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TALES OF THE CITY: CURRENT GENTRIFICATION IN ATLANTA CONTRASTS SHARPLY TO PREVIOUS WAVES OF URBAN RESTORATION

Changing demographics and a greater appreciation for central-city living have sparked a new wave of gentrification in Atlanta.

Yet recent gentrification is a sharp contrast from restoration efforts in the '70s and '80s, said Larry Keating, professor of city and regional planning at Georgia Tech's College of Architecture.

Gentrification, the upgrading of deteriorated urban property by middle-class or affluent people, is a subject of great debate because it often results in lower-income residents being forced to move.

"In addition to displacement, resurgent gentrification also raises issues about changes in political power – at both the neighborhood level and throughout the city," said Keating, who presented a paper, "Resurgent Gentrification: Politics and Policy in Atlanta," at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting held Aug. 16-19 in Atlanta.

Keating uses the term "resurgent gentrification" to contrast current restoration with the slower-paced gentrification that occurred from 1965 to 1990. Resurgent gentrification in Atlanta has six key characteristics:



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More extensive. Compared to three or four neighborhoods that were gentrifying at any one time in the past, Keating counts eight or more Atlanta neighborhoods now in transition, including Mechanicsville, Edgewood, Summerhill, Cabbagetown, Reynoldstown, Pittsburgh and Capitol View. In addition, a greater number of housing units are affected.

Less dependent on unique architecture. Past gentrification was largely driven by historic-preservation efforts. Today's gentrification is more about location – people want to be closer to city amenities and avoid

long commutes and traffic congestion. That means proximity is influencing their real-estate purchases more than architectural style.

Reversed racial transition. Today whites are moving into black neighborhoods whereas 20 years ago, the term “racial transition” referred to blacks moving into white neighborhoods, Keating said.

Greater volatility. In previous decades, gentrifiers were typically middle- and upper-class whites moving into white working-class neighborhoods. With the new racial component -- whites moving into black neighborhoods -- combined with socioeconomic differences, resurgent gentrification sparks more conflict.

State-sponsored gentrification is more prevalent -- and a greater threat to poor communities. Today public subsidies, such as federal block grants, are funding projects that often result in homes priced in the \$200,000-\$300,000 range rather than affordable housing. In past seven years, the Atlanta Housing Authority has taken down approximately 5,000 affordable housing units that haven't been replaced, Keating said.

Population shifts affect racial composition of the electorate. From 1990 to 2000, the black population in the city of Atlanta dropped from 67.1 percent to 62.1 percent while the white population increased from 31 percent to 34 percent. Although small, these population changes remain significant because they cause political power to shift in some districts. Conversely, during earlier waves of gentrification, blacks were still moving into Atlanta, so gentrification had less of an effect on politics.

Three of the most serious repercussions of resurgent gentrification are: loss of affordable housing, displacement of poor residents and the destruction of indigenous sociological communities.

“Although the resulting challenges of resurgent gentrification are similar to those of previous decades, what has changed is the

magnitude of the problem,” Keating said. “In the long run, more poor people lose.”

What's more, resurgent gentrification is not isolated to Atlanta, Keating added, noting that cities such as Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Oakland, Calif., face similar phenomenon.

Keating's paper draws from his work on the Atlanta Gentrification Task Force, a city-appointed committee he chaired from 2000 to 2001. As a result of its research, this task force endorsed 40 recommendations. The Atlanta City Council passed five of these recommendations -- which focus subsidies on the lowest income households -- into legislation.

“Some of the recommendations are controversial, so I don't know if they'll remain, but it is significant that the local government took some action against the negative effects of gentrification,” Keating said.

In fact, the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan social policy and research organization in Washington, D.C., is including these recommendations in a new study on how local governments are responding to resurgent gentrification.

“There is considerably more work to be done in this policy area,” Keating says. “There are many reasons why gentrification is positive -- both for cities and society as a whole -- but we need to minimize the damage that gentrification does to low-income groups.”

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