

Gentrification and the Experience of Space in the Third Ward

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To follow the Third Ward's history is to discover that it flourished during segregation, and that it has a long history of race contributing to its defining identity.

Around the mid 1960's, the racial make-up of the neighborhood changed from primarily Jewish residents to Black residents. With this, the Third Ward grew into a thriving African-American community containing primarily Black churches, Black owned businesses, nightclubs, and schools. Historic institutions include St. John Baptist Church on Dowling, from where Black Panther Carl Hamilton was shot; the El Dorado Ballroom; Wolf's Pawn Shop; Frenchy's; Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church; and the Houston Negro Hospital School of Nursing. From still prior to this time stands Emancipation Park, perhaps the most telling among these in regards to the historical significance of the area. Although fully embraced by the community as a living, breathing community park and center, the original memory of the park—a remarkable place where freed slaves and their children would congregate to celebrate Juneteenth- is not lost on anyone.

The same cannot be said, however, for much of the rest of the community. (Mainly, significant aspects which helped to form the Third Ward's distinct culture and civil rights history in the 1960's.) As the area has begun to gentrify, recognized for its attractive location near downtown, former residences and businesses have been disappearing quickly.

A quick survey of many parts of the Third Ward will reveal streets dotted with empty lots, 'for rent' signs in the windows of old establishments, and innumerable boarded up, abandoned homes. Once a bustling location, it can easily seem like a long stretch from the former community. However, more remains to be understood. Further venture into the Third Ward will reveal a still present energy: residents who greet each other knowingly in their neighborhood roads, lead and participate in grassroots community programs like Project Rowhouses and the Progressive Amateur Boxing Association, as well as over a 100 Churches thriving, establishments surviving, and families who refuse to sell. There is a vibrancy found here that refuses to be pushed out.

To look at these contrasting, seemingly contradictory aspects of the Third Ward is to understand its struggle: a push and pull affects the community at its core. Abandoned lots interject unwanted on once lively streets; for rent and sale signs manage to find staunch rivals in neighbors who insist that their home is "not for sale, not for sale;" and landmarks insurmountably present the community's history in the face of imposing renovation. That this change affects the Third Ward's residents and their lives is undeniable. The push and pull continues to play out, interacting definitively with the community's present and influencing the unclear future that lies ahead.

In this sense, the Third Ward is at this moment struggling with its identity – who it stands to be amid all of this scavenging and change, and who it will be: how the community will manage to hold onto itself while integrating new construction and residents. And although it is so often overlooked by the rest of the residents of Houston, the Tre and its residents are truly amazing. Here, threads of the past, present, and future are physically melding into each other- at times at conflict, but always inescapably

intertwined. That the residents must face an openly changing reality on a daily basis; clearly understanding that in a few short years the ground beneath them may be entirely different, and that this involves both personal loss and gain- this is the Third Ward in 2010. This is gentrification. More so, this is American cities everywhere. And, this is me.

Arriving into this workshop, I found myself attracted to the idea of a gentrification story from the get-go. Academically, I knew I was interested in the issue, but as the workshop began progressing, I couldn't seem to get past that. Other students were finding personal reflections in their photography, and while I was finding emotional attachment, I couldn't express why. I found myself gravitating towards spaces- spaces of conflict between two factors, people in their spaces, and to an extent, memory, history, loss, and humor. This is my life at the moment. Coming off a year away from school, which I spent largely on my own attempting to carve solid ground into a life I felt had gotten away from me; I came into this desperately unable to shrug off a fear of the new. At this moment I felt myself stepping off of my barely constructed reality. Throughout this workshop, the reason for my gravitation towards Third Ward spaces became clear. In addition to learning so much from the workshop, the amazing people involved, and the community, I've learned that life is defined by change. I have in fact been photographing my reflection at every turn.