



Gentrification — More than Meets the Eye

For decades after World War II, high-income families and individuals in the United States migrated from urban areas to the suburbs. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, this began to change. Higher income professionals, drawn by low-cost housing and easier access to downtown business areas, relocated to economically distressed inner-city and working-class urban areas. This reversal of urban migration led to the rebirth of some neighborhoods. However, it also caused displacement problems among long-time and poorer residents unable to afford higher rents and taxes. These areas experienced gentrification: the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas.

This issue of *Research in Focus* takes a look at the gentrification phenomenon but with a twist on the mainstream experience. It shows that gentrification is more than just people of higher income moving into distressed neighborhoods. It is about social justice, about obligation of residents to each other and the neighborhood, and about valuing neighborhoods as places of attachment. The article **In Black Gentrifying Areas, Place Matters** summarizes the doctoral research of Dr. Barbara Combs titled “The Ties That Bind: The Role of Place in Racial Identity Formation, Social Cohesion, Accord, and Discord in Two Historic, Black Gentrifying Atlanta Neighborhoods.” In this research, Dr. Combs explores the emerging phenomenon of Black gentrification where both poor and working class residents and new residents of greater economic means are Black. The article **Urban Revitalization through Loft Conversions** examines Dr. Michael Powe’s dissertation “Loft Living in Skid Row: Policies, Plans, and Everyday Practices in a Distressed Neighborhood.” It highlights Dr. Powe’s view about the impact of loft development in economically distressed neighborhoods and shows how this type of gentrification raises tensions and exposes double standards in policies affecting loft residents and long-time residents. Both articles show that gentrification is more than meets the eye.

In Black Gentrifying Areas, Place Matters

Historic Black enclaves nationwide are experiencing a residential shift. Middle-class Blacks are returning to historic Black neighborhoods and engaging in a process of renewal and rebuilding, part of a phenomenon that some researchers call “Black gentrification.” Black gentrification is similar to mainstream gentrification with one notable exception: In Black gentrifying neighborhoods, both the old residents and the new residents of greater economic means are Black. In addition, Black gentrifiers in these neighborhoods often feel a responsibility or obligation to their lower-income Black neighbors. Although there is a growing body of research on Black gentrification, none of the notable studies explore Black gentrification in the South. The research of Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant (DDRG) recipient Dr. Barbara Combs is helping to change this.



Dr. Barbara Combs poses near Atlanta’s West End Historic District sign.

In 2006, Dr. Combs, then a Ph.D. candidate at Georgia State University, attended a university-sponsored Urban Fellows breakfast forum on urban issues. She went there intending to learn about the complicated dynamics present in urban gentrifying spaces, particularly racial strife in these areas. Instead, she was introduced to a topic that would become the focus of her dissertation and change the course of her life. Considering the wide economic gulf

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often present in gentrifying spaces, Dr. Combs wondered if the tensions would be lessened if the gentrifiers and the old residents were both Black. The issue intrigued her, and she decided to focus her dissertation research on Black gentrification neighborhoods.

One of her first steps was to identify communities to study. Since she lived in the Atlanta metropolitan area, she decided to focus on two Atlanta neighborhoods. Her dissertation, “The Ties That Bind: The Role of Place in Racial Identity Formation, Social Cohesion, Accord, and Discord in Two Historic, Black Gentrifying Atlanta Neighborhoods,” examines Black gentrification in two historic, in-town Atlanta neighborhoods: the Old Fourth Ward—which houses the birth home of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—and the West End. The Atlanta focus of Dr. Combs’ research is significant in that it highlights a southern city and helps her to fill a void in the Black gentrification literature, which singularly focused on northern cities.

Dr. Combs’ study is qualitative in nature; therefore, she wanted to schedule 2- to 3-hour interviews with up to 60 people and then transcribe the interviews in a timely manner. This is where her 2008 DDRG grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD’s) Office of University Partnerships helped her tremendously.

“The grant helped with both of those hurdles,” said Dr. Combs. “I was able to give my program participants an honorarium, and I was able to pay to have the interviews transcribed. Additionally, being able to say that my research was funded gave me a certain amount of cachet and opened up doors with some interviewees.”

Research in Focus

Dr. Combs’ research analyzes how place matters in the formation of social identities in Atlanta’s Old Fourth Ward and West End neighborhoods. Specifically, she argues that attachment to the neighborhood space (something she terms “place affinity”) has the potential to obviate social tensions in gentrifying Black communities and bind residents to each other and the social space they all occupy. The answers to the following questions summarize her discussion.

What is the relationship between place and race in Black gentrification neighborhoods? In other words, does sense of place in these neighborhoods differ for Blacks and those who are not Black?

Dr. Combs’ research finds that a distinct sense of place does exist in the Old Fourth Ward and West End

neighborhoods. She notes that despite a “contrary past and a changing demographic present,” each neighborhood is very distinctly perceived as a Black neighborhood. This perception has a significant impact on various racial/ethnic groups’ perceptions of particular places in the community along distinctly racial lines. The connection to place based on race is more pronounced for Black respondents in the Old Fourth Ward. Non-Black respondents there were less likely to express strong place-based attachments to the neighborhood than their Black counterparts. However, after analyzing all survey data based on residents’ responses, Dr. Combs concludes that in both neighborhoods, sense of place differs for Black and non-Black members of the community.

1. What is the relationship between race and class in forming social identities in Black gentrification neighborhoods?

This research finds that race and class are both important bases for the formation of social identities. Individual residents each possess multiple identities, and while race and class are both significant identities, race still seems to be of paramount significance in the community. In both the West End and the Old Fourth Ward, individuals are identified, grouped, and delineated on the basis of race. Even in integrated neighborhoods such as those under study, respondents tend to view the neighborhood and places in them as distinct “Black spaces.” Their comments evidence an awareness of the racial/ethnic categories to which they and others around them belong as well as class distinctions among people.

2. What is the impact of gender on neighborhood-level interactions?

Surprisingly, Dr. Combs’ observations and interviews did not show evidence of any significant impacts of gender on neighborhood-level interactions. Men and women in the study neighborhoods exercise certain precautions (rules of engagement) in their dealings with others in the neighborhood. However, these cautions and precautions do not vary much by gender. Instead, the way people act and interact in the neighborhood space appears to be a direct reflection of an individual’s perceived status as an insider or outsider in the community. Someone who looks out of place in the neighborhood, male or female, is likely to be marked and targeted by some elements in the neighborhood.

Urban Revitalization through Loft Conversions

In cities throughout the United States, loft conversions are transforming aging industrial and commercial buildings into residential apartments and condominiums for young professionals and the affluent. For city governments faced with tightening budgets, stiff intercity competition for capital investment, and problems with homelessness and decaying infrastructure, loft developments are seen as a promising mode of urban revitalization. However, the juxtaposition of wealthy loft dwellers with housing and services for marginalized groups poses challenges for all involved, primarily because the needs and priorities of long-time residents of distressed neighborhoods are often very different from those of their newly arrived loft neighbors.

In his dissertation, “Loft Living in Skid Row: Policies, Plans, and Everyday Practices in a Distressed Neighborhood,” Dr. Michael Powe explores the impacts of loft development on distressed central city neighborhoods by focusing on the case of Los Angeles’ Skid Row. Dr. Powe argues that loft development did not lead to the economic gentrification and widespread residential displacement that accompanies mainstream gentrification. However, it did raise tensions and expose double standards in policies affecting loft residents and long-time Skid Row residents in different ways—from trash collection to providing public toilets, openness to the presence of families, and the spatial overconcentration of alcohol-serving businesses.

Research in Focus

Cleanliness and Safety

In his research, Dr. Powe focuses on the ways in which the living conditions (specifically crime, disorder, trash, and toilets) on Skid Row changed in the context of loft development. He found that the city of Los Angeles abdicated duties of trash pickup and providing clean, sanitary public toilets while simultaneously enacting and strictly enforcing laws against littering and public urination. He further argues that, in the context of homelessness, more needs to be done to provide reasonable, legal means of disposing of “material waste and relieving oneself.” He notes that private business improvement districts (BIDs) do a great job collecting thousands of bags of trash each month, but BIDs cannot function where for-profit businesses do not operate.

“On San Julian Street between 5th and 7th Streets, an area widely known to be Skid Row’s ‘Ground Zero,’ only

nonprofit businesses operate, and consequently, these blocks do not receive services from the BIDs operating on surrounding streets,” states Dr. Powe. “The problem of visible trash and grime is only exacerbated by the predilection of the news media to focus cameras on Skid Row’s dirtiest blocks, which, in turn, presents a rather negative and stereotype-reinforcing picture of the everyday lives of the people struggling to survive there. Surprisingly, it is also not helped by well-meaning charitable organizations that drop off food and other goods to the people on the streets without also taking responsibility for the disposal of the refuse.”



Dr. Michael Powe

Dr. Powe also notes that, at about the same time that loft development and the renaissance of downtown Los Angeles was taking place, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) began the Safer Cities initiative, a zero-tolerance strategy of policing. Under this initiative, police on Skid Row treated a littered cigarette butt with the same attention and focus as drug sales or violent crime. LAPD officials spoke of the policy’s effectiveness in communicating the fact that the old norms and values of what was acceptable on Skid Row do not apply anymore. To that end, Safer Cities added 50 additional officers to the 50 square blocks of Skid Row (at an expense of about \$6 million).

However, violent crime statistics on Skid Row do not reflect the neighborhood’s reputation as a dangerous haven for criminals. For instance, the LAPD’s own statistics of homicides on Skid Row demonstrate that the neighborhood is among the safest areas in the city. Dr. Powe argues that the presence of additional police forces, then, had the latent effect of giving the appearance of safety more than actually improving the lives of long-time residents or new loft residents. “The police serve the city well, but given the costs of the Safer Cities initiative, I maintain that a policy more in line with community policing (that is, making the community’s residents equal partners alongside the LAPD in addressing the neighborhood’s ills) would have, and still could, generate more bang for the public’s buck,” says Dr. Powe.

Socioeconomics, Diversity, and Shifting Demographics

Dr. Powe’s research highlights the demographic, social, and economic changes to Skid Row following loft development. He notes the neighborhood’s increasing socioeconomic diversity, the presence of young families living in lofts, and the rising number of dogs living with loft owners in the area. He argues that the increasing number of families in the area was a surprisingly contentious thing.

When the public's attention falls on the living conditions in Skid Row, city officials often respond by removing children from the neighborhood rather than working to correct or address the conditions themselves. "Politicians and city officials have continually insisted that some of the challenges of Skid Row (e.g., poor quality housing, inadequate parks, concentration of sex offenders) make the neighborhood a poor environment for children, and in keeping with this idea, they have seen to the removal of children from the area, even in cases in which families are split up," says Dr. Powe. "Following loft development, however, loft residents with children are populating the area in a new way, reopening the emotional wounds for separated, low-income families and revealing a blatant double standard in the rights of families." As long-time Skid Row resident interviewees were quick to point out, removing children from a neighborhood only stifles its political and social growth. Neighborhood leaders insisted that the exclusion of low-income families results in the treatment of Skid Row as a district for the indigent rather than a neighborhood or community like any other.

Culture and Urban Economies

In recent years, cultural districts have attracted increased attention as an urban economic development strategy. Some modern researchers argue that culture can revive urban economies, not by placing a shiny veneer over crumbling decay but by using the arts to engage community residents and revitalize their neighborhoods. In his research, Dr. Powe explores the potential for the development of a *cultural cluster* (which includes a concentration of cultural providers, resident artists, and cultural participants) in Skid Row. He notes that the western edge of the neighborhood, Main Street, has already been rebranded as a part of Los Angeles' Gallery Row and is the site of a monthly art walk event that regularly attracts thousands of people. Dr. Powe argues that the Downtown Art Walk presents a tremendous opportunity to promote the artistic and creative efforts of long-time Skid Row residents. "The Downtown Art Walk is already helping to improve relations between loft residents, the broader public, and long-time residents of Skid Row. I believe that it could also lead to economic support for the many creative nonprofit agencies on Skid Row and promote a unique neighborhood identity and vitality," says Powe.

Recommendations for Skid Row

Dr. Powe offers the following recommendations for Skid Row's future development as an inclusive, diverse neighborhood.

- First, given the apparent policy double standards and the wide range of needs of Skid Row's diverse resident population, planning in Skid Row should be refocused as a neighborhood-scale, community-based process. Skid Row is currently marked by the growing presence of loft resident families in a neighborhood where low-income families are actively discouraged and by the overconcentration of alcohol-serving establishments in an area where individuals openly struggle with alcoholism.

Planning in Skid Row should be a process in which social differences are the starting point of conversations about the neighborhood's future. Skid Row's particular struggles should not be treated as exceptions to the challenges of normal neighborhoods. Rather, a talented city planner with first-hand knowledge of Skid Row should bring together the neighborhood's diverse residents and work to foster respect across divisions of class, race, ethnicity, and housing status and tenure. The presence of families from diverse backgrounds and the struggles of residents' recovery must be taken as legitimate concerns that shape the neighborhood's future. Based on reports from interviewees of all backgrounds, the divides among the people living and working on Skid Row are not unbridgeable.



Dr. Michael Powe (center) interviewing Skid Row residents.

- Second, the LAPD's Safer Cities initiative should return to its original tripartite foundations of enhancement, outreach, and enforcement. The enforcement component of the initiative—the hiring of 50 additional police officers to patrol Skid Row—received nearly all of the funding and attention relative to the enhancement and outreach components. The enforcement piece of the initiative should be dialed down, and its funding should be moved toward services like public toilets, additional trash collection, and better public park facilities. Safer

3. How do social/psychological attitudes vary among neighborhood residents in Black gentrification areas?

After reviewing residents' responses on their attachment to and satisfaction with the neighborhood, Dr. Combs notes that there are varying social/psychological attachments to the neighborhood space based on factors like longevity in the neighborhood, race, and gender. In both the Old Fourth Ward and West End neighborhoods, old-timers—individuals who had resided in the area (continuously) for at least 10 years—expressed higher levels of attachment to the neighborhood than those who resided there for less than 10 years. However, the disparity in attachments between both groups is much greater in the West End. The responses also show that in the West End, gender does matter for attachment and satisfaction, but in the Old Fourth Ward it does not. A number of Old Fourth Ward female old-timers expressed high attachment to the community of the past but lesser attachment to the present community. The Old Fourth Ward is an area with a rich cultural and historic legacy, and the research suggests that attachment levels are higher in such areas.

4. How do the social engagement levels of residents in Black gentrification neighborhoods vary?

Residents, business owners, and stakeholders can all participate in neighboring activities, which Dr. Combs defines broadly to include formal activities such as participation in civic organizations and less formal activities such as interacting with neighbors (including visiting each others' homes, conversations across fences and on streets, community events, and urban gardening). Active participation in civic organizations in the neighborhood, however, seems to be the purview of an elite few.

5. What factors influence the decisions that the gentry (i.e., those with the economic means to leave these neighborhoods) ultimately make about staying or leaving?

This research finds that most of the gentry (those who are middle class or above) view homeownership as an investment. Certainly, many choose to invest in the Old Fourth Ward and West End neighborhoods because of their social, cultural, or psychological attachments to the area; however, their attachment levels are much like a community of limited liability. In a community of limited liability, there are a multitude of relationships and associations and a sense of identity; however, attachment is contingent and voluntary. In times of economic

uncertainty, this form of attachment may make it easier for the gentry to leave the neighborhoods. As supported by respondents' self-reported attachment levels to the community, the gentry express higher levels of satisfaction and attachment to the study neighborhoods than the non-gentry (poor and working class). However, the gentry are only willing to invest up to a point. Residents may invest themselves (identity- and resource-wise) in an area, but they do it like a business and will only invest to a point. When investment is no longer prudent, they are likely to pull out.



House on Oglethorpe Avenue in a gentrifying section of the West End.

Ties That Bind

Despite the focus on conflict in existing gentrification literature, Dr. Combs' research concludes that in the West End and the Old Fourth Ward, much more accord exists in the communities than has been outlined previously. She notes, "The communities under study are teetering on peril, and in the face of economic uncertainty, residents indicate more willingness to, at least provisionally, admit some racial outsiders into a 'community of solidarity.' The residents in the communities are bound together. Some of those ties are based on individuals' attachment to the neighborhood, its places, spaces, history, and people. Other people evidence a more rational form of attachment based upon the growing realization that home prices are likely not going up any time soon, so it makes logical sense to preserve the community, and, in so doing, preserve the value of your own home. In either case, I find that these strong, affective attachments to place have the potential to obviate tensions in Black, gentrifying neighborhoods."

Dr. Combs is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Shorter University in Rome, Georgia. For more information, contact Dr. Combs at bcombs@shorter.edu. To request a copy of "The Ties That Bind: The Role of Place in Racial Identity Formation, Social Cohesion, Accord, and Discord in Two Historic, Black Gentrifying Atlanta Neighborhoods," e-mail oup@oup.org.

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Cities should be moved away from its broken windows model, which equates long-time, low-income residents with disorder. By ceasing the fining and jailing of destitute Skid Row residents, the city and state will save money on the high costs of incarceration. Safer Cities should be restructured in line with the community policing model, in which the community plays a far more significant role in quelling crime and overseeing police action.

- Finally, the creative nonprofits based on Skid Row and the concentration of interest in the arts on Main Street should be better bridged to foster economic and community development simultaneously. Following the concept of the cultural cluster—as conceived by Mark Stern and Susan Seifert of the Social Impact of the Arts Project—the cooperative energies of Skid

Row's distinctive creative arts and the highly popular Downtown Art Walk could be brought together to foster a socially inclusive creative city. One possible policy would focus on moving the Downtown Art Walk one block further into Skid Row (onto Los Angeles Street) and giving more space and attention to the positive things happening within Skid Row. If policies are drafted by Main Street gallery owners and Skid Row-based arts and recovery organizations, a solution that is appropriate for all residents could be designed.

Dr. Michael Powe currently serves as the John E. Sawyer Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Washington. For more information, contact mpowe@uci.edu or m.powe7@gmail.com. To request a copy of "Loft Living in Skid Row: Policies, Plans, and Everyday Practices in a Distressed Neighborhood," e-mail oup@oup.org.

HUD's Office of University Partnerships (OUP) provides grants to institutions of higher education to assist them and their partners with the implementation of a broad range of community development activities, including neighborhood revitalization, housing, and economic development. It also provides grants to doctoral candidates to develop and conduct applied research on policy-relevant housing and urban development issues. This newsletter, *Research in Focus*, highlights the accomplishments of grantees in OUP's Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant and Early Doctoral Student Research Grant programs. It includes a variety of articles on past and current grantee dissertations and research.