RACE, POWER, AND NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE:

A CASE STUDY OF REDEVELOPMENT IN FREEDMEN'S TOWN; HOUSTON, TEXAS

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION
Race, Power, and Neighborhood Change:

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By GEORGINA RHAE BIENSKI
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Urban redevelopment in the United States is often fraught with tensions. Reinvesting in low-income, inner-city communities can improve the built environment, services, and safety in a neighborhood, but it can and has historically displaced residents. Government supported urban redevelopment in low-income African American neighborhoods in the United States has often compelled Black residents to move elsewhere. This dissertation is a case study of redevelopment in one such neighborhood—Freedmen's Town in Houston, Texas. It focuses on three distinct, but related redevelopment efforts by private and public actors from the 1970s through the early 2000s to examine how relationships of power played out in space as city leaders and developers wanted to demolish the neighborhood in its entirety, while residents strived to stay in the neighborhood and retain its cultural and historical significance.

Freedman's Town is a neighborhood adjacent to the central business district in Houston. As the name implies, it became home to many African American migrants who moved to the city from nearby plantations following Texas’ Emancipation in 1865. It was the center of Houston’s African American cultural and professional life until the early twentieth century, but then experienced decades of disinvestment, land loss through eminent domain, and population loss. In the 1970s, the city began exploring ways to encourage private investment in the area. Private investors wanted to redevelop the
neighborhood in its entirety and relocate the residents to other parts of the city. Despite efforts by residents to preserve the built environment, most of the historic buildings were lost as a direct consequence of the redevelopment efforts put forth by city officials and private developers. Community opposition and activism prevented the destruction of the entire neighborhood, however, and some historically and culturally significant structures remain due to the efforts of the residents and their allies. During this time period, many Black residents moved out of the neighborhood and many white residents moved in.

This dissertation aims to increase the understanding of neighborhood change by capturing the nuances of how relationships of power played out in this historically significant Black neighborhood at the local and federal level during the time of the redevelopment periods and beyond. It explores strategies used by the community to oppose wholesale redevelopment in each effort and examines how that opposition changed the way the city and real estate investors approached redevelopment, revealing relationships of power and their continuous evolvement. It is significant to the scholarly community because state-sanctioned demolition and displacement in African American communities has been occurring since at least post World War II with the federal Urban Renewal program. Several scholars have studied those communities and other scholars are studying more recent destruction and redevelopment in low-income Black communities, especially via demolition of public housing in cities across the United States. This project will contribute to other research by studying how so many single-family homes were lost and how some of the structures survived in such an environment.
Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I thank my advisor Kathe Newman, who not only guided my research and writing, but also quickly became my biggest cheerleader and advocate. Words nor actions could ever appropriately demonstrate how much I appreciate her patience, guidance, time, and support throughout this endeavor. Thank you to my other committee members, Bob Lake, James DeFilippis, and Jeffrey Lowe, who provided excellent comments that improved my dissertation and also made it fun. And thank you to Jeffrey, who met with me several times to discuss ideas in person, which is invaluable when you live in a different city from the university you attend.

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Thank you to my husband, Mike, and our daughters, Allison and Helen, who endured this with me and often ate in the midst of writing material on our dining table. Thank you all for reminding me to relax and have fun. This dissertation took longer to complete since I have a family, but I could not imagine it any other way, nor would I ever want to.

As I sat with my dad while he lay in the hospital shortly before his death, he asked me if I was going to finish my Ph.D. I told him that I would. This conversation came up several times in my mind as I sometimes questioned my ability to do so, but dad, I did it.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father, George Raymond Bienski, who always believed in my abilities more than I did, and to the memory of my grandmother, Helen McClosky Walkoviak, who was the epitome of a decent human being.
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<tr>
<td>APV</td>
<td>Allen Parkway Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBD</td>
<td>Central Business District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTA</td>
<td>Freedmen's Town Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWCC</td>
<td>Fourth Ward Community Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCPD</td>
<td>Houston City Planning Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HHA</td>
<td>Houston Housing Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HHFC</td>
<td>Houston Housing Finance Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUD</td>
<td>U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRI</td>
<td>Houston Renaissance Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIFD</td>
<td>Tax Increment Finance District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIRZ</td>
<td>Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URA</td>
<td>Uniform Relocation Act</td>
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<td>VRA</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1984, forty blocks of Freedmen’s Town in Houston, Texas, a historically African American community, was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places due to the efforts of residents and community activists. Despite this placement, fewer than 30 structures remain of the nearly 580 structures originally included in the historic designation.\(^1\) How were so many historically significant structures lost? As I examined archival data to answer this question, I learned about three distinct efforts city administrations and private real estate investors undertook over three decades to redevelop Freedmen’s Town, also known as Fourth Ward, in its entirety. This newfound knowledge of the powerful forces trying to redevelop Freedmen’s Town in a city known for its laissez-faire development and limited citizen political participation made me wonder how any structures in the neighborhood survived.

Freedmen’s Town, as the name suggests, is where previously enslaved persons from nearby plantations moved after they received news of their freedom on June 19, 1865. The majority of important Black institutions in Houston were created and based in Freedmen’s Town following Emancipation. It was the center of African American cultural and professional life in the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—home to doctors’ and attorneys’ offices and homes, religious and educational institutions, and night clubs hosting jazz and blues bands. The neighborhood, which was near the central business district, witnessed decades of disinvestment and population loss through most of the 20th century, however, as land was taken by eminent domain and residents moved to other, often newer Black communities in the city. Most residents were renters and absentee

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\(^1\) The nomination form lists 580 structures and that number is commonly used to cite the number of structures lost, but the nomination included non-contributing structures and structures that had already been demolished at the time of the application (“National Registry,” 1984).
landlords did not maintain their properties, resulting in many homes being in dangerous physical condition, if they were habitable at all. By 1980, Freedmen’s Town had become the poorest Black neighborhood in Houston (Wintz, 2010).

City leaders and real estate developers began to actively study redevelopment in the neighborhood in the 1970s, when Houston’s population and economy were expanding and office space was in high demand. The city wanted to build luxury apartments and leasable office high rises on a public housing site adjacent to Freedmen’s Town to expand downtown.\(^2\) City leaders also wanted to lure middle-class residents back to the city and thought the redevelopment of Freedmen’s Town could help do that. Private real estate developers and absentee property owners in the neighborhood wanted to cash in on Houston’s economic and population growth and thought it would never be a better time to do that given Freedmen’s Town’s location.

Residents and community activists agreed that neighborhood conditions needed improvement, but opposed the wholesale demolition and redevelopment of their neighborhood as proposed by city leaders and real estate investors. In a city historically known for its lack of community organizing, residents and community leaders in Freedmen’s Town organized themselves and garnered support from political leaders, academics, attorneys, and even a famous local news reporter to help them block the complete elimination of the neighborhood. They used a variety of tactics in their attempt to prevent the total destruction of Freedmen’s Town. They used strategies to redefine Freedmen’s Town from a “slum” or “ghetto” to a historically and culturally significant neighborhood whose buildings and streets were worth saving. They used federal policies and laws to help redistribute local relationships of power. Residents of a public housing

\(^2\) The land on which the public housing sits was the original Freedmen’s Town, but had been acquired through eminent domain in the 1930s. It will be discussed throughout the dissertation.
project and their allies used litigation tactics to prevent the total demolition of the housing project, which many people thought was the domino that would prompt Freedmen’s Town’s complete elimination.

City leaders and private developers responded to these actions using both incentives and threats. On some occasions, they proposed such things as a small historic district and relocation funding to residents who would be displaced by the redevelopment. On other occasions, they threatened to use eminent domain or change property setbacks to take property they wanted to redevelop. The public and private sectors worked together to create new laws and financial tools to bypass others that had become unavailable due to the residents’ actions. During all of this, mysterious fires destroyed homes and historical churches in the area. Many low-income Black residents were forced to move.

Purpose of study

“Power, in urban design as in physics, is the rate with which force is exercised through space.”
—Vale, 2000, p. 5

Relationships of power reveal themselves in space. Neighborhood change and neighborhood (re)development in the United States has often involved race and/or racial transition. Following Emancipation, Freedmen’s Towns were created throughout the south as previously enslaved persons moved to nearby urban areas to find more opportunity and leave the power structures of the plantations. In the early 20th century, many Black southerners began moving to the North and Midwest due to discrimination and violence in the Jim Crow South. When the Great Migration created Black communities in northern and mid-western industrial cities, discriminatory policies led to their decline (Sugrue, 2005). The federal government began to subsidize residential displacement in these communities as it funded urban renewal and highway construction in inner cities and gave local
municipalities the power to use eminent domain. It worked with local jurisdictions to choose and procure the sites to demolish, so often in Black neighborhoods, that the Urban Renewal program was eventually termed "Negro Removal." Federally subsidized white flight to new suburban enclaves and red-lining exacerbated decline in inner-city neighborhoods, with the most important part of this story being race (Beauregard, 2006). Fast forward to the present, and local jurisdictions are working with private developers and using public money to redevelop inner-city neighborhoods, causing another round of displacement and forced movement. The most precarious cases of this are often those that fund the demolition of public housing units that displaced residents in the first place, to now displace residents in that public housing to redevelop the areas and attract middle- and upper-income residents to the area (Vale, 2013).

This dissertation is about relationships of power and neighborhood redevelopment in a historically significant Black neighborhood. I examine the strategies used by the public and private elite who wanted to redevelop Freedmen’s Town in its entirety and the pushback from the community to keep that from happening. I then examine how that opposition changed the way the city and real estate investors approached redevelopment, revealing relationships of power and their continuous evolvement. I focus on the period from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s, when most of the decisions were being made for the neighborhood’s future, but I also review the neighborhood historically to better understand the context and relationships of power that created the circumstances that made this kind of redevelopment possible.

I use the changing built environment as evidence of how these relationships played out in space. I examine how the space was negotiated among city leaders who wanted to entice middle- and upper-income (mostly white) residents to move into the inner city, private developers and absentee landowners who wanted the most return for their
investment, and the residents who wanted to stay in the neighborhood and honor its history and culture.

**Potential contribution**

Studying neighborhood redevelopment, especially government subsidized redevelopment, in Black neighborhoods that leads to displacement, is essential to understanding what has been occurring in the United States for the past century. While many studies have focused on processes of neighborhood change in northern and midwestern cities, there is less literature on community transformation in sunbelt cities, even though most of the population growth in the United States since 1970 has occurred in sunbelt cities. This research tries to fill in that gap by examining redevelopment forces in a historical African American neighborhood in Houston, Texas that has experienced municipally led redevelopment. Studying Freedmen’s Town presents an opportunity to study neighborhood change in a city with a different style of governance and history than cities in the northern and midwestern United States. It also presents an opportunity to study neighborhood change in a culturally and historically significant African American neighborhood within the context of a city with a history of slavery and Jim Crow laws.

**Research questions**

My overlying research question was, “how and why did Freedmen’s Town change physically and demographically from the 1970s through the 2000s?”

To answer this overlying research question, I asked the following sub-questions:

1. How did public and private actors with relatively more power than the neighborhood’s residents and their allies—specifically, city of Houston officials and
private developers and investors—work together to try to change the built environment of Freedmen's Town?

2. How did Freedmen's Town residents and their supporters respond to the proposed redevelopment plans? What strategies did they use to oppose the conditions of the proposed redevelopment plans that would result in the total elimination of Freedmen's Town and displacement of all its residents?

3. How did the actions of Freedmen's Town residents and their supporters affect subsequent redevelopment proposals by city officials and private developers?

Methodology

To answer these questions, I conducted a case study of redevelopment in Freedmen's Town in Houston, Texas, from the 1970s through the 2000s. The case study method is often the most appropriate research method when asking how and why questions (Yin, 2009).

To answer how Freedmen's Town changed physically, I looked at changes in the built environment through photographs, newspaper articles, and other archival sources. I began with the nomination form of Freedmen's Town Historic District, which contains a list of 580 structures with their addresses, photographs, and a map showing the location and footprint of each structure and the other structures in the forty blocks. I then looked at all of the addresses that were listed in the nomination form in Cole's Directory for the years of 1975, 1984-85, 1990-91, 1994-95, 2000-01, and 2005. This allowed me to see how long the resident(s) had lived at the given address and other information that indicated when the structure might have been demolished. Using a digital map of Freedmen's Town historical district, I used AutoCAD to indicate which structures had been demolished, noting those I
knew burned from fire, and used a Google Earth image to see what structures exist now. This helped to analyze how the built environment had changed.

I then looked at the Harris County Appraisal District’s website for records of the properties included in the district to learn about ownership and property value. I referred to census data to find out how the neighborhood changed demographically. Census data also provided information about how the housing stock changed from 1970-2000, regarding the number of total units, vacancy rates, and tenure during these years. To help answer why the neighborhood changed, I studied archival sources such as local newspapers and other publications, especially the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Houston Post* (until its last issue in 1995), *Cite*, an architecture and design publication from Rice Design Alliance at Rice University; the *Houston Defender* and the *Informer and Texas Freeman*, local Black weekly newspapers; *Freedman’s Journal*, a publication about Freedmen’s Town (from 1983-1986); and the *Houston Press*, a local weekly publication. I also reviewed literature regarding gentrification and redevelopment in inner-city neighborhoods.

**Limitations**

Using archival data, especially newspaper sources, means facing bias among reporters. For instance, one reporter kept calling Fourth Ward a “slum” and wanted the neighborhood and the adjacent public housing, Allen Parkway Village (APV), demolished and redeveloped, while *Cite* leaned more toward keeping Freedmen’s Town and Allen Parkway Village intact. I tried to account for this bias by comparing the articles from the different sources used, which represented a variety of perspectives from Houston and beyond, including the perspective of Black Houstonians and Fourth Ward residents.
Findings

The data revealed three major redevelopment efforts undertaken and pushed by local elected leaders and private developers—Houston’s growth coalition—working together. At the same time, Fourth Ward residents and community activists pushed for the kind of redevelopment they wanted in the neighborhood and pushed back against the demolition of houses and APV and the wholesale redevelopment proposed by the city and developers. Their actions affected how Houston’s growth coalition approached each subsequent redevelopment effort, revealing relationships of power along the way.

The data from the map I made revealed that the most change in the built environment regarding building footprints, or scale, happened on the east side of the neighborhood closest to downtown and the south/southeast of the neighborhood closest to Midtown. Some residential structures and businesses in that area today are marketed as Midtown and essentially have become part of the Midtown neighborhood, despite being in the boundaries of what was previously known as Freedmen’s Town.

Outline of the dissertation

This chapter introduces the study of redevelopment in Freedmen’s Town, including the purpose of the study, the research questions, methods and data sources used, and the study’s limitations. Chapter two reviews urban studies literature that focuses on themes I found while analyzing the redevelopment efforts and community opposition to them, and provides the theoretical framework for my findings. Chapter three provides a brief history of Houston and Freedmen’s Town to contextualize the redevelopment proposals beginning in the 1970s. Chapters four through six, the empirical chapters, describe the three distinct redevelopment efforts. Chapter four examines the first publicly proposed redevelopment effort, which became public in the 1980s, and describes how residents and other
community activists worked to prevent the total demolition of the neighborhood. Chapter five chronicles the second public redevelopment effort put forth in 1990 by leaders of two corporations who worked to redefine the neighborhood with a new name, and how continuous community opposition prevented the proposed redevelopment from becoming a reality. Chapter six describes the final redevelopment effort—the one that created the most change in the neighborhood—that occurred throughout the 1990s put forth by the newly elected mayor, who had been a major real estate developer in Houston, and other real estate developers he knew. Chapter seven culminates the dissertation by discussing the implications of my research about redevelopment in Freedmen’s Town and its relationship to the literature reviewed in chapter two.
Chapter 2- Literature Review

In this chapter, I review urban studies literature that informs my discussion of how and why Freedmen’s Town was redeveloped and how contestations and negotiations among those who had varying degrees of power resulted in the new built environment and demographics in the neighborhood. The following themes facilitated a better understanding of my findings from the redevelopment of Freedmen’s Town: 1) theories of neighborhood change; 2) neighborhood change and race; 3) how exclusion and narrative can be used to change neighborhoods; 4) urban politics literature concerned with who has power in urban (re)development; 5) relationships of power and the built environment; and 6) how urban (re)development history is told. Before I delve into that literature, however, I briefly discuss how land is commodified in the first place, since it is its commodification and the potential profit from land that brings about the type of state-sponsored development and ensuing displacement seen in the Fourth Ward and other inner-city—often low-income, minority—neighborhoods that have previously experienced disinvestment.

The commodification of land

Land is nature. It sustains us with its bodies of water and plants and trees that grow food. It takes institutions created by humans to make it into a commodity, by creating things like rules for its exchange, and "legal" boundaries defined as legal by the state apparatus, etc. (Polanyi, 2001). These institutions—the market and the state—become entities in their own right, but humans are the ones doing the work within them, so that the values of the institutions reflect the values of those humans. I will elaborate on this throughout the literature review.
Theories of neighborhood change

This section explores theories of neighborhood change, including urban ecology, growth machine, uneven development, and gentrification. I also discuss racial capitalism, especially as it relates to uneven development and gentrification.

Urban ecology emerged in the midst of foreign immigration and southern Black migration to northern industrial cities and assumed that any neighborhood experiencing an influx of another ethnic or racial group would soon become homogenous again through a cycle of invasion and succession (Park and Burgess, 1925). As immigrants assimilated into “American” culture, they were able to move farther from the city core into what were considered to be better neighborhoods, but urban ecologists thought Black residents were an exception to this evolutionary process, calling them and their neighborhoods “disorderly” (Park and Burgess, 1925, p. 56). Even though their diagram illustrated the relationships of power that created it, Park and Burgess did not account for those relationships of power to explain the pattern of neighborhoods in the city (Betancur and Smith, 2016).

Urban ecologists considered this process to be natural and did not consider things such as discrimination, or racism, or access to capital, as factors in this homogeneity. White neighborhoods were considered more desirable and residents in other parts of the city were considered successful if they were able to move to the outer circle into the white districts. And so, the idea of white places as normative was carved into academic ideology, especially as contemporary Black scholarship at the time was dismissed as “merely a window into the Black experience” if it was considered at all (Dantzler et. al., 2022, p.166).

Logan and Molotch (1987, p.9) critique urban ecologists’ assumption of a natural process, saying “they ignore that markets themselves are the result of cultures; markets are bound up with human interests in wealth, power, and affection... These human forces
organize how markets will work, what prices will be, as well as the behavioral response to prices.” Or, as a more contemporary scholar puts it, “The market is us. The market is a reflection of our values” (From Imbroscio 2021, quoting Taylor, 2020). Imbroscio (2021, p. 32) discusses the intricacies of this relationship when he explained how redlined areas “merely reflected the racist, socially constructed market value of the land.” He further adds that the people making the maps were probably racist themselves as well, which further implicates the relationship between the state, the society (people/ humans), and the market.

The growth machine theory has described the process of urban place-making as one which results from the conflicts of local coalitions interested in property values, the exchange value, and residents who are interested in the use values of their surroundings. Land is a market commodity capable of creating wealth and power for some, through the mechanism of growth (Molotch 1976). For this reason, actors interested in gaining profit from real estate who would usually not work together decide to work together to better achieve the goal of gaining profit from land by attempting to increase its value. These actors include the rentiers as the center, along with businesses that profit directly from the development process, which can be place bound or not; those who benefit indirectly from growth, such as local media or utility companies; and institutions with local ties, such as universities or sports teams (Harding 1995). Though some are individual homeowners who benefit from increased property values, others such as developers or investors have knowledge of future land uses and even play a role in deciding future land uses. These “place entrepreneurs” are more strategic in buying and selling real estate predicted to be more profitable in the future due to changes in property values caused by land use changes that they help put into place (Rodgers 2009). Logan and Molotch (1987) focus on the local governing coalitions who manipulate the built environment to accumulate capital, but also
consider the pushback from community interests as an important part of how urban spaces are arranged and rearranged. Temkin and Rohe (1996) focus on the social cohesiveness within a neighborhood and others’ perception of the community in their discussion of neighborhood change.

The theory of uneven development explains neighborhood change from a political economy perspective and contends that places are shaped by where people can make money (Harvey, 1978). When excess money from the production and consumption process has no more room to grow in the production and exchange of commodities nor the current built environments available, more productive space is needed to grow capital. This process creates uneven development as capital put into one place means that other places do not have as much capital. Investors invest in places capable of making the most profit. “The vast quantities of capital fixed in place act as a drag upon the capacity to realize a spatial fix elsewhere... If capital does move out, then it leaves behind a trail of devastation and devaluation” (Harvey, 2003, p. 116). In post-war days, federal government subsidies, such as highways and FHA loans, and available cheap land on the outskirts of cities made suburban development lucrative (Jackson, 1985). Disinvestment increased in cities as they lost economic bases such as factories and middle-class residents to the suburbs, which devalorized properties in the city even more. As the land in the suburbs was converted to homes and commercial spaces, it lost the agility to accumulate more capital since the very characteristic of the built environment is that it is physically fixed in space and has a long turnover period (Smith, 1996). At the same time, new investment opportunities became available in inner cities due to a previous inability to obtain credit and the disinvestment that followed (Smith, 1982).

Harvey (1978, p. 116) says the “devaluation of capital in the built environment does not necessarily destroy the use value—the physical resource—which the built environment
comprises. This physical resource can now be used as ‘devalued capital’ and as such it functions as a free good which can help to reestablish the basis for renewed accumulation.” In terms of neighborhood redevelopment, the infrastructure still exists when buildings are torn down. Roads might need to be repaved and sidewalks may need to be built or redone if desired, but the infrastructure is there—sewer lines, electric poles, streets—to decrease the cost of development. The built environment can be transformed during the redevelopment process so that the existing residents’ use value will become the new residents’—the ones the governing regime is trying to attract—use value once the neighborhood has transitioned. Dantzler (2021, p.4) thinks Harvey should be more specific about how using the built environment for accumulation is “predicated upon the (de)valuation of people and places” where white bodies and places benefit from a higher valuation than Black bodies and places (also see Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022).

The theory of uneven development becomes more helpful if we consider its intersection with racial capitalism. Often, the credit was hard to obtain in inner-city neighborhoods and subsequent disinvestment occurred (by the private and public sectors) because of the race of the individuals residing in the neighborhood. Imbroscio (2021) discusses the racism that caused property values to decline with Black residents’ presence and rise with the presence of white residents combined with the exclusion of Black bodies. Whereas others have attributed the wealth gap to mid-century federal policies keeping Black Americans out of the suburbs, he argues that the conventional analysis, which blames federal discriminatory policies, misses the deeper racism that allows and supports property values’ association with race (Imbroscio, 2021). Taylor (2019, p.11) discusses how the real estate industry separated white spaces from Black spaces and explains that rather than a dual housing market, this was a “single American housing market that tied race to risk, linking both to the rise and fall of property values and generating profits” that only got
stronger as time passed. Racial inequalities are not an outcome of uneven development, but rather a central component of the urban process itself (Dantzler, 2021).

The literature on gentrification explains how urban areas that had previously experienced disinvestment began to experience reinvestment. Some theories explain the process as a result of cultural changes due to a new economy of the city (demand-side explanation) and some theories explain it as a product of uneven development that lends itself to profit (supply-side explanations) (Lee, Slater, and Wily, 2008). Zukin (1989) explains that post-industrial professionals prefer a certain lifestyle they can find in urban spaces. Other research has found that opportunities for profit has encouraged the redevelopment of inner-city areas (Smith 1979).

The process of gentrification has changed since Ruth Glass discussed it the 1960s as a back to the city movement by individual homeowners. It has become an urban strategy used by city governments to encourage private development since the 1990s (Hackworth and Smith, 2001; Smith, 2002). In addition to decreasing risks and costs of land (re)development, private investors have also benefitted from neoliberal policies such as the deregulation of financial markets which included the commodification of mortgage debt (Weber, 2002). All of this has contributed to the private real estate industry's interest to invest in previously disinvested places.

Rucks-Ahidiana (2022, p. 2) argues that gentrification is a product of racial capitalism, “an economic system in which race defines value and profit accumulation.” She discusses how value becomes associated with race, and how racialized spaces (unlike disinvested white spaces) often have another component that makes them appear more valuable, such as proximity to the central business district. Even then, developers and real estate investors often require heavy state subsidies because they think the neighborhood is too risky for investment without it (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022). She found that racial
(de)valuation of Black neighborhoods affected how they experienced gentrification since state-led gentrification (whether federal participation through programs like HOPE VI or city-led gentrification) often led to quicker change and more displacement than gentrifier-led change (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022).

**Neighborhood Change and Race**

“If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”

(Merton, 1946, p. 193).

As African Americans migrated to cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, neighborhoods became more racially segregated due to discrimination (Drake and Cayton, 1996; Sugrue, 2005). The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) discouraged mortgage loans in minority communities and thus played a significant role in inner-city disinvestment by not insuring the mortgages in areas inhabited by Black residents, a process called redlining (Jackson, 1985). At the same time, the FHA also encouraged restrictive covenants in suburban areas, which upheld racial residential segregation (Jackson, 1985). The federal government did not invent racism nor the exclusion of Black residents from neighborhoods with white residents, but its policies excluded Black residents from communities at the national scale and encouraged the separation of Black and white neighborhoods, which essentially codified the “racist market rationality” that associated Black spaces with lower property values (Imbroscio, 2021, p. 32). Betancur and Smith (2016, p.28) charge the federal government with using the assumptions of urban ecology to racialize urban spaces at the national scale of government by ranking them according to race and class. Imbroscio (2021) wants us to be careful, though, to realize that these redlined areas, while racist actions themselves, merely reflected the racist, socially constructed market value of the land.
The private real estate market has historically lobbied the federal government to assist financially and politically with the development and redevelopment of land in urban areas. Some of the procedures put forth by the real estate industry led to increased racial residential segregation. Gotham (2001) discusses the role of real estate elites as they began lobbying the federal government to redevelop urban areas across the nation as early as the 1930s, to revitalize downtown areas and stimulate economic growth during the Depression. He argues that the modern real estate industry helped to create segregated neighborhoods by creating restrictive covenants, which denied minority residents equal access to housing (Gotham, 2000).

In the mid-20th century, several factors—post-war suburban residential development, the construction of highways, segregated public housing, local implementation of federal housing policies, Black residents' lack of access to credit and housing markets—converged and changed how urban environments looked. Anderson (1964) found that private real estate actors were unwilling to reinvest in inner-city areas in the mid-twentieth century until the federal and local government assumed most of the risks involved with it and subsidized demolition and redevelopment. The Urban Renewal Program, created in 1949, was used to clear blighted areas and create large plots of land for redevelopment to increase downtown property values and revive cities. In many cases, federal and local governments worked together to secure land clearance and then offer it to developers at a discounted rate (Gotham, 2014).

Urban renewal destroyed much more housing than it replaced. It famously became known as “Negro removal” since African American residents occupied seventy percent of the units demolished for urban renewal projects (Gotham, 2001). Between 1956 and 1972, about 3.8 million people were displaced from their homes due to urban renewal or freeway construction (Dreier et al, 2004). In his study of the federal Urban Renewal Program,
Anderson (1964) found that poor neighborhood conditions were merely being shifted to another location rather than being removed.

As subsidies were provided for urban renewal, the government also began to heavily subsidize single-family homes for white residents in the suburbs (Jackson, 1985). Black residents were denied living in the suburbs due to discriminatory real estate practices and lending practices (Beauregard, 2006). Between 1949 and 1959, African Americans purchased less than two percent of all housing financed with VA and FHA help (Dreier et al, 2001; Hirsch, 1998). Congress continuously increased the FHA’s and VA’s funding, which mainly benefitted white Americans, while deferring proposals for public housing, primarily for Black Americans, claiming it was socialist (Freund, 2007). Since Black residents were systematically excluded from these opportunities to move, they were often restricted to overcrowded and frequently deteriorating inner-city neighborhoods (Freund, 2007).

Imbroscio (2021) argues that even if Black Americans had moved to suburbs in the mid-twentieth century, the inherent racism in our society that places more value for white bodies and spaces than for Black bodies and spaces would mean that inequalities would still exist due to differences in property values.

Beauregard (2006, p. 78) argues that race is the most important explanation for anti-urban sentiment following the Second World War and discusses how the media encouraged this line of thinking by contrasting the “protective” world of the suburbs with the “dangerous” world of the city in addition to the federal government favoring the suburbs financially. Gotham (2014, p. 154) explains how the real estate industry “cultivated” the desire for white Americans to live in the segregated suburbs.

Some research explains how local implementation of federal urban and housing policies worked to maintain segregation once civil rights had been gained in the mid-19th century. A key way to achieve segregation, especially in schools, was through residential
segregation. Sugrue (2008) discusses how northern cities were historically more segregated than southern cities since schools could not legally be segregated in the north and one’s neighborhood determined one’s school. The Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education that overturned the separate but equal doctrine prompted the country’s local housing agencies to work to maintain segregation (Hirsch, 2000). A branch of the FHA reported that many southern agencies were using urban renewal to promote school segregation as a reaction to the Brown decision by moving Black families out of areas that had previously been integrated (Turner, Popkin, and Rawlings, 2009).

Fast forward to the 1990s, and research finds similar patterns of displacement and segregation. Academic research about the negative effects of concentrated poverty has led to deconcentration efforts in federal public policy, like the HUD program, HOPE VI. Though there is something to be said about no legitimate economic opportunity in poor, often minority, neighborhoods, the decision to focus policy on deconcentration versus creating economic opportunity and expanding (or creating) social services in those economically stressed neighborhoods (or anything else other than moving people somewhere else) reveals our current assumptions about assimilation and white places as normative such as those assumptions from urban ecology of about one hundred years ago (Dantzler et. al, 2022).

Goetz (2011) examines displacement caused by the demolition of public housing in the context of state-supported gentrification and found that hundreds of thousands of low-income, mostly Black, families, have been displaced due to HOPE VI, and that several cities had large disparities between the racial composition of those displaced due to demolished public housing units under the HOPE VI program and their overall public housing profiles. This means that a higher percentage of African American households were displaced by
demolition of public housing than the numbers they represented in public housing in the respective cities. It could also mean that Black public housing residents occupy lower quality housing. While many researchers and advocates justify the removal of public housing units on the grounds of deconcentrating poverty, studies show that residents typically move nearby and remain in the inner-city or move to other disadvantaged neighborhoods with high poverty rates (Goetz, 2010). In another study, Goetz (2004) found that neighborhoods where people moved became poorer and more segregated. Since the neighborhoods these residents leave are experiencing reinvestment, this suggests that investment and disinvestment patterns are continuing. Research has found that inner-ring suburbs are experiencing disinvestment (Smith, Caris, and Wyly, 2001), suggesting that Anderson’s (1964) observation of poor neighborhood conditions moving somewhere else is occurring again. Goetz (2011, p. 1600) concludes that this latest version of state-led reinvestment is, “in many ways, an update of the urban renewal experience of the 1950s and 1960s.”

Processes of neighborhood change—Using exclusion and narrative

In this section I discuss literature that analyzes how exclusion and narrative is used to try to change neighborhoods and urban places, especially from Black residents to white residents. When municipalities and/ or private investors want to change the use of an urban area or attract new (higher-income) residents to an area, they might use strategies that ultimately exclude the current users or current residents of an area. They can also use their relatively stronger influence in the media to portray the urban area as one that needs redevelopment and also use words and/ or images to encourage investment to attract a

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3 Since local housing authorities are responsible for maintaining these projects using federal money, it could also mean that housing units occupied by minorities are not as well maintained by local authorities. We will see an example of this in the Allen Parkway Village project discussed in the empirical chapters.
new kind of user and/or resident. In this section, I discuss literature that examines how those with power use exclusion and narrative to advance their desires for neighborhood change.

In his case study of Chester’s redevelopment, Mele (2017) discusses the exclusion of Black residents in the new development. As the waterfront was redeveloped to attract middle-class suburbanites, not only did places go away, like places to barbeque or fish, but new surveillance and policing measures along the waterfront to ensure the comfort of the suburbanites, meant that Black men did not feel comfortable hanging out along the waterfront anymore, establishing their exclusion from the places they used to hang out. Imbroscio (2021) found that the removal of Black residents is necessary for property values to significantly increase. In her discussion of the Anderson’s study of the Urban Renewal program, Drake (2014) explains how African American spaces were often excluded from adjacent areas by being contained and separated within clear boundaries of other places, which was supposed to make others more comfortable in those adjacent spaces.

Smith (1996) discusses the “revanchist” city in which behaviors that might appear threatening to some are criminalized, creating a “sanitized” environment for certain urban consumers. Goldberg (1998:21) says the New Segregationism “imagines a demonizing and demonized Other that needs accordingly to be set apart, isolated, circumscribed and constantly surveilled.” This seems to be how some cities are addressing the supposed desires of new middle-class residents and tourists. A couple of examples are Mayor Giuliani’s “street sweeps” and Mayor Bloomberg’s “stop and frisk” policy. Cahill (2013) spoke about how the “stop and frisk” policy in New York City worked to keep young Black men in their homes since they were afraid of being harassed if they ventured outside. Goldberg (1998: 25) discusses some of the contradictions in urban spaces and says that “as interaction is increased, access is monitored, traversal policed, intercourse surveilled.” The
emergence of these new ways of policing and governing seems to have coincided with gains achieved via the Civil Rights Movement. The informalities that Goldberg (1998) speaks of in the New Segregationism seem to align with new urban policies that increasingly have less public accountability as public-private partnerships are formed and private companies become responsible for providing public services.

Wyly and Hammel (2004) found that gentrification was correlated with heightened racial discrimination with regard to mortgage lending in their study of 23 large cities in the United States and note that while discrimination may become worse in gentrifying areas, heightened exclusion of minority residents may also be a prerequisite for reinvestment. In 2000, African Americans trying to purchase a home in core gentrified areas were 1.25 times more likely to be turned down than those with identical qualifications trying to purchase homes elsewhere (Wyly and Hammel 2004).

One's socioeconomic class can also explain one's exclusion, as explained by Patillo (2007), who found conflicts between the incoming Black middle-class residents and the long-term Black residents of a lower socio-economic standing in a Chicago neighborhood. Public pay phones were removed and a prominent boulevard in the community was redeveloped so that practices like barbequing would be outlawed as lower income residents did these things and made the newer residents feel uncomfortable (Patillo, 2007).

Narrative is often used as a strategy to encourage redevelopment of certain places. Mele (2017, p. 158) says that race strategies are intentionally used by those in power to support neighborhood change and he discusses how valuable the "vilification of Black spaces" is to the process of neighborhood change. In his study of Gary, Indiana, Catlin (1993) found that names were changed for locations and businesses once a Black mayor was elected in 1967. Somehow the name, Gary, had become associated with Blackness and white residents wanted to rid the city of that image by removing "Gary" from the names of
prominent things around town (Catlin, 1993). In her discussion of neoliberalism and urban redevelopment, Weber (2002, p. 520) discusses the need for municipalities to stigmatize places to justify “absorbing the risks and costs of land development” for private investors.

**Urban politics—Who has power in U.S. cities?**

From the urban political theory literature, regime theory and growth machine theory are the most relevant to discuss based on the data gathered about the redevelopment of Freedmen’s Town. Regime theory is suitable in general to facilitate a better understanding of who governs and who has power in U.S. cities, due to their complex political economic systems in place given the relationships among the federal, state, and local governments; the local, national, and international businesses that have local influence; and the electorate. A growth coalition is one type of regime, in which the members interested in gaining a profit from real estate work together to increase the value of land, since land is a market commodity capable of creating wealth and power for some through the mechanism of growth (Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Growth coalitions are only interested in growth, but regimes can have other goals, even progressive agendas (Mossberger, 2009).

Relationships of power exist among all of the institutions and people in a city, such as governments, businesses, and the electorate, among others. Power is shared by various members of an urban regime, forcing the members to cooperate with each other to accomplish anything (Stone, 1989). By working together, those in the regime are better able to accomplish their goals in the fragmented urban political environment (Stoker, 1995). In a regime, those with political and economic resources often have more power than those in the electorate, and in a growth coalition, the common bond of a desire for
urban growth provides a strong cohesion for the governing regime (in this case a growth coalition) to work together even more (Rodgers, 2009).

Regime theory acknowledges the imbalance of power that privileges business interests and the investor class, who have enough resources to make economic decisions without the consent or help of other members of the regime (Stoker 1995; Stone, 1989). Stone (1989, p. 226) attributes this imbalance of power to the "very nature" of capitalism. In her discussion of Stone's study of Atlanta's regime, Mossberger (2009, p. 43) discusses how Atlanta's regime created and sustained cooperation "through control of selective incentives and small opportunities." The idea that some members within the regime have control of things or resources implies an imbalance of power between those giving the incentives and those receiving the incentives. Stone (1989) analyzes how the Atlanta regime kept its power and priorities despite much social change and also tries to account for why a big part of the electorate—poor and working-class Black Atlantans—never got anything on the agenda, despite big gains in the electoral process. Harding (1995) talks about Bachrach's and Baratz' discussion of the two faces of power and how the agenda is often set before there are any decisions made on it, so that anything decided by the electorate or those with less power is already teased out before they even see it.

When it comes to the question of power, Logan and Molotch are less concerned with "who, if anyone, rules?" and more concerned with "who has the greatest influence over the physical restructuring of places, why, and with what effect" (Harding, 1995, p. 44). Logan and Molotch argue that decisions made by the growth machine benefit the most powerful, while the least powerful, especially low-income communities, are the most burdened (Harding 1995). This is because the built environment is used by those in power—private and public sectors—to increase the wealth of members in the growth regime, who in turn support the political careers of the public actors in the regime. Sometimes, the public and
private sector members are one and the same. Urban politics is ultimately about land use
decisions since land values depend on what the land is surrounded by, making the real
estate industry “key actors in urban political coalitions” (Swanstrom, 1988, p.100).
“Structural speculators” use the local government to enhance their land values by
determining what the land will be used for (Logan and Mollotch, 1987, p. 67). This is why
Swanstrom (1988) thinks an urban government’s most important power is its power over
land use.

What about the residents?

Jones-Correa and Wong (2015) think Stone’s view of the regime is too limited and
discuss instances where residents’ mobilization has affected city politics in a sustained and
meaningful way and think the non-elite actors need to be part of the narrative of urban
politics as much as the elite actors. “They may not direct policy for the city as a whole, but
the actions of these actors accrete over time, shaping local environments over years and
often with broader effects for their neighborhoods and communities” (Jones-Correa and
Wong, 2015, p. 168). Stoker (1995) thinks that with enough mobilization, citizens can
disrupt governing regimes by opposing their agendas.

Ferman (1996) expands on Stone’s regime theory by including how communities
respond to the regime and the extent of their inclusion or exclusion by the regime. In her
study of Pittsburgh and Chicago, she explores how the political culture of the respective
cities influenced how policy was actually implemented in each city and compares the access
to community-based organizations had to affect decisions made by the local governments
(Ferman, 1996). She found that racial issues affected how the governing regime in both
cities related to the neighborhood organizations, with Pittsburgh being more inclusive, at
least seemingly, and Chicago not being as inclusive (Ferman, 1996). Ferman (1996)
accounts for Pittsburgh's non-confrontational style to having fewer Black residents in the city and having a more cohesive governing regime, versus the spatial electoral politics of Chicago that often turned people within the regime against each other. The less cohesive regime in Chicago allowed space for contestation (Ferman, 1996). However, she makes clear that the inclusion in Pittsburgh was only about the common goals of economic growth for the city and not about inclusion in anything else.

What about influences beyond the local?

Jessop, et. al. (1999) critique the growth machine theory of treating local politics as isolated from economic and social processes. While they understand the desire for growth machine theory to move away from the structuralist accounts that ignored local agency in determining urban forms, they argue that the interaction between local forces and supra-local forces cannot be ignored either. A problem of scale exists within the growth machine theory as global or national interests are not accounted for in the hypothesis, even though global forces have become more influential in the production and reproduction of urban space (Jonas and Wilson, 1999). Woods (1998) implies a regime at the national and global scale that resulted in regional relationships of power remaining in place despite much local opposition. The federal level of government—“the bloc’s seniority in Congress”—was able to quell the effective local diverse resistance working together to oppose the Southern plantation bloc (Woods, 1998, p. 9).

Stoker (1995, p.67) discusses the need for regime theory to look beyond the local regime and consider how outside forces work within the regime framework—the need to recognize “the impact of shifts in exogenous conditions.” National and international businesses and federal government policies affect local economies and local regimes must
respond to these exogenous forces in which they have no say, other than how they choose to respond to them (Stone, 1987; Stoker, 1995).

These relationships of power, at the local level and beyond, appear in local places, such as neighborhoods, as those with more power manipulate the built environment to their liking. The next section addresses how these relationships are revealed in these places and why we should focus on examining the power relationships themselves to better confront how these unequal urban places are formed and continued.

**Relationships of power and the built environment**

“What does it mean that Black claims to space are always temporary?”

Wilkins (2020)

As we have seen, land and the built environment on the land is often manipulated to enhance its value. Those in power have also manipulated the built environment to retain or gain power. This section discusses how places are used to retain or gain power. It also discusses the importance of studying how relationships of power form these places rather than trying to transform places without acknowledging these relationships. When we do not acknowledge the relationships of power that form these places, we risk continuing the patterns already evident in U.S. communities.

“Persons live within structures of domination if other persons or groups can determine without reciprocation the conditions of their action, either directly or by virtue of the structural consequences of their actions” (Young, 2011, p. 38). In their conversation about Pilsen and Bronzeville, Betancur and Smith (2016, p. 50) discuss how racial minorities “often had to move where the dance of investment and disinvestment took them.” In his discussion of the Mississippi Delta, Woods (1998, p. 71) explains how the planter regime and others in power used their control of space as a tool to prevent Black Mississippian to gain power and for the status quo of the planter bloc or regime to remain
by doing things like destroying “centralized housing” “for the primary purpose of crushing
the Union League movement in the South.” On the other side of that which Woods
discusses, Drake (2014) talks about how public housing residents used their space to
increase their political power in Atlanta.

Some research argues that it is not the spaces themselves which must be analyzed,
but the relationships of power that form those places. “Critical explanations portray change
as the result of instabilities associated with class and intergroup struggles that can end only
by uprooting exploitation and subsequently constructing radically different social relations”
(Betancur and Smith, 2016, p. 19). DeFilippis (2017, p194) talks about the “political and
conceptual problem of using space to solve social problems” in his critique of Place Matters
and explains:

Space and place play vital roles in the shaping of social relations and the political
economy. And the processes that are central to the constitution of American
society...[including race relations] are all deeply and thoroughly spatial. The
question becomes, 'What are the logics and values inherent in, and manifested
through, such spatialized processes?' Those logics and values, in turn, are functions
of the power relations between groups within society. Thus, it is those power
relations that we must analyze and transform. (DeFilippis, 2017, p. 195).

Imboscio (2021, p.44) also discusses how space is often viewed as “the cause of racial
injustices rather than the effect.” But the racialized capitalism in the U.S. reveals itself in the
urban, which is “both a site and process of racialized development” (Dantzler 2021, p. 118).
It is in this process where we see relationships of power revealing themselves as the built
environment is (re)created.

In addition to affecting how places are formed and reformed, relationships of power
can reveal themselves in how events in neighborhood (re)development are recalled.
The power of narrative

How history is told matters. Thomas (1998) warns that urban policy decisions can oppress twice—once when the decisions are made and again when it is recorded if community empowerment is not acknowledged. Sandercock (1998a) discusses the role of how history is told, and how excluding certain memories or the role of certain actors can further diminish power. Woods (1998, p. 27) says that “Bloc[s], agendas, and movements that challenge the dominant regime are often eliminated from the historical record and from popular memory by the normal workings of the dominant institutions.”

Sandercock (1998a, p. 50) argues that we need to step away from “meta-theorizing” or we “will never be able to see the potential for transformation inherent in any city at any time. This seems particularly important in planning history, ... concerned with questions of action, of change, of transformation, of empowerment.” She wants to move towards theories like Foucault’s that recognize human agency and away from theories such as Marxism that attempts to explain everything. I attempt to do that in the following chapters, by examining data about how Freedmen’s Town was redeveloped and how the space was negotiated between those with different levels of power and how those with power used land fictions to pursue redevelopment as they wanted it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined literature to help explain how and why neighborhoods change and how and why they have changed historically in the United States. Given the history of the racialization of space and since this research is about municipally-led neighborhood change in a historically significant Black neighborhood, I included literature that focuses on neighborhood change within the context of race and racial change.
It is especially helpful to look at the interrelatedness of the growth machine theory, how land is fictionalized, uneven development, and racial capitalism. The racist value of land provides a constant incentive for those with enough power and resources (and, importantly, stand to gain from changing the land use) to continuously try to turn over the racial demographics of urban spaces to make a profit from the land. Especially as rural land becomes less available for creating land fictions due to already being developed for residents, constantly changing areas of land already developed from Black to white spaces, and vice versa from white to Black spaces, creates a constant ebb and flow of disinvestment and reinvestment that can create a lot of profit for those with the power to define the land by putting in place policies that fit the narrative of what they claim the land to be. This is the “urban process under racial capitalism” (see Dantzler, 2021).

The upcoming chapters combine demographic data with archival data to learn more about the roles of Houston’s municipal leadership, real estate developers and investors, and businesses in the gentrification of Freedmen’s Town and how that affected the process of neighborhood change in the historically significant neighborhood (see Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022).
Chapter 3- Houston and Freedmen’s Town

Houston is often celebrated as a laissez-faire city, but in reality, it has received a lot of government assistance to help its economy grow (Feagin, 1988). City leaders and the business elite have continually lobbied for state and federal help to expand the city’s economy, but have historically pushed back heavily against any funding for social services, and did not want any regulations regarding the built environment. A strong business elite working intimately with local political leaders meant the governing regime devoted its energy to growth with minimal focus on social services and community improvement, which meant that many Houstonians, including entire neighborhoods, were left out of receiving any benefits from Houston’s booming economy.

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of Houston’s political economic culture, built environment, racial relations, and civic participation from its early years to the latter part of the twentieth century to better understand how and why municipal and private business leaders pursued redevelopment in Fourth Ward. I then provide a brief history of Fourth Ward, or Freedmen’s Town, as it is also known, and show how its geography and demographics have changed through the years as the city took land for various urban projects and as its residents moved to other parts of the city.

Political and economic culture of Houston

“The Houston ideology is that the job of government is to help business succeed”

(Klineberg, 2020, p. 28).

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4 I discuss these components from the late 1970s/early 1980s to the beginning of the millennium in the next three chapters as I follow the redevelopment efforts in Fourth Ward.
Houston was born as a speculative real estate venture, when two brothers who had moved to Texas from New York, John and Augustus Allen, bought land around Buffalo Bayou in August of 1886, soon after Sam Houston defeated the Mexican army nearby. They named the city after the local hero as part of its marketing scheme. John Allen was on the Texas legislature and the brothers convinced the legislature to locate the capital of the new Republic in Houston so that land values would instantly increase (McComb, 1969; Sibley, 1968). Business leaders helped their cause by pledging to build the capitol building at their own expense and offering free lots to the government (McComb, 1969; Sibley, 1968). This marked the beginning of a strong private influence on government in the city and the beginning of a strong relationship between Houston’s private and public sectors and their focus on economic growth.

Choosing the particular site at Buffalo Bayou was a shrewd decision because it provided the new Texans the supplies they needed. At the time, water was the cheapest way to transport goods and they shipped through the Gulf of Mexico that ran up to the bayou (McComb, 1969). From its beginning, city leaders and local business elites—often one and the same—have sought public money to facilitate private profit (Feagin, 1988). Houston’s business leaders successfully lobbied Congress for federal funding to significantly improve the port in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Klineberg, 2020; Feagin, 1988). Local businessmen worked to tie the railroads into the expanding United States railroad system to more easily transport cotton, sugar, and lumber, and lobbied the Texas legislature in the 1850s to support a privately-owned railway development plan (Feagin, 1988). It paid off since the number of cotton bales received by rail increased by

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5 The mosquito-ridden, swampy, hot climate and the lack of sanitary services led to a yellow-fever epidemic in 1839, and the capital was moved to present-day Austin in the Texas hill country (Platt, 1983).
6 James Sanders Holman, the first mayor of Houston, was a real estate agent in Houston hired by the Allen brothers.
nearly three times from 1854 to 1860 (Sibley, 1968). When oil was discovered near Houston in 1901, the city was thus well poised to take advantage of it as the port and railroads were already in place.

In his case study of Houston, Feagin (1988:111) discusses the “urban boosterism” used by the Allens, the two brothers from New York who bought land in Houston as a speculative investment immediately following Texas’ gain of independence from Mexico. They advertised the land as highly desirable to people unfamiliar with Houston’s hot and humid climate and even showed hills looking over the “river,” which was actually a bayou situated on marsh land that was flat. People were surprised when they arrived in Houston to such a swampy, flat place, but few people had the resources to go anywhere else, so the “DNA of the community was injected with a combination of both boosterism and a determination to exploit every available opportunity” (Klineberg, 2020, p. 14).

In 1910, Houston businessmen proposed a new kind of financial agreement in which the federal government would match private funds to improve facilities at the port (Vojnovic, 2003). At the same time, lobbyists persuaded the Texas legislature to allow for “navigation districts” so that taxpayer-backed bonds could pay for port expansion (Feagin, 1988). When Congress approved $1.25 million to improve the Houston Ship Channel in 1911, it was the largest amount of money Congress had ever given to a local municipality and it was the first time the federal government matched municipal funds (Vojnovic, 2003). Later, federal regulations in the form of tax breaks, price fixing, and subsidies for petroleum infrastructure all helped the oil industry and thus Houston’s economy as it became the “Energy Capital of the World” (Vojnovic, 2003; Feagin, 1988). In 1932, Jesse Jones, a member of the Suite 8F crowd and head of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (appointed by FDR) brought WPA projects to Houston, including City Hall, the Coliseum, and
Jeff Davis Hospital (Lin, 1995). During and after World War II, the federal government provided substantial funding for Houston's petrochemical industry along the ship channel corridor, which also became a large part of the city's economy (Thomas and Murray, 1991; Feagin, 1988).

But not subsidies and regulation for all...

As Houston's business elite solicited government funds and regulations to facilitate profit making in the private sector, it simultaneously resisted federal aid for any social programs (Feagin, 1988). The cold war in the 1950s and 1960s gave municipal and business leaders a nationally acceptable excuse for protesting any federal funds that benefitted social programs by calling them communist (Fisher, 1992). The laissez-faire economy was assumed to replace the need for distributive social programs as it was assumed that money and resources would trickle down to those with lower-paying jobs (Vojnovic, 2003). Public and private officials in Houston were willing to comply with a federal program's conditions so long as it supported growth and development, but they resisted any federal programs that prohibited the private sector from doing exactly what they wanted to do with land, even programs offering a lot of money (Thomas and Murray, 1991).

Between the early 1970s and mid-1980s, Houston was often cited in national and international media as an example of how a free enterprise system works better than a government planning system for sustaining a robust city (Feagin, 1988). By the end of the 1970s, however, more Houstonians were beginning to question this style of governance as it became apparent that the continuously booming economy was not trickling downward.

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7 The Suite 8F crowd emerged in the late 1930s as business elites (whose roles overlapped with the public sector) who came together to have more influence in the development of Houston until their influence decreased in the 1970s (Feagin, 1988).
Nationally, some reporters were also calling out the irony of Houston’s continuous and explosive growth against a backdrop of poverty and inner-city deterioration among shiny new high-rises, and few services or programs to help the most vulnerable residents (Klineberg, 2020).

**Urban planning**

As the largest city in the United States without zoning, Houston is known for its lack of formal planning. It looks similar to other Sunbelt cities, though, because many parts of the city have deed restrictions, which often have the same effect as zoning. Like social programs, zoning was thought to be socialist since leaders thought land should not be regulated by government, but deed restrictions were acceptable within Houston’s political economic culture since they are written and enforced by individuals instead of the government. However, since deed restrictions only cover a certain boundary rather than uniform rules for the whole city, you can have things like expensive homes adjacent to a high-rise building or gas station (Thomas and Murray, 1991).

The business elite has historically controlled planning in Houston, resulting in city planning departments responding to business’ and real estate developers’ needs rather than public needs (Feagin, 1988). Houston’s planning department has historically reacted to private developers rather than guide them or make plans for any comprehensive development. Leaders think the market should regulate land use rather than the government, so decisions are based on what the market demands, with no vision for what would benefit communities or the city in the future (Greanias, 1998). The most important source of planning has been the Houston Chamber of Commerce. The private sector has historically controlled even broad urban development patterns. For instance, the Chamber of Commerce developed a flood mitigation plan, an international airport, and a
transportation plan and private engineering firms have designed water and sewer plans for the city (Thomas and Murray, 1991).

From Houston's beginnings, merchant areas received infrastructure in the built environment while residential areas did not. In his discussion of the Reconstruction era, Platt (1983, p. 29) refers to Houston as a “Hollywood movie set” because, while residential areas did not have essential public health infrastructure such as a good water supply or sewage system, or paved streets and lighting, the merchant area had everything it needed to show the world that Houston was a city— paving, drainage, gas lighting, and horsecars.

**Annexation**

Houston has always taken advantage of lenient state annexation policies. The city grew geographically from 74.2 square miles in 1945 to 579.4 square miles in 1988 through annexations (Thomas and Murray, 1991). The annexations allowed Houston to capture the tax base of the surrounding communities—the suburban growth—but the operating budget doubled between 1973 and 1978 since the new residents wanted services too (MacManus, 1983). Houston’s tremendous growth in the 1960s and 1970s caused major problems with its infrastructure, resulting in traffic and flood control issues, that began making leaders think about planning for the future in a more coherent manner (Beloff, 1985). The enormous growth in Houston between 1970 and 1980 was very uneven geographically with most of the growth in the suburbs as the central city population declined, and by the mid-1980s, there were calls for more comprehensive planning solutions in the city (Feagin, 1988).

Following the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, Black Houstonians became more influential in city government and city-wide elections (Murray, 1994). In 1979, the United States Justice Department ordered Houston to change the composition of its city council in
order to annex white suburban areas (Kaplan, 1983). The city council’s composition changed from eight at-large council members to nine members from geographical districts and five at-large members. This made the council accessible and having to answer to a diverse population that more truly represented Houston’s population and not just business interests and white residents since some districts were composed of mostly minority populations.

As Houston’s geographic area and population grew rapidly in the 1970s through annexation and immigration, city leaders ignored the Black community, who endured many burdens from this growth as city leaders focused on newly annexed areas and ignored older, minority neighborhoods (Bullard, 1987). In the late 1960s, realtors, developers, and businessmen realized the city must begin to do something about inner-city deterioration because it had reached a “crisis level” and the mayor saw that its residents were becoming “increasingly vocal” with their unhappiness about the situation (Thomas and Murray, 1991, p. 289).

The economic growth of the 1970s brought many people into the city from other places. One of the results of this was a bigger proportion of the population willing to pay higher taxes to get better public services. Many native Houstonians also did not mind paying higher taxes for better services given the problems that growth from the 1960s and 1970s brought—higher crime rates, flooding, and traffic problems. This was still supported from a growth perspective though. A new generation of business leaders thought Houston could not compete with other cities if it did not have a better urban infrastructure and public services, especially since migrants from other cities expected more in terms of social services than native Houstonians (Thomas and Murray, 1991).
**History of race relations in Houston**

Houston is a southern city with a history of slavery and Jim Crow laws, but it never had the kind of dichotomous population of white and Black residents found in other southern cities due to Texas’ history and border with Mexico. Before Texas became a republic, free Black persons from the United States moved to the area due to more opportunity and less racial prejudice offered by the Spanish and Mexican governments (Beeth and Wintz, 1992). However, as more white Americans began moving to the area from the southern United States, the general attitude changed toward African Americans.

When Mexico became independent from Spain in 1821, the new government passed laws that increasingly limited the ownership of enslaved persons in the new country (Burrough et al., 2021). Southern cotton planters from the United States had immigrated to the territory when it was under Spanish law that supported the institution of slavery and did not want to lose the ability to have enslaved people, (Burrough et al., 2021). When the Mexican president issued a decree in 1829 to free all enslaved people in Mexico, the settlers began to talk openly about a rebellion (Burrough et al., 2021). Once Texas received independence in 1836, the enslaved population in the state increased from 5,000 in 1835 to 182,556 in 1860 (Beeth and Wintz, 1992). In 1839, Houston passed an ordinance that required all free Black residents to leave the city (Beeth and Wintz, 1992).

When growing numbers of Black Houstonians began to vote from 1870 to the 1890s during the Reconstruction period, white leaders passed laws and policies to minimize their voting power, like an all-white Democratic primary and electing the city council at large versus by ward (Feagin, 1988). In 1839, city council members—called aldermen at the time—were selected by wards, but around the turn of the century, the city changed it to elect aldermen at large, which effectively disenfranchised many Black voters since
residential segregation was well in place by then, but white residents held the majority in Houston as a whole (Wintz, 1990; Feagin, 1988). Black political participation in southern states was nearly eliminated by the end of the nineteenth century, and Houston was no different, due to the new laws and policies meant to stifle civil rights (Haynes, 1992). Most middle-class Black Houstonians in the early 1900s chose to not publicly speak out against Jim Crow and relied on their own community to get through the injustices (Pruitt, 2013). They thought that regular wages and housing—even if it was minimal—were more important, at least temporarily, than speaking out against injustice (Pruitt, 2013).

Historically, Houston has not had the same level of violence seen in other U.S. cities. However, in 1917, northern Black soldiers were stationed at Camp Logan near the Fourth Ward, and a rumor of a Black soldier’s death by a police officer led to the city’s worst violent racial upheaval in its history, leaving 20 people dead—16 white and Hispanic, and 4 Black. Tensions had already been high as the all-white Houston police force in the Jim Crow south had been clashing with the Black soldiers from the north. Though the event did not seem to affect race relations on the surface, it is thought to have contributed to the declining racial climate that saw the revival of the KKK chapter in Houston in the 1920s (Beeth and Wintz, 1992). The Camp Logan incident also sparked the establishment of a Houston chapter of the NAACP and the creation of the Houston Informer in 1919 (Pitre, 1999; Pruitt, 2013).

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8 Camp Logan was situated about 4 miles northwest of Freedmen’s Town. In 1924, the city of Houston bought the land and created a city park, named Memorial Park, to honor WWI soldiers. It is the largest urban park in Houston and is currently undergoing a major restoration and expansion. The park’s conservancy is working with the South Texas college of Law, the National Buffalo Soldiers Museum, and the NAACP to collect and preserve histories from the camp and to dedicate a place to honor soldiers from the camp by 2028 (Shay, 2023).
Quietly ending Jim Crow segregation

During and after World War II, many Black Texans moved from rural areas to Texas cities in search of jobs (Pruitt, 2013). As the Black population increased, Black residents began to collectively resist Jim Crow laws (Pitre, 1999; Jensen, 1992). Two lawsuits from Black Houston residents, working with the Texas chapter of NAACP and attorneys Thurgood Marshall and James Nabrit, went to the Supreme Court—Smith v. Allwright in 1944 and Sweatt v. Painter in 1950—outlawing the all-white primary in Texas and opening the University of Texas’ graduate schools to Black applicants respectively (Cole, 1997).

Houston did not experience the violence that accompanied the Civil Rights campaign to end segregation in other southern cities with Jim Crow laws (Bullard, 1987; Haynes, 1992). In the early 1950s, municipal golf courses, libraries, and city hall restrooms were all quietly desegregated due to civil rights lawsuits against the city and county filed by Black residents (Jensen, 1992). The hushed desegregation efforts continued during the sit-in counter movements of the 1960s, as Houston’s business elite convinced the local media to avoid covering it, so as not to draw attention to it by anyone who might be violent, and thus avoid any negative publicity that might affect corporations or individuals from moving to the city for economic opportunities (Berman, 1998). Business owners closed their businesses until they could figure out how to integrate the lunch counters without much fanfare (Cole, 1997). When local leaders wanted to build the Astrodome with public funds, Black leaders said they would support it if it were integrated and business and government leaders knew that hotels and everything else had to become integrated too when people were coming to see an event at the Astrodome, so this transpired into hotels and restaurants being integrated.
Houston’s business leaders’ fear of a bad image along with continuous activism of the Black community in Houston allowed for a relatively peaceful transition from the Jim Crow era to the post-Civil Rights era in the city. The activism and accomplishments of the Black community would be admirable in any city, but it is especially commendable within the context of Houston and its historical discouragement of citizen participation.

**Participation in a laissez-faire city**

The growth coalition in Houston has historically discouraged participation from anyone in the city, regardless of race or class. Fisher (1992, p. 255) asks, “who participates in the privatization context?” Community mobilization is difficult to organize when the public sector is weak and the private sector is strong, like it is in Houston. The combination in Houston of a private sector controlling the public sector, the fact that many people came to Houston with the objective of making money and moving on, and the continuous disenfranchisement of ordinary citizens, has always discouraged political activism. “Such public power privately exercised makes shadow planning something very close to the real thing, but without one crucial element: direct accountability to the citizens of the community” (Greanias, 1998, p. 29). In a privatized context, there are “much less visible targets” (Fisher, 1992, p. 269). Thomas and Murray (1991) think the mere vastness of Houston’s geography curtails participation too since services are deconcentrated, making it tough to see the social service structure as a whole. Feagin (1988) attributes individualism as a reason for lack of organizing in Houston. Houston business and civic leaders have also actively discouraged activism, at least historically. For instance, when plans were made for Tranquility Park adjacent to city hall in the 1970s, the city purposely designed it as a fragmented space so that people could not easily congregate there for a protest (Architecture Center Houston, 2018). In the early 1980s, the Chamber of Commerce wrote an “Action Plan” in which they addressed concerns about “militant organizers” moving to
Houston from northern cities possibly “changing unsophisticated local citizens into militant protesters” (Feagin, 1988, p.281).

The growth coalition’s exclusion of individual participation extends to entire neighborhoods. While even wealthy areas with white residents can experience injustices due to decisions made by the growth coalition, Black neighborhoods have experienced the worst injustices in Houston (Bullard, 1987). White and Black elites in Houston are more interested in making the most profit they can from individual land ownership rather than working to ensure affordable housing availability (Lowe and Richards, 2022). The next section describes Freedmen’s Town, the land available to freed Black residents following Texas Emancipation, because no one else wanted the swampy land that was prone to flooding along Buffalo Bayou at the time.

Other redevelopment efforts in the city

Other redevelopment efforts in the city did not involve the destruction (erasure of structures and people from the area) that the proposed redevelopment in Freedmen’s Town did. For instance, in the East End, community leaders worked to revitalize places that included the historical significance of the residents’ Mexican heritage, even if it resulted in a “caricature” representation intended to attract tourists, it was “based on the preservation of minority culture in the context of local history” (Lin, 1995, p.639). In contrast, the land in Fourth Ward was always only viewed by the city as land to be cleared and redeveloped into something else entirely. On the other hand, in the original Chinatown, even though Chinese American entrepreneurs invested in the area, they were no match for other private developers who received public funding to invest in downtown ventures, especially as the new convention center, baseball stadium, and basketball arena were developed around the original Chinatown in east downtown.
Freedmen’s Town

Early history and property ownership

Also known as Fourth Ward, Freedmen’s Town became home to many African American migrants who came to the city from neighboring rural areas following the announcement of Emancipation in 1865. They came to Houston by foot, often via Old San Felipe Road (now West Dallas), which ran from the Brazos River to Fourth Ward (Pruitt, 2013). The city’s Black population surged following Emancipation, but even before that, free Black Houstonians and enslaved Black Houstonians who lived away from the house in which they were enslaved, lived in Fourth Ward (Wintz, 1990). They originally settled on rural land at the current site of the Historic Oaks of Allen Parkway Village and then expanded to the west, south, and east from there (Thomas and Murray, 1991). Fourth Ward’s Black population increased from 1,314 in 1870 to 9,397 in 1920 to 15,440 in 1940 (Pruitt, 2013). Many Black Houstonians trace their roots to Fourth Ward—its streets, shotgun houses, churches, and schools (Wintz, 1990).

In 1870, 4.2 percent of the Black residents in Fourth Ward owned their homes and in 1900, almost 12.1 percent of Black residents owned their homes (Wintz, 1990). Following Emancipation, white landowners were willing to sell their land to the incoming Black residents, and with the disrupted economy following the Civil War, farm land on the edge of the city was cheap (Beeth and Wintz, 1992). The disrupted economy might also have encouraged white landowners to sell their property to newly freed Black residents as a way to make money.

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9 The city was originally organized into four wards, and later into six wards, as political districts.
10 Shotgun houses had their origins in west Africa, then moved to Haiti, New Orleans, and up the Gulf Coast to Houston. (Holmes, 1986).
The majority of important Black institutions were created and based in Fourth Ward. Black businesses lined up along West Dallas at the beginning of the 20th century (Reeves, 1990). Doctors and lawyers set up offices in Pilgrim Hall (see Figure 3.1), which also had drug stores and grocery stores, as well as a grand ballroom for parties (Pruitt, 2013). It was across the street from Colored High School (later named Booker T. Washington High School), of which many alumnae went on to higher education to get Bachelor degrees and beyond (Pruitt, 2013). The Carnegie Colored Library (see Figure 3.2) was established in 1913 after Booker T. Washington requested a grant from Andrew Carnegie (SoRelle, 1992). The first hospital for Black Houstonians was established in Freedmen's Town in 1910 and was staffed by African American doctors (Podagrosi and Vojnovic, 2008). Many churches were built in the area, the most notable structures were Antioch Baptist Church, founded in 1866 with the present building built in 1879; Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church, a 1929 Gothic Revival structure designed by Black architect, J.J. Hawkins; and Bethel Baptist Church. The Gregory Institute opened in 1870. When the building was destroyed by a storm, it was rebuilt at its current site in 1903, and the building that stands there now has been there since 1926 (see Figure 3.3). The Lincoln Theatre, which was rated the best Black theater in the South, was also in Freedmen's Town (Richardson Sr., 1992). Several lodges serving Black Houstonians were also in the area that is now part of downtown (Richardson Sr., 1992). Prominent members from the community created the city's first park for African Americans—Emancipation Park in Third Ward. When the city refused to pave the streets that were constantly flooding, previously enslaved Fourth Ward residents made bricks and paved the streets with them. Jack Yates, a previously enslaved person and first pastor of Antioch Baptist Church, encouraged and helped residents buy property and get an education. Some say he even cosigned mortgages.
for many of his congregants, some of whom could only sign with an “X” at the time (Kennedy, 1990).

**Figure 3.1: Pilgrim Hall circa 1927**

Source: Houston History Research Center at the Julia Ideson Building, Houston Public Library, Houston, TX, Photograph Collection MS 19-1320.
Decline and neglect in Freedmen’s Town

Fourth Ward never had a lot of land, and its adjacency to white communities and downtown limited it geographically. In the 1920s, other Black communities with more available land for development began to attract more Black residents and institutions as more African Americans migrated to the city (Wintz 1990; Pruitt 2013).
When Sicilians began immigrating to Houston in the 1920s, many settled in Fourth Ward alongside Black residents. Since they were considered to be higher in the “caste” system than African Americans, they were able to quickly open grocery stores and other businesses in Fourth Ward (Reeves, 1990; Wilkerson, 2020). When Black homeowners could not pay for groceries during the Depression, the Italian merchants took their property deed as payment for their debt (Reeves, 1990). This resulted in a neighborhood with many white landlords with Black renters instead of one with many owner-occupied houses, and
the following decades continued to see a decrease in owner-occupancy rates (Bullard, 1987).

Property loss continued in Freedmen’s Town as the city took land for various urban projects. (See Figure 3.4 for this discussion.) The central business district expanded to the west in the 1930s and 1940s, with City Hall, an entertainment venue, and Sam Houston Park replacing residential and commercial structures in the neighborhood. In the 1940s, the newly created Houston Housing Authority deemed the original settlement of Freedmen’s Town (where Historic Oaks of Allen Parkway Village now sits) as “blighted” and acquired the land through eminent domain to build a 37-acre all white public housing project, San Felipe Courts, renamed Allen Parkway Village when it became desegregated in the 1960s. In 1929, the city constructed Allen Parkway, so that residents of River Oaks—the most prestigious neighborhood in Houston, developed in 1927—could drive to downtown without the need to take West Dallas, which had stoplights and went right through Freedmen’s Town (Lappala, 1985). San Felipe Courts, the new all-white housing development, was built to beautify the parkway and rid it of the original Freedmen’s Town’s Black residents (Podograsi and Vojnovic, 2008). The elevated Gulf Freeway, completed in 1959, further decimated the neighborhood as important cultural buildings were demolished and the remaining land in the neighborhood was split in half. Eventually, all of the land on the east side of the freeway became part of the central business district, except for Antioch Baptist Church, which now sits in the midst of high-rises in downtown Houston. Before the 1960s, inner-city minority neighborhoods lacked the political power necessary to challenge these land-use decisions in a city run by oil men and developers.

The neighborhood experienced disinvestment through much of the 20th century and by 1980, it had become the poorest Black neighborhood in the city (Wintz 2010). Because
of its proximity to downtown, city officials and developers had long aspired to redevelop Freedmen’s Town.

*Figure 3.4: Property loss in Freedmen’s Town*

Houston Planning Department studies Fourth Ward

With a planning grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Planning (HUD), the Houston City Planning Department (HCPD) prepared the “Midtown- Fourth Ward Neighborhood Plan” in September 1975. The plan emerged as part of Houston’s Neighborhood Improvement Planning Program, which began in 1972 to improve neighborhoods in the city through comprehensive planning (HCPD, 1975). Midtown and Fourth Ward, two neighborhoods adjacent to downtown, were the first in the program (See Figure 3.5). These neighborhoods were appealing to city leaders who wanted to expand downtown due to high demand related to the city’s economic and population boom in the 1960s and 1970s. The document discussed widespread poverty in the area and said that over half of the structures were ill-maintained, and needed major repair (HCPD, 1975).
With this plan, the city was trying to encourage private investment in Fourth Ward by proposing to pay for the infrastructure needed for future use and trying to guarantee that the neighborhood would be redeveloped as a whole rather than piecemeal (HCPD, 1975). A major theme of the document was about anticipating the future development in the area by doing things like widening the streets and improving access to surrounding neighborhoods and downtown, enlarging the utility system capacity to serve larger residential and commercial development, and providing relocation information to existing residents. Though Fourth Ward residents were interviewed about what they wanted for the future of the area, the document discussed the importance of the city to promote the “inevitable change” of Fourth Ward’s future and encouraged the city to pave the way for private development, which included demolishing the existing structures and relocating the residents and churches (HCPD, 1975, p.1). As Figure 3.6 shows, the east end part of Fourth Ward was slotted to be an extension of downtown as a commercial area and the heart of Freedmen’s Town was allocated for residential redevelopment.

The planning department issued another document in 1976 about the Montrose and Fourth Ward Community Development Area. The area was one of 23 target areas in Houston designated by the mayor’s office to receive HUD funding provided by the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 (HCPD, 1976). This study provided facts and data about the neighborhoods regarding things like land use, housing, and population demographics. Census Tract level data from the document help reveal redevelopment pressures on Fourth Ward at the time. (See Figure 3.7 for Census Tract locations for the following discussion.) Census Tract 401 represents the North Montrose neighborhood, which historically has had white middle-class residents in single family houses. Census Tracts 402 and 403 represent the Montrose neighborhood, an area known for its bohemian flair that gave rise to the counterculture movement and the LGBT community in Houston in
the 1960s and 1970s. The document includes Census Tract 125 as Fourth Ward, but that area is actually known as Midtown, a neighborhood that historically had warehouses and industry to support downtown, but has been since converted into a trendy neighborhood for young professionals with multi-story townhomes and luxury apartments, bars, and restaurants.\textsuperscript{11} Census Tract 126 essentially encompasses Fourth Ward, including APV.

\textsuperscript{11} Midtown originally had some wealthy residences soon after Houston was founded, but most of them had been either demolished or converted into commercial space by the 1970s. The eastern portion of Fourth Ward has actually been marketed as Midtown and feels more like Midtown physically and culturally than Fourth Ward now.
Figure 3.6: Fourth Ward Development Plan

Source: Houston City Planning Department (1975) p. 21

Figure 3.7: Montrose and Fourth Ward Census Tracts

Source: Houston City Planning Department (1976). p. 3.
(Neighborhood names added by author)
In order to present a clearer picture of the redevelopment pressure Fourth Ward was under during this time, I will discuss some data from HCPD's 1976 document. This pressure was in addition to the fact that Fourth Ward and APV are situated next to downtown. Table 3.1 shows that while the average value of housing in Census Tract 126 in 1970 was not much less than in the other areas, and even more valuable than housing in Census Tract 402, the average rent was just one half or less than one half than rent in the other tracts. It does not indicate factors like the condition or size of the structures or land parcels, but it does suggest a rent gap as discussed by Smith. Smith (1996, p. 65) discusses a landlord’s inability to collect “potential ground rent” when structures are not maintained throughout a neighborhood and disinvestment has occurred. Because the land in Fourth Ward was so close to downtown in a city with a booming economy, its location commanded higher property values, but because abandonment and disinvestment had occurred, the rent was low relative to surrounding areas. Smith (1996, p. 67) defines the rent gap as “the disparity between the potential ground rent and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use.” Absentee landowners sought to exploit this difference with help from the city.

The 1976 document provides data regarding housing activity from April 1970 to December 1975 (See Table 3.2). Tracts 401, 402, and 403—the Montrose neighborhood—all had net gains in the number of housing units. While tract 401 had a net loss of single-family homes, they were replaced by multi-family homes, indicating a greater land value and change in the structure of the built environment since multi-family homes represent more population density. While Montrose was experiencing net gains in its housing, tracts 125 and 126—essentially Midtown and Fourth Ward respectively—experienced a net loss in housing units. These two neighborhoods were the closest to the central business district and the loss of housing could have been the result of building abandonment such that Smith
(1996, p.67 italics in original) discusses, “Buildings are abandoned... because they cannot be used profitably.” After years of disinvestment and lack of maintenance, many houses were deemed dangerous and many did not have working plumbing or heat. The document indicates that homes in Fourth Ward were being demolished by the city through a program of demolishing dangerous buildings (HCPD, 1975). There was also a building moratorium in Fourth Ward due to inadequate water and sewer infrastructure and absentee property owners had been demolishing buildings as they anticipated redevelopment (Fourth Ward Mobilizing, 1980).

Table 3.1: Average Value of Housing and Rent in Houston and Fourth Ward and Montrose-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Tract</th>
<th>Fourth Ward</th>
<th>Montrose</th>
<th>Houston</th>
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<tr>
<td>Avg. value of housing</td>
<td>$24,900</td>
<td>$16,400</td>
<td>$17,900</td>
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<td>Avg. Contract Rent</td>
<td>$114/mo.</td>
<td>$48/mo.</td>
<td>$95/mo.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Houston City Planning Department (1976). (See Figure 4.2 for map of Census Tracts.)

Table 3.2: Housing Activity in Fourth Ward and Montrose- April 1970 to December 1975

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Tract</th>
<th>Units Built</th>
<th>Units Lost</th>
<th>Net gain or loss</th>
<th>Units Built</th>
<th>Units Lost</th>
<th>Net gain or loss</th>
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<td>125</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>-64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>128</td>
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<td>-17</td>
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<tr>
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<td>141</td>
<td>-124</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Houston City Planning Department (1976). (See Figure 4.2 for a map of Census Tracts.)

**Saving an important landmark**

In 1978, Cullen Center had applied pressure to Antioch Baptist Church, the first church in Freedmen’s town founded in 1866 just seven months after Emancipation in Houston, to sell their property to them (Meeks, 1989). Led by Martha Whiting, the
granddaughter of Jack Yates, the church’s congregation refused to sell it and applied for historic designation in the National Register of Historic Places and received placement in 1979 (Keltner, 1984).

**Conclusion**

By the time redevelopment efforts publicly began in the mid-1980s, Freedmen’s Town was but a fraction of the land it had been before the city took so much land for Allen Parkway Village, city hall, and the elevated Interstate 45. Most residents were renters in this poor neighborhood that had experienced many years of disinvestment, by the city, and by absentee landowners who did not upkeep their properties. Some real estate speculation had already occurred in the area, due to its location near the CBD, but real estate investors were about to get much more active in their quest to achieve the most profit for their land in Freedmen’s Town.
Chapter 4- Redevelopment Effort 1

Introduction

This chapter examines the first redevelopment plan of Fourth Ward, publicly proposed in the mid-1980s, by city officials and real estate speculators, who worked closely with the absentee landowners of Italian descent discussed in the previous chapter. It describes how residents and their supporters responded to the proposed plan and how space and the narrative surrounding that space were negotiated and renegotiated throughout this time period, that then set the stage for future redevelopment efforts in the neighborhood.

City officials, absentee landowners, and real estate investors wanted to demolish nearly all of the structures in Freedmen’s Town, including Allen Parkway Village, and relocate the existing residents to another part of the city. The city wanted to expand downtown and lure middle-class residents from the surrounding suburbs by redeveloping Fourth Ward and replacing the public housing at APV with luxury housing. City leaders worked with white absentee property owners and real estate investors to try to assemble the numerous small parcels of land into one big parcel to make the land more desirable to a big developer and thus more profitable.

Residents of Freedmen’s Town also wanted reinvestment in the neighborhood, but did not think demolition was necessary. Community leaders worked to change the narrative of the community from one that should be torn down in its entirety to one that should be redeveloped while honoring the history of its built environment and the residents that built it. They did this by going beyond the scale of the local government and using
federal policies and laws to prevent the neighborhood’s total destruction, including the
demolition of the adjacent APV site.

Local Context

This effort became public around 1984, but it had been in the making for about a
decade before that, when the city used federal funds to study how to redevelop Fourth
Ward and other inner-city neighborhoods (HCPD, 1975; HCPD, 1976). Around the same
time, in 1977, the Houston Housing Authority (HHA)\(^\text{12}\) secretly put in a request to the
federal government to demolish APV. City leaders and absentee landowners did not have a
formal plan for future land use in Fourth Ward, but devised a plan to prepare the area for
private development by proposing to assemble the numerous small parcels of land into one
large block of land. Central to this redevelopment effort was a proposal by the local housing
authority to demolish APV and redevelop it as privately-owned leasable office space
buildings and luxury apartments.

Fourth Ward’s adjacency to downtown had always made it vulnerable to
redevelopment as the CBD expanded to the west. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, white
absentee landlords were ready to sell their land and saw the municipal support as an
opportunity to sell it for maximum profit. Most residents were low-income African
Americans who rented their homes and did not have much political or economic clout in a
city historically known for supporting private development and discouraging community
activism. Fourth Ward residents, however, organized themselves and garnered support
from lawmakers and other activists to prevent the destruction of their neighborhood. Their

\(^\text{12}\) During the time period of this research, HHA was referred to Housing Authority of the city of Houston
(HACH) and then changed to Houston Housing Authority.
efforts, alongside one of the biggest economic downturns in Houston’s history, helped to prevent the wholesale demolition and redevelopment of their neighborhood during this time period.

Houston experienced great economic expansion in the 1960s and 1970s due to its role in international oil production (Feagin, 1988). While other cities in the United States slipped in and out of recessions after World War II, Houston enjoyed 40 years of uninterrupted growth that quadrupled the city's population from 627,000 in 1940 to 2.7 million in 1980 (Gilmer, 2000). Much of this growth occurred in the suburbs, which Houston easily acquired with lax annexation policies within the state of Texas. But when annexing land and servicing the suburban areas became more difficult, city officials began to try to figure out how to redevelop inner-city neighborhoods near the central business district (Thomas & Murray, 1991).

Real estate investors capitalized on this growth and began to develop other areas of the city with high- and mid-rise office space and mixed-use development outside of downtown in the 1970s. When Greenway Plaza, a 52-acre mixed-use development with nearly five million square feet of office space, opened in 1973 five miles west of downtown, its developer claimed it would be the next downtown (Schadewald, 2010). This prompted downtown business leaders to focus on expanding downtown to increase leasable office space and make it more enticing for people to visit. They formed Central Houston Incorporated, a non-profit corporation, in 1983 to promote the downtown region and ensure its prominence as the center of business, cultural, and entertainment (Eury, 1984). Downtown Houston was known throughout the city to empty on weekday evenings when employees left the office buildings, and to be a virtual ghost town on weekends. In 1984, Central Houston called for the public and private sector to work together to begin a housing
initiative downtown, of which Fourth Ward was a potential site, to help make downtown a destination beyond weekday working hours (Eury, 1984).

**Redevelopment Plan**

When the first major redevelopment effort became publicized around 1984, it consisted of about 150 acres, and included APV and Jefferson Davis Hospital (see Figure 4.3). The effort was led, at least publicly, by Efraim Garcia, who had become the director of Houston's Department of Planning and Development in 1983. He worked closely with Metropolitan Development Corporation, the largest landowner in the area, and many individual absentee property owners in the area, to try to assemble the land so they could offer it as a block to a private developer. The Housing Authority of the city of Houston, led by Earl Phillips, played a big role in this effort as well by promoting the demolition of APV, which would clear the way for private development on the public housing site.

*Figure 4.1: Map of redevelopment effort circa 1984*

Created by author using GoogleMaps.
The City

Garcia had been chosen as Houston’s planning director in 1983 because of his success using Urban Development Action Grants (UDAGs) in San Antonio and persuading developers to participate in an urban renewal project (Thomas and Murray, 1991). Garcia planned to apply for a UDAG to fund a historic district and low-income housing in the Fourth Ward as a way to garner support from Black citizens in Houston who had supported Kathy Whitmire and helped elect her (Thomas and Murray, 1991). Mayor Whitmire had campaigned against APV’s demolition, but was now in favor of its demolition and seemed to be working for the wholesale redevelopment of Fourth Ward.

White absentee land owners and real estate speculators

Absentee property owners, most of whom had inherited their land from Italian immigrants, had wanted to sell their land for years. Most were landlords of small shotgun houses or cottages that needed major repair and said that repairing them would require a rent increase the current renters could not afford (Keltner, 1984).

Though most parcels of land were small and owned by individuals who had inherited it, some investors had bought land in Fourth Ward as real estate speculators. Over a quarter of the lots owned by property owners with ten or more parcels were vacant in 1984 (Hermance, 1984). On the eastern edge of the neighborhood closest to downtown, but separated by the elevated freeway built in the 1950s, landowners were demolishing homes and paving their parcels to create parking lots (Keltner, 1984). They were not used much, but property taxes were much lower for parking lots than for rental property, and these lots had coin boxes to avoid the need to pay a parking attendant (Hermance, 1984). Essentially, they were paved empty lots.
The white absentee land owners thought that assembling the individual small parcels of land into one block would make it more appealing and thus more valuable to a potential developer ("A Fourth Ward overview," 1984). In 1983, Efraim Garcia began working with individual, absentee owners of the property in the proposed redevelopment zone to form the Fourth Ward Property Owners Association (Hermance, 1984). When an individual owner joined the association, they gave up some of their rights as a private property owner and gained the potential to sell the property for more money in the block with the others. Once 85% of landowners would join the association, Metropolitan Development and Real Estate Company would work with the city to negotiate a deal with a potential developer (Keltner, 1984). Metropolitan Development owned 12 acres of land in Fourth Ward and was a leader of the Fourth Ward Property Owners Association. The 225 or so mostly white landlords who controlled 85 percent of the land would then extend options to the Metropolitan Development and Real Estate Company, who had agreed to sale the properties as a group for a minimum of $20 per square foot—well above what anyone could get from the individual sale of their properties (Thomas and Murray 1991).

*Houston Housing Authority and Allen Parkway Village— "As APV goes, so goes Fourth Ward"

The director of the HHA, Earl Phillips, played a major role in this redevelopment effort since the fate of APV was so important for this effort’s implementation. Mayor Whitmire had hired him because he had connections at HUD under the Reagan administration, but when Jack Kemp replaced Samuel Smith due to charges of influence-peddling and bribery at HUD, he did not have as much influence. HHA had been trying to demolish APV since 1977, when the authority secretly submitted an application for demolition to HUD, after a developers approached then mayor, Jim McConn, about buying the property. In 1979, HUD gave HHA $10 million to renovate APV. HHA used about $1.5
million, then secretly submitted an application for APV's demolition to HUD again, resulting in the remaining $8.5 million being frozen ("HHA may fund," 1990). In 1984, HHA sent its third demolition request to HUD (Rodriguez, 1990). In the application, HHA explained to HUD that business leaders and developers had been asking them about buying the land on which APV sat for years (Ghirardo, 1984). Phillips said he wanted to demolish APV to sell or lease the land and use that money to build better quality public housing in other parts of the city (Elliott, 1985a). The plan was to lease or sell the land of APV to a developer who would build office buildings on the site as an extension of downtown and also build high-end residential units with views of Buffalo Bayou and downtown (King, 1985). HHA would then use the proceeds to build at least as much affordable housing units in other parts of Houston (Loddeke, 1985). City leaders liked the plan of redeveloping APV into office space and luxury housing because that would make Fourth Ward more likely to be redeveloped as well.

People complained that the housing project was an eyesore, with vacant and vandalized units facing Allen Parkway. More than one-third of the units were boarded up in 1984 due to neglect by HHA, which residents said was intentional as a way to gain support for its demolition (Sablatura, 1984). When someone would move out, HHA would board up the apartment, rather than lease it out to another family on the waiting list, and if families added new members and became too large for their unit, they would be evicted rather than allowed to move to a larger unit in the complex (Ghirardo, 1984). People driving to and from their workplace downtown would see boarded up units and think demolition was the best thing for the complex. Residents also accused HHA of letting Vietnamese refugees move in ahead of Black families on the waiting list (King, 1985). In 1976, the year before HHA first proposed demolition of APV, the complex was 66% African American and 5% Indo-Chinese. By 1984, that had changed to 33% African American and 56% Indo-Chinese
(Sablatura, 1984). Though many Vietnamese refugees moved to Houston during that period, a report claimed that HHA was purposely moving these families into the project to abate opposition to its removal since a language barrier and cultural differences made the residents not as cohesive a group as they had been in 1977, when the Black community strongly opposed the first proposal for demolition (King, 1985).

The demolition of APV was vital in this proposal to redevelop Freedmen’s Town. It sat on what was considered to be the most valuable land in Fourth Ward, adjacent to Buffalo Bayou and downtown alongside the scenic road, Allen Parkway, that spanned from downtown to River Oaks, one of the wealthiest and most prestigious neighborhoods in Houston. Absentee landowners, city leaders, and real estate speculators thought its presence was a barrier to the redevelopment of Fourth Ward and that its removal and redevelopment would bring higher property values to the land so close to downtown, whose property values soared in the late 1970s due to Houston’s economic and population growth (Ghirardo, 1984). Absentee property owners wanted APV to be demolished because they thought it would maximize their profits for land in Freedmen’s Town and city leaders wanted to demolish APV since private developers and investors did not want to redevelop Freedman’s Town with APV there (Hermance, 1984). APV’s demolition was such an important component of this redevelopment plan that the day after HHA commissioners voted to ask for HUD’s approval to tear down APV and relocate the residents in November of 1983, Garcia and the white absentee property owners met to discuss how to attain maximum profits on the land in Fourth Ward and how to deal with the scattered African American homeowners who might not want to sell their land (Hermance, 1984). It was often said, “as Allen Parkway Village goes, so goes Fourth Ward” (Ghirardo, 1984, p. 14).

Amidst the redevelopment efforts of the city and real estate developers, residents of Freedmen’s Town and APV were working on opposing the wholesale redevelopment of the
neighborhood and demolition of the public housing project and improving the neighborhood and APV.

**Community opposition and municipal response**

“They’ve got all kinds of money and all those big shiny buildings downtown, and damn if they don’t want the little house I call home”

Jacqueline Bechman, one of the 104 resident owners in the Fourth Ward. (Hermance, 1984, p9).

Residents wanted reinvestment, but they wanted to retain the cultural and historical fabric of the neighborhood and they wanted to remain in the neighborhood (“Fourth Ward Mobilizing,” 1980). Residents began to organize to fight the demolition of APV and the wholesale redevelopment of Fourth Ward in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They garnered support from others in positions of power who did not live in Fourth Ward to help ensure a successful opposition to the city’s plan of total redevelopment. The city used incentives and threats to try to encourage Fourth Ward residents’ complicity in its redevelopment as imagined by the city and real estate interests it was working with.

**Black landowners—Residents and churches**

Metropolitan Development Co. worked with white absentee property owners, and Garcia worked with Black resident property owners, but he did not approach them until after a year of meetings with the white absentee owners (Paasch, 1984). The 104 Black resident homeowners, the few Black businesses, and the Black ministers of the twenty churches who owned property in the area were excluded from the white absentee landowners’ discussions and were not invited to the “closed-door” meetings to discuss redevelopment in Fourth Ward (Hermance, 1984 p. 118). When Garcia finally met with Black land owners, he urged them to join the property owners’ association, but they did not want to join it (Paasch, 1984). Garcia tried to convince the resident property owners and
church ministers that his plan was the best option to prevent uncontrolled development in the area and said if the city did not have a part in it, Fourth Ward redevelopment would be uncontrolled with no relocation money for the displaced residents (Hermance, 1984). Initially, Garcia said those who joined it could get $15,000 in addition to the $20 per square foot that other property owners were assumed to get (Brown, 1984). Even if they thought they would eventually sell their property, these homeowners did not trust Garcia and thought they could make more money if they did not join the association (Hermance, 1984). Garcia tried to persuade them to join the association, but he said no one could be forced to move or sell his or her home since the city did not have authority to condemn property (Paasch, 1984).13

The role of churches

Churches played a pivotal role in Fourth Ward as a way to organize residents and the greater African American community in Houston to rally around saving existing structures in Freedman's Town. On Sundays, the churches would fill up with current and previous residents who travelled from all over Houston back to the “Mother Ward,” with some congregations dating back to the late 1800s (“Fourth Ward mobilizing,” 1984).14

Garcia thought the cooperation of Black ministers in Fourth Ward was vital for redevelopment to proceed because “they hold sway over the community and control critical lots in the ward” (Hermance, 1984, p. 137). Without their cooperation, the city would not be able to assemble parcels large enough for a large-scale development project and investors

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13 In the next effort described in Chapter 5, private investors and elected government officials tried to make eminent domain an option.

14 At a lecture I attended at the Gregory School, a Black gentleman commented about how he used to come to Fourth Ward on Sundays when there were more churches and the streets would be filled with noise from the churches, who competed with each other to make the most noise.
would probably avoid a plan that would allow some aging unimproved structures such as the churches to remain. Garcia told pastors in the area that they could either participate in the city's plan and get relocation benefits for their parishioners or watch the area get redeveloped by big land brokers without relocation benefits, but the ministers knew they could not buy replacement land and build a comparable structure at the price Garcia was offering (Hermance, 1984).

When persuasion did not work for resident homeowners and church leaders to cooperate with Garcia, he used other approaches to try to convince them. He told them the city had many tools at its disposal to force holdouts to cooperate in the city's plan, including condemnation or creation of a new street grid that would run through a holdout's property. He quietly told ministers that Houston's current set-back ordinance would be a major problem for property owners with buildings near the property line on streets that needed to be widened, and almost every street needed to be widened according to this plan. He warned residents that if they did not cooperate with the city's plan, they would not get anything to help them with their impending relocation (Hermance, 1984). Members of Mount Horeb Baptist Church and its pastor showed their commitment to staying in the neighborhood when they raised money to build a new center of worship that sat on the property line on the edge of the narrow street that Garcia had said was threatened to change (Hermance, 1984).

**Allen Parkway Village residents**

The fact that HHA needed HUD’s permission to demolish APV greatly influenced the efforts to redevelop Fourth Ward. In 1983, residents of APV organized and formed a residents’ council, and used litigation tactics to fight the project’s demolition. They solicited and received support from Henry Gonzalez, a U.S. Representative from San Antonio and
chairman of a House subcommittee on housing, to intervene in HHA’s application to HUD. Gonzalez argued that with 5,000 Houston families on the waiting list for public housing and only 4000 units available, it would be “atrocious” to demolish these available units and added that HHA had not shown enough evidence that demolition was the best option (Loddeke, 1985, p.A3). Mickey Leland, a Democratic congressman representing the 18th Congressional District, of which Fourth Ward and APV were a part, also opposed APV’s demolition and worked with residents to oppose its demolition (Kiely, 1989). Leland and another U.S. Congressman from Dallas, Martin Frost, sponsored an amendment to a housing and community development appropriations bill in 1988 that prohibited spending federal money to demolish APV and three public housing projects in Dallas (Rodriguez & Clayton, 1988). Federal funds were not necessary to demolish APV, as potential buyers could pay for its demolition or HHA could seek a loan to demolish it, but demolition was a hard sell for housing activists since it was the largest public housing complex in Houston with 963 units, representing about a quarter of the public housing units in the city (Rodriguez, 1988).

Lenwood Johnson, a resident of APV and founder and president of the APV Residents Council, worked with Barry Klein, a real estate broker active in local civic issues, to prepare a critique of the plans to tear down the project, hoping it would garner support from local civic clubs and federal bureaucrats to oppose the demolition plans (Hermance, 1984). Klein said, “The so-called revitalization of the Fourth Ward will be no different from the urban renewal programs of the 1960s, which eventually became known as ‘Negro removal’ programs” (Hermance, 1984, p. 120). Opponents of APV’s demolition wondered how units would be replaced in other areas of Houston when other Houston neighborhoods had recently successfully opposed the construction of public housing in their neighborhoods, whereas Fourth Ward residents welcomed APV and wanted the units rehabilitated (Ghirardo, 1984). Since the demolition of APV was such an important
component of the complete redevelopment of Freedmen’s Town, these residents’
opposition was instrumental in preventing the complete elimination of Freedmen’s Town.

Neighborhood residents and organizations

Gladys House, whose family had lived in the house where she lived in Fourth Ward for more than 120 years, was instrumental in the opposition to the wholesale redevelopment of Freedmen’s Town (Rodriguez, 1997). She was in the seventh grade when she began attending meetings at the churches in the neighborhood but said that every meeting “would be elected officials coming in and threatening residents with this or that” (Rodriguez, 1997). She founded the Freedmen’s Town Association (FTA) in 1981, which advocated for the revitalization of the neighborhood.

The Freedman’s Town Association advocated for the revitalization of Freedman’s Town through renovation of the housing structures and sought to make the neighborhood a national historic district in order to protect the structures. House and others who sought national historic district status found an ally, Ken Briesch, president of the Texas Historical Commission, whose interests included the historical significance of vernacular buildings (Elliott, 1984). Fourth Ward had a plethora of vernacular buildings, as most of the houses were shotgun houses from the late 19th and early 20th century.

Garcia asked the residents to withhold applying for national historic designation and said that if they stopped their application, the city would create a six-block historic district and pay for residents to be relocated (Keltner, 1984). The city planned to seek federal money to create a new street grid and replace existing infrastructure in the neighborhood to reduce the cost of development, and in return, the city would require the developer to set aside land for a historic district, 400 housing units for the elderly, and 200 low-income housing units (Brown, 1984). He also warned that a national historic district
would cause rents to increase substantially and cause gentrification of the area (Keltner, 1984).

However, the federal assistance for relocating residents was contingent on direct displacement by a federally subsidized program and since a historic district would ban federal money to be spent on redevelopment, Garcia warned residents of applying for a historical district because anyone displaced could not receive these funds if Fourth Ward became a historical district (Hermance, 1984). An UDAG award could also be used for the relocation of the 7000 or so residents (Thomas and Murray, 1991). If renters were displaced by a UDAG project, they could receive up to $4,000 over four years to help find housing elsewhere and homeowners could receive up to $15,000 plus moving expenses (Brown, 1984).

In the summer of 1984, forty blocks of Freedman’s Town were nominated for historic district status to the National Register of Historic Places by the Texas Historical Commission Board of Review and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in January, 1985 (“A Fourth Ward overview,” 1984). In response to the nomination and acceptance of 40 blocks of Freedmen’s Town as a national historic district, the city proposed a historic district of about six blocks near the vacant Gregory Elementary School, which was proposed to be developed into a museum of Black history (Grotta, 1984). There was also discussion about historically significant homes being moved to this site (“A Fourth Ward overview,” 1984). Since the designation precluded the use of federal funds by the city, Garcia proposed a utility district that would “allow a real-estate developer to sell bonds to finance the infrastructure improvements” that would then “be retired by taxing subsequent purchasers of the improved property” (Fox, 1985, p.9).

In addition to precluding using federal funds to redevelop Freedman’s Town, the listing in the national historic registry helped activists redefine the neighborhood as an area
with historical and cultural significance, which arguably allowed the resident activists to gain more support from outside the community. Residents and their supporters did this not only as a strategy, but because it was what the neighborhood meant to them. It seems that many people thought of Fourth Ward as an area with only problematic residents, such as drug dealers who squatted vacant houses, and only derelict houses with no hope for redevelopment but only destruction and wholesale redevelopment. Emphasizing its cultural and historical significance to people in Houston and beyond allowed them to view the neighborhood from another perspective besides the narrative being presented by the city and developers.

Residents began to garner more support for keeping their neighborhood from total destruction and wholesale redevelopment by redefining the neighborhood as it was known to most Houstonians. Glady House wrote an article in the Houston Defender entitled, “Freedman’s Town- Not Fourth Ward” in which she wrote about the history of Freedmen’s Town and asked Black Houstonians to help preserve the neighborhood (House, 1982). In 1983, House again appealed to Black residents when the first issue of Freedmen’s Journal featured the article, “The Rebirth of Freedman’s Town,” in which she explained the history of the area and how it had experienced disinvestment (House, 1983). What had previously been referred to as “Fourth Ward” by all Houstonians, including its Black population, began to take shape as “Freedmen’s Town,” which had been the name of the original settlement where APV currently sits.

Art Exhibit

In February of 1986, a local art gallery, Diverse Works, hosted an exhibit called, “Architecture and Culture: The Fourth Ward,” that looked at Fourth Ward’s cultural assets and recognized its value to the city (Rodriguez, 1986; Holmes, 1986). As part of the exhibit,
architectural teams studied and presented ways to rehabilitate the units at APV and the famous architect, Renzo Piano, who had recently designed the Menil Collection Museum in Houston, was scheduled to talk about how to restore the structures in Fourth Ward (Holmes, 1986; “Piano will speak,” 1986).

**Conclusion**

In the mid-1980s, shortly after Garcia began working with the Fourth Ward Property's Association, Houston's economy crashed after experiencing several years of growth. Amid controversy over the fate of APV and the collapse of Houston's economy, the redevelopment project put forth by Garcia and the white absentee landowners in Fourth Ward was never realized (Boisseau & Gill, 1990). Lawsuits by APV residents, policies put into place by Leland, and the Secretary of HUD all delayed a decision about the fate of APV. Houston's troubled economy and slump in the real estate market and especially the number of vacancies in adjacent downtown's office buildings discouraged private developers' and investors' interest in the land on which APV sat, and HHA was not willing to discount the asking price. But lessons learned from this effort helped to shape the following two redevelopment efforts put forth by powerful entities with many resources, which ultimately shaped the current built environment and demographics in Fourth Ward. The next chapter will describe the second publicly proposed redevelopment effort and the residents' reaction to that proposal.
Chapter 5- Redevelopment Effort 2

“I doubt if there’s a city this size in the country with such a large property not only available so close to downtown but suitable for development so close to the downtown district.”
Local businessman (Baird and Hooper, 1990).

“But just across the Fourth Ward is the skyline of downtown Houston. Its gleaming glass towers are in the walking distance from the heart of the ward, and it’s their proximity that makes many people think the slum neighborhood is a great place to build the city’s future.”
-Boisseau & Gill, 1990

Introduction

The first redevelopment effort stalled in 1986 due to the successful opposition by APV residents and the unknown fate of APV and an economic downturn in Houston, but talk of redevelopment led to more disinvestment in the neighborhood as absentee property owners anticipated new development and failed further to maintain their rental properties (Gill & Boisseau, 1990). The Fourth Ward area experienced much disinvestment in the 1980s as real estate speculation escalated in and around the neighborhood. Census data show that 669 units of housing were lost between 1980 and 1990, resulting in a 26% decrease of housing units. The vacancy rate increased from 13.1% to 51.1%, and owner-occupied homes decreased from 102 houses to 28 houses, and its population decreased by over 67 percent. See Table 5.1. Abandoned houses were deliberately set on fire, and in a single block, all of the houses were either burned out, boarded up, or had a caved-in roof (“Abandoned and burned,” 1990; Gill and Boisseau, 1990).

In an attempt to get renters to move out of their properties, Metropolitan Realty had not been paying the water bill in many of their rental units, resulting in the water being turned off (Sablatura, 1989). This caused residents to move out of those properties (at least those who could), and then the homes would be demolished (Sablatura, 1989). Larger property owners in the area who had bought land as investment said that getting insurance on the properties was difficult since the properties did not meet city code and new
construction had been banned by the city since they had set new requirements for street size and setbacks (Baird, 1990c).

### Table 5.1: Housing Units in Fourth Ward (Census Tract 4101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total housing units</strong></td>
<td>2,886</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,556</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,887</td>
<td></td>
<td>896</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupied</strong></td>
<td>2,511</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
<td>2,222</td>
<td>86.9%</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
<td>1,972</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vacant</strong></td>
<td>375</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Owner Occupied</strong></td>
<td>108</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Renter Occupied</strong></td>
<td>2,403</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>2,120</td>
<td>95.4%</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>96.4%</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Prepared by Social Explorer

Two distinct occurrences then seemed to have made room for new actors to publicly propose a new and distinct redevelopment plan. In May of 1989, Metropolitan Development—the real estate firm that owned more than 70 rental properties on 12 acres and led the Fourth Ward Property Owners Association—declared bankruptcy (Sablatura, 1989). Metropolitan Realty and Efraim Garcia led the first redevelopment effort, so the company’s dissolution created an opportunity for new actors and new ideas to emerge. Less than three months later, in August of 1989, Mickey Leland, the United States congressman who had championed residents’ opposition to APV’s demolition and the wholesale redevelopment of Fourth Ward, died in an airplane crash. The new congressman, Craig Washington, who was also HHA’s lawyer, thought APV should be demolished and that Fourth Ward should be redeveloped (Roth, 1990). He worked closely with private developers to try to use public funds to pave the way for private redevelopment in Fourth Ward (Mintz, 1990).

This chapter describes the second redevelopment effort, which became public in early 1990, and explains how residents and their supporters responded to the proposal.
This effort was spearheaded by leaders of two private companies, Cullen Center and American General, whose corporate high-rise office buildings were at either end of the proposed redevelopment. At 600 acres, this proposal included a much larger geographical area than the previous plan put forth by Efraim Garcia and absentee property owners that involved 150 acres (See Figure 5.1). It included the area of North Montrose west of Taft Street, the western boundary of the first effort's proposal. North Montrose had been included in the 1976 Data Book written by the city's planning department, essentially Census Tract 401 from Figure 4.2. North Montrose was very different demographically than Fourth Ward. Whereas Fourth Ward residents were primarily low-income African American renters, North Montrose residents were primarily middle-class white homeowners.

Essential to this plan, according to the developers, was the creation of a special tax district in the area and the demolition of APV. HHA continued to push for its demolition, while Fourth Ward and APV residents continued to oppose its demolition and the wholesale redevelopment of Fourth Ward. The inclusion of North Montrose generated opposition from white homeowners living in that area of the redevelopment plan as well. This plan did not materialize due to the unknown fate of APV, and, to a lesser extent, the inability to create a special tax district.

**Local context**

*Houston's economic comeback and "downtown renaissance"*

In 1987, the city's economy began to come back from the economic downturn of the mid-1980s, and by May of 1990, all of the jobs lost because of the bust had returned to the city (Gilmer, 2000). Houston's government and business leaders were trying to diversify Houston's economy since dependence on the oil sector had caused the recent economic devastation. In order to diversify the economy, business and city leaders wanted to
improve the image of downtown by redeveloping parts of it to attract more businesses to locate or relocate to Houston. Civic and non-profit organizations used local and federal public funds and matching private funds to renovate historic downtown buildings and their surrounding areas, and private developers invested their own money to renovate historic buildings downtown (Holmes, 1990; Hassell, 1990; Johnson, 1990). A new convention center had opened in 1987 and the city was trying to figure out how to attract conventions and their visitors (Holmes, 1990). Central Houston continued to work on plans to encourage downtown employees to stay downtown after office hours and to lure people to come into town in the evenings and weekends for entertainment or shopping (Coulter, 1990).

President George H.W. Bush, who considered Houston to be his hometown, arranged for the 16th Economic Summit of Industrialized Nations to be held in Houston in 1990 (Chriss & Rust, 1990). Houston civic and business leaders thought this was a good chance to prove to the nation and the world that Houston was “back from economic hell”
They used this opportunity to repair the city’s image from one of economic collapse to a city on the rise again (Hassell & Boisseau, 1990). Time Magazine reported after the event, “The city is in the third year of a brisk economic recovery that is transforming the fourth largest U.S. city from a freewheeling oil-and-gas town to a more broadly based cosmopolitan center” (Woodbury, 1990, p.44). But even international reporters learned that Houston’s downtown was “desolate” in the evenings (Hassell, 1990, p.D1). With an established theater district and plans for more theaters and entertainment complexes, business and city leaders continued to work to make downtown a destination outside of weekday work hours.

**Fourth Ward’s role in Houston’s comeback**

Houston leaders wanted a symbol that the city was back, and in early 1990, this most recent redevelopment interest in Fourth Ward was thought to be a big part of that image, which could then lead more people to invest in the city (“Welcome symbol,” 1990). As in the previous redevelopment effort, Central Houston’s members were pushing for upper- and middle-income housing near downtown to help pave the way for retail and nightlife in the central business district to make it an evening and weekend destination (Baird and Hooper, 1990). The Fourth Ward area was thought to be the most logical place to begin that housing because of its adjacency to west downtown, where plans were being made to develop a new entertainment complex near existing performing arts theaters. One of the developers said about Fourth Ward, “It’s clearly an area of high visibility for the entire city of Houston” (Bivins, 1990).
Proponents of this redevelopment effort

Private developers

In late January of 1990, the Houston Post reported that the leaders of Cullen Center and of American General had proposed to redevelop 600 acres west of downtown (Baird & Hooper, 1990). Cullen Center is a downtown high-rise office complex, adjacent to Freedmen’s Town but separated from it by the elevated Interstate 45. American General occupied a mid-rise and high-rise office complex built in the 1980s, about a mile west of APV along Allen Parkway (See Figure 5.1). Max Schuette, chairman of American General, recalled how he and Marvin Marshall, president and chief executive officer of the Cullen Center, were looking at the land between their high-rises from their respective offices and noticed that many buildings were either falling down or had been burned. Given the location of the neighborhood and the disinvestment that had occurred there, they thought its redevelopment was inevitable and decided to take on the initiative themselves (Gill, 1990d). Marshall had initiated a large-scale planning investigation of the Fourth Ward in late 1987 and early 1988, about a year after the first effort had stalled due to the unknown fate of APV (Gill & Boisseau, 1990; Taylor, 1991). Schuette had previously helped the city study economic redevelopment in Fourth Ward and eventually concluded that using the private sector would be the most effective way to redevelop the area (Taylor, 1991).

In the first redevelopment effort, a few real estate speculators bought land in Fourth Ward, with Metropolitan Development being the largest landowner, but Fourth Ward was still primarily individual absentee landowners with small lots (Baird, 1990c). When

15 This freeway was the one built when the city took land through eminent domain in the 1950s from Freedmen’s Town that then split the neighborhood. Eventually, all of the land east of the freeway became part of the downtown business district except Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, which is discussed in Chapter 3.

16 AIG bought American General in 2001 and is still in the complex as of 2023.
Metropolitan Realty declared bankruptcy in 1989, Revenue Properties, the real estate arm of a consulting firm for oil and gas companies, bought about 10 of their 12 acres of property (about 70 rental properties) that Metropolitan Realty had owned (Boisseau and Gill, 1990). Archival data indicates that much more speculation was occurring west of Fourth Ward in North Montrose than in Fourth Ward during this time, and American General and Cullen Center had both acquired land in the area (Boisseau & Gill, 1990). American General had bought land in 1989 from Metropolitan Development and Real Estate Company and was the largest property owner in the area with 48 acres—42 acres around their office and 6 acres in North Montrose (Boisseau & Gill, 1990).

White absentee landowners

Aside from the ten acres or so owned by Revenue Properties, who had bought most of Metropolitan Development’s property in the area once they declared bankruptcy, and land owned by a handful of other real estate speculators in the area, most properties in Fourth Ward were still owned by the same Italian American families who had become members of the Fourth Ward Property’s Association in the first effort. These owners still considered their inheritance a burden, and supported this redevelopment effort and the creation of a special tax district (Gill, 1990e). They complained that rents did not offset property taxes or high water bills, and said that repairing the houses was not a good option because renters could not afford higher rents and vandalism often occurred, like plywood stolen from boarded-up houses (Gill & Boisseau, 1990). These absentee owners thought this redevelopment plan could get them a fair price for their properties, even if eminent domain was used.
The new U.S. congressman, Craig Washington, who had been elected in a special election following Leland’s unexpected death, had very different ideas from his predecessor of what should occur with APV and Fourth Ward. While Leland had been working with residents of APV to use legal tactics to prevent the demolition of the project, Washington’s law firm had been representing HHA in lawsuits brought forth by APV residents and their supporters (Kerr, 1989; Roth, 1990). He had been chosen by HHA because he held a political office, but he and HHA always insisted there was no conflict since demolition was in the best interest of his constituents, even though it was strongly opposed by many, and he insisted his plan would not cause displacement (Kerr, 1989, Simmon, 1989). While campaigning, he refused to take a position about the fate of APV, and focused on his desire to revitalize the neighborhood by bringing all of the interests together. When Lenwood Johnson told Washington he was biased since he represented HHA in previous lawsuits, Washington insisted that he merely represented them as a professional and that did not mean he held their particular views about demolition (Robinson, 1991a). Whereas Leland had fought with APV residents to prevent its demolition by using his political power to pass the Frost-Leland Amendment, Washington used his political power during this redevelopment effort to try to overturn the Frost-Leland Amendment so that HHA could use federal money to demolish APV and Fourth Ward could be redeveloped. Washington, like Phillips, believed that low-income housing should be scattered and not as densely populated as APV (Roth, 1990). Though APV was not a high-rise and was designed as garden apartments, advocates for its demolition argued that it concentrated the poor since nearly 1,000 housing units were located on a 36-acre block of land. This idea was shared by many others, including federal officials driving housing and urban policies.
Washington played a central role in this effort by his own initiative. As a state senator, he had worked with Marshall to create a proposal for a special district and introduced legislation to create a special tax district for the 600 acres before the plan had been made public (Kerr, 1989). When Washington was contacted by a local Black weekly newspaper, however, he insisted that his plan was not similar to American General’s plan and emphasized how the tax abatement plan he introduced in the last state congressional session could help to build 1,500 affordable housing units in the Fourth Ward and another 1,500 units around the city (Uduehl, 1990). In fall of 1989, Washington revealed some preliminary drawings for Fourth Ward’s redevelopment while campaigning for the congressional seat (Rodriguez, 1990b). Soon after he was sworn in as a U.S. Congressman, he met with Central Houston Incorporated and told them that during his first term there would be groundbreaking in Freedmen’s Town and on APV’s land that would include houses for high-income, middle-income, and lower-income residents (Rodriguez, 1990a; Roth, 1990). Washington worked privately with developers, community leaders, and HHA officials to “build a consensus on how to redevelop the area” and thought he was going to be the source that finally got Fourth Ward redeveloped after so many years of political fighting and standstill due to opposition (Mintz, 1990).

While Washington was working with Marshall to create the special tax district as a Texas legislator, he was also working to demolish APV as an attorney for HHA (Rodriguez, 1990b). Creating the tax district and demolishing APV were the two most important factors the developers cited for this redevelopment plan to be realized (Baird, 1990d; Gill, 1990c). Washington thus played a key role in this effort by using his political power to support these two things.
Proposed physical plan of redevelopment effort

The first redevelopment effort in the mid-1980s focused on how to assemble the land to sell to a developer as one block. Garcia never presented a concrete physical plan for the proposed redevelopment, as his role was to prepare Fourth Ward for private redevelopment using public funds to improve the infrastructure in the neighborhood (though a plan was presented by the Houston City Planning Department in a 1975 publication). This second effort, on the contrary, had a physical plan before the redevelopment effort was known to the public. In October of 1989, Washington announced his plans for the redevelopment of Fourth Ward outside of Antioch Baptist Church (Simmon, 1989). On April 13, 1990, Marshall and Schuette discussed the redevelopment proposal called Founder's Park for the first time on the local public broadcasting station in Houston (Baird, 1990c).

Andres Duany, one of the founders of the New Urbanist Movement, was hired as the planner for the project and had toured the area with American General and Cullen Center officials (Boisseau & Gill, 1990). Hiring Duany indicated the developers’ commitment to the total redevelopment of Freedman’s Town. Unlike Garcia’s plan in the first effort to create a new street grid in Fourth Ward due to the narrow streets, Duany liked the small scale of the existing street grid and planned to keep it (Boisseau & Gill, 1990; Baird, 1990e). Preliminary plans called for mostly middle- to upper-income housing, with condos, apartments, and townhouses, and included landscaping, parks, small lakes, and town squares (Baird, 1990a). See Figure 5.2. Duany said this would accommodate a mix of incomes in the area (Baird, 1990d). The Jefferson Davis Hospital site—vacant and scheduled for demolition, would become a low-rise retail center (Baird, 1990a).

Properties west of Taft in North Montrose were more likely to be renovated and keep their residential character while properties east of Taft in Freedmen’s Town were
more likely to be demolished (Baird, 1990c; Bivins, 1990a). The developers called their proposed development Founders Park, referring to a cemetery in the area with one of Houston's founders’ gravesite, John Kirby Allen, as well as veterans from the Texas revolution and Confederate Army (Baird, 1990a).

Figure 5.2: “Founders Park” Development Proposal

Tax increment financing district (TIFD)—A finance tool for redevelopment

When the placement of Freedmen's Town on the national historic registry in 1984 precluded the city from using federal funds to redevelop it or prepare it for private redevelopment, Efraim Garcia had said the city might create a special tax district in the area
as another way to use public funds to encourage private investment in the area. The creation of a tax increment financing district (TIFD) was a major part of the tool kit in this effort, not only as a way to publicly finance redevelopment, but also as a way to assemble land through eminent domain and try to gain community support by proposing to use some of the funds to fund low-income housing in and around the proposed redevelopment area (see Mead and Cole, 1998). State legislators had created tax increment financing districts (TIFDs) in Texas in 1982 to help give an economic boost to disinvested areas and encourage private investment (Thomas 1990). Like tax increment districts throughout the United States, property taxes in the district would be frozen for a set number of years and any taxes collected above that first year’s valuation would be put back into the area for infrastructure like streets and utilities rather than go toward city services like fire and police protection, schools and health services (Baird, 1990a). At the time, TIFDs had not been used in Houston yet, but had been used nearby, so city leaders and private developers were familiar with them (Mintz, 1990).

In 1989, then State Senator Craig Washington and State Representative Larry Evans, whose districts included Fourth Ward, introduced and sponsored a law in the Texas legislature to create a special district for the 600-acre redevelopment project proposed by Marshall and Schuette that would freeze property taxes for ten years to encourage redevelopment at the request of Fourth Ward absentee property owners, including Marshall and others interested in the area’s redevelopment (Kerr, 1989). Washington also worked to change the tax increment law to allow for more than 10% of the property in a proposed zone be developed for residential use (Baird, 1990a). After the amendment was passed, a tax increment district could be more than ten percent residential if the owners of at least 50% of the appraised value of the property submitted a petition to the city requesting a tax increment district (Baird, 1990a). With this new rule, American General owned enough
property in the area to create the district themselves since North Montrose was included as part of the district (Baird, 1990h).

**TIFDs and eminent domain**

Under Texas law at the time, creating a TIFD would allow the city to use eminent domain, which the developers and property owners said was necessary to assemble land with such scattered ownership (Baird, 1990a). Houston officials could decide to buy the land for what they considered a fair price and then sell it for whatever purpose they saw fit for it (Baird and Hooper, 1990). A developer familiar with special taxing districts said that a tax increment financing district was rare when a majority of the residents owned their homes and that most developers would remove those areas from the district (Gill, 1990i; Baird, 1990b). The threat of eminent domain under the TIFD law created a lot of opposition from white homeowners in North Montrose, even though government officials said that it would be used sparingly in that area and would be used primarily in Fourth Ward east of Taft.

**TIFDs and low-income housing**

One of the biggest reasons for residents’ and their supporters’ opposition to the demolition of APV and wholesale redevelopment of Fourth Ward, besides its historical and cultural value, was the loss of affordable housing for the low-income renters who would be forced to relocate. When Craig Washington had worked to change the tax increment law to allow more residential properties, he also worked to require TIFDs to use one-third of their revenues for low-income housing so that one-third of the money would go toward building or buying low-income housing and the other two-thirds would go for infrastructure improvements such as streets, or water and sewer systems (Mintz, 1990; Rodriguez,
Washington thought the special taxing district was the “key” that could “unlock the political impasse” on APV and Fourth Ward because of this promise to provide low-income housing (Rodriguez, 1990a). Washington and the developers hoped that using the special tax district to fund low-income housing might help appease the opposition who feared poor residents would be forced out of their homes (Gill, 1990a).

**Allen Parkway Village**

"Nothing can be done in that entire area in the way of redevelopment and revitalization without including the Allen Parkway Village site"


Like the previous plan, the demolition of APV was essential for this effort’s implementation (Rodriguez, 1990a). The opposition of APV’s demolition continued throughout the 1980s as residents and their supporters incessantly fought to keep the wrecking ball from the largest housing project in Houston, gaining more supporters along the way. The demolition request HHA had submitted to HUD in 1984 had been held up in HUD for five years. When Jesse Jackson came to Houston for the Democratic presidential debate in February of 1988, he toured Fourth Ward with Mickey Leland, who told him about the city’s plan to demolish APV (Moran, 1988). Jackson accused the city of abandoning Fourth Ward as he looked at abandoned lots littered with trash and said he would call HUD Secretary, Samuel Pierce, to ask him to not allow HHA to demolish APV (Moran, 1988). In late January of 1989, a local influential newscaster, Marvin Zindler, showed a series about APV on the local news and with it, persuaded city council and Mayor Whitmire to withdraw support for its demolition after four and half years of supporting it, but they would soon begin supporting its demolition again (Friedman, 1989; Gravois & Jakovac, 1989).

In December of 1989, HUD sent a letter to HHA requesting more information for the 1984 demolition application and said the housing authority needed to provide proof that
there would be no federal funds used for its demolition, that all of the units would be replaced, and that the tenants would be involved in the decision (Kerr, 1990a). In January of 1990, HHA sent its fourth demolition request to HUD, in which it proposed demolishing all of the units except 150 that would be renovated or rebuilt on the site, another 200 units in Fourth Ward, and 650 low-income units to be bought or built throughout Houston using money from the sale or lease from the vacant land at APV after demolition (Kerr, 1990b). The developer(s) would pay for the demolition and in return they could buy or lease the prime land upon which APV sat, adjacent to downtown and Buffalo Bayou (Rodriguez, 1990a; Pope, 1990b). The demolition proposal also proposed a museum of the history of Freedmen’s Town, which would include an exhibit of what a unit at APV looked like (Gill, 1990b; Kerr, 1990b).

In April of 1990, HHA wrote a letter to about 200 major developers around the United States asking for proposals to develop the APV site (Kerr, 1990b; Rodriguez, 1990c). The letter stated that while it was possible to renovate the units at APV, the low-income population would be better served by providing more low-income housing units in other areas of Houston, which the authority could do with money earned by selling or leasing the land on which APV sat (Rodriguez, 1990c). The authority requested proposals to create at least 150 units on the Allen Parkway site, with another 200 in the area and 650 in other parts of town, like the proposal sent to HUD in January (Pope, 1990b). Even though the letter summarized the controversial history of APV and said that “pending litigation in federal court may affect the ultimate decision” about the project’s future, HHA required a nonrefundable fee of $10,000 for developers to purchase the required documents to submit the proposal (Kerr, 1990b). Some people thought the high nonrefundable fee was a way for HHA to favor Cullen Center and American General while making the bidding process look fair, but HHA officials insisted the fee was necessary as a way to fund the study of APV’s
future and develop specifications since they could not use federal funds for anything involving the potential of the project’s demolition (Kerr, 1990b; Rodriguez, 1990c).

The Founders Park Group, the name American General and Cullen Center gave themselves, was the only bidder for the APV project (Freelander, 1990). HHA board members rejected their bid, citing it as vague on when and where the required low-income housing units would be built (Pope, 1990b). The developers proposed replacing the 1,000 units lost at APV over a longer time period than HHA deemed acceptable and they had not included 150 units on the APV site (Baird, 1990i). Marshall said that keeping 150 units on the APV site lowered its property value too much (Baird, 1990g). Schuette said, “this plan is workable because we are going to be able to create real estate values in the area that do not presently exist. The housing project land is key to increasing the land values for the entire area,” (Baird, 1990f, p.D4).

**Opponents of this redevelopment effort**

Fourth Ward residents continued to oppose the wholesale redevelopment of their neighborhood and APV residents and their supporters continued to oppose its demolition. The inclusion of North Montrose brought more opposition to this effort, primarily because homeowners in the predominantly white middle-class neighborhood feared the use of eminent domain in their area.

*Freedmen’s Town and APV residents and their allies*

One of the hurdles to the Founders Park venture was an ongoing lawsuit by APV residents against HHA in which the outcome was uncertain (Baird, 1990g). Since the fate of APV was crucial to this redevelopment plan, this lawsuit and the continued opposition from APV residents was critical to prevent the implementation of this plan. Freedmen’s Town
residents also continued to work on economic development themselves, like opening up a sandwich shop and washteria (Barth, 1991).

Churches were important architecturally and socially in Fourth Ward (“Houston’s historic,” 1990). In early April of 1990, Fourth Ward ministers and civic leaders met at Bethel Baptist church in the Fourth Ward and formed a group—Freedmen’s Town/ Fourth Ward Neighborhood Revitalization Association—to revitalize Fourth Ward and “resist any development that would displace its mostly poor and Black residents” (Sallee, 1990). People in attendance wanted to rehabilitate buildings in Fourth Ward, buy property to renovate, and unite to oppose any outside development they did not see fit for the neighborhood (Sallee, 1990). Reverend Samuel Smith, the pastor of Mount Horeb Missionary Baptist Church that had defied Garcia in the first effort by building a new worship center on the property line, expressed the same sentiment held by many, “The churches are strategically located in this area, and that blocks any buyup of this land” (Sallee, 1990).

North Montrose residents

“We are understandably concerned about a plan that would redevelop our neighborhood along with the Fourth Ward. My wife and I have been waiting a long time for a Fourth Ward redevelopment plan. We simply want to be allowed to stay in our home, raise our family and see the Fourth Ward area put to good use”

North Montrose resident (Raulston, 1990, p. C4)

North Montrose residents vowed to fight the plan to redevelop their neighborhood due to its secrecy and the discussion from the developers to use eminent domain as a way to assemble property in the area (Bivins, 1990b). Virgil Knox, the spokesman for the North Montrose Chapter of Individual Landowners and Homeowners, compared American General and Cullen Center to “cockroaches” that “work when the lights are out” since they had been so secretive about their plans (Bivins, 1990b, p.B1). Knox did not live in Montrose
nor Fourth Ward, but was the founder of the umbrella organization, Individual Landowners and Homeowners Inc., which opposed the creation of the Grand Parkway—the third and most recently built outer loop in the metropolitan area—due to property rights’ issues. North Montrose residents attended a city council meeting to oppose the redevelopment plan since council members had to approve the TIFD ("Residents oppose plan,” 1990).

**Developers’ response to opposition**

The developers of this plan arranged for community forums as one way to try to mitigate opposition from the redevelopment area’s residents. In the summer of 1990, the *Houston Post* announced a multi-day public forum scheduled by Duany and his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, to talk about the proposed redevelopment in which they were going to mediate between the developers and the community residents (Baird, 1990d). Duany had been introduced to the public on June 19, 1990, with about 30 people in attendance (Gill, 1990b). Duany resigned soon after that over a disagreement about how much control he would have over the project (Pope, 1990b).

Following Duany’s resignation, Cullen Center and American General hired Carr, Lynch, Hack, and Sandall out of Cambridge, Massachusetts to be master planner and Sikes, Jennings, Kelly, and Brewer from Houston to be joint lead architects (Baird, 1990f). These two firms had worked together on a redevelopment project in Boston’s Back Bay together, which involved several groups of neighborhood and civic associations, and Carr, Lynch, Hack, and Sandall had worked on several inner-city projects (Baird, 1990f). Thus, they had experience with this type of project that involved many different interests and community

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17 June 19, also known as Juneteenth, is the day Texans celebrate Emancipation, so I find it interesting that developers chose that particular day to publicly introduce Duany. Archival data indicates that Fourth Ward residents did not attend this forum nor the forum following this one, but did go to a forum in August of 1990 (Baird, 1990d; “Forum to focus,” 1990; “Forum on community,” 1990).
groups. Both local mainstream newspapers reported that Gary Hack would moderate a 4-day forum about the project in August of 1990 (Baird, 1990f; Gill, 1990c).

In the meantime, Hack and Houston architect, Frank Kelly, said they would meet with people affected by the project before the forum to discuss any potential problems and would not come up with any specific plans until they got community feedback at the forum (Gill, 1990c). Hack began having private meetings in early August preceding the four-day public forum to introduce himself and met with the North Montrose Civic Association to try to gain the trust of its members, who were leery of a TIFD due to its legal authority to take property through eminent domain (Baird, 1990h). I did not find any archival data indicating any leaders of this plan meeting with Fourth Ward residents.

About 300 to 400 people attended the first day of the forum on August 18, 1990 (Friedman, 1990). Most residents opposed the plan, as North Montrose residents feared the use of eminent domain that could be used under a TIFD to take their properties and “freeze the already deflated values” of their homes, and Johnson of APV’s residents’ council said the project had already been designed without input from the residents (Friedman, 1990). Both groups protested outside the forum, but the North Montrose residents agreed to meet with the developers after Heck went outside and listened to them (Gill, 1990e). The North Montrose chapter of Individual Landowners and Homeowners Inc. met with American General and Cullen Center representatives the next morning to discuss the group’s concerns with the developers’ plan (Gill, 1990f). About 250 people attended the last day of the forum and about forty Fourth Ward and North Montrose residents protested outside (Baird, 1990j).

The forums did not appear to change the minds of residents, homeowners, or community organizations in North Montrose and the Fourth Ward (Baird, 1990j). Similar to the first effort, certain decisions had already been made by the developers regarding
redevelopment, and residents who attended argued that the framing of redevelopment issues prevented them or anyone else truly being able to participate with ideas of their own (Taylor, 1991). Nevertheless, Schuette, Marshall, and Washington kept trying to convince residents to support the effort. In response to opposition at the forum, the planners proposed moving houses in good condition in Fourth Ward to an area of about seven blocks that would become a historical area and proposed a homesteading program where Fourth Ward renters could obtain ownership of houses by renovating them (Baird, 1990j).

Cullen Center and American General released a new plan in December of 1990 that increased the number of low-income and moderate-income housing units from 1,200 to 4,000 units in Houston over the next 25 years, with 300 of those within Founders Park (Baird, 1990k, Gill, 1990j). APV would be demolished and mid-rise, market-rate apartments would be built in its place and a campus-style office complex would be built on the Jefferson Davis hospital site (Baird, 1990k). All owner residents would be guaranteed a place in Founders Park, remaining APV residents would be given the opportunity to stay in Fourth Ward, and all other Fourth Ward residents displaced would be given affordable housing options elsewhere in Houston (Baird, 1990k). A Freedmen’s Town historic district would be created on the western edge of Fourth Ward by moving 50 to 100 historic houses there and renovating the vacant Gregory school as a community and cultural center and churches would “be allowed” to stay in the neighborhood (Baird, 1990k). Significant churches in the area would either remain at their current place or be moved to a new boulevard with a large linear park (Gill, 1990j).

As with the previous redevelopment effort, displacement and relocation of Fourth Ward residents was expected as a condition for this proposal. Most [or many?] real estate investors familiar with the proposed redevelopment project did not think a mixed-income community would work and one real estate agent said, “Until the lower socio-economic
groups are removed, the project has no chance” (Baird and Hooper 1990). Some of the special district funds were planning to be used to relocate residents (Rodriguez, 1990a: Mintz, 1990).

Conclusion

Like the first redevelopment proposal, this plan was never realized. HUD did not approve APV’s demolition and a tax increment finance district was not approved. A year after Founders Park Venture held the community forum, the proposed redevelopment project in Fourth Ward had stalled due to the uncertainty of APV’s future, according to Marshall (Gill, 1991c). Schuette said the project had to be “economically feasible and politically acceptable” in order to be realized (Gill, 1990c). Those two requirements could not be achieved simultaneously since the developers said that APV had to be demolished entirely for the redevelopment project to be economically feasible and that was not politically acceptable to residents and their supporters, who kept fighting the demolition of the nearly 1,000 unit project (Baird, 1990d).
Chapter 6- Redevelopment Effort 3

Introduction

The first two redevelopment efforts did not materialize, but they laid the foundations for the third redevelopment effort, which produced by far the most change to the built environment in Fourth Ward. While the second redevelopment effort was at a standstill due to the undetermined fate of APV, ongoing disinvestment by absentee landlords continued, while some Fourth Ward residents and activists promoted economic redevelopment by the local community.

This chapter describes the third redevelopment effort, which was initiated by the city and private developers working in partnership to push for wholesale change in Fourth Ward. Bob Lanier, who had been a major real estate developer in Houston, was elected mayor of Houston in 1992. He brought in other major developers into his administration to help him redevelop inner-city neighborhoods—one of the main goals of his administration. The boundaries of this proposal were very similar to the boundaries of the first effort and less ambitious than the second effort in terms of land. See Figure 6.1. Efforts to redevelop downtown continued and became more of a reality in the biggest economic upturn in Houston since the collapse of the mid-1980s.

Lanier used his political power and called in some favors to overturn the Frost-Leland Amendment, thus ending the ban to use federal money to demolish units at APV, and to gain HUD approval to demolish most of the units at APV and redevelop the site with less public housing units. The redevelopment of APV is what ultimately shaped this last effort and the built environment of Fourth Ward itself, as everyone had predicted all along, but none of the property was sold for private development. The city used public money to acquire over one million square feet of land in the area, and after APV’s fate had been determined, a tax increment reinvestment zone (TIRZ) was created to allow for more public
money to fund the redevelopment. The city and private developers included local pastors who formed community development corporations (CDCs) to build houses for low-income and moderate-income ownership in Fourth Ward. Much was lost in Freedmen's Town, but despite a strong growth machine in Houston, some important cultural and historical structures remain due to the residents' long-term opposition.

Figure 6.1: Map of redevelopment effort circa 1994

Local context

Ongoing disinvestment continued amid land speculation in Fourth Ward at the beginning of the 1990s. Burnt out buildings covered many blocks in Fourth Ward and arson was suspected as fires struck nine vacant houses in the summer of 1991 (Gill, 1990i; Barton & Milling, 1991). Residents thought the fires were set to make room for private redevelopment, but firefighters investigating them thought they were set by drug dealers or addicts using the vacant buildings (Liebrum, 1991). Regardless of the cause, these fires, along with demolition of structures, created more vacant lots in the area amid continued
disinvestment. Property owners used their control of land in Fourth Ward during this time period by boarding up vacant houses or tearing them down and not maintaining the vacant property to bring down the value of surrounding property so that owners would sell for less and more quickly (Podagrosi and Vojnovic, 2008).

A new mayor—a new urban agenda for Houston

While campaigning for mayor of Houston in fall of 1991, Bob Lanier stood in Fourth Ward and accused opponent Mayor Whitmire of ignoring the neighborhood, pointing out piles of trash and abandoned houses as he promised to “redo the Fourth Ward” (Bernstein, 1991b). When he became mayor the following year, one of his main goals was to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods to make them more competitive with suburban areas so that people would move back to the city (Robinson, 1995c; “Lanier gives,” 1992; Kennedy, 1992). Over 100,000 people had left the inner city in the 1980s and most of them had moved out of the city limits, which affected Houston’s tax revenues (Plesa, 1993a).

When Lanier was elected, he had about $60 million worth of land and apartment complexes in and around Houston (Bernstein, 1991b). After he was elected, he said he would restructure his finances and properties to avoid conflicts of interest with his duties as a mayor (Bernstein, 1991b). However, before his mayoral term, he did not recuse himself from voting to approve various sections of the Grand Parkway—the newest loop in outer-suburb Houston—when he had been highway commissioner, even though he owned 1,700 acres of land in the area that benefitted from the highway's construction (Lomax, 2016). And as Houston Metro chairman (Kathy Whitmire had appointed him in 1988), he diverted money from the proposed rail system in the city to fund design work on the outer loop (Lomax, 2016).
Downtown reinvestment

Downtown civic and business groups had been trying to make downtown an evening and weekend destination for over a decade to help the city's tax revenues and local businesses. By the end of 1993, downtown was on the verge of a construction boom for the first time since the economic decline of the mid-1980s (Weintraub, 1993). A new convention center had opened on the east side of downtown, and on the west side of downtown—adjacent to Fourth Ward—a new performing arts theater had opened and the old convention center’s site was being transformed into an entertainment complex (Mason, 1993; Weintraub, 1993). A new park along Buffalo Bayou and Allen Parkway adjacent from the APV housing complex was also in the works (“The Fourth Ward on balance,” 1995). In 1979, the Wortham Foundation—the philanthropic arm of American General Corporation—gave the Houston Chamber of Commerce $500,000 to study how to redevelop the bayou (Nocera, 1983). Mayor Whitmire did not like that particular plan, so she created the Buffalo Bayou Task Force in 1984 to study how to improve conditions in and along the bayou, which created a report in 1985 that focused on flood control, water quality, and park development along the city’s main bayou (Todd, 1985). The growing economy and downtown projects made the redevelopment of Fourth Ward feel much less risky for private developers, especially as the city economically and politically supported and promoted its redevelopment in this effort.

Economic redevelopment activity by residents and activists

“My ancestors built this community and I intend to keep it going”
Gladys House, resident and activist, founder of FTA (“Fourth Ward community’s,” 1993).

Amidst the three redevelopment efforts by the city and private developers from the 1980s through the 1990s, Fourth Ward residents continuously worked on community
development and economic growth in their historic neighborhood. As chapter 3 discussed, residents worked to get forty blocks of the neighborhood listed on the National Historic Registry and residents of APV worked with lawyers and legislators to prevent the demolition of the housing project in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, residents and community leaders worked to curb the disinvestment in Freedmen’s Town by clearing weeded lots, repairing houses, supporting local businesses, and trying to prevent the demolition of historical buildings (“Fourth Ward community’s,” 1993; “Group’s mission,” 1994). They did all of this in the midst of continued disinvestment by absentee landowners.

Community leaders believed that local economic development and businesses owned by Fourth Ward residents were vital to the community’s success (“Young residents benefit,” 1995). Gladys House, the founder and leader of FTA, applied for grants and used federal programs and laws, such as the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), to borrow money from banks to build houses and open businesses (Gill, 1991). FTA opened Camp Logan sandwich shop, which had after-school programs for local students and programs for adults, in addition to serving food (“Fourth Ward community’s,” 1993; “Group’s mission,” 1994). In July of 1996, FTA completed the first new home built in the Fourth Ward in more than 50 years (“Construction to begin,” 1996; “Home of hope,” 1996). The city had donated the land for the homes to FTA and Comerica Bank financed the project under the CRA (Martin, 1995b). House thought the new homes would encourage residents to “take back their community from the slumlords and negligent investors who have plagued the community for years” (Martin, 1995b).

The owner of a well-known restaurant in Freedmen’s Town called “This Is It” soon began serving twice as many customers once he moved to a larger building in the neighborhood in 1995 after finally receiving a loan he worked on getting for four years (“Coming Monday,” 1995). Darrell Patterson, a lifelong resident of Fourth Ward and the
founder and director of the Fourth Ward Health and Educational Center for Youth, wrote an article in the Houston Defender about the importance of Fourth Ward residents working together to improve the area (Patterson, 1993). Community institutions such as Anchor House, established in the late 1970s, the Wesley Community Center, established in 1986, and the Good Neighbor Healthcare Center, each offered health and social programs for residents of Fourth Ward (Wilson, 1993).

Renovation of historical properties

In the mid-1990s, Houston passed an ordinance that made qualifying historical structures in Freedmen's Town eligible for city tax breaks for renovation (Martin, 1995a). Martha Whiting, the granddaughter of Jack Yates who had been influential in saving Antioch Baptist Church from demolition, had inherited his house in Freedmen's Town and donated it to the Heritage Society to renovate and display in Sam Houston Park, a park adjacent to City Hall known for its historic buildings that have been relocated there (“Historic Yates House,” 1994; “Yates House now open,” 1996). See Figure 6.2. Ironically, the house now sits on land that used to be part of Freedmen's Town before the city took it to build City Hall and the park in the 1930s. Jack Yates' son, Rutherford B.H. Yates, had also built a house in Freedmen's Town. It had been boarded up for years and was about to be demolished in 1995, when his daughter, Olee Yates McCullough, asked community activist and preservationist, Catherine Roberts, to work with her to preserve it. Roberts bought the property and they formed a non-profit organization to restore the house and preserve its architectural integrity. It now serves as a museum with other structures in the neighborhood to educate Houstonians and other visitors about the history of Freedmen's Town and its residents.
The progression of this redevelopment effort

The fate of Allen Parkway Village

As in the previous efforts, the fate of APV was crucial to this redevelopment plan. While the Founders Park project was at a standstill due to the unsuccessful attempts to demolish APV, HHA hired a consultant firm who had successfully prepared demolition plans elsewhere in the nation to help them apply to HUD again for permission to demolish the project (Robinson, 1991a; Gill, 1991b). HHA received $200,000 from the Houston Housing Finance Corporation (HHFC) to prepare the application since the Frost-Leland amendment precluded the authority to use federal money to prepare or study anything dealing with APV’s demolition (Robinson, 1991a; Robinson & Gill, 1991). HHFC is a city-sponsored non-profit corporation that provides home loans to low- and moderate-income households. The mayor nominates its board members and the city council approves them. This loan/grant
was approved during Mayor Whitmire’s last year in office and became a large part of the funding for Fourth Ward’s redevelopment when Lanier was mayor.\(^{18}\)

U.S. Representative Henry Gonzalez of San Antonio, who chaired a housing subcommittee and had long opposed APV’s demolition, held a hearing at the public housing complex in 1993. Twenty-nine units were occupied at the time (Plesa, 1993b). At the hearing, Mayor Lanier promoted its demolition and redevelopment, but HUD Secretary Cisneros proposed demolishing all of the APV units except 150-250 units and then using the entire site to build other (but fewer) housing units on the land so that none of the land would be sold to private developers, (Plesa, 1993b; “Mayor’s demolition plan,” 1993). Cisneros called it a compromise and said “‘Not a single square foot should be sold away from the housing authority’” (Plesa, 1993b; “Officials Swap Views,” 1993). This was not what Lanier nor residents of APV and opponents of demolition wanted. Lanier wanted to rehab 150 of APV’s units on the site and find replacements for the other 850 units elsewhere in city so the rest of the APV site could be used for private development, while APV residents and advocates wanted all of the units to be rehabilitated (Plesa, 1993b).

At the time of the announcement, HHA was applying for new federal funds available from HUD’s Urban Revitalization Demonstration Program, also known as HOPE VI, and planned to use the HOPE VI program to help renovate 150 units on the APV site, build 100 replacement units in Fourth Ward and 100 replacement units in Third Ward, buy and renovate 300 replacement units around the city, and finally, sell the rest of APV land to a developer and use the proceeds to build the 350 remaining units needing replacement under the current law at the time (Robinson, 1993a; Robinson & Mason, 1993). While Lanier was on the Texas Highway Commission, he had approved a major road around San

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\(^{18}\) The agreement was that HHA would pay back the loan if they sold the APV land to a developer, but the money would become a grant if the land was not sold (City intends..., 1991).
When Sheila Jackson Lee won Washington’s congressional seat in 1994, she opposed the demolition of APV, unlike Washington. With Washington no longer trying to overturn the Frost-Leland amendment in the U.S. Congress, Mayor Lanier turned to Tom Delay, a powerful Republican U.S. Congressman from a suburban Houston district with no ties to the Fourth Ward area, to help allow federal funds to be used to demolish APV. In 1995, Delay included a provision to the Veterans Affairs-Housing and Urban Development bill that repealed the Leland/Frost amendment (Guillory, 1995). In January of 1996, nearly twenty years since HHA had submitted its first application to demolish APV, HUD granted HHA permission to demolish 677 units and renovate 286 units at APV (“Allen Parkway makes plans,” 1996). U.S. Representative Jackson Lee considered it a victory since none of the land upon which APV sat was sold to a private developer, but APV residents and their supporters disagreed, considering it a loss (“Allen Parkway makes plans,” 1996). In June of 1996, HHA vacated the remaining residents of APV, and in December of 1996, HHA began demolishing units at APV.

Participants in this redevelopment effort

In November of 1995, soon after the Frost-Leland amendment was overturned, Julio Laguarta, a private developer known for assembling land, friend of Mayor Lanier, and Houston’s Planning Commissioner appointed by Lanier, formed the private non-profit company, Houston Renaissance Incorporated (HRI), specifically to redevelop the Fourth

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19 Delay and Lanier had previously worked together to block Houston from using federal money to build a public rail system in the city (“A delayed reaction,” 1995).
Ward by acquiring property in the area (Robinson, 1995c). He was very familiar with the area as he had advised Mayor McConn about redevelopment of the area back in the 1970s, before any of these redevelopment plans had been presented to the public (Harol, 1999).

HRI’s board consisted of land developers and investors and other “heavy hitters with ties to Mayor Bob Lanier” who had opposed the most recent zoning proposal in Houston, including Mayor Lanier’s Metro chairman, Billy Burge, who had worked with Schuette and Marshall on the unsuccessful Founder’s Park redevelopment proposal, and Frank Kelly, an architect who had worked on the Founder’s Park plan (Robinson, 1995c). Bill Calhoun, a Black businessman who worked with Laguarta (per Laguarta’s request) to gain support and help from Black ministers to oppose the zoning effort, was also on the board (Harol, 1999).

Laguarta noted how this plan was different from the Founders Park plan: “if you own the land... there are very few barriers for you to do whatever it is you wish for that property... demolition, notices to vacate, rehab, new construction,” and then quickly added, “if you start out with a not-a-profit motive, but with a motive that you’re trying to redevelop neighborhoods” then you don’t “walk in with a bulldozer and wipe out everything in sight” (Robinson, 1995c). Laguarta had been meeting with ministers in the area, Gladys House with FTA CDC, and officials from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, though House did not trust his intentions (Robinson, 1995c). In October of 1996, the city of Houston gave HRI a $3.4 million grant from HHFC under the condition that HRI would supplement it with $7 million in loans or grants from private lending institutions (Bivins, 1996; Wallstin, 1997). HRI planned to build 350 houses for low- and moderate-income residents and 330 market-rate housing units (Rodriguez, 1997a).

The Fourth Ward Community Coalition (FWCC) was formed in 1996 and included churches in Fourth Ward, CDCs, and a neighborhood council (“Coalition and Houston Renaissance,” 1997). Reverend Floyd Williams, pastor of Friendship Baptist Church and
president of FWCC, said their goals were to have the first option to buy property, maintain the historical significance of the area as much as they could, renovate Gregory School into a school, museum, or community center, and allow displaced residents who wanted to return to Fourth Ward to be able to return (“Coalition and Houston Renaissance,” 1997). The FWCC was looking at programs that could provide subsidies to current residents to be able to afford higher rents and maybe even be able to afford to buy a house (“Coalition and Houston Renaissance,” 1997). Residents in Fourth Ward argued that even with a subsidy, most of them could not afford one of the proposed new houses in Fourth Ward (“Struggling to preserve,” 1995). Rodney Penn, of the National Black United Front, said, “by saddling the poor with big houses, mortgages, upkeep and taxes, some say, the program includes a built-in incentive for them to leave, contrary to original plans for creating a thriving mixed-income community in the Fourth Ward” (Mason, 1997g).

Public forums

In July of 1997, about 100 residents and community leaders from Fourth Ward and others interested in the proposed redevelopment met with the architect hired by HRI and FWCC at Antioch Baptist Church to see his plans and give their input for the first time since the project had been proposed (Henrichs, 1997). HRI and FWCC had hired David Lee, a Black architect and Harvard professor who had grown up on the south side of Chicago and had worked on similarly funded projects in other cities (Wallstin, 1997). Some residents became emotional when they talked about their fear of displacement, but Lee assured them they would get subsidies to be able to afford the higher prices (Henrichs, 1997; Wallstin, 1997).

About a month after the first public forum, Lee led another meeting at Antioch Baptist Church, and again, people expressed fear of current residents getting priced out of the neighborhood (Pickler, 1997). Lee empathized with the residents by talking about his
upbringing in South Chicago and tried to reassure them they would not have to move out of the neighborhood (Pickler, 1997). Reverend Williams explained, "We want to see the quality of life be better and improvement of the community. And we want to erase the concept, if it exists, that this plan is not for the residents but for others" (Pickler, 1997). Unlike the forums of the second effort, this plan seemed to gain support after the meeting (Pickler, 1997).

**Displacement of residents**

“If we can tear down Freedmen’s Town, we can tear down the French Quarter, we can tear down all of Jerusalem... it’s going to end up with a plaque and bunch of white people” Lenwood Johnson, APV resident and founder of APV’s resident council (Marshall, 1997).

In November of 1997, residents began to receiving eviction notices from property owners to vacate their homes within two to three months (Zuniga, 1997). Stevens insisted that none of the notices came from HRI, but residents said they were being told to move because HRI had bought the property on which they lived (Marshall, 1997; Villafranca, 1997). At the time, HRI owned over forty percent of the lots in Fourth Ward (Zuniga, 1997).

Residents and other community activists said the city was responsible for relocating displaced residents per the Uniform Relocation Act (URA) since the city had spurred the redevelopment (Mason, 1998a; Villafranca, 1997). The URA required anyone receiving federal housing grants to pay the moving expenses of residents who needed to move due to new development as well as any increase in their rents for up to 42 months. What bothered Michael Stevens the most, however, according to minutes from an HHFC meeting about Fourth Ward, was the requirement to give notices to residents who had to move (Wallstine, 1998). When the city unsuccessfully tried to get a waiver from HUD regarding this requirement, Stevens decided to forego the federal grant and look for money in the city, and
gave HRI $3.4 million from homeless and housing bond funds (Wallstine, 1998). This relieved HRI and the city of any obligations set forth by the URA.

Former APV residents, who had been recently displaced themselves, supported the Fourth Ward residents whenever these eviction notices started coming and attended several eviction hearings (Bryant, 1998). Lenwood Johnson wanted to “set up a trust that would buy property with city funds designated for low-income housing” (Bryant, 1998). The mayor’s office said it was not that simple though, “It boils down to who will be in position to obtain the land for development. If you don’t control the land, you can’t develop. It remains to be seen if he can do that or not” (Bryant, 1998). In April of 2000, HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo intervened after Lenwood Johnson had met with his assistant about the need for some residents to move twice (Snyder, 2000). A spokesman for the Houston HUD office said that HHA was required to give displaced APV residents money for moving expenses and rental subsidies since they were using federal funds to redevelop APV, but the city of Houston had no such requirement (Mason, 1998b). HHA had used HOPE VI funds to demolish part of APV and redevelop the site with less subsidized housing, and its redevelopment seemed to spearhead more demand for land in the area, which urged absentee landlords to finally sell their land for the “big bucks generated by the demand for property” (“Trying to stop,” 1998).

As more residents began to face eviction, including elderly residents who had lived in the neighborhood for decades, newly elected Mayor Lee Brown, the first African American mayor of Houston, responded to community activists and said the city would help those being displaced for redevelopment (Mason, 1998a). Mayor Brown had served as police chief of Houston from 1982-1990, but had not been involved in any kind of redevelopment effort until now, as he inherited impending resident displacement from Lanier’s administration. Newspaper articles reported that 100 to 140 residents in Fourth
Ward were facing eviction and up to 300 could face eviction in the coming weeks as absentee owners continued to sell their land (Mason, 1998c; Mason, 1998e). Many cities were facing the same dilemma as residents across the country were being evicted to make room for private redevelopment on private property, so the Brown administration looked to other cities to see how they had handled it (Mason, 1998b; Mason, 1998d). When they did not find much precedent in other U.S. cities regarding relocation funding for Fourth Ward evictees, city council voted to use federal grants to help pay moving and related expenses to those displaced due to new development (Mason, 1998f). The city felt obligated to help those being displaced because of their involvement in the area, including using public funds to improve the infrastructure in Fourth Ward (Bryant, 1998).

Audits

In August of 1998, Mayor Brown's administration began to audit HRI to see how they spent the $3.4 million grant, since no houses had been built on their properties in Fourth Ward (Mason, 1998g). The audit found that HRI spent the $3.4 million from the city as they were supposed to—to buy and assemble land in Fourth Ward (Schwartz, 1998a). The audit found that Laguarta had made lots of money from the Fourth Ward redevelopment project, but HRI board members argued that he had earned all of it since he had secured the city's support for funding and building infrastructure in the area, had been able to gain the cooperation of almost 1,000 individual landowners, resolved title and encroachment issues, and obtained the required signatures to create a TIRZ by petition (Rodriguez, 1998).

Upon learning about the results from the city's audit, City Controller, Sylvia Garcia, ordered another audit of HRI, to examine whether they complied with the city's contract (Mason, 1998h). As Garcia's audit was about halfway done, the Texas Attorney General's
office began their own investigation of HRI for possible violations of the Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Act and other laws under the scope of the Consumer Protection Division (Mason & Schwartz, 1998). They investigated whether HRI had open meetings, if they complied with competitive bidding when awarding contracts, and if they had allowed historic properties to deteriorate and then demolish them (Mason & Schwartz, 1998). The city controller’s audit found that payments to board members may have violated the city’s agreement with HRI since it had banned any HRI directors, staff, or employees from financially gaining from the project (Schwartz, 1999b; Schwartz, 1999d). Laguarta was paid $10,000 a month as HRI executive director at the same time he was on the board of directors and another board member was a partner at a law firm that received payments from HRI (Schwartz, 1999b). Laguarta had since resigned but was still getting paid as a consultant (Schwartz, 1999b).

Per the Texas Attorney General’s request, City Controller Sylvia Garcia also audited HHFC, because there was concern that the public might not have had full disclosure about a land exchange they had been involved in with a private developer (Schwartz, 1999h). She also questioned HHFC’s oversight of the $3.4 million grant contract between HRI and the city, since HRI failed to submit financial reports and annual statements to them (Schwartz, 1999h).

Houston Renaissance transfers its land to Houston Housing Finance Corporation

When HRI could not obtain loans from private banks, HHFC had loaned them $6.6 million from affordable housing funds. In February of 1999, the local newspaper reported that HRI had debts of more than $6.6 million and had spent the $3.4 million that the city had given them, yet had only bought about half the land they agreed to buy under the city contract (“Fourth Ward revitalization,” 1999). Mayor Brown’s administration had changed
HRI’s role from one of land assemblage and master planning to holding and moving parcels of land to HHA or the CDCs in the area (Schwartz, 1999b). In March of 1999 (before a TIRZ district was created), after four years of not selling land for redevelopment, HRI pulled out of the Fourth Ward redevelopment project and gave the 1.1 million square feet of land it had acquired in the area to HouTex Redevelopment Authority, a subsidiary of Houston Housing Finance Corporation (HHFC), created by them to handle everything in Fourth Ward relating to the redevelopment effort, in exchange for HHFC forgiving HRI’s $6.6 million loan (Houston Renaissance..., 1999; Schwartz, 1999d). HouTex was then put in charge to sell the land to HHA, private developers, and Fourth Ward Community Coalition (FWCC), which was comprised of Antioch Project Reach CDC, Uplift Fourth Ward CDC, and Freedmen’s Town CDC (Fourth Ward redevelopment..., 1999). There had been a lot of private development in the adjacent Midtown neighborhood southeast of Fourth Ward, which made council members more comfortable that market-rate housing would happen more readily in the Fourth Ward than they originally thought (Schwartz, 1999a).

Creation of Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone

In June of 1999, a tax increment reinvestment zone (TIRZ- a version of TIFD) was approved by city council after proponents reconfigured the TIRZ district in order to get the signatures needed to create it by petition (Schwartz, 1999e). They dropped about 12 parcels of land and added about five parcels, the main one being an almost completed apartment building with over 300 apartments (Schwartz, 1999e). Though the boundaries were questioned by some, the city had obtained the required signatures representing over 50% of the property tax value in the zone, even though they only had four signatures (Schwartz, 1999e). HHFC represented about 25 percent of the assessed property value in the zone and the new apartment complex, “tethered to the zone” by way of a two-block long
right-of-way, represented about 20 percent of the assessed property value (Schwartz, 1999g).

Conclusion

Once APV was able to be torn down and redeveloped with less units, it seems like redevelopment in Fourth Ward could not be stopped, just as community activists had predicted. Of course, it happened in concert with many other changes in the neighborhood itself. While the city and developers worked to change the laws to allow APV’s demolition, they also worked to change laws and property boundaries within Freedmen’s Town to make redevelopment easier for them by making it more difficult for residents and activists to oppose the demolition of structures. Disinvestment continued as fires destroyed many houses and even a couple of important churches. Some property owners did not pay utility bills as a way to make room for demolition when residents moved out. Vacancy rates increased from 13.1% in 1980 to 59.1% in 1990 and housing units then decreased from 1887 units is 1990 to 896 units in 2000. See Table 5.1. This broad disinvestment then allowed for a new kind of development to follow, especially as many of the remaining residents were evicted. See Tables 6.1 and 6.2 for how demographics and socio-economic status changed in the neighborhood as new residents moved into the neighborhood.

This effort is by far the one that made the most impact, with the redevelopment of APV and the TIRZ district, as well as public funding from the city to semi-private developers to acquire land in Fourth Ward, using the power of the growth machine. In this effort, leaders held both public and private roles, blurring the lines between public and private, and effectively making land use decisions based on their potential profit for them or their
friends. For instance, as Lanier’s housing advisor and as president of HHFC (appointed by Lanier), Michael Stevens decided to give over $10 million from HHFC funds to HRI. Though about $7 million of this sum began as a loan, it became a grant once HRI backed away from the project due to questions regarding how they used the money, and the land was transferred to a new subsidiary of HHFC. Many people in Mayor Lanier’s administration were involved in real estate and had been developing suburban areas around Houston. It seems like they found a more lucrative development strategy in the city.

Table 6.1: Population, Race, and Ethnicity, Fourth Ward (Census Tract 4101)

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<td>2,255</td>
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<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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<td>Other race</td>
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<td>4.7%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Prepared by Social Explorer

Table 6.2: Median Household Income in Fourth Ward in 2013 Dollars (Census Tract 4101)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<td>$15,783</td>
<td>$34,601</td>
<td>$64,110</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

20 Margin of error: ±$7,071
Chapter 7- Discussion and Interpretation

Introduction

Amidst these three redevelopment efforts by public officials and private developers, residents and community activists took on arguably one of the most, if not the most, cohesive growth coalition in the United States to block the total destruction of Freedmen’s Town. Due to their continuous efforts, its history, and the history of its residents, was not erased—though much was lost in the historic neighborhood.

As residents and community activists continuously opposed the demolition of structures and displacement of residents in Freedmen’s Town, Houston’s growth machine continuously and relentlessly counter-attacked, creating new laws and ways to publicly fund the project. When residents prevented using federal money to fund redevelopment, proponents of redevelopment used the state level of government to fund it with local public funds. The local housing authority kept pushing for APV’s demolition despite HUD’s disapproval, and refused to rehabilitate the units despite receiving federal money to do so. Local authorities threatened to use eminent domain to acquire land, but did not even need that strategy, as they used the sheer power of the growth machine to gain control of a large part of the area’s land in the last effort.

In this chapter, I walk through each redevelopment effort, and explain how public and private entities worked together to try to redevelop Freedmen’s Town. I then describe the strategies used by residents and community activists to fight the wholesale destruction and redevelopment of their neighborhood, and how the growth coalition responded. Archival data suggests that in each subsequent effort, local officials and private real estate investors took what they learned from the previous effort and used their power to change things to sidestep what the residents and community activists had previously achieved in
terms of how they could redevelop the neighborhood—namely how they could fund it and how to gain control of land owned by Black residents and churches.

**Main findings**

A recurring theme in my analysis of these three redevelopment efforts is how various groups of people used what power they had to influence the neighborhood’s redevelopment during this time period. The city and private real estate investors and developers—those with relatively more power—used exclusion, narrative, and control of land in their attempt to redevelop the neighborhood in its entirety. When they realized they needed more control of land to get what they wanted, they used their “brute” power—power they had due to their political and economic resources in the political economic organization of the growth machine in Houston—to change boundaries of the redevelopment site or change and/or threaten to change laws to increase their control of land they did not own. Resident activists and their allies—those with relatively less power—used narrative, scale (of government), and their control of land (via ownership) to try to stop the wholesale redevelopment of their neighborhood. The city’s growth machine kept pushing for redevelopment, and in the end, was able to achieve much of what they wanted—the demolition of most of the structures and relocation of poor, Black residents—primarily by changing rules to gain control of the land.

**Pre-redevelopment efforts- Using scale to change local relationships of power**

Relationships of power are not static. Before these redevelopment efforts were considered by anyone, the Black community in Houston worked to increase their relative power in the city. The Supreme Court case of Smith v. Allright (1944) ended the all-white primary in Texas, which helped to end the outright exclusion of Black voters in Texas. During the sit-ins of the 1960s to end Jim Crow laws, Black Houstonians used Houston’s fear
of a bad image and desire for a new sports complex to end Jim Crow in Houston without much fanfare. After the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, the all-white housing at APV was opened to Black residents. The Voting Rights Act passed in 1965 improved access to voting and increased Black representation in city elections, since it affected how Houston could annex surrounding white suburban areas. Black Americans worked to get these laws passed at the federal level when local white authorities in U.S. municipalities were resistant to change. Black Americans and their allies used the federal level of government to change relationships of power in Houston and other cities across the South with Jim Crow laws. These actions arguably set the stage for Freedmen’s Town’s residents and their supporters to have more influence in the 1970s and the years following, when these redevelopment efforts were in full force, than residents would have had during previous eras when land was taken to redevelop other parts of the neighborhood, such as when land was taken by eminent domain to develop APV.

Redevelopment effort 1

Once the first redevelopment effort was publicly underway in the mid-1980s, the city and private real estate investors excluded Black resident homeowners, a handful of Black absentee property owners, and local pastors from the decision-making process of redevelopment in Freedmen’s Town. Garcia and white absentee owners met for at least a year before Garcia met with Black resident owners and local pastors. When Garcia finally met with them, it was not about including them by getting ideas on how to reinvest in their neighborhood, even the pastors whose cooperation was essential given the land owned by the churches and the pastors’ influence on neighborhood residents. Rather, he spoke about their cooperation with the plan put forth by the absentee owners and real estate investors that required their displacement.
The city initially asked residents for input regarding the redevelopment of Freedmen's Town, but it seems this was more about adhering to federal requirements than true inclusion, since the same document discusses the “inevitable change” in the neighborhood and the relocation of residents due to proposed changes put forth by the city (HCPD, 1975, p. 1). The document also discusses improving access between Fourth Ward and downtown and other adjacent neighborhoods, as it was physically cut off from them via the elevated freeway built in the 1950s and other streets that stopped the small neighborhood streets from going through to surrounding neighborhoods, spatially excluding the area and its residents. City leaders began to talk about connecting the area with other neighborhoods only as they began to reimagine Freedmen’s Town with different residents. This implies layers of exclusion—from exclusion of people in terms of participation to the spatial exclusion of a community occupied by those same people.

Garcia initially used persuasion to try to convince local Black pastors to cooperate, such as paying for relocation expenses for resident homeowners, the churches, and their parishioners, but he quickly turned to the city's ability to gain control of land when they did not agree to those conditions, and threatened them with things like eminent domain, condemnation of their property, and new property set-back requirements due to a new street grid he told them was coming soon. Community leader Martha Brown said, “he has made it quite clear he is the one with the power” and activist Gladys House said “he doesn’t bite his tongue about saying the city has the power to impose upon property owners so severely they will not have a choice about selling” (Hermance, 1984, p.9).

Proponents of redevelopment—the city, real estate investors, and some mainstream media—used terms like “slum” and “ghetto” to gain support for the total destruction and wholesale redevelopment of the neighborhood. Some proponents of redevelopment even used the term “development” rather than “redevelopment” to describe what they wanted to
do—implying that nothing was in the neighborhood to begin with, much less thousands of residents in a historically significant neighborhood. Archival data suggests that the city and real estate investors assumed they would get control of the land to do what they wanted with it, versus trying to work with residents and activists to redevelop it in a more coherent manner.

**Community opposition**

While the city was trying to racialize Freedmen’s Town with words like “slum” and “ghetto” to support its demolition, residents and their supporters were bringing the neighborhood’s important racial history front and center in order to save it from the wrecking ball. Residents and other activists worked to get forty blocks of the neighborhood on the national registry of historic places. This designation in 1985 helped to change the narrative from a neighborhood that should be totally demolished and rebuilt as something else entirely, into a narrative that encouraged rehabilitating structures to preserve it due to its cultural and historical significance. In 1986, a local art gallery hosted an exhibit about Fourth Ward, which highlighted its history with photographs and discussions, including a presentation by a famous international architect. This exhibit helped to broaden the audience that received the residents’ narrative, as well as bringing to the forefront other visions for Freedmen’s Town in which existing residents could continue to live there.

Residents and activists used the national scale of government to change the local relationships of power regarding land use in Freedmen’s Town. In addition to shifting the narrative of Fourth Ward from a slum to be demolished entirely into a historically and culturally significant neighborhood, the residents’ successful bid to turn forty blocks of Fourth Ward into a national historical district denied local authorities the use of federal funds to redevelop the neighborhood, making it tougher to demolish it in its entirety, since
the city had planned to use federal funds to demolish buildings (mostly homes) and improve infrastructure for incoming developers. While Freedmen’s Town Association was working on the historical district, APV residents were working to prevent the total demolition of the public housing site. They and their allies sued HHA, using national laws and policies to prevent APV’s demolition by local authorities. A local congressman worked at the federal level to ban federal dollars to be spent on its demolition or on studying its demolition. Since APV was so important to the equation of Fourth Ward’s redevelopment as the city and private real estate interests viewed it, the residents’ use of the national scale of government to affect what the local scale of government could do regarding APV was crucial to prevent the total demolition of Fourth Ward.

Black resident home-owners and leaders of churches used their ownership of land in Freedmen’s Town to help block the total destruction of the neighborhood. One pastor showed he was not intimidated by Garcia’s threat of a new property set-back requirement when he built a new structure that sat on a property line Garcia had threatened to change. Both sides used the control of land to exercise their power. In this instance, the pastors had control of the land by ownership and Garcia was trying to gain control of land without ownership by using the “brute” power of the municipal government to change the rules of the built environment.

**Redevelopment effort 2**

The second redevelopment effort highlighted the racial and socio-economic component of neighborhood redevelopment and how a space can be racialized and deracialized for profit. It also highlighted the collaboration of private and public figures working together in a growth machine. In the first effort, Garcia had mentioned creating a special tax district as a way to publicly fund the project since placement of the national
historic registry precluded using federal money. In this effort, Craig Washington, a state senator, worked with the developers before the plan was known to the public, to change law at the state level to allow for public funding to redevelop Freedmen’s Town by working on a special tax district for the area. Allowing a special tax district also allowed for eminent domain, which Garcia had said the city did not have authority to do in the first effort. It seemed that Houston’s growth coalition used what was learned during the first effort to change the way things could be done in this second effort.

Archival data indicate a sharp contrast as to how white middle-class North Montrose residents were treated versus how the Black Fourth Ward residents were treated by the developers. When North Montrose residents opposed the special taxing district due to fear of eminent domain, developers told them that eminent domain and demolition would only be used in Fourth Ward, and that houses would be renovated in North Montrose. The houses did appear in better shape in North Montrose as they were mostly owned by residents living in them versus absentee owners who did not properly maintain them, but the historic registry pointed out the homes in Fourth Ward that could not physically be saved. Most archival data in mainstream newspapers, indicated the houses in North Montrose deserved to be renovated since most were brick and some had already been renovated, while the ill-maintained wooden houses in Fourth Ward should be demolished, but did not provide the history of how the houses became so dilapidated by absentee landlords avoiding upkeep and basic maintenance.

Archival data suggest that North Montrose residents were included in meetings more than Fourth Ward residents. For instance, developers held their first public meeting about the development on Juneteenth—that was either ignorant or purposeful given the importance of that holiday to many Black Houstonians. Some Fourth Ward activists decided to not attend some of the meetings since they felt decisions had already been made and
their input would not matter. Like the first effort, the developers in this effort had already made decisions and were only trying to get the residents' and pastors' cooperation to be able to demolish the neighborhood and relocate them.

Proponents of total demolition and wholesale redevelopment of Freedmen’s Town continued to use terms like “development” instead of “redevelopment” and to call the area a “slum.”

Despite the recent placement of the neighborhood into the National Historic Registry under the name of “Freedmen’s Town,” the leaders of this redevelopment proposal named it Founders Park, referring to a cemetery in the area with one of Houston’s founders’ gravesite, John Kirby Allen, as well as Confederate soldiers and veterans from the Texas revolution. Founders Park as a name could have really wiped out the historical and cultural value of Freedman’s Town and it seemed intentional—to deracialize the area in an attempt to attract higher-income, lighter-skinned residents. This would have not only disrespected the history and culture of the community and its residents, but it could have erased the entire neighborhood.

Continuous opposition

Most mainstream archival data during this time period refers to activism and protest from North Montrose residents. This focus could be racial and class bias of the mainstream media. It could also be a result of the private developers’ focus on the cooperation of middle-class white residents of North Montrose versus the poorer Black residents of Freedmen’s Town, who some chose not to attend the first couple of public forums due to their past experiences with the city and real estate investors who did not really listen to them. For instance, one article refers to the developers talking to North Montrose residents who were protesting a meeting, but says nothing about them including
Freedmen’s Town residents. However, APV residents continued to fight its demolition and ministers in the area formed an organization to rehabilitate the neighborhood as they saw fit and block any buyup of property in the neighborhood. And residents continued to work on the kind of redevelopment they envisioned for the neighborhood, with such things as opening a sandwich shop and laundromat in the area.

This second effort never gained support from residents in North Montrose nor Freedmen’s Town. Developers blamed the city for not supporting their effort more, like using the city’s power to help create a special tax financing district. Ultimately though, the developers pulled out of the project due to the uncertain future of APV.

Redevelopment effort 3

The third and final effort I discuss is the one that changed the built environment in Freedmen’s Town the most. Disinvestment continued in the area and mysterious fires destroyed houses and historic churches during the 1990s. Data suggest that public private partnerships and overlaps of public and private roles in this effort—the most cohesive growth coalition of these three efforts—helped to push through the city’s and developers’ agenda much more than the previous two efforts. Their overlapping roles was instrumental in changing the built environment of Freedmen’s Town. In a growth machine, public and private entities work together to have more power. When these roles overlap, people have both political resources and economic resources that can go unchecked.

These actors in the third effort also benefitted from decades of trying to push demolition and redevelopment in Freedmen’s Town. The cohesiveness of the growth machine in this effort helped the city and private developers gain more control of the land, which ultimately shaped the trajectory of the neighborhood. Mayor Lanier recruited a powerful congressman from a west Houston suburb to help overturn the Frost/ Leland
amendment. Once that was overturned, HHA received a HOPE VI grant to redevelop APV, providing the federal money the city had wanted for years. The grant not only paid for APV’s redevelopment, but validated it as well. The city then gave millions of local public dollars to the private, non-profit company, HRI, to acquire and assemble the land in Freedmen’s Town. Shortly after that, the city worked to create a TIRZ for the area, but first had to change its boundaries to get the required signatures of property owners in order to form the TIRZ under Texas law.

Archival data indicate that an important part of this last redevelopment effort was the inclusion and participation of the pastors of neighborhood churches. In the first effort, Garcia commented on how important it was to get the support of area ministers. City officials and private developers in this effort worked to get more support from ministers in the area. Laguarta met with ministers earlier in the process of this redevelopment effort than others did in previous efforts and held public forums at Antioch Baptist Church, a place that probably felt more comfortable than the community center outside of the neighborhood (in Montrose) used in the second effort forums. The Black architect, David Lee, also related his experience of growing up in Chicago to the residents of Fourth Ward, and local ministers’ participation probably made the residents feel more comfortable as well.

In the end...

Much was lost in Freedmen’s Town due to Houston’s growth machine’s push for redevelopment over the course of three decades. But things were saved too, due to the continuous activism of pastors, residents, and their allies in Houston and beyond. Residents and activists continue to work on historical renovations in Freedmen’s Town, educating
others about its importance in Houston's history, and opposing the removal of the remaining brick street pavers.

**Findings' relationship with literature**

Swanstrom (1988, p.100) talks about the importance of a city's government ability to control land and the implication of that on land value, and says "(t)he most important powers of city government are powers over land use." This research revealed the importance of Houston's growth coalition working to gain control of land in Freedmen's Town as they continuously sought after it and was able to create the kind of change they wanted physically, demographically, and economically once they used their power to gain control of more land in the third effort.

This research showed how narrative was used by the growth coalition to redevelop Freedmen's Town. Following Beauregard's (2006) discussion about anti-urban sentiment, it seems that if race was the most prevalent explanation for anti-urban sentiment, then urban spaces might need to displace that race, and any images involving that race, to attract residents from the suburbs, which is what the city and private developers tried to do with Freedmen's Town. Rucks-Ahidiana (2022, p.6) explains, "There is a racial logic beyond capitalism, which manifests in how value is assigned (valuation) and diminished (devaluation) from products, places, and people. The valuation process primarily benefits white products, places, and people, while devaluation disadvantages non-white people." If a space had previously been racialized as a way to justify its demolition, it is often deracialized then in order to gain—and thus extract—the most economic value as it exists in the United States today. In Freedmen's Town's case, it was racialized to demolish the historic structures in the neighborhood, then deracialized to encourage investment by others. For instance, wanting to rename the entire area "Founder's Park" in the second
effort, and the marketing of the eastern and southern portion of the neighborhood as Midtown provide two examples of how the city and developers wanted to deracialize it. Freedmen’s Town’s residents, however, found ways to positively racialize the neighborhood amidst this negative racialization when they received placement on the registry of national historic places and when they and others highlighted the importance of the neighborhood.

Federal policies and laws provided a means for Freedmen’s Town’s residents to find avenues to fight the wholesale redevelopment of their neighborhood. Placement as a National Historical district, policies and laws around public housing for APV residents that gave them avenues with which to litigate, and policies that required resident input, all helped residents oppose the redevelopment plans put forth by the local growth machine. These federal policies can provide a sort of checks and balances for citizens of communities where privatization of the public sector is strong and it is hard to figure out how to actually oppose something in the local context (see Fisher, 1992).

**Current built environment in Freedmen’s Town**

This research has attempted to show how relationships of power revealed themselves in space by documenting these three redevelopment efforts and examining the process of how the land was transformed. The built environment in Freedmen’s Town is much different now than it was in 1984 when it became listed on the National Historic Registry. Most of the shotgun houses were demolished or burned, a few were moved, and only a handful remain in the neighborhood. The east side of the neighborhood—the closest to downtown—has large apartment complexes that turn inward and tin houses with fenced-in front yards. This area of the neighborhood has been marketed as Midtown, and actually feels like Midtown—a trendy neighborhood southwest of downtown with townhomes and large apartment complexes marketed to young adults—rather than Freedmen’s Town. West of that are some large architecturally modern houses (what some
would call McMansions) sprinkled in here and there with fences around them, that disengage the houses and their residents from the rest of the neighborhood. Rows of smaller houses that were built by the church CDCs align some streets in the central to western part of the area, and are more compatible with the scale of the previous houses they replaced, but also very different. There are also affordable housing complexes for elderly residents, public housing managed by HHA, and some historical houses built by prominent Black families in Freedmen’s Town following Emancipation. Community activists continue to work to renovate historic homes in the area and some structures have been named UNESCO Slave Route Project sites. See Figures 7.1-7.6.

**Figure 7.1: Antioch Baptist Church surrounded by downtown high-rises**

![Photo taken by author](image-url)
Figure 7.2: Apartment complex on east end marketed as Midtown (from across I-45)

Photo taken by author

Figure 7.3: Brick streets in west Freedmen’s Town by historic homes undergoing restoration

Photo taken by author
Figure 7.4: HHA housing in foreground, barber shop undergoing restoration as a UNESCO site, and market-rate housing in background

Photo taken by author

Figure 7.5: Bethel Baptist Church interior (city park)

Photo taken by author
Final thoughts

This research described and analyzed the processes involved to redevelop Freedmen’s Town that recreated the built environment in much of the remaining neighborhood. A determined city hall and private real estate investors and developers would not stop trying to demolish what was left of Freedmen’s Town despite the many lawsuits, the creation of a national historic district, and continuous activism from residents.
and their allies. Relationships of power revealed themselves as redevelopment proceeded in Freedmen’s Town as the city and developers used their power to create rules and policies that diverted the residents’ efforts and created a new narrative and “reality” for that land. When the roles of private developers and public figures became especially intertwined in the last effort, these “structural speculators” continued the storyline that had been in existence for nearly half a century—that redevelopment of APV and adjacent Freedmen’s Town was good for everyone, including the residents it displaced since it would allow them to move out of concentrated poverty.

This storyline continues to hold its validity because the idea of white places as normative continues to direct public policy. Though demolition might have been the proper thing to do for some public housing projects, this was not the case for APV. Rather than use the grant they received from HUD to renovate the project, the city kept applying for its demolition, constantly trying to set in stone the narrative that demolition of the housing project was the best for the city and its residents. The city actively pursued its disinvestment by boarding up units once someone moved out and stopped maintaining the property, despite federal money to do so. The same held true for the neighborhood as various tactics were used to prevent any kind of reinvestment other than the type of reinvestment city leaders and private developers proposed—the destruction of the existing landscape and creation of a new one serving other people. In other words, they actively worked to make their narrative “real,” acting out their own storyline by creating disinvestment as they talked about the need for demolition because of disinvestment.

The racist value of land allowed city leaders and developers to market the land in a certain way to increase its value. But first, they had to stigmatize the land and the people on it by racializing it to justify its wholesale demolition and presumably necessary relocation of the residents. (Of course, the idea of deconcentrating poverty to justify relocating all of the
residents helped with that part of the story.) Once the idea of demolition was widely accepted, the city and developers worked to deracialize the space and redefine the neighborhood to create an opportunity for profit.

In the third effort, city leaders working on Fourth Ward’s redevelopment also held private positions that made decisions regarding financing the redevelopment and changing the built environment. Because of their dueling positionality, those persons who overlapped the public and private roles could effectively create changes in the land that correlated with the narrative of the space becoming white, something previous regimes could not. And once residents of APV and Freedmen’s Town were evicted via the processes put in place in the third effort, the exclusion of poor Black bodies helped to create new socially constructed land values.

The current system of racial capitalism not only allows, but encourages the exploitation of Black spaces. Just as the rise of white suburbia and “second ghettos” post WWII were inextricably linked (Hirsch, 1998), so are inner-city reinvestment and inner-suburb disinvestment as it is occurring today. Going back to Craig Wilkins’ question about the temporality of Black claims to space, as long as a relationship exists between land values and the color of a person’s skin who lives on it, people standing to profit and/ or gain in some way, such as developers, real estate investors (which now include REITs and retirement accounts), and municipal governing regimes, will continue to find ways to turn over the race of neighborhoods, such that has been occurring since urban renewal, blockbusting, etc. (see Dantzler, 2021).

DeFilippis (2017) warns that if we continue to try to rework geography rather than try to adjust the political economy to make it more equitable, we will continue to get the same results. Not only that, but the existing inequities of both the political economy and
places will likely increase. The question becomes, how do we revise this long-standing narrative that Black spaces are less valuable and white spaces are more valuable?

**Considerations for future research**

This research focused on archival data to examine the processes of neighborhood redevelopment within the context of a low-income Black neighborhood adjacent to the central business district. To further understand how neighborhoods change based on racial demographics, which continues a pattern of investment and disinvestment, or valuation and devaluation, we could examine the processes of neighborhood change, including how narrative is used in the process, in low-income or moderate-income white neighborhoods experiencing racial change, and compare and contrast whether the processes are similar or dissimilar depending on the race and/or ethnicity of the residents moving in or out of the neighborhood.
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