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To Understand How Gentrification in Durham Works, Just Read the Signs

Two different kinds of for-sale signs have been popping up in a traditionally Black Durham neighborhood in the shadow of downtown, and they neatly illustrate the forces that are turning such neighborhoods white.

The first kind is a red-and-white placard made of hard plastic, like the one in the front yard of a bungalow on the 100 block of Lodge Street in South Durham. The home's gray exterior shingling is starting to buckle. The handsome charcoal-gray Cadillac Coupe DeVille parked in front is missing a license plate, and the grass is growing tall in the sloping backyard.

A cute little toddler stands in the doorway next to a pitbull puppy. They are both smiling and are the same height. When a prospective buyer arrives to ask about the home, a teen boy comes outside and tells the buyer to call the number on the for-sale sign. The home, built in 1925, has an estimated value of \$156,200 and is listed for sale at \$289,000.

The second kind of sign is more professional-looking, like the one that sits a few blocks away, in front of a two-story Craftsman home with a white picket fence at the end of the 200 block on West Piedmont Street. A man, who is arguing with his girlfriend, stops to tell the *INDY* that the home's former owner attended Howard University but put the home up for sale because of crime and gunshots in the neighborhood. This home, built in 2017, is on sale for \$448,789.

The first kind of sign represents the forced exodus of working-class African Americans from the inner city, driven by skyrocketing property taxes, an influx of new homes that are far

beyond their financial reach, and neighbors who no longer look like them. They are selling their homes to developers and individuals for above, but not far above, market value.

The second kind of sign represents a shift in who lives in the inner city and what that means. Moreover, it represents the developers or wealthy individuals who buy these houses, renovate them, and sell them at prices that far exceed what the original owners received or can afford.

Affluent whites of the sort who fled to the suburbs during the 1960s and 1970s now want to live near downtown, especially faced with Durham's housing shortage elsewhere in the city. And so Black residents are being shunted off to exurbs.

This is the inverse of 20th-century white flight, when white people fled racially mixed urban regions, leaving them impoverished, for suburbs and exurbs.

Now, instead, we have gentrification, where white people are fleeing the suburbs and exurbs for racially mixed urban regions, enriching them—but not to the benefit of longtime Black residents.

But it didn't have to be this way, and it still doesn't if the political will to address it at the city level can be found.

The current gentrification of Black neighborhoods in Durham may well be even more insidious than the urban renewal programs that displaced thousands of Black homeowners and hundreds of Black-owned businesses more than half a century ago.

N.C. Central historian Jerry Gershenhorn writes in his biography, *Louis Austin and The Carolina Times*, that in 1962, voters approved an \$8.6 million bond referendum to finance water, sewer, and street improvements in the Hayti district. The goal, per recommendations by UNC-Chapel Hill's Department of City and Regional Planning, was to clean up and modernize 200 acres of Hayti to improve the city's tax base and make room for the planned east-west expressway.

The referendum won tremendous Black support in the face of white detractors who “take delight in keeping a Negro section of the city a blighted area where they have the delight of looking down or turning up their noses at Negroes,” as Louis Austin, the legendary publisher and editor of *The Carolina Times*, wrote.

Urban renewal at least held out a promise to improve the quality of life in Black communities, though it was never fulfilled. But forces of gentrification today hold no such promise in struggling neighborhoods where wealthier white newcomers who want to live near downtown are buying homes in formerly all-Black enclaves, driving up property taxes to levels older residents can’t afford. Nor, after selling their homes, can they afford newly refurbished ones that often sell for \$250,000–\$500,000.

Even when Black and Brown members of the city’s working-class garner pre-approved housing loans, they are easily outbid for homes in their neighborhoods by more affluent newcomers. As a result, realtors are increasingly directing them to towns like Graham, Mebane, Butner, and even Henderson, where they can purchase more home for their money.

The anger and frustration felt by Black residents who are being priced out of the city is understandable. History is alive in the Bull City. Old-timers eagerly share archival documents and film footage of the traditionally Black Hayti district south of downtown, while a new generation has declared its intent to rebuild “Black Wall Street” as it was when the Black community’s commerce and quality of life earned the praise of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, who rarely agreed on anything.

Cynics say it took the Japanese people less time to rebuild a country ravaged by two atomic bombs than it has to rebuild Hayti.

Gentrification in hardscrabble Black communities was inevitable after a long series of broken promises: the federal government reneging on granting Black freedmen 40 acres and a mule at slavery’s end, redlining at the onset of FDR’s New Deal, and the proposed urban renewal that had its start in 1949 and 1954, when Congress authorized federal funding for urban slum clearance and new construction.

In Durham, that new construction was conspicuously absent, save for the east-west expressway that cleaved the heart of 200 acres of Hayti, perhaps destroying it forever.

Community organizer Lamont Lilly, whose activism and political life were [chronicled in the INDY last week](#), calls the white homeowners who have arrived from all over the country to buy homes along the Fayetteville Street corridor “colonizers” with little regard for how their presence is uprooting a community that has been cheated out of a fundamental birthright: the sanctuary of a home.

“Trust me,” he says, “families are being destroyed.”

Last month, Carmen Williams was among the city planning commissioners who voted unanimously to not recommend rezoning requests for the proposed development of nearly 900 homes in North Durham’s traditionally Black Braggtown community.

Before casting her vote, Williams chastised a representative of one of the developers, who made a last-minute offer of \$100,000 to be split by the city’s affordable-housing fund and the [Braggtown Community Association](#), whose members [shared their concerns](#) about being forced out of neighborhoods that were settled by freedmen who had labored at the Stagville plantation about 10 miles away.

“You see opportunity, but you don’t see options,” says Williams, who wondered why the funds could not be used to create more affordable homes. “You don’t see the community. More and more people everywhere have decided they can’t be bought.”

It did not have to be this way, and preserving the Hayti district could have had an enormous citywide impact.

Gershenthorn notes that before urban renewal, “Durham’s planners argued that Hayti was an ‘economic and esthetic drag’ on the city, and a detriment to ‘public health, safety, morals and welfare.’”

Gershenthorn adds that in contrast, many Blacks viewed Hayti, with its 4,000 homes and 500 businesses, “as a vibrant though poor African American community which suffered because

of overcrowding and inadequate housing." The Hayti community, particularly low and middle income residents hoped for the revitalization of substandard housing in much the same manner as gentrification is doing now.

Henry McKoy, who is director of entrepreneurship at N.C. Central's business school, previously told the *INDY* that the loss of Hayti is incalculable.

"We are talking about literally billions of dollars in lost economic value for the Hayti community that could have resulted from expanding as the macroeconomic landscape expanded," McKoy said. "Black Durham was denied the economic standing that it had built over the course of the century before the [east-west expressway] came through."

Working-class Black families throughout Durham's urban core say they are now targets of an urban land rush, besieged with unsolicited calls and visits to their homes from strangers who want to buy them out.

And they are selling. Entire blocks of Black neighborhoods are now white: in East Durham, along Guthrie Street, on the 1100 block of Dunstan Avenue in South Durham, Walltown to the north, and pretty much all of the south side along the edge of downtown. Durham Housing Authority director Anthony Scott touts this as a success story because of mixed-income development, as opposed to herding low-income residents into a neighborhood destined to be bedeviled by poverty and crime.

Success for whom, though? There's a trundle-down complex on Fargo Street where two townhomes are priced at more than \$150,000, and a single room farther up the street is renting for nearly \$800.

Nate Baker is an urban planner and a senior associate with [Clarion Associates](#) in Chapel Hill. He also serves on [Durham's city planning commission](#). He says the inner city and who gets to live there is being redefined in Durham and in similar cities across the country.

"For decades, the inner city typically referred to historic residential neighborhoods where low-income, Black, and working-class people lived," he says. "But the inner city also encompassed neighborhoods that were walkable, close to transit, and near services."

These areas, he added, were “notorious” for both public and private disinvestment, but as investment shifted to downtown and market preferences shifted toward walkable places, the inner cities that whites once fled became the natural locations for revitalization.

Baker understands the longtime residents’ frustration and anger.

“Gentrification now means that any efforts to make neighborhoods better threatens the ability of low and middle income residents to remain where they are,” he says. “Imagine the injustice of living in neighborhoods neglected by society for decades only to be forced out of your neighborhood by the very investments that residents needed all along.”

Aya Shabu is a dancer and writer who recently purchased a home that’s undergoing renovations in East Durham’s Hyde Park neighborhood. The married mother of two is the founder of [Whistle Stop Tours](#), with stops in storied African American neighborhoods.

“I am seething,” Shabu said last week while walking along West Pettigrew Street, where she is creating a new tour that will explore [Black Durham’s involvement with the Green Book](#).

Shabu walked past the BullHouse, a luxury apartment complex near the intersection of Fayetteville and Pettigrew Streets, where white tenants walked in and out. The rear of the impressive housing complex straddles Jackie Robinson Drive. The apartments that rent between \$1,300 to a little over \$5,000 are far beyond the capability of people who have lived in the community for decades.

Shabu is also frustrated because of what used to occupy the sprawling stretch of land where the building sits. There was the Black-owned Biltmore Hotel, a glittering jewel in the crown of the old Hayti district, which was called “the finest Negro hotel in America.” It shared space along Pettigrew Street with bars, restaurants, gas stations, a drugstore, dry cleaners, a theater, and *The Carolina Times* before it was burned to the ground in the late 1970s in a suspected arson.

“We can pretty much predict where Black people will be economically twenty to fifty years from now,” says Shabu, who calls gentrification in Durham “Black erasure.”

Baker says a question that's not asked enough is, "To where are gentrified residents being displaced?"

"The answer to that question is 'further away,'" he says. "Further away from jobs, transit, services, and quality-of-life opportunities. In Durham it means the poorly serviced exurbs, where the cost of travel is higher. To the county. To Graham or Burlington."

Vanessa Mason-Evans, who lives in North Durham, echoes Shabu's unease.

"It's like they are trying to erase all of the Blacks out of the communities where they have dwelt for years," she says. "It's like they want us back on the plantation, but in a different way."

Mason-Evans is the chair of the Braggtown Community Association. At slavery's end, her family arrived in Braggtown from plantations in Chatham and Granville counties. The family worked hard and bought more than 10 acres of land in the neighborhood. Today, her family members own homes, a convenience store, and a gray concrete building on the land purchased by their forebears. For nearly 20 years, Mason-Evans has dreamed of transforming the building into a small business mall. She envisions an organic fruit and vegetable market, a barbershop, ethnic-flavored restaurants, a nail salon, and a tailoring shop.

"We have had dreams for years for what it would look like," she says.

But Mason-Evans and her family have repeatedly been denied loans needed to develop the property.

"There was always a reason why we couldn't qualify for a loan," Mason-Evans says. "One time it was our credit score. Then it was something else. Then they told us if we did this thing, or that thing, we could qualify. We just gave up."

Mason-Evans thinks her application would have been approved if she were white.

"I know it would have made a whole lot of difference," she says. "Blacks have a harder time getting loans, and I think it's a way to deter you. Then it becomes a challenge to replenish

finances and just trying to hold onto what you have, and that's with a lot of Black people."

Baker says the private sector and real estate capital monopolize the building of cities that does not contribute to a healthy, "truly just and democratic society."

But the public sector—particularly local government—has "an incredibly powerful tool" in its arsenal: the power to regulate real estate through zoning that has had a well-known history of dividing people by race and class.

Durham's zoning and subdivision regulations make up the city's Unified Development Ordinance; Baker calls it "the rules, or DNA, that shape the urban form." He and his fellow members have lobbied for double the amount of sidewalks in new developments, along with making them more transit-accessible and green sustainable. And he says there is much more work to be done beyond "tweaks, or even comprehensive overhauls to our planning systems and regulations."

Baker points to tangible actions that include local government support of neighborhoods that are resisting the efforts of "well-capitalized developers and unyielding, racist market forces."

Baker also thinks the city needs a more institutionalized system of neighborhood planning, where residents are engaged by planners and organizers to create a vision of their community that calls for "new policies, regulations, programs, and metrics to achieve that vision."

Finally, Baker says the city needs a system to address controversial large-scale development projects. He suggests that the city or a consultant hired by the city should conduct a charrette process with developers, impacted residents, and other stakeholders, "so that there is a fair mediation that can help all parties achieve the best development."

"Our planning system shouldn't be a regime that greases the wheel for real estate capital," Baker says. "It should work endlessly to achieve a humane and democratic city, inspired equitably by residents."
