new retail and development price them out of a neighborhood they've lived in for decades. Others say newcomers are bringing money to a community that could use more.

TC: The process has become something of a flashpoint from Honolulu to Harlem and beyond. It's gentrification—a word that describes what's happening in cities all around the world. Gentrification can almost feel like an abstract academic term to a lot of people. But when it comes for your neighborhood, you know it when you see it.

TC: So this time on *Sidedoor*, we'll hear about the complicated feelings that arise when a tight-knight Washington community, once written off as a center for crime and poverty, turns into a housing hotspot for newer, richer residents. And we'll hear how a pioneering museum at the center of changing neighborhood empowers a group of local teens to keep a record of their ever-evolving communities.

[BREAK]

TC: A twelve-minute drive from where the *Sidedoor* team works in Washington, D.C. is the neighborhood of Anacostia. It's east of the national mall, which is where most of the Smithsonian's museums are, and separated from the rest of the city by the Anacostia River.

TC: In the middle of the neighborhood is the Anacostia Community Museum. And when you walk inside, it feels like walking into Washington, D.C.'s family photo album.

TC: You get a sense of the smaller neighborhoods that make up a city with a big impact. There are photos, documentaries, and oral histories from residents of a city with a robust history of community activism. A history that can often be overlooked when so much of its legacy is tied to the federal government.

TC: And the neighborhood that the museum is named after, Anacostia, is lesser known, but it pops up in U.S. history books as a point of interest. It was involved in fights to desegregate public spaces, before that, it was home to abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and more recently, it gave rise to go-go music.

[SWATCH GO-GO MUSIC]

TC: Now it's home to Rosie Hyde. She's a retired parole and probation officer, proud Washingtonian, and has lived in Anacostia since the 1980s. *Sidedoor* producer Haleema Shah went to her home to learn more about the neighborhood.

Haleema Shah: Can you describe where we're sitting for people who are listening?

Rosie Hyde: Okay, we're sitting out here on the porch now. And they getting ready to get busy, the sun is out here. What can I say? That's the oldest store in Anacostia or whatever. Like here, my neighbor lives here...she is 80, 84 years old. My other neighbor on the corner is 84 with a 92 year old husband or whatever.

TC: It's a close-knit community. And it's where Hyde's children are from and where her grandkids are growing up.

RH: I'll see if that's my baby's class. Watch this…How are you? Hi little people! Hi there!

People: How you doing today? How you doing today?

RH: (Laughs)

TC: For decades, Hyde's community has been mostly African-American. Anacostia, and other neighborhoods like it were segmented from the rest of Washington, D.C. by the Anacostia River. And Anacostia became known as a crime-ridden and low-income neighborhood.

TC: But lately, that is starting to change. Because Washington, D.C. needs more housing for its growing number of new and well-off residents.

TC: In the last three years, some of the fastest climbing home values have been in and around Anacostia. And with the pricier homes come newer amenities. Chipotle and Starbucks both recently announced their first locations east of the river. You might remember Aysha alluding to that in her in poem earlier. And don't worry, we'll hear more of that poetry later.

TC: Rosie Hyde told Haleema more about Anacostia's evolution to an up-and-coming neighborhood when they stepped inside.

RH: It's hot out there.

HS: It is so hot.

HS: Has anyone ever asked to buy your house?

RH: The people send something in the mail every day. I get something every week in the mail.

HS: How much have they offered you in the letters?

RH: Well, the max is $500,000. Okay.

HS: How much did you buy the house for?

RH: Sixty. So I don't think that was bad investment.

TC: By the way, having someone offer you $500,000 for a house that you bought for $60,000 means that its value grew by over 700 percent in a few decades. For some people, selling a house that has skyrocketed in value is too good of a deal to pass up. Hyde's neighbor, for example, is selling her house. But Hyde says she has no plans to do the same.

RH: My house can never be for sale. Never ever. It is heir property. I have a son, and he is a powerhouse. He his mother's child. Okay? And when I'm done messing around here, I don't know what it'll be, but it won't be sold. Okay?

RH: My thing is building generational wealth, is what is important. So on any given day, you come into this house, you'll find four or five generations of people. And so that's how it's always been growing up.

TC: So she plans on keeping her house in the family. But for some people, selling your home for a lot more than you bought it for is too good of a deal to pass up.

RH: My neighbor: European, just moved in in June or whatever. He's a lobbyist, and his girlfriend. The person who was in the house before him, she died two years ago. And, they sold the house and he just moved in in June of last year. He don't own the house. He's renting the house from the people who bought the house.

TC: Now, if you haven't already guessed, what Hyde is seeing is pretty characteristic of gentrification. What's unique in Anacostia, though, is that the feelings residents are expressing about gentrification inside their homes, are also being preserved for the public.

TC: Because back at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, community members and curators are documenting neighborhood change as it happens.

TC: Samir Meghelli is chief curator at the museum where an exhibition called "A Right to the City" is on display. It looks at the transformations that Washington neighborhoods, including Anacostia, have been going through for years.

TC: And he told us why the rising property value that Hyde is seeing can be good news for some, but definitely not everyone.

Samir Meghelli: So, you know, there is with rising property values all kinds of implications. Some of the obvious positive ones are that, you know, for a homeowner that has owned a home for a long time that sees their property value rise, that means they have more value for their home. But at the same time it can come with that rising property taxes and part of the challenge is particularly is you see for senior homeowners.

TC: And a side note, Samir isn't crazy about using the word gentrification.

[MUSIC]

SM: You know, gentrification is actually a term I largely avoid. It is a term that has taken on so many meanings over time that depending on the day and depending on the person you ask, they'll get provide a different definition.

TC: So you won't hear us using the G-word much in this episode. Instead, Samir described what's happening in Rosie Hyde's neighborhood as part of an ongoing process of change that can be disappointing for some, and exciting for others.

SM: I mean, the reality is in neighborhoods like Anacostia, there are deeply mixed feelings about that kind of change. On the one hand, there is both a desire for you know, more daycare facilities to more supermarkets, more sit down restaurants, but also for the community to have a greater sense of ownership over those amenities when they arrive.

TC: There's also a cultural component to all of this. When residents who have been living in an area for decades leave, sometimes a neighborhood's flavor and customs go with them. And while these changes are happening now, their roots are old.

SM: You know, the changes that have reshaped this community over the past 60, 70 years, are changes that have affected neighborhoods across the country. You know, this community historically was actually two communities, one white, one black living side by side. Living in segregated worlds. And that began to change in the 1950s when a number of processes started to unfold.

TC: You might be able to guess what some of those processes were. A big one was desegregation. When Washington, D.C. public schools ended segregation in 1954, a lot of white residents left east-of-the-river communities like Anacostia heading for other parts of Washington and the suburbs instead.

TC: And let's not forget the other process—urban renewal, a federal policy that was big in the 1950s and 60s.

SM: And the idea was that the federal government would fund essentially any municipality across the country that was interested in quote-unquote "renewing" particular neighborhoods in their cities. And these neighborhoods disproportionately ended up being working class African American neighborhoods and some cases Latino neighborhoods, Chinese American neighborhoods.

TC: The idea was to tear down what were called "slum neighborhoods" and replace them with affordable housing. But urban renewal resulted in *less* housing, *more* strip malls, and dispersed, disconnected communities.

TC; Eventually, national figures, like novelist James Baldwin who was known for his social commentary in the 50s and 60s, said urban renewal was designed to target African Americans.

Archival Audio of James Baldwin: A boy last week, he was 16 in San Francisco told me on television they were tearing down his house because San Francisco is engaging, as most northern cities are now engaged, in something called "urban renewal." Which means moving Negros out. It means Negro removal. That is what it means. And the federal government is an accomplice to this fact.

TC: In Washington, D.C.'s case, urban renewal projects pushed working class African-Americans out of different corners of the city...and into areas like Anacostia. Combine that with

the white flight that took place in the same areas after school desegregation, and the result is this:

SM: The creation of a 90 plus percent African American neighborhood, that as it became more African American in its demographics became increasingly neglected by the city. And over time became a deeply stigmatized neighborhood.

TC: And if you're listening to this story and feeling like it could apply to Chicago, Houston, New Haven, Connecticut and other cities, well, it's because it does.

TC: Anacostia, and the rest of southeast Washington are in the federal government's backyard. So, when lawmakers were thinking about everything from urban renewal to the War on Drugs, Anacostia was sometimes a laboratory for national policies affecting cities.

TC: Okay, I should add something here—neighborhoods changing both economically and socially seems like it's in the DNA of America.

SM: You know, what we think of as gentrification is both old and new. There are elements of it that have very, very deep roots. And yet there is something distinctive about the change that's reshaping cities, both American and global cities now. The extent and the pace at which populations are growing, and the extent to which residents of cities in some cases don't have the right to exercise influence over the change that's happening I think is also importantly new in some ways.

TC: The money coming in might be new, but the story is old. Think about it—this part of town went from racially segregated communities living side-by-side, to almost entirely African-American. And now, that's changing again.

TC: And remember the teen writers I was telling you about earlier? Well, they're absorbing the history that Samir documents in the "Right to the City" exhibition. And for some of the writers, the story hits really close to home. Amaria Jones is 17-years-old, and grew up in Anacostia her entire life. She's seen this neighborhood change in history books, and from her own front porch. Here is the poem she shared:

Amaria Jones:
Born into blackness.
"How long?"
"How long," she thinks, and says, as she waits for a change that has been spoken of but never completed.
"Why?"
Mama wonders as a circle of familiarity encloses around her.
The fight for equality has been fought before, but unequally so.
She murmurs and complains about the advantages of the whites, the rights of the whites, and the pleasures that her children are not welcome to enjoy.

The joy she excuses herself from daily because of the color of her skin.
Her tongue burns when she might say
“Baby, you cannot go there because you are not welcome.”
“Daughter, you are just as smart as them. They are scared of your smarts, not your looks. Don't worry.”
He says, “Mama, I have made white friends. They have invited me over to play.”
She says, “you do not have white friends. Nor do you have white neighbors. You have white foes who want to take you away from me.”
“Where's Papa?”
“Your daddy works across town to provide you better. Why do you worry me with his whereabouts? You eat, don't you?”
“I need new shoes, Mama.”
“I need a new life, baby.”
“Can we go to the fair?”
“Are we white?”
“Is Daddy ever coming home?”
“Is your stomach full?”
Her painting of change had become smeared, damaged, trampled even.
Her desires had metamorphosized.
She no longer wanted change.
She looked for revenge

TC: We’ll hear more from Amaria, and how she and the museum capture neighborhood change around them right after this.

[BREAK]

TC: We’re back. And here’s a quick recap. Anacostia is a neighborhood in Southeast Washington, D.C. separated from the rest of the city by the Anacostia river. Over time, it developed a reputation as a neighborhood hard hit by crime and poverty.

TC: Now, as populations swell in Washington, D.C., and cities worldwide, Anacostia is going from the wrong side of the tracks, or in this case the river, to a potential housing hotspot for newer, wealthier residents.

TC: Lots of cities have seen this pattern. And usually the good news is this—new money can bring things like better grocery stores and parks. The bad? It can often lead to long-time residents being pushed out by rising costs.

TC: Just before the break, you heard a poem from 17-year-old Amaria Jones. She wrote about neighborhood change in a workshop at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum. That workshop is led by Pier Penic. She’s an educator who is a big believer in focusing on African American history and the power of writing.

TC: And, for part of the summer, Pier guided eleven local teens as they wrote poetry, memoirs, and short stories about neighborhood change in Washington, D.C. And she did that by using the “Right to the City” exhibition as a teaching tool.

Pier Penic: When I started talking about it and showing them film footage of, sort of, different forms of gentrification going on all over the world, then they started to really care. They took a wonderful tour of the exhibit. It was a docent-led tour, which allowed them to empathize a little bit more about what the residents were going through and feeling.

TC: And that’s what inspired the poem Amaria read earlier. Haleema and I caught up with her after her reading.

HS: What was it like growing up? Like, do you have any memories of what to be a kid in Anacostia?

AJ: Sure. When I was younger I used to play on the front porch all the time. That was my place. That was the place to be. Hanging with my next door neighbors. But now I’m just kind of like, school, home, school, home. ‘Cause I don’t have a lot of friends around my area, so...

TC: And what was your piece about?

AJ: My piece was about the early part of Anacostia where families were separated by Anacostia River, but not only that, because of the colors of their skin. They weren't permitted to go to certain places.

TC: Like, what does that mean?\

AJ: So, I was looking at one of the documentaries. And, one of the ladies, She was talking about how when she was younger she couldn't go enjoy the movie theater or go to certain events over there because it just was not open to her. So, everything that she did was in the higher-up community.

TC: And, why did you choose to write about that?

AJ: I chose to write about it because it's still kind of current today. Although we are permitted to go to certain places, sometimes you don't always feel welcomed and I know I've have experienced that myself. So, to be able to connect with something like that and then to speak about it again was very powerful to me.

TC: So obviously, change is kind of a big theme here. But sometimes, when its happening around you every day, it’s hard to spot. And it’s not always clear how you can influence it. That is where people like Pier Penic come in. Encouraging teens to write about how they feel about neighborhood change is a way of empowering a future generation.

PP: Writing about this exhibit is ownership. It doesn't matter how the city changes, but they can always write about it and remember it through their writings and through their journalistic memoirs. They can write and keep that. The city may change, but our memories won't. Our memories will not be lost.

TC: If you haven't felt this way already, let me state the obvious for a second. The Anacostia Community Museum is different. It reflects a community back onto itself. Taking ordinary stories from ordinary people, and placing it in the puzzle of extraordinary issues that define our times.

TC: Would you make a case to a tourist from not the DMV area, you know, who wants to see the ruby slippers and the hope diamond. Would you make a case to them, that they should come east of the river to visit the Anacostia Community Museum?

SM: The Anacostia museum pioneered the whole idea of what a community museum could be. You know, in the late 1960s, it was truly a radical notion that a museum would break the mold of being this place where only certain kinds of histories, traditional histories or traditional fine artists work was being displayed and highlighted.

TC: As I talked to Samir, I realized that part of his job is bridging the past and the present.

SM: As much as these issues of neighborhood change and gentrification seem, like, new and recent, actually are much older. And so, I think people are empowered by the idea that these are issues that communities have faced, and in some cases successfully worked through. And, you know I think, hopefully we'll walk away with a deeper understanding of these complex issues, hopefully inspired by some of the histories that are recounted, and a desire, more than anything else, to get involved on a more meaningful level.

TC: And that's part of the power of the exhibition, and the kids' poetry. They showcase how change is constant and maybe inevitable. It asks a key question of people who knew the city decades ago, and also those who are coming up in it now. The question is this: Who has a right to a city? And maybe, who should have the power to change it?

TC: I was really moved by the writing I heard from the kids who were digesting all of this. So I'll leave you with one last poem. This is from 13-year-old Cohen Boddie.

Cohen Boddie:
Freedom.
Freedom is an everlasting hope that once reached, can never be taken away.
Freedom.
Freedom is like a breeze lightly gliding past your face.
Freedom.
Freedom is like the sun's rays illuminating your soul.
Freedom will never stop striving for you.
Freedom is like a man finally running without shackles.

Freedom is like a dog running without a leash to hold it back.
Freedom is like a person with a passport to wander the world wonders and what it has to offer.
Freedom is like the relaxing winds on the highway.
Freedom is not having to worry about your house being bulldozed.
Freedom is hope.

Crowd: Right to the city!

[MUSIC]

TC: This episode of Sidedoor is dedicated to the memory of Lori Yarrish, the late director of the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, whose incredible energy and enthusiasm inspired everyone who knew her.

TC: And if you're ever in the neighborhood, and perusing the Smithsonian museums in Washington, D.C., make sure you meet our friends in Anacostia and get a feel for the community. After all, they say that all politics are local politics. And those words feel pretty wise when you see the exhibit "Right to the City." It's a small piece of the enormous gentrification puzzle that people are trying to solve across the country.

TC: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

(Haleema stumbles into the room)
HS: Hey, Tony, I just wanted to record someth—

TC: Haleema, you're not on yet.

HS: Oh, God, I'm so sorry.

TC: Okay, well, since you're here we might as well tell people who you are. Sidedoor-ians, meet Haleema Shah.

HS: Heyyyyy….

TC: You heard her talking to Ms. Hyde earlier in the podcast. It sounded like the two of you were having a great time on her porch.

HS: I did. And, you know, as a new person who moved into Washington, D.C., I felt very strange asking her about the value of her home and asked verfy specific questions. But she was very nice about it. But, honestly, having intimate conversations like that on her porch, in her home, around her neighborhood, that's one of the best parts of working for Sidedoor.

TC: Okay, well, hopefully, we'll hear you doing more of you doing that, because, dear listeners, I have some bittersweet news. It's my last episode as host of *Sidedoor.* I'm going to be starting a

new adventure soon and globetrekking through Australia, Asia, and Europe. And for now...I'm going to be passing the mic over to Haleema.

HS: Do you want to do that now?

TC: Yeah, I guess.

HS: Maybe we should do this later. I feel like you and the audience might need a moment alone, Tony.

TC: Okay, we'll do a bonus episode or something when we do a much smoother mic hand-off and introduction to you.

HS: Okay. Good idea.

TC: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board.

TC: And thanks as well to listeners like you, who allow the Smithsonian to do its work.

TC: And if you've been enjoying Sidedoor, leave us a review in Apple Podcasts! It helps people find us and scratch their Smithsonian itch.

TC: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Haleema Shah, Jason Orfanon, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Elisabeth Pilger.

TC: Extra support comes from John Barth, and Genevieve Sponsler.

TC: Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda.

TC: Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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TC: So, for the last time, at least for now, I'm your host Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC OUT]