

From Destruction To Spectacle:  
Utilizing District Identity In Gentrifying Neighborhoods In Houston

by

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## Introduction

Within the various disciplines in Urban Studies, a wealth of literature has been produced to better understand the development and redevelopment of cities. Questions of inequalities have played an important role for the study of cities from a critical perspective, leading theorists and researchers within the critical urban studies camp to ask the important question of "cities for whom?" Countless studies have expanded on this question and presented different perspectives of inequalities within many cities in the United States, with the exception of Houston. The City of Houston is the fourth largest city in the country, containing a major trade port, an internationally known medical center, and a massively developed petrochemical/energy industry. The city's elites, which I define as the groups of people who dominate the avenues of power within the city, are mostly centered around the energy industry and have presented strategies to establish a new chapter for the city. They envision Houston becoming a global city, comparing themselves to Shanghai, Tokyo, Singapore, London, New York, Frankfurt ([Greater Houston Partnership 2019](#)). This strategy, though new, holds a similar trend in transforming the city from an industrial heartland that ignored the potential of growing land value within its inner city, to a city that has a developed inner city that is competitive with other major cities, such as those highlighted above. This thesis will be studying the question of district redevelopment, which makes up a major element of the transformation towards the 'global city' that elites seek to accomplish.

Throughout the 20th century, Houston has been a boomtown due to its rapid takeover of the oil economy, cementing itself as the energy capital of the world (Feagin 1988; Klineberg 2020). A near-endless growth stemming primarily from refining and transporting petrochemicals has profoundly shaped the city's ideology, establishing a highly concentrated focus around profit

and business-centric growth. There was a bullheaded optimism within the business and industrial community throughout the last century, most visible in the claim that “you could dress a gorilla in a business suit, send him downtown, and he’d become a millionaire in a week” (Klineberg 2020:36). Heading the optimism of these communities was the Chamber of Commerce, Houston’s premier business association, who would boost the city’s competitive edge by citing financial and industrial data. The chamber, for example, would note that “Whereas in San Antonio they will tell you about the Alamo, and in Dallas about the Little Theatre, in Houston they cite figures: \$293,000,000 worth of bank deposits... 1,200 oil companies... 300 oil supply houses... 1,000,000 bales of cotton” (Feagin 1988:63). For Houston boosters, economics, value production, and growth in the realm of commerce and industry was the primary concern. The drive to strengthen production and position itself as the energy capital would affect the spatial development of the city and the ideology that would drive the city’s developmental model.

The city has a rather unorthodox method of citymaking. Most major cities throughout the U.S. developed a zoning approach to citymaking in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developing cities in ways which spatially divided industry, commercial, and residential areas. Houston never adopted zoning; in its introduction for debate within the late 1940s, business elites were split on the question. The pro-zoning side was led by Jesse Jones, a banker who imagined the city in a similar light to Chicago, and the anti-zoning side was led by Hugh Roy Cullen, an oilman whose vision for Houston was to establish it as a “free-enterprise city” (Levy N.D.) and saw the idea of zoning as un-American, socialist, and an attempt to slow the city’s explosive growth for the benefit of “downtown interests” (Hart 1993; Kaplan 1980). With Cullen and realtors’ victory in rejecting zoning ordinances, Houston’s use of space continued to grow in an erratic fashion. The combination of No Zoning laws alongside growing suburban sprawl would mean that Houston

would be made up of warehouses and industrial plants that develop alongside lower class houses, vast square miles of territory painted by sprawl consisting of suburban-esque housing, commercial plazas, and industrial spaces, and the inner-city would be underdeveloped when compared to major cities, particularly in the Northeast. This underdevelopment of the inner-city, maintaining closer to a suburban rather than an urban space, would give it the moniker of an “un-urban” city (Fulton 2022).

Houston was significantly affected by the 1980s economic crises, halting and reevaluating the spatial and economic norms that characterized the city prior to the economic downfall (Schaffer 1989). Although the city would continue to grow, the infrastructural and economic crisis established a division among elites: on one end, the oil elites that held influence over the city government clung to a vision solely centered around defending and strengthening industry; the other held newer, more diverse elites who envisioned a more competitive city both in cultural and economic aspects. An agreement between the two sectors was reached, setting the ground for a shift away from the unplanned free-enterprise city that Houston boosters had pushed, opting instead for a somewhat planned redevelopment effort, in tune with other major U.S. cities, that would often pivot into gentrification and displacement in some areas.

This thesis will study the two major approaches to gentrification via district revitalization that has occurred in Houston since the turn of the century. Through this research, I will compare two sets of neighborhoods to explore neighborhood change, displacement, identity, and authenticity, and how this has changed over time in Houston through re-development strategies. First, I will focus on the gentrification that occurred in the Midtown and East Downtown districts, which can be found neighboring downtown to the west (Midtown) and the south (East Downtown). They are representative of the first waves of gentrification in Houston, where no

cultural identity was used as a reference point for redevelopment and the existing cultural group in the area was destroyed as displacement occurred. Contrasting the cultural destruction that occurred in the first waves, I will focus on the Montrose and East End/Second Ward districts, found west of Midtown (Montrose) and South and East of East Downtown (Second Ward/East End), which covers the spectacle of the culture being displaced as a means to redevelop and create a unique, marketable identity for the district. Through this focus, I aim to connect districts' intensification of the displaced community's culture with broader strategies presented by city-wide growth machines. I examine these changes over time through an in-depth analysis of strategic growth documents created by city, state, and economic elite organizations. Those methodological details are explained below, but first I provide an overview of the patterns in the literature on these themes.

## Literature Review

### Accumulation and the Organization of Space

To understand the dynamics of redevelopment it is critical to have a general understanding of the political economic system of capitalism. Our capitalist system rests on capital accumulation (Harvey 1975; Marx 1976 [1867]; Thier 2020), which is the added value of a completed cycle of production (investment-product creation-sale) that, in turn, is placed back into circulation. The circulation of capital thus becomes the central element of capitalism: as a law capital must be reproduced in order for the capitalist to preserve their wealth, and as such further and further accumulates capital and its accompanying wealth (Harvey 1975). The law of value accumulation in the capitalist economic framework becomes relevant in an urban context when considering how capital shapes the landscape where its circulation occurs. Harvey notes

that through the creation of “fixed and immobile capital” within geographical landscapes, the past capital that was developed in the space remains, becoming a source of continuing circulation or a “prison which inhibits the further progress of accumulation” due to the shift away from that source of capital towards a newer source of value (247). Placing this in an urban context, this would mean that the fixed capital utilized to develop industry can be fundamental for the economic health (through capital circulation) of a district, if not the whole city, but there exists an eventuality of this fixed capital to become counterproductive for accumulation. This could be because new technology has rendered the space obsolete, or because the primary method of capital circulation in the area has shifted away from that type of industry, such as a shift from an industrial focus to a commercial, or speculative one. As such, the construction of space, from the point of view of a theoretical political-economic perspective, is governed by the laws of capital accumulation. Viewing redevelopment through questions of accumulation, its laws demand that redevelopment occurs in a way that generates more wealth, which would in-turn be cycled back into further redevelopment. This cycle changes the character of the neighborhood and creates what is coined as ‘gentrification.’

## Gentrification

The laws of accumulation and its effects on land development become the clearest in the phenomenon of gentrification. Gentrification, coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the displacement of working class districts by the middle class “gentry” (Glass 1964, as cited by Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2007), can be defined as “the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use” (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2007:xv). This process of transformation is transitioned in by creative professionals, who beautify the area and add value, opening it up for non-creative professionals to move after

(Brown-Saracino 2010; Zukin 1982). The shifts from a working-class to a middle-class economic space was governed under the guise of a changing political economy; a combination of a “long structural process of deindustrialization and cyclical decline in property values” allowed the space for elites “to direct a new mode of development that increased economic value” (Zukin 1991:39). This economic value comes at a difference from the value that Marx and other political economists studied in what is seen as the ‘industrial capitalist’ period; rather than value primarily being produced by industry through factories, the economic value that is developed arises from speculation in real estate and housing markets, as well as cultural consumption that is generated within the gentrified area. In other words, the land and the space-making occurring within it is transformed into a commodity, one that is more valuable for investors due to the “near-monopoly control over land and improvements” that are “fixed in space but their value is anything but fixed” and whose improvements, though not permanent, have a “very long turnover period in physical as well as value terms” (Smith 1979:75). Gentrification thus generates commodities through the redevelopment of space, introducing itself in working class districts that have low-cost and high-reward land which ultimately displaces the population that once made up the area.

An important limitation to literature on gentrification dealt with race. Lees (2016) reappraises the literature, focusing this reappraisal through an argumentative framework that race and ethnicity has been understudied. In her reappraisal of the literature, she pushes the narrative away from a “white gentrifiers displacing black and nonwhite ethnic minority populations” (208) stereotype towards a more complex image. This image includes black (and non-white) gentrification, and a push away from a gentrifier-led towards a state-led process. Taylor (2002) provides a strong example of this new complex image; in analyzing the Black-led gentrification

of Harlem, she studies the stories of various gentrifiers, providing a narrative that shifts away from purely economic motives towards a complex interplay of viewing Harlem as a refuge, as an act of resistance and maintaining the land within the community, and as a longing for deeper meaning by returning to their identity. This valuation of space for the communities that live there by Black and Latinx, Rucks-Ahidiana (2022) argues, counterposes itself with white-led gentrification, who value neighborhoods for diversity and the social worth that they gain, and most importantly with the gentrification led by the city, developers, real estate investors, and large employers. Their gentrification, in line with Lees' reshifting of gentrification as a state-led process, focuses itself on developing land that "meet demands for housing and economic growth with little to no interest in non-economic worth," which would mean that "conditions such as location and potential return on investment matter" (183). The goal is to have the middle class in an area who have the highest potential in providing the value accumulation sought after by the city, investors, and developers, regardless of the cost of displacement.

## Growth Machines

The profit-led gentrification devised by different elements of elites establishes common ground to develop a growth coalition (Logan and Molotch 2007 [1987]). The growth coalition is concerned with one primary motivation: the growth and development of the city. Where and how growth occurs would be influenced by growth coalitions and level of influence on the city. As such, in order to achieve the widest level of gains for the members within the coalition, the coalition itself needs to gain hegemony over the city's public institutions. Such a hegemony can only be achieved in two ways: bringing in as many political-economic actors (businesses, industries, academies, public officials) into the coalition so as to gain more connections and minimize outside competition, and establishing a strong consensus capable of eliminating any



meaningful alternative than what is proposed. Once a hegemonic grasp of the city's growth decisions is reached, the city becomes a growth machine: a machine who serves growth above all else.

The growth machine, by its nature as a system that serves to grow the value and economy of place for the interests of the elites, strongly situates itself in the critical, or Marxist, framework of urban studies. A fundamental question of critical urban studies is '*cities for whom?*' (Jonas 2015), in which Logan and Molotch present a clear response when considering city development: for the land owning elites. This position follows other major critical theorists (Castells 1979; Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 2003 [1970]) whose framing of the city falls along class lines. Much like in the larger capitalist framework (Marx 1976 [1867]), it is the economic elites who govern and shape decisions of the city towards their class interest, which does not always benefit all sectors or classes of society, despite the elites' claims that their decisions are for the benefit of all (Davis 1990). Rather than develop cities that are for the benefit of all, cities often develop unevenly; in the most extreme cases, cities develop where elites live in elysiums that are walled off and guarded from the slums that make up lower class districts (Davis 2017 [2005]). Typical developmental decisions in the United States, however, opt instead towards developing growth strategies that prioritize 'beautification' and creating 'competitive' regions, framing redevelopment in a commodified or marketized manner. In this manner, any developments created are stated to be in the benefit of all when, considering value and competition, growth strategies are developed primarily to favor those who have an economic benefit within the district over abstract statements of favoring everyone.

The growth machine, when running smoothly, is an effective tool of the elites to develop the city towards their vision. Particularly in our neoliberal age, in which cities are ideologized as

spaces of competition with others for resources, funding, and cultural and political prestige, the development of cities becomes more enmeshed with the strategic decisions of local growth coalitions, who aim to strengthen the city's competitive edge and, in turn, reap the benefits of the added value that is brought with increased attention. That said, coalitions do not always maintain a single, monolithic view over growth. While Logan and Molotch acknowledged divisions among growth actors, noting that elites "may differ on which particular strategy [of growth] will succeed..." there was no substantial analysis on tensions within growth coalitions beyond stating that, "only under rather extraordinary circumstances is this consensus endangered" (2007 [1987]:51). In analyzing Houston's growth machine, for example, Schaffer (1989) provided a deeper analysis on the complications and conflicts internal to the growth coalitions. By studying Houston's Chamber of Commerce, Schaffer provided a history of the split within the growth machine, tearing itself into two competing coalitions during the oil crisis. The two coalitions had competing ideas around growth: the Chamber of Commerce represented the older industrial interests over city growth, which maintained a focus on energy dependency while ignoring the economic/infrastructural crisis occurring in Houston, and the Houston Economic Development Council represented a combination of newer industrial and commercial elites, which pushed for diversification in the local economy, clear marketing strategies, and planning and developing in areas have been neglected. Although neither coalition pushed for open conflict, and in fact would reunite and form the Greater Houston Partnership, the study highlights the heterogeneous system of differing, often conflicting differences within coalitions and machines.

## World Cities

To better understand the competition that has developed within cities and their various growth machines, it is important to understand globalization. Globalization has been heavily

influential in the increased competition between cities for prestige and recognition, replacing old regional productive systems with a global productive system in which cities are the nodal points between the interlinked world (Friedmann 1986). Friedmann establishes this hypothesis as an introduction for a larger framework in which cities and political-economic processes should be studied, one in which global capital plays a decisive role in the organization and restructuring of cities occurring during the late 20th century. The world's major cities are divided in two categories and two sub-categories: *Core* and *Semi-Periphery* nations, and *Primary* and *Secondary* cities. A hierarchy is established through these categories, making a primary city in a core nation the most powerful and influential category, and a secondary city in a semi-periphery nation influential, but far less powerful within the global economy. The hypothesis' main arguments, which better delineate what Friedmann is conceptualizing, mostly focuses on labor and industrial production. Although he makes some nods towards the construction of space within cities and the effects of cultural phenomena on the importance of cities within his hypothesis, he does not greatly consider these variables as critical for the hierarchical placement of cities within a global economy.

Building upon the World City hypothesis, Sassen (2001 [1991]) further develops the concept by including the function of the city in a globalized economic context. Global Cities go beyond being nodal points for global processes, the core of Friedmann's analysis, towards sites of specialized production. Production such as business services, financial innovations and management, and other related products that undergird the scattered network of production ranging from factories to offices. With a growing specialization within the city, the nature of the city begins to shift: income inequality sharpens due to a loss of middle-class manufacturing, leaving instead a growth in management and financial services (primarily employing the upper

classes), as well as growth in low-wage commercial, industrial, and residential service industries. Luxury restaurants, retail, and housing – amenities for the high-income workforce – develop in gentrifying districts within cities to provide a high quality of life for the growing upper class to live in the city rather than the suburbs. Given the scope of her research on global cities as an economic phenomenon, there was not much space devoted to the spatial impacts beyond brief sketches. While she remarks on the changes of the city, noting growing levels of space taken by upper and lower classes, her analysis focuses elsewhere. Instead, she frames the analysis on a macro-sociological scale, both in political-economic and spatial questions. While growth machines and gentrification on a neighborhood/district level is left unconsidered by Sassen, her global cities analysis establishes the framework to understand what impulses growth in cities and the inter-city / inter-regional competition.

### Cultures of Cities / Spectacle of Authentic Cities

A powerful tool of growth machine-led gentrification to compete in the global city hierarchy is in commodifying the culture of cities. Culture, as a concept, can take various meanings and interpretations based on its context. For our purposes, culture as it relates to the city and authenticity is best defined by Williams' (1965) , in that culture within society “is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (57, as cited by Miles 2007:31). Culture goes beyond aestheticism and flows into the everyday, shifting and being shifted by people and political-economic forces. In a city context, culture is manifested in the city's spatial construction, the behaviors residents have with one another, and the manufactured aesthetics the city maintains. Using culture as an object of analysis, Zukin (1995) presents different methods in which this concept supports a city's political economy with symbols, institutions, public and

‘public’ spaces, and other uses of space that creates a cultural identity for the city. At the heart of this construction of cultural identity is the *symbolic economy*, which groups together various symbols, spaces, and entrepreneurial or commercial/financial capital, with aims to create a unique city-image capable of making the city more competitive for tourism and speculative capital. Such an economy is created through unique cultural identifiers along with the control and curation of city culture and living to display an image or vision of what the city is or could be. Its construction furthers speculation, boosts tourism, and accumulates capital for elites, all while creating spaces that are public, *but controlled*. Zukin symbolizes these controlled public spaces through the Disney company given their near-complete maintenance of its spaces to give an illusion of being public while being private. *Disneyfication* thus becomes the process of shifting public spaces away from being open and free towards a space for consumption and commercialization. Thus, public spaces that once were “primary site[s] of public culture” and a “window into the city’s soul” (259) have become spaces that present a *spectacle* of public culture, curating away the realities in order to present an imagined reality.

A major element of building the spectacle is ensuring that the spectacle is perceived as authentic. Zukin (2009), studying primarily New York City, noted that authenticity is used as a means of differentiation and a method of establishing a unique image or presentation which, she notes, can be artificially created for the sake of consumption and value creation. Authenticity is recognized less on its connection over the right or ability to inhabit a space, which she describes as a city’s ‘origins,’ and more on capturing the ‘experience’ of such origins through the maintenance and re/construction of buildings and the development of distinct cultural identities within neighborhoods. The power contained within the use of authenticity stems from people, primarily from middle and upper classes, accepting the idea of the authentic as the urban, the

gritty, and the diverse. Despite accepting these premises as descriptors of an authentic place, the question shifts towards the contradiction of authentic place-making without danger nor the loss of comforts typical of the middle and upper classes. Family-owned shops, convenience stores or bodegas, and other stores central to the community's day-to-day maintenance are replaced with new stores, new cafés, and other storefronts that primarily cater towards the new waves of residents. In essence, Zukin describes the process of gentrification, noting the use of authenticity by developers and pro-growth actors as a method to increase the land value and marketability of a neighborhood.

Following the conceptualization of the image of authenticity as a tool for development, Aptekar (2017) further developed the idea when analyzing the use of ethnic cultural themes and ideas within two parks in Astoria, Queens. These two parks, Athens Square Park and Socrates Sculpture Park, are rooted in the historic Greek district of New York City. Athens Square Park was created by the Greek community as a place to commemorate their history and roots. This park followed Zukin's (2009) description of the image of authenticity closely: the Greekness of the park was accentuated through the construction of visual symbols (statues, columns, an amphitheater) with the aims of centering the Greek history and culture of the area. Such place-making neglected the historical accuracy of the symbology just as much as the relationship these symbols of ancient Greece have with contemporary or modern Greek culture. Socrates Sculpture Park took a different approach; rather than memorialize the history of the Greek community within the district, the park established a vague 'ethnic' cultural symbolism as a means of creating a *spectacle of authenticity*. Instead of establishing a specific cultural identity with the aims of coding the space as 'Greek,' such as in Athens Square Park, Socrates Park opted instead for vagueness to work in concert with its gentrifying surroundings. This vague cultural

symbolism allows gentrification two things: develop enough of a cultural tie to the district's past to entice incoming higher income residents, and curating the characteristics and symbols shown so as to present an exoticised image that accentuates the *good* of working-class ethnic districts, while removing or reframing the *bad* of working-class ethnic districts. Thus, the spectacle establishes a space that is *rough* yet safe, *urban* yet luxurious, *exotic* yet familiar.

### The Gayborhood (Spectacle of Sexuality/Progressivism)

Spectacles of authenticity are not solely created within ethnic neighborhoods; it can occur in any space that contains a clearly defined culture that isn't seen as 'mainstream' and can, therefore, be commodified and marketed as a niche or exotic space. This plays out most notably in U.S. gayborhoods. Contemporary co-optations of gayborhoods and the cultural clashes happening in a gayborhood being gentrified has been a crucial element in better understanding the ties between gentrification and cultural spectacles. A gayborhood, or a gay neighborhood, is an urban space centered around the LGBTQ+ community as both residents and visitors. This means that businesses, residential areas, social service agencies, and, more broadly, the cultural normativity in the district is geared towards a homonormative reality—one in which heterosexual signifiers such as strollers, heterosexual couples, and commodities geared around the heterosexual norm is uncommon (Conner and Okamura 2021; Brodyn and Ghaziani 2021). As captured in Ghaziani's (2014) systematic analysis of the gayborhood, the nature of the gayborhood within urban analyses both popular and academic have been conflicting: it is seen as either an enclave or a ghetto—a refuge or a first wave of gentrification. For the sake of the thesis, we will be taking Ghaziani's conclusions that gayborhoods are, in many ways, a contradictory development of opposites; gayborhoods have elements of the positive and the negative positions staked out by theorists, journalists, social scientists, and residents. Beyond the question of the

gayborhood's position in space-making and gentrification, the recent shifts and transformations within gayborhoods as spaces for niche markets to establish themselves in (Hanhardt 2008) and the perceived loss of security of gayborhoods as *safe spaces* for gay people to express themselves without judgment or discrimination is critical in understanding the "post-gay" gayborhood within the broader phenomenon of city space being reshaped towards value accumulation. Ghaziani, following Rushbrook's (2002) study into the use of gayborhoods and queer spaces by secondary world cities to gain a competitive advantage through boosting the progressive and cultured nature of the city and, in effect, more diverse consumer markets for travelers and would-be followers of cosmopolitanism, acknowledges the shifts in the understanding of the gayborhood within the context of the city and the growth machine. The gayborhood is now chic and a cultural center of the city, and as a result has been Disneyfied Zukin (1995) .

Brodyn and Ghaziani (2021), in conducting qualitative interviews with heterosexual residents' in two Chicago gayborhoods in order to study divergences between liberal attitudes and homonegative actions, develop a sharp understanding of the subtleties in the prejudices held by heterosexual residents, and the effects of such prejudices in the action and inaction of those residents in regards to the LGBTQ+ community. According to the researchers, heterosexual residents, generally self-labeling as *progressive*, consider their integration into gayborhood spaces as an aspect of being accepting, diverse, and cosmopolitan, gaining a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) as a reward, all while living in mostly white neighborhoods. This attitude, the researchers note, often pairs with a sense of spatial entitlement, in which heterosexual residents feel entitled to have total access to the gayborhood's spaces without the need to conform to the norms and rules established by the LGBTQ+ community. At the root of



their spatial entitlement is a sense of privilege and power over the region, something that some 'progressive' heterosexuals are conscious of and claim a sense of benevolence by not exerting it on the gayborhood. Whether or not they are sincere in their statements, their existence fuels the commodification of the gayborhood and its transformation into markets for niche retail, services, and speculation (Hanhardt 2008). This power dynamic transforms the gayborhood as just another part of the cosmopolitan buffet for "wannabe world cities" (Rushbrook 2002:188) to gain a competitive edge in providing the cosmopolitan spectacle so valuable for speculative capital.

## Summary

The emergence of world cities has paired hand in hand with growth machines to develop a redevelopment-centered gentrification that centers its efforts on accumulating value. Increased competition to be economically and culturally influential in order to entice professionals and companies to move has necessitated city redevelopments, creating new realms of competition and the use of space and cultural foundations within those spaces. The cultures of cities, particularly in relation to the neoliberal "Disneyfication" of public spaces, becomes a unique focal point in understanding growth coalitions and the larger framework of world cities and the competitions occurring between them to achieve those points. These links between economics and culture are seen most intensely in gayborhoods, in which questions of the social position of gayborhoods in light of gentrification are called into question. Most importantly, the gayborhood literature reckons with city-wide plans to change the cityscape into a spectacle of progressivism that is founded less on inclusivity and more on profit. Questions of the spectacle of cultural characteristics to undergird financial and developmental growth so the city can be more competitive all fall back to questions of *who has power* and *who doesn't*. Across the United

States, elites, though fractured and often contesting, hold control on how cities develop and for whom it should be developed.

For Houston, these distinct threads found in cities are interwoven in the redevelopment strategies undertaken by state-led growth machines. Houston is no exception to the trends in the literature, which suggest that the gentrification occurring by district redevelopment will be primarily motivated by value accumulation, no matter the cost of displacement. The concepts presented by gentrification, growth machine, and world cities scholars underline reasons *why* the city is not an exception, particularly if it aims to realize a diversified economy and become more competitive against other major cities in the United States. It is in the concepts related to culture, particularly the concept of the spectacle, that my analysis around the revitalization of our four districts will become important. These urban-cultural concepts explain the *how* of gentrification and displacement, particularly in discussing Montrose and East End/Second Ward. Through an analysis of the districts' histories, the strategies that state-led growth machines undertook, and the effects the strategies had on the cultural presentation and makeup of communities, I seek to expand on the existing literature by presenting new perspectives on the concepts examined, and the interrelation they have with one another.

## The Context

In this analysis I will be studying the revitalization of four districts: Midtown, East Downtown, Montrose, and East End/Second Ward; I will be studying the districts' revitalization through plans created by growth machines, analyzing documents produced and the effects those plans have economically, demographically, and spatially. Before we present the four districts and the effects revitalization has had, it is critical to introduce the actors involved in the

revitalization. All three actors introduced are growth coalitions, whose aims for growth are, more often than not, running in parallel with one another.

## The Actors

### *The Greater Houston Partnership*

The Greater Houston Partnership is the flagship growth machine coalition in Houston. The partnership, a formal membership-based organization, has been the unofficial governing body for the city of Houston relating to most issues related to the political economy of the city (Parker and Feagin 1991). The partnership is organized as one major body overseeing 12 counties that are seen as contributing to the regional economy. As such, the partnership as a system handles the broader strategies and aims of the city's economic class, partnering with district-based bodies which they call 'Economic Development Organizations' (EDO). These can be local chambers of commerce, economic development councils, management districts, associations, as well as minor city governments. As these focus on the development of the shape and character of different sections of the city, the partnership, meanwhile, tracks and analyzes the economic health of the city, the changes occurring, and establishes strategies that tackle the growth and development of the city at-large. Although the partnership does not center its strategies on individual districts, the coordination occurring between them and the EDOs often results in similar long-term visions for the city's image and visual construction.

### *The Municipal Management District*

Municipal Management Districts (MMDs) are state-created public bodies that create and carry out growth strategies for the district they are created for. Conceptualized in the 1980s, the management districts were established with the expressed purpose to be managed by business

and property owners, executives, and other business community affiliated district elites for the purpose of developing the land of which they are part. As such, the management district became the primary growth machine apparatus at the neighborhood and district level, allowing business leaders to consult with district elites and create an action plan that can best serve the area's profitability. That said, the management district is restricted to certain types of development, done so to ensure that no developer or property owner is favored over others. Rather than directly develop the land, what they are instead tasked with is the question of establishing an image and culture of the district, particularly in areas that are making turns toward gentrification. As such, the Allen, Boone, Humphries, Robinson law firm (N.D.), in writing a document about MMDs for use by the Texas Government to explain them, states the acting of these bodies as a "mini-chamber of commerce" due to their intimate ties to business, relationship towards growth in a private and marketized manner, and the work towards creating a 'brand' for the district they belong to.

### *The Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone*

Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZ) are municipal-formed bodies formed with the task of attracting new investment in their district/region. Acceptable criteria for creating a TIRZ center around redevelopment, whether it be because of "substandard, slum, deteriorated, or deteriorating structures... the deterioration of site or other improvements," or other elements that "substantially arrest or impair the sound growth of the municipality or county creating the zone" (City of Houston N.D.). In order to begin any projects or efforts in revitalization, a project plan must be prepared and presented to the city council, who would approve the plans for the district's revitalization. The TIRZ is, ultimately, quite similar to the MMDs in their direction and limitations, with their differences related to the governmental body that formed them. Both aim

to develop the zone in a value-cumulative manner, and their primary constituencies are the property owners, business leaders, and others who are most invested in raising the land value of the district.

## The Methods

### *MMD and TIRZ*

To understand the changes that have occurred, I analyzed 11<sup>1</sup> of the 67 MMDs that have been approximated for the Greater Houston Area (Allen Boone Humphries Robinson N.D.). I have chosen those 11 primarily because they are in the City of Houston and especially in the central area of the city that is encircled by highway 610 (popularly known as “the loop”), as well as having a substantial amount of language within the MMD itself. By substantial language I refer to having enough information on their website and documentation that is available to be analyzed. Within these 11 MMDs, I explored their websites’ “About” pages, along with any accompanying documents such as service plans to note common trends in three areas: economic growth, quality of life, and marketability. I chose to explore these trends due to the existing literature’s emphasis on these facets playing a role in revitalization and gentrification. Given that I focus on only 11 of 67 MMDs in Greater Houston, this analysis of MMDs in Houston is by no means comprehensive, serving mainly as a point of analysis for the changes undergoing in the city, particularly in the districts that will be highlighted. That said, there may be value in creating a more comprehensive study of MMDs since their introduction in Texas in the 1980s and their effects towards space.

A common trend that tied MMDs together is the idea of creating a unique, marketable identity for the district for which it is part. The level of focus around this would differ between

MMDs depending on the conditions of the district, but questions on how to make the district stand out in difference to other districts run common in MMDs and TIRZ. Common methods of developing marketable identities focus on beautification and public safety, the actionable steps for those two varying again on the conditions of the district. Lastly, the economic growth of the district, and in particular growth which enhances the district's property values, rang similar across the MMDs. The function of these bodies thus serves as a city/state supported private growth machine, priming the areas for revitalization and gentrification.

### *Cole*

In order to best track the changes that have occurred in the four districts I will be analyzing, I will be using the Cole Directory of Greater Houston<sup>1</sup>. The Cole Directory is a reference book that creates a list of businesses and the census tract wealth rating of cities. The Cole Directory defines and tracks their Wealth Rating through Census Bureau data, along with block canvassing and real estate valuations, taking the average of all the families residences to create a rating. Their rating ranges from \$A as the "Highest wealth zones," to \$E, the "Low wealth zone." This, I argue, presents a more useful method to track longitudinal changes in wealth over the census' data on income, for two reasons. First, the Cole Directory marks small business owners and marketers as their primary audience, providing guides for various financial possibilities and responsibilities available in an area. Given that audience, I find it reasonable to utilize this as a marker for the health and investments prospects of an area, given the methods the Cole Directory estimates their wealth rating. Second, the abstraction of wealth into ordinal data can avoid questions of inflation and inaccurate representations of the purchasing power of the dollar in different points of time. As such, it'd be more accurate for longitudinal study purposes

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<sup>1</sup> Different names are also: Cole's Directory of Houston and Harris County; Cole Directory of Greater Houston and Vicinity

to use wealth ratings by an information services company over utilizing money as markers, even if the methodology for creating wealth ratings is not rigorously defined. The use of business directories is inspired from Kosta's (2019) similar use to track gentrification on a commercial level. Given that commercial-level gentrification is not the primary focus of my research, I will not be employing Kosta's methodology on an exact basis. That said, I found that the cultural changes that occurred within Midtown and East Downtown are centered around commercial space-making, and so future studies on these areas will find his methods invaluable to better understand how gentrification occurred on a precise level.

## Results

### Cultural Destruction: East Downtown and Midtown, Formerly Chinatown and Little Saigon

Prior to the construction of the spectacle, cultural destruction was the *modus operandi* of district renovations. As the drive to urbanize and revitalize cities grew in Houston, the sole interest of restructuring the urban core was precisely in urbanizing it; if the culture survived or not was secondary, for the interest of parties involved in accumulating value within the district was around restructuring it to be more competitive and marketable (East Downtown Redevelopment Authority 1999; 2008; 2011; Midtown Redevelopment Authority 1997). Competition and marketability, in the late 90s through the 2000s, often meant establishing new urbanist style gentrified districts: shotgun houses were replaced by townhomes, warehouses were converted into clubs and restaurants, and questions of walkability and branding became a major point of interest in revitalizations. Such changes laid the path for increased density at the cost of the culture that distinctly shaped the district.

As much in Little Saigon as in Chinatown, the cultural destruction brought about by urban re-development was totalizing in its effect. Both districts were impoverished and mostly forgotten prior to the push towards revitalization, allowing it to create an organic cultural center for their respective communities. As money was pumped into both districts, land value raised, rents soared, and the businesses and residents that were previously in these areas moved outwards. Both moved towards the southwest, concentrating in a district that would later be named *Asiatown*. As a result of the displacement, names were replaced: Little Saigon became Midtown, and Chinatown became EaDo. To avoid any transitory naming errors, I will refer to them in their contemporary names.

### *Midtown*

Unlike most other distinguishable districts within the City of Houston, the midtown district was not established culturally primarily from a residential population. Rather than the district being primarily a Vietnamese residential community, the district became a Vietnamese cultural hub due to the businesses, religious and cultural centers, and organizations serving the Vietnamese immigrant community (Hegstrom 2003). The lack of a residential-focused cultural character development is unsurprising: viewing the census, Midtown would see its population steadily decrease from 1,854 people in 1960 to 770 people in 1990. A steady decrease would be paired with a “\$D” value in the Cole’s Directory Wealth Rating, a directory that releases yearly reports informing would-be companies the level of risk and statistics they can expect when placing a business. Both the decreasing population and the low wealth rating record allowed the district to have a flourishing Vietnamese commercial community. Low rents and a central location in the city would serve the community well, generating value for the business community alongside the district.



In 1994, the Midtown TIRZ was created by petition. Formed with the aim to revitalize the district, it and the 1996 formation of the Midtown Redevelopment Authority established a transition towards a new “mid-density, multi-cultural, mixed use residential community” that “Houstonians... can live in, raise families in, and point to with pride again” (Midtown Redevelopment Authority 1997:1-2). The aim: reshape the real estate of the area and introduce a form of urban and transit planning, covering 57% of the land in Midtown for renovation and revitalization. Main Street becomes a central heart of the redevelopment plans, developing the mixed-use landscape that reestablishes the district towards becoming a visibly urban and city-like space. Their strategy proved to be rapidly successful: between 1990 and 2000 the population rose to 3,886 residents and the wealth rating rose to a “\$B,” lurching the area in a wildly different direction. With a rising wealth rating and waves of new residents, the Vietnamese character began to break down. Midtown, once seen as Little Saigon whose space was dotted with outwardly Vietnamese symbols—most notably with bilingual street signs—quickly became untenable to maintain the character and feel that dominated the latter half of the 20th century. For businesses and restaurants, the choice was either to shift itself to cater around newly coming middle-class white residents, or to migrate out of Midtown and into the new Asiatown outside of the loop. Most businesses opted for the latter, reshifted the cultural atmosphere away from a Vietnamese-distinct district towards a more desired image of a vague multiculturalism that often meant non-whites would be given some space, but the hegemonic culture which codes the district would be middle-class white. The existing Vietnamese businesses that shifted their restaurants to primarily serve the new coming resident and customer base faced a similar destruction as those that left. This is because, although the name, the staff, and the owners may remain the same in any existing Vietnamese restaurant that survived the

shift, the business becomes a spectacle of the ethnicity it presents itself as, a spectacular reduction of a culture into palatable bite-sized portions that those familiar and unfamiliar can consume.

The spectacular reduction of a culture will later be used on a district-wide scale, as we'll see in the cases of Second Ward and Montrose but, for the case of Midtown, there was no explicit cultural spectacle that was created. As was noted, the aims of the TIRZ and Redevelopment Authority directors centered around the formation of a district that is multicultural, mid-density, and mixed-use. Although some brief comments were made about retaining the cultural heritage of the district—the Little Saigon heritage—the plans for abstract multiculturalism and the flight of most Vietnamese establishments towards Asiatown meant that there was no necessity to create a spectacle of a dying past. Although there was no intent for Little Saigon to be culturally destroyed in Midtown, few tears were shed by the redevelopment groups within the district. In fact, Midtown's history, as interpreted by the Redevelopment Authority, is that “the make-up of the neighborhood after 1990 was comprised of vacant land, abandoned buildings, a few single family residences, and a few prosperous businesses” (Midtown Redevelopment Authority N.D.). Seconding the redevelopment authority, Trinity Episcopal Church—recognized as the leader in the push towards forming the redevelopment authority and the TIRZ for Midtown—failed to recognize the significance of the Vietnamese community which, although only representing a 4.4% and 1.25% of the district population in 1980 and 1990, were higher than the city-wide average (.59% and 1% in 1980 and 1990). Instead, the history created by the growth machine considered the district to be a “period of decay,” (Trinity Episcopal Church N.D.) which would change through the revitalization efforts, now becoming a “thriving and revitalized area that exists today” (Midtown Redevelopment

Authority N.D.). Both fail to mention the Vietnamese community that transformed Midtown into Little Saigon, and so Little Saigon came and went, fading away from popular and official memory.

### *East Downtown*

East Downtown was the residential and commercial heart of the Chinese community. Brief historical sketches of the district date the arrival of Chinese immigrants in the 1930s, choosing the area due to cheap land value and the development of an On Leong Association, a Chinese merchants association that helped arriving migrants settle in the area and acted as a growth coalition for further developments of Chinese commercial and wholesale businesses (East Downtown Redevelopment Authority 2018). The formation of ‘Chinatown’ as an ethno-cultural space was dependent on the On Leong Association, the wholesalers, and retail shops that were central to the district’s economy. Much like Little Saigon in Midtown, the Chinese and Asian community as a whole were often scattered throughout the city once finding more permanent settlement spaces; as a result, the heart of the cultural distinction of Chinatown rested on commercial, logistical, and cultural (entertainment, religious, service) land use. Although the business and wholesale associations and companies flourished, the Cole Directory consistently gave the district an “\$E” wealth rating value, considering the EaDo population to lack the buying power that other districts maintained or grew.

Changes in the makeup of downtown affected EaDo’s value. In the late 1960s, Texas Eastern Corporation’s plans to create the *Houston Center* office blocks led to a continuous purchase and razing of building spaces west of the heart of Chinatown. With the project’s abandonment due to the 1982 oil crisis, many lots remained undeveloped and largely vacant, creating a sense of distance between EaDo and downtown. In the following years, the George R.

Brown Convention Center was constructed next to EaDo, reshaping the realm of possibilities for the development of the land surrounding it. This readjustment of possibilities towards the region's development was further added with the 1996 announcement of Enron Field's (now Minute Maid Park) construction next to George R. Brown. Although both megaprojects were not being created in EaDo and had a highway separation from the district, the existence of them became critical catalysts for the creation of both the Management District and the municipal TIRZ in 1999. The first project plan for the region aimed to expand Chinatown's retail and residential capacities, given the district was primarily centered in retail and warehousing, and had a low population which was correlated with the area's low density.

Two amendments would be made to the project plan. The first occurred in 2008 and was motivated by the acquisition of 422 acres into the district, pushing the TIRZ board of directors to adjust their strategy accordingly. Although the first amendment didn't have any fundamental changes to the original project plan, redevelopment efforts raised the land value, pushing more Chinese community members out of the district. Similarly to Little Saigon, the push-effect caused by rising costs would be paired with the draw of the growing 'New' Chinatown within the Asiatown district, in turn reorienting EaDo as 'Old' Chinatown, never recovered from the slowed commercial activity of the 1990s. Old Chinatown rebranded itself to EaDo in 2009, and the second amendment solidified the new strategy that follows a similar course of Midtown: urban, mixed-use, multicultural, and pedestrian-friendly and attractive. Wealth rating in the district shot up due to the success of the project plans and the construction of the BBVA (now Shell Energy) stadium across the highway from the George R. Brown convention center and Minute Maid Park, seeing the district rise to an "\$A" by 2015. Scattered remains of "Old" Chinatown still exist in the district: some wholesalers are still open for business, the Tien Hou

Taoist Temple still rests next to the highway, and other smaller spaces remain unmoved, acting as fossils for the district that relegates them to its history, largely indifferent to any memorialization of its Chinese history beyond murmurs of possible historical markers placed in future parks.

Memory served a larger purpose for the gentrification of EaDo than it did with Midtown. While both had a similar cultural destruction of the Asian community that centered itself in the district, EaDo's roots in warehousing and logistics served as a central facet for its gentrification. Midtown was reshaped towards the urban; it did not matter who or what would be reflected within it, so long as it was mid-density and mixed-use. Midtown thus becomes an interesting beginning for the city's gentrification efforts, providing the cleanest example of a revitalization program neglecting the area's cultural history when conducting gentrification efforts. The aim was to establish an urban district with the walkable urbanist characteristics of transit and pedestrian oriented mixed-use neighborhoods, blending the residential and commercial markets and speculation together in a mutually reinforcing manner. They succeeded. EaDo, revitalizing a few years after Midtown, shared a similar vision but differed from Midtown, given stated intent in the early project plans to revitalize it *for* Chinatown rather than a vague future multicultural community. Despite this, as Chinatown faded out of the district, there seems to have been no attempts in recapturing the cultural symbolism and memory. No spectacle was created for EaDo, apart from typical warehouse/industrial refabrications into residential and artistic spaces typical of gentrification. The previous culture, as a result, was razed and buried, making way for *the urban*, best symbolized by the three-story townhome so readily used in both districts.

## On Creating the Spectacle: *Montrose and Second Ward*

After Midtown and EaDo's complete cultural reshifting, future communities would not suffer an overtly similar process. While I cannot say with certainty what has moved MMDs and TIRZ away from a destructive model towards building spectacles, there are different factors that may have influenced the switch. Previous studies have shown that incoming residents have complex, even opposing, opinions on cultural changes in a community due to gentrification (Brown-Saracino 2009). This is because incoming residents who are classified as gentrifiers are not a single monolith. Instead, there are three different abstract types of gentrifiers: the pioneer, who assumes the characteristics and aims of the typical gentrifier; the homesteader, who has interests in changing aspects of the community they integrate themselves in, but do so in a way that retains an essence or spectacle of the area's culture intact; and last there is the preservationist, who is conscious and actively opposed to gentrification due to connections to displacement and the destruction of a community's culture (4-13). Given the nature of preservationists and homesteaders, it could be reasonable to assume that this serves an influence, if minor, towards the pathways for district redevelopment.

In tandem with the influence of newcomers/gentrifiers in a neighborhood under redevelopment, there are cases in which cities have more to gain in marketizing an already existing neighborhood character rather than destroying it outright. With city growth machines and municipal governments perceiving cities as competitive market hubs in a world or global cities system following the rise of neoliberalism, cultural and symbolic capital become increasingly important to exploit as a means to gain an edge. It is better for a city to have more culturally distinct districts that are marketable; in other words, the community not only has to have a distinct look and feel, but it needs to be distinct in a way that is enticing for newcomers

and/or tourists more so than the longstanding residents. EaDo had some consideration for this in their early project plan, even if the image of Chinatown was destroyed within the district in the following years, and it may have been a key element to set the stage for future district redevelopments to be more conscious around long-standing culture and its position within gentrification. Montrose and the East End would, therefore, grow differently than what was before, bringing and centering elements of the community's culture in the forefront alongside the urbanization projects the city as a whole seeks to make.

### *Montrose - Marketizing the Gayborhood*

The Montrose District has had the status as the city's gayborhood since at least the 1960s. Like many other gayborhoods across the country, Montrose doubled as a cultural and residential hub for the LGBTQ+ community, strengthening its cultural image as a gayborhood due to the rich nightlife that catered and was run by the community. The district's existence as a 'gayborhood' and the prejudicial attitudes typical in mainstream U.S. society allowed and restricted the district to an autonomous or marginal status, the choice of the two dependent on the opinions of the observer. In other words, 'gay' Montrose allowed its residents to have access to cheap land to develop a longstanding and 'out of the closet' community without fear of reprisals or violence for doing so. That said, this also meant that Montrose would not be necessarily valuable or of interest for property owners and developers, casting the district to marginality despite its white-coded cultural status given its population hovering around 96.7% white in 1960 to 81.1% in 2000, higher than the 76.8% (may include Latinxs, given they were coded in the census as 'White') and 30.8% averages in 1960 and 2000, respectively.

Attitudes around the LGBTQ+ community in general warmed up at the turn of the century, bringing to the forefront the debates around the directions of gayborhoods and the gay

community as a whole. For Montrose, warmer attitudes around the community meant that the old status was now liable to change. Following the momentum of neighboring Midtown, the East Montrose Management District was formed in 2005, followed by West Montrose (and the inevitable integration into a *Montrose* Management District) in 2011. Little information exists about the first few years of the Management District besides lawsuits and court rulings breaking the power of the district, leading to a soft dissolution in 2018. In 2015, however, the city government established a TIRZ and a redevelopment authority that was far more successful in building community and developer support than the state management district. The TIRZ and redevelopment authority came at an ideal time where developers and speculators were finding Montrose a good location in which to invest. It is unsure whether the new wave of confidence in developing the district came in tangent with the formation of those city authorities, or because of them.

Two project plans were created: the first in 2015, and its amendment in 2020. Both plans were predicated on enhancing transportation, density, and developing parks and open spaces for pedestrians. This was a step towards developing the district towards multi-family mixed-use constructions, which is a vision for the district to reshape Montrose. These aims to make Montrose urban, while quite similar to EaDo and Midtown's stated aims, are far more interested in maintaining an LGBTQ+ image, even if it assumes itself as a veneer rather than being truly authentic. This is seen in the TIRZ's Livable Centers Final Plan, in which they remark that they will "continue to encourage all of the things that have made Montrose Montrose" ([2021:3](#)), placing emphasis on small business development, public art that emphasizes the Montrose *vibe*, and applying to become a historic district, preserving structures and places that were key points of the districts LGBTQ+ history. This development plan threads the needle between the



development of queer and, as a Montrose developer put it, ‘quirky’ spaces (Sarnoff 2015) that have ties to the past, all while marketing and exploiting the district’s history to increase value. The Disneyfication of Montrose lies in subtle distinctions that maintain a presentation of the district as a gayborhood; distinctions such as rainbow-colored crosswalks, pride flags, establishments that present a queer aestheticism, and anything that generally visually codes the space as LGBTQ+ or artistic, regardless of whether or not this established spectacle is genuine. Tackling the redevelopment of Montrose by turning to its past and intensifying it makes sense from a cultural value production lens: because it uses an already developed cultural expression within the district, Montrose can evade Midtown and EaDo’s failed attempts of a vague, multicultural urbanity, focusing instead on playing up the uniqueness of a longstanding gayborhood within the city. In addition to having a unique, marketable identity, the gayborhood literature has shown that gayborhoods also double as a spectacle of cosmopolitan progressivism for incoming non-LGBTQ+ residents. Essentially, incoming residents can reap the benefits of living in a marginalized, urban community, without needing to live in nonwhite neighborhoods, often perceived as more dangerous and crime-ridden (Chiricos, McEntire, and Gertz 2001). This makes districts like Montrose more lucrative and places a stronger emphasis on maintaining elements of queer culture as redevelopment occurs.

The vice president of communications for the Greater Houston Partnership and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, when asked in an article about a changing Montrose, stated: “Montrose is a couple of miles from downtown, and we cannot be a world-class city if we hold on to what we used to be. We can either move into the higher-density required for a major city, or we can hang on to a past that is already gone” (Hogstrom 2021). Given that the concentration of businesses prior to the redevelopment shift existed primarily at the intersection of Westheimer

Road and Montrose Boulevard, the focal center of the character of Montrose centers itself there. Visual clashes exist on Westheimer between the old low-density bars and shops of historic Montrose, and the low-rise mixed-use buildings drifting westward from Midtown. The ‘Montrose Collective’ building best encapsulates the *New Montrose*; the collective, which isn’t a collective, rather a building, is a reimagined shopping center. Restaurants, ‘boutique workplaces,’ and ‘merchants,’ take up most of the advertised space, while LiveNation rents office space in the upper sections. Minimal effort is given to presenting a queer veneer to the collective, abstracting the LGBTQ+ perceived cultural characteristics to baseless words like inclusivity and eclectic, and throwing cultural/artistic rhetoric such as ‘collective,’ ‘creative canvas,’ and ‘independent merchants.’ Montrose is culture, Montrose is the arts; the murals and sidewalk crossings highlight the artistic and queer cultural past of Montrose, showing that *the community* made Montrose its home. While there are plans for establishing Montrose as a historic district, and therefore limiting the types of construction and demolition of buildings permitted, townhouse/low-rise expansions continue to develop, attempting to create a disjointed harmony between the detached housing typical of Montrose’s semi-urban past, and the townhouses that further build the density and higher value space desired by TIRZ.

### *East End/Segundo Barrio*

Although Latinxs have formed communities throughout most of Houston, the East End, and Second Ward in particular, have been a symbolic homebase to the Latinx and Chicane community. Much like neighboring EaDo, the East End was known primarily for its industrial and logistical weight over residential and commercial. Warehouses, light industry, railways, and businesses that supplement them are all key elements of vast swaths of the East End, particularly closer to the bayou and the Port of Houston in its Southeast. Although the industrial base gave

the district an importance to the city, particularly in relation to distribution and logistics, such importance did not translate into infrastructural and land improvements. The district was largely abandoned economically, marked by Cole Directories as “\$E” wealth rating value, leaving any commercial aspect of the district to be mostly populated by major storefronts and Latinx-owned businesses.

To speak of the East End as one district is quite impossible; although the Greater East End is officially one district and is managed by a single chamber of commerce and management district, the size and character of the different communities within the districts makes a single analysis quite unwieldy. This is especially true when considering the formation of the management district in 1999 and the municipal TIRZ in 2011, whose objectives in the past 10 years have varied in different sectors. In the East End, the developmental method geared itself around what they call “strategic corridors;” these strategic corridors would have different developmental aims: in the easternmost section next to the port and refineries, called Harrisburg/Magnolia Park, the development is geared around improving the industrial and warehousing capacity of the district; the northernmost section, called Second Ward, would be geared towards commercial and residential redevelopment similar to the gentrification occurring in EaDo, Midtown, and Montrose. For the nature of our study, I will be focusing on Second Ward itself. Although this provides an incomplete picture on the gentrification and cultural redevelopment of the East End as a whole, I defend my decision to limit my analysis on the Second Ward on grounds that it is representative of the end cycle of development within the district. Whether planned or accidental, redevelopment in the East End appears to create distinct waves of gentrification. The oldest and most gentrified sections are within Second ward, which shares boundaries with EaDo and Downtown; the newest projects for redevelopment are closer

to Magnolia Park, furthest away from the Downtown area. Viewing the documents that are produced by Greater East End Management District, there is little doubt as to the intention of transforming most, if not all, of the East End to match a gentrified “Latinx” aestheticism that makes up the current culture of Second Ward.

The “Latinx” aestheticism of the district forms the heart of the spectacle. As the Latinx population in Second Ward fell from 74.5% in 1990 to 31.5% in 2020, less than Houston’s 44.5% Latinx population, the district appeared to develop stronger Latinx and industrial visual cues. For the residential parts of Second Ward, the industrial played out the strongest: townhomes generally adopted a slanted roof, mimicking the old warehousing roof style; certain houses were given a corrugated wall finish, resembling shipping containers that were once frequent throughout the district; and the color schemes in the newly built or redeveloped homes bring memories to the paints used to give warehouses and certain mills/factories, particularly silver grays, dark-reds, and navy blues. On the commercial side, the name of the game was cultural nods to their Latinidad. There was a major focus on Navigation Boulevard, which is one of the longest streets within the East End and the centerpoint for economic/cultural activity in Second Ward. Navigation, nicknamed by the management district as “El Corazón de la Comunidad” (Joyce 2014) leads the way in the Latin-Americanization of the increasingly non-Latinx area; through mural-making, restaurants taking a deeper Latinx character to the point of caricature, and, most importantly, the creation of an esplanade, Navigation is able to situate itself as firmly Latinx, as seen by the gaze of the United States.

Navigation’s esplanade highlights the district’s Latinx roots, industrial past, and the walkable future the management district and associated developers hope to bring to Second Ward and the broader East End. The Latinx roots come from its bright pink and orange colors,

reminiscing ideas of the “pueblos mágicos” of Mexico / Colombia/ Central America, as well as the near-stereotypically Mexican papel picado on the iron archways, that memorialize the industrial heydays of the district, running along the esplanade. Then comes the esplanade itself: the very existence of a walkable and semi-commercial space in between traffic-ways have their ties to Mexican cityscapes, particularly in more tourist-centered districts within CDMX. Its differences lay in the commerciality of the space: in Mexico, the commerciality comes not from the creators/owners of the space, rather from the informal economy of street vendors; in Navigation, if/when there’s any commercial activity occurring it is either from district events or from the sparse brick and mortar, or corrugated steel, micro-shops that was built as part of the visual space. Thus, the prized Latinization of the district becomes overt and supports future plans of the 15-Minute Neighborhood, plans idealized for the East End in which bike-riders, pedestrians, and small-shops can take hold. The theme for our 15-minutes would be (post-)Latinx and post-industrial, for a younger and more financially capable audience, slowly chipping away at the family-centered low-income district the Second Ward (and broader East End) once was.

### *“Affordability” and the Micro-Living Phenomenon*

Both the Montrose and East End/Second Ward community developers have devised plans for tackling questions of affordability in an ever-increasingly expensive district. For Montrose, the Livable Centers strategic plan addresses affordability as a challenge within the recommendations section; this is because Montrose is already expensive. Rising housing and rent costs have steadily grown and have been displacing residents, particularly noted are artists and LGBTQ community members, and as such the plans are focused more on retaining and developing the few spaces that *could* be more affordable, rather than halting or decreasing value

and rent costs. For development, two realistic options are available: working with developers to create mixed-income housing within the luxury housing projects that are underway and creating *Accessory Dwelling Unit* (ADU) developments. ADUs, “also referred to as garage apartments, mother-in-law cottages and granny flats,” are defined by the municipal government as units that “are above the garage or detached, free-standing units on single-family lots” (City of Houston). These ADUs, although potentially affordable, cannot support a family, nor are they discussed to behave as such. While the gayborhood, similar to national trends, have not been places for multi-generational families, centered more around singles and couples, the relegation of affordable housing towards small spaces or limited mixed-income options create uncomfortable situations where the poor are provided second-rate housing opportunities while incoming middle- and upper-class residents have much more varied options.

The East End, unlike Montrose, is not already inundated with unaffordable housing prices. While Second Ward has seen the highest growth of upscale, luxury housing (Luck 2022b), there are more opportunities to save affordable housing rather than reestablish it. With the new-coming 15-Minute Neighborhoods project, questions of affordability are tackled mostly by focusing their plans around micro-living. Micro-units, which are noted at about 400 square feet, are presented by the Concept Neighborhood developers as naturally having lower rents. This, paired with the planned mixed-income apartments lacking luxury amenities, are what are offered as solutions to questions of affordability. The former, much like the case with ADUs in Montrose, are unrealistic for families. The size of the units may be acceptable for single or paired residents, but would become an unsustainable burden, particularly related to mental health, for larger, low-income families (Evans, Seagert, and Harris 2001). In addition, micro-living schemas, such as our ADUs and micro-units in Montrose and Second Ward, target young single

people as a quirky, more affordable alternative to family-sized housing. This alternative, as Harris and Nowicki (2020) note, establishes itself as a solution to housing crises, when, in fact, it solidifies the issues by decreasing living space sizes rather than addressing high housing costs. As for the mixed-income apartments, the planned affordability portions are geared towards “people making between 60 to 80 percent of the area’s median income—about \$57,000 for a family of two” (Luck 2022a), which presents a critical contradiction. By gearing the mixed-income apartments around a family of two, which is smaller than the family and household sizes in the district, which have averaged around 4.28 family size and 3.73 persons per household in 1990 to 3.82 family size and 2.25 persons per household in 2020, the portions that are designed to be more affordable are out of step with the on-the-ground conditions of families residing in Second Ward. In addition, the estimates provided are, ultimately, speculative. What it would actually cost to live there, including in the sections demarcated as ‘affordable,’ will not be known until the housing is built and listed on the market.

## Conclusion: Where Have All the People Gone?

In this thesis, I have studied the two major approaches to Houston’s redevelopment efforts, whose efforts represent a shift away from the unplanned model influenced by the free-enterprise city ideology characteristic of the 20th century. These redevelopment efforts, organized by management districts and tax increment reinvestment zones, followed revitalization strategies that would reshape the city to become more urbanized and competitive within the world cities system. Such efforts have a positive relationship to city-wide strategies created by the Greater Houston Partnership, whose focus in the past decade or more has been around reimagining the city for the professional middle-class resident, furthering the development of

company headquarters and offices, as well as transitioning the city to become the dominant center of green-energy production and reframe the city's nickname as the "*Green Energy Capital of the World*" (Greater Houston Partnership 2019; 2020)

The two major approaches that dominated city redevelopment efforts differed in their approach to culture/community. The first efforts, best represented by Midtown and EaDo, had a largely indifferent attitude to the existing Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. Developmental interests centered around the construction of a low-rise, urban district; what culture would dominate the revitalized space was not a primary concern for the growth machine. If any space was devoted to considerations regarding culture, those considerations circled around vague ideas around reshaping districts into multicultural communities. As a result of such vague approaches to the cultural space-making of revitalized Midtown and EaDo, as well as rising costs fueled by the strengthened property values and a rising wealth rating, Vietnamese and Chinese residents faced growing displacement pressures, destroying any significant cultural presence they held in the community, leading to what I present as the districts' cultural destruction.

Redevelopment efforts that developed after the cultural destruction period reimagined the way revitalization occurred. Instead of destroying the cultural character of a community, growth machines would instead appropriate characteristics and create a spectacle of the district's historic culture. Montrose and East End/Second Ward become the most representative of this new approach, reshaping the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities' cultural characteristics to become more marketable and more visible. Care was taken to create strategies to develop cultural identifiers and symbols, developing public art and landscapes that are following particular cultural facets. In addition to retaining elements of the existing culture, questions around displacement were also tackled by the growth machines. Both provided more concrete proposals



of mixed-income housing that centered around ‘micro-living.’ These arrangements cater the proposed affordability to audiences who are younger and single over families, indirectly influencing the makeup of the community.

The revitalization strategies and their effects fall in line with research related to culture and its use in gentrification (Aptekar 2017; Hanhardt 2008; Rushbrook 2002; Zukin 1995; 2009), and the primary aims and makeup of the growth machines supports theses by critical theorists that our urban makeup is for the value accumulation and consumption of elites (Castells 1979; Harvey 1975; 2012; Lefebvre 1970). Although the research builds on existing frameworks and analyses without presenting any new theories or modes of analyses, the complexities of Houston’s redevelopment through its relationship between state/municipal governments with the development of growth machines, and the use of cultural spectacles within districts to become more marketable and competitive, creates a new perspective on literature that has not tackled southern cities in a significant way. That said, it is important to mention an important limitation to the paper’s findings in not covering revitalization/gentrification efforts in African-American communities, who make up 22.5% of the city’s population. The gentrification occurring in Third (Barajas 2021) and Fifth wards (Snyder 2021), in particular, are worth exploring, and, considering Rucks-Ahidiana’s (2022) analysis of different approaches and intensities of gentrification based on race, may present a different perspective on the approaches studied here. In addition, the research does not take into account the complexities of people and their relationships to spatial changes, due to the research question focusing on the political-economic shifts of the city and its spatial development. Further research on the opinions, relationships, and lived experiences of gentrification and district revitalization is critical to have a better, more complex understanding of the topic and introduce a more human element to the findings.

Neil Smith, one of the major theorists on gentrification, was mockingly asked at his book launch party to give the solution to gentrification. He instantly replied ““a socialist revolution”” (Hackworth 2018:47). Whether or not his answer was sincere, it does create an interesting dilemma: how do you halt a process of accumulating profit from a commodity such as housing and land/property? Is there any other adequate solution other than decommodifying housing? Houston’s working-class inner city residents, if they wish to remain in the inner city, need to reckon with these dilemmas. If the Greater Houston Partnership succeeds in their aims of transforming Houston, the conditions of the working-class within the city will only worsen as the city is propelled into being a global city, however the partnership defines that term. I cannot give a solid answer on what solutions can be made to halt or alleviate the process, nor can I give an answer to the steps that need to be taken to decommodify housing. This thesis is merely a step towards resolving the dilemmas of district revitalization in a capitalist system; the solutions, I believe, fall on the hands of residents, civil society institutions, and experts/intellectuals, whose collective work can create new imaginaries and solutions to the rising tide of gentrification and displacement in Houston.

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