

Tales of the City

Current gentrification in Atlanta contrasts sharply to previous waves of urban restoration.

by T.J. BECKER

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 1970s and 1980s, says 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," says Keating, who presented a paper, "Resurgent Gentrification: Politics and Policy in Atlanta," at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting held in August 2003 in Atlanta.

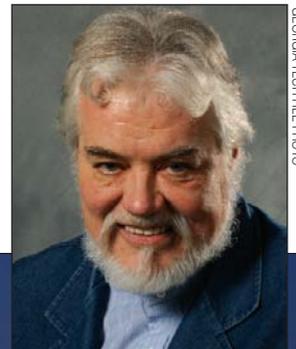
Keating uses the term "resurgent gentrification" to contrast current restoration with the slower-paced gentrification that occurred from 1965 to 1990. Resurgent gentrification in Atlanta has six key characteristics:

- *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.

Below: 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 1970s and 1980s, research shows.

Larry Keating



GEORGIA TECH FILE PHOTO

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What has changed is the magnitude of the problem. In the long run, more poor people lose.

Changing demographics and a greater appreciation for central-city living have sparked a trend in middle class or affluent people upgrading deteriorated urban property.

- *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 says.

- *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 to \$300,000 range rather than affordable housing. In the past seven years, the Atlanta Housing Authority has taken down approximately 5,000 affordable housing units that haven’t been replaced, Keating says.

- *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 says. “In the long run, more poor people lose.”

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

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 says.

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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