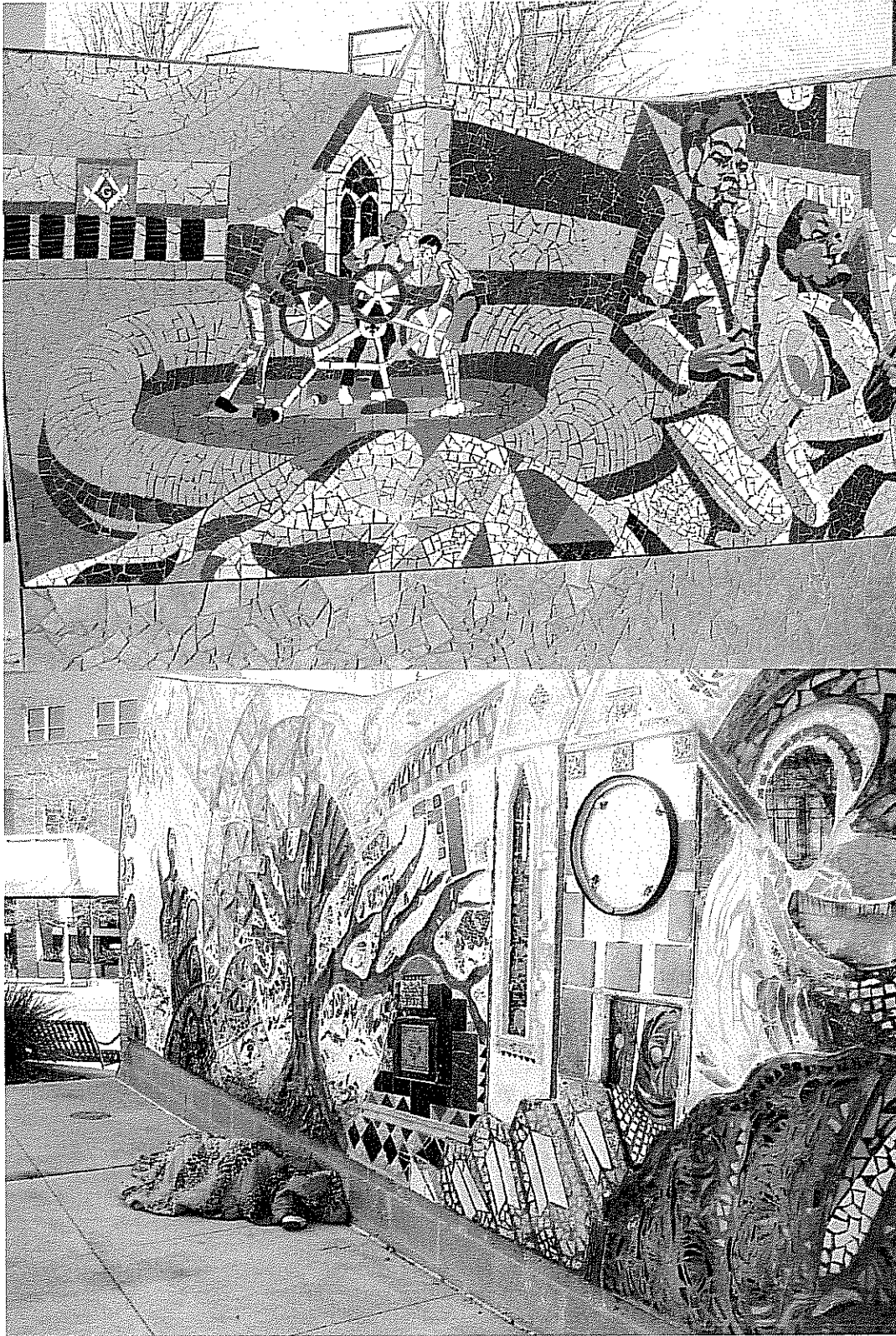


East Austin Mosaic: The Shape and Color of Gentrification



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Walking down East 11th street in Austin, Texas the landscape that falls before me is gentrification. Not just white people moving into black neighborhoods, not just condos where there were houses, but a visible narrative that marks space and bodies – marks them with history of racial and economic struggle, and continuing encroachments of opportunism and neglect.

Austin was created with the construction of the Texas state capitol between 1882 and 1888, and those who built it and represented therein settled the city that now surrounds this landmark site. Because slaves built the Capitol (black slaves) and the legislators were white, a mixture of bodies separated into small, scattered communities populated this diverse space until 1928. In this year, the city made a master plan to establish the roads, water systems, commerce district and everything else that makes a city modern – it was development. When creating the modern within Austin, the White, upper class city government physically segregated the city. All freedmen communities were to be moved East of East Avenue. This street was later turned into a freeway, Interstate-35, which only made the separation between people – Black and brown and poor on one side and white and rich on the other - more solid and seemingly permanent. Now things are changing once again.

* This paper is a precursor to field research and community organizing planned for the future. These themes will be revisited with data and collected stories from East Austin residents. A completed version of this paper will examine the different resistance strategies that have been employed by East Austin communities.

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Walking East on 11th street, past the dividing line of I-35, a changing landscape becomes more and more obvious the farther one walks. We begin where it ends: new 'modern looking' buildings, condos, a wine bar, art gallery, 'bistro', and the City of Austin office buildings. Accompanying these sites are the bodies that they were made for – White bodies, rich bodies, those that pay \$8 dollars for a mimosa, ten dollars for a sandwich, drink wine that comes from far away. These are not the only bodies on the street, however. The past is still there in more ways than one. A mosaic representing the street's historic past – jazz music, freedmen walking 1930's streets, Black shops, Black people, Black culture. Behind the mosaic on this day is not an unfamiliar site, a homeless black man sleeps on a sheet of cardboard; another panhandles across the street.

Between glass buildings - some already built, some in construction - sits The Historic Victory Grill. Founded in 1945, the restaurant, bar and music venue has been designated as 'historic' and thus safeguarded against the increasing rent costs and tax rates that have driven so many of Victory's contemporaries away. There is a mural painted on the wall dedicated to its founders. Inside it is empty. It remains a relic. It represents the city's response to gentrification, or perhaps it represents the idea that gentrification is not happening at all, or at least as the city says, not along racial lines. The 'historic' designation is meant to preserve the flavor of the neighborhood, but as the neighborhood disappears around it, it becomes more and more like the mosaic, marking space as historically or culturally Black while Black people themselves are being removed. Or

perhaps it becomes more like the Obama Store across the street, a monument to remind us of race, and at once tell us that it is no longer important.

(Dis)Investment

The development on the East side is more than black businesses closing down, although when they are gone they are not so much forgotten as is the process that removed them. Deeper than the replacement of one type of structure with another, or body with another, gentrification always resides within the city structure, only rising up to displace people when necessary. The dislocation and relocation lies dormant as does the whip on a plantation, an army in its barracks or the unclenched fist of an abusive partner; it is an element of structuralized violence – seemingly innocent, with victims hidden and justifications abundant.

Walking East on 12th street, an earlier stage of the gentrification process is visible. Here, the White bodies are only beginning to arrive - we are still in Black Austin, but not how it was or should be. The buildings here are Black establishments: bars, liquor stores, BBQ, barber shops, an arsoned NAACP building stands a blackened skeletal frame, shops struggle to survive due to the sorry economic state and the bodies produced by this. Cops, crack, prostitutes, gangs; here black and white clash violently and frequently. 12th and Chicon, ‘the most dangerous corner in the city’ is currently going through gentrification, though at the stage its in, it is often called something else.

Gentrification usually moves in three phases: disinvestment, flight, and re-colonization. Disinvestment is traditionally a lack of commercial investment, growth, social services, and police, but certain types of investment can have similar effects as these forms of neglect. Section Eight housing, for example, has been stacked around 12th and Chicon for decades, flooding a small area of the city with nearly all of its low-income housing. These investments caused a shift in the demographic of the area, driving out middle-class Blacks to the suburbs and hurting business in the area hard. Over the last ten years, only more and more middle class Blacks have moved out, while lower-class and under-class people have moved in. Currently, 12th and Chicon is a hub of crime and street traffic. Presently the city seems to want to clean up the area, as the police are a constant presence, the root of these problems is far from the surface that the police patrol however, as schools, homes and other amenities have disintegrated from neglect.

Neglect can be strategic. Developers can be savvy. City governments can look the other way. Upper class Blacks can betray their communities. These things can go on unnoticed. Gentrification usually follows a pattern, however. Land remains valuable, especially if it is close to downtown, regardless of the state of the buildings or bodies that inhabit it. A gap appears between the amount of rent that people are paying and the value of the land. When this rent gap gets big enough, visible gentrification takes place. Land is sold and flipped, developers build invasive structures, and landowners sit on land leaving buildings empty. The area sits, as does 12th and Chicon, and waits.

City Responses

In *The Homeless Body*, Samira Kawash explains how the distinction between homeless people and the public “is often reinforced by the images and rhetoric used by advocates for the homeless as well as the structure and organization of services directed toward the homeless.” In the same way, Black communities, and those being displaced in general, are made distinct from the public spatially and temporally. This is apparent with Austin’s designation of historic sites, one tool in the city’s arsenal of anti-gentrification methods that actually contribute to gentrification. The City designates a building, either a business or simply a structure as a historical site, which protects it from being bulldozed or bought out, and keeps the tax rates down. The city claims this helps to protect the community, but focusing on individual buildings has a reverse effect. First of all, the historic designation raises the property values of surrounding structures, making it harder for other businesses and homes to remain. Secondly, it ignores the community (people) while preserving the most visible markers of the community and relegating them to the past, to history. This focusing on individual structures also plays out with the city’s housing program.

Austin’s housing department is well aware the gentrification happening on the East Side; they see poor people being displaced by rich developers, and they want to stop this. One city program that has been successful in mitigating the classist elements of gentrification is S.M.A.R.T housing: Safe, Mixed income, Accessible, Reasonably priced, Transit oriented. While a thorough dissection of the ontological and practical implications of these five requirements, as well as the qualification process, is useful in a larger argument, here I will focus only on the low-income aspect of SMART Housing. Individual homes

are bought refurbished and sold to families who qualify. This keeps housing prices lower and theoretically maintains the community threatened by increasing property values, tax rates and rent. The problem with focusing on individual houses rather than on the community as a whole is that anyone can, and does, move into the houses. In fact, the SMART program has only made it easier for middle class White people to gentrify East Austin.

Structures and Bodies

Walking East on 12th Street a Black Prostitute walks past me going the other way. She stares at the ground avoiding the glares of the two white police officers sitting in their patrol car in a parking lot of a closed down butcher shop. Next door stands a newly built, modern looking building - the big red sign flaps in the wind "East End Flats: available soon." The East End is what people are starting to call the East Side; the name is common in marketing to Whites moving into the area. This area is a corridor; the condos are out of place next to the older houses, the prostitution and drugs have moved in, away from the war zone further west, the police arrive as infantrymen – the first occupiers of a coveted land.

Landscape is created and recreated by structures and bodies that populate the area. Different spaces can be read in a myriad of ways depending on the eye of the observer; where one may see revitalization, another may see invasion. Houses stand in uniform rows, single story, 2 bedrooms, modest homes, inhabited by families for fifty years or more. Then one stands out, four times the size of any house on the block, uber modern

design, two stories, large glass panes, chic, trendy – it was built for White people, it does not belong, it is an invasive structure, not wanted by the people already there, but built for those who are to come.

Using Nirmal Puawar’s analysis that certain bodies are meant to inhabit particular spaces, a similar argument can be made for these houses described above, or the condos, or any of the new development taking place in East Austin. These structures are hyper visible, not only as new, but also as for Whites. This causes a rupture in the landscape, marking it as a place undergoing change. There is a power in these houses, many still vacant, as they represent who will soon be there, a different class of people, and a different race. The neighborhood’s age, history, and inhabitants are invisible to the development taking place; it is one based on sheer numbers – profit at stake. A place that was designated long ago for black bodies is marked, with the construction of a single house, as the future sight of white bodies. The bodies themselves marked for particular spaces.

Bodies and Structures

Walking East on 17th Street a man fixes cars parked on the road; he is a permanent fixture, always working, smiling, and talking to people as they pass. He fixes cars for people in the community; here there is still a community. Another man joins him, out of work, but on his feet. Another approaches, jittery and strung-out – visibly on crack. Here, everyone knows a crackhead. Everyone has a cousin or a brother or a friend who has fallen victim to the disinvestment, the lack of work, and the lure of exit from an unfriendly and unwelcoming world, from structuralized violence, and familial violence

and personal violence. The one crack addict on the corner is just part of life to his neighbors. Three Black men stand on the corner: one working, one getting by, and one struggling. A car of white folks looking at real estate drives by. The people inside see three crackheads on the corner; the hyper-visibility of the one marks the others. This place needs to be cleaned up.

The way that Black bodies mark the East Side is not just racial, but is marred by those bodies that are most visible. Drugs, gangs and prostitution are openly threatening to prospectors in the area. They do not see that these bodies exist in these spaces precisely to assign them as 'in need of development'. Neither do they see the majority of the people here, who have always been here, honest and hardworking and being displaced. There are record foreclosures in the area, peoples basic needs are unmet in terms of social services, education and representation, the criminal justice system preys on those who struggle hardest – the state does help to secure this place, this is marked as unwanted by the outside force, the invading force, the land they want, but the bodies are not wanted, they are criminal obstructions to the inevitable coming tide.

Katherine McKittrick explains how when “who we see is tied up with where we see through truthful commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place.” This is the case when the City of Austin sees Black bodies on the East Side as part of a narrative of development. They

mark the space as undeveloped, and reflect the position of developer onto the well to do city. In this narrative, the right thing to do is develop.

Colonial Outpost

Walking East on MLK the landscape is split in two; a stable Black community lies to the South, but to the North is new construction visible beyond fields of grass. What was once the old airport lies directly in the middle of traditionally Black Austin; it is the site of the new Mueller development, the largest development currently taking place in Austin with nearly 5,000 proposed homes. It is currently only partially constructed and inhabited, but Black bodies are already invisible here, while “greenspace” borders separate the new development from the already existing communities. White, upper-class families play in the parks, they are safe and comfortable and close to downtown.

The placement of this new community couldn't be more central to what is demographically Black (see map 1), and the development itself couldn't be more White, however there are other factors that compound the racial divide of development. Firstly, the Mueller development site received \$46,436,807 in dedicated public funding for infrastructure costs and an additional \$184,995,000 for infrastructure and other projects from land sales, totaling over 230 million dollars from the city of Austin, while the communities in the surrounding neighborhoods have received little support from the city in terms of their own sustainability. Ironically the Mueller site claims to be sustainable, not an uncommon buzzword in the ‘new urbanism’ movement, while the term refers to a neighborhood’s ability to adapt and remain, to not be displaced. The larger picture of

displacement is mitigated in the eyes of developers because their invasive, White neighborhood will not fall victim to the very problems they are causing. The racial distinction between Mueller and its surrounding areas make this even more disturbing as the message the city is sending by using the term ‘sustainable’, is that new (White) developments are protected in a way that old (Black) neighborhoods are not.

Another buzzword that Mueller uses to sell itself is ‘affordability’ (see doc 1). It boasts 25 percent of its units to be affordable, meaning affordable to people making under the median income for Austin \$45,000 – \$55,000, while the median income for African American families is \$35,000. This further designates Mueller as a space for White people, more specifically upper-middle class, White families. This is clearly the kind of development that the city is interested in, and this development is grounded in a language as old as this land.

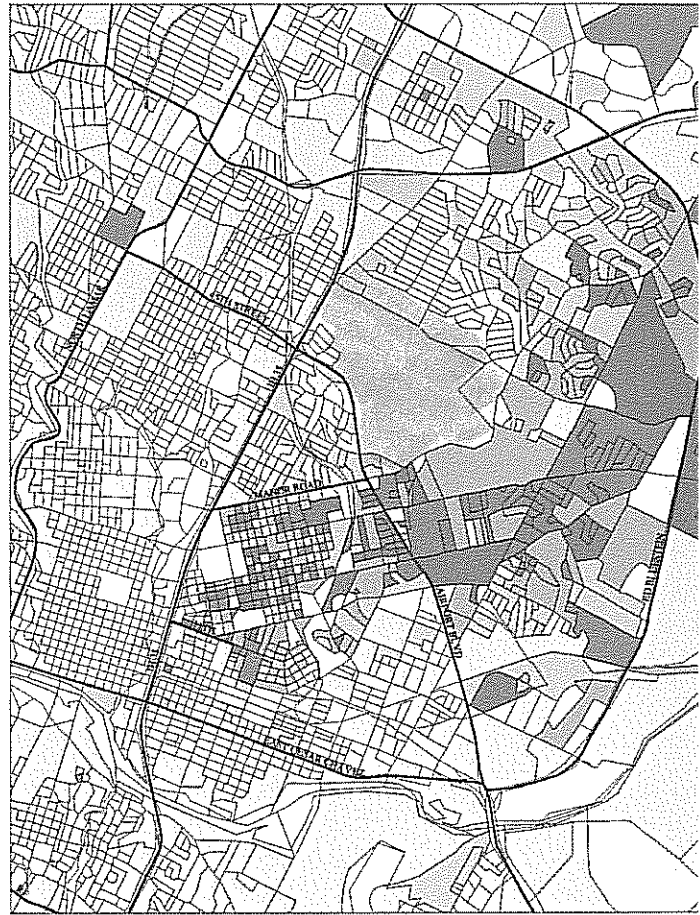
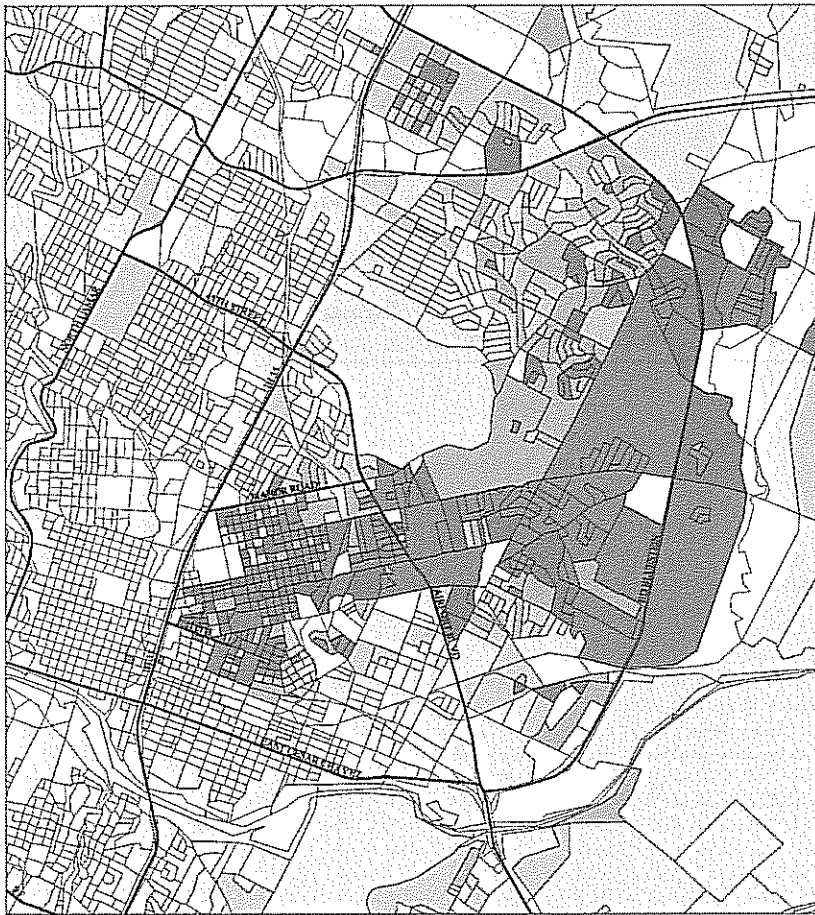
Resisting a Developing World

The passageway under I-35 is unpleasant. It is said to be dangerous, full of homelessness, crime, broken glass. This is no accident, as the 1928 master plan and the larger history of segregation of Austin clearly mark the freeway as a barrier between East and West. Recently there has been a push to make the passage safer and easier, and the city has responded positively to this proposal. What timing! Just when the East Side is changing from Black to White does the city respond to this concern. Just when a particular demographic moves in, does the desire to connect the area to downtown reach the city government. Indeed, the improvement of East Austin is one of The City’s

Changing African-American Landscape in East Austin

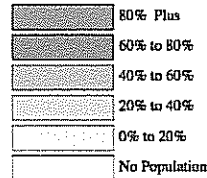
African-American Population Concentrations, 1990 and 2000.

Austin, Texas. 1990 Census and Census 2000 Data.



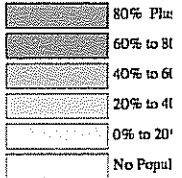
1990 Population

Percent African-American



2000 Population

Percent African-A



Map produced by: The City Development, Department of Planning, City of Austin, May 2002

Mueller