

# The Legacy of **DISPLACEMENT** in San Antonio



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by Rodolfo Rosales

After World War II, America was confronted with two major issues that would define America into the twenty-first century. The first issue was that while all Americans put their lives on the line in the war against fascism fought overseas, the cancer of racism continued to undermine the very life of our democracy. As W.E.B. Dubois stated in “The Forethought”, to the classic *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), “This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line”.

Ironically the first step in addressing this cancer at the national level was in 1948 when President Truman, albeit with an international reputation in mind in the wake of a world war against fascism, integrated the military. Then in 1954, described as “Simple Justice” the Supreme Court, facing an intense civil rights politics in the streets, ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas, that “Separate but Equal” was inherently unequal. The most powerful blow, however, emerged from the streets – The Little Rock Nine, the Greensboro Sit-in, the Freedom Rides, the Standoff with George Wallace, the March on Washington, the Bombing of the Church in Birmingham, killing Four Young Girls, the assassination of Malcolm X, Bloody Sunday: the March from Selma to Montgomery, the black student rebellions leading to the establishment of Black Studies on university campuses – with these actions and events simply being the highlight of a tumultuous intense struggle for racial justice. The end result was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

## **The Historical link between Housing, Community and Poverty**

The historical struggle for racial and social justice is far from over, especially as we race through Trump’s destructive four-year term. In the midst of a public health crisis unmatched by any in our history, we face the efforts of a solipsistic President to delegitimize the voting rights of Blacks and Latinos, refusing to accept the legitimacy of our national general elections, refusing

to lead in the struggle against one of the most devastating health crisis faced by the U.S., a continuing tragic and wanton killing of Black lives by police actions across our urban environment, an economic crisis in the midst of the pandemic, lack of access to decent health care, a crisis in access to housing for millions of Americans, and on January 6 a failed insurrection on our Congress - we have a long and hard journey ahead, even with Donald Trump limping off into the sunset.

Through all of this, the most profound issue that we face as a civilization beyond this horrible period, aside from climate change, is the widespread poverty that we have faced throughout the history of this nation. When you are poor you don’t have access to education, to health care, to a decent paying job, to a decent and safe community – to a voice – and what connects all of those needs is a decent place to live which is the one issue that is ensconced in the economic analysis of society, or in more precise terms, hidden, is housing. This observation becomes critical when the foundation of politics has historically been a space that is universally called community, in a space where we can extend ourselves to each other. Following this logic, a home presupposes community, the space where home is protected, where culture and its traditions are produced and preserved, and most important where agency/citizenship emerges. The point is that the link is from community to home. A place to live does not in itself make a community. But a community does presuppose homes, not simply houses. From this perspective, a nation’s ability to reproduce a civic culture emerges from the linkage between home and community.

In the midst of this grinding history of poverty, the first half of the 20th century exposed an incredible uncaring attitude in our national political leadership. During this period the government focused on a housing policy that was geared to the needs of the upper class and middle class white urban residents: “Upper- and middle-income Americans found their ability to secure quality housing greatly enhanced by federal income tax, highway, and other pro-suburban policies. By contrast, Congress proffered increasingly



miserly aid to low-income families for whom the goal of homeownership remained plainly unreachable.” (John Bauman, et.al.).

This was exacerbated in the Sun Belt era as our post-WW economy began to restructure in response to the decentralization of production at the cost of cities in the manufacturing belt, better known as the “Rust Belt.” Industries fled to the Sun Belt seeking cheaper costs to do business in the anti-union, anti-tax environment of right-to-work states. Eventually this bleeding from the once mighty industrial centers only paused in the Sun Belt on its way to greater profits internationally where unions were almost non-existent, taxes were minimal, bringing production costs to a minimum.

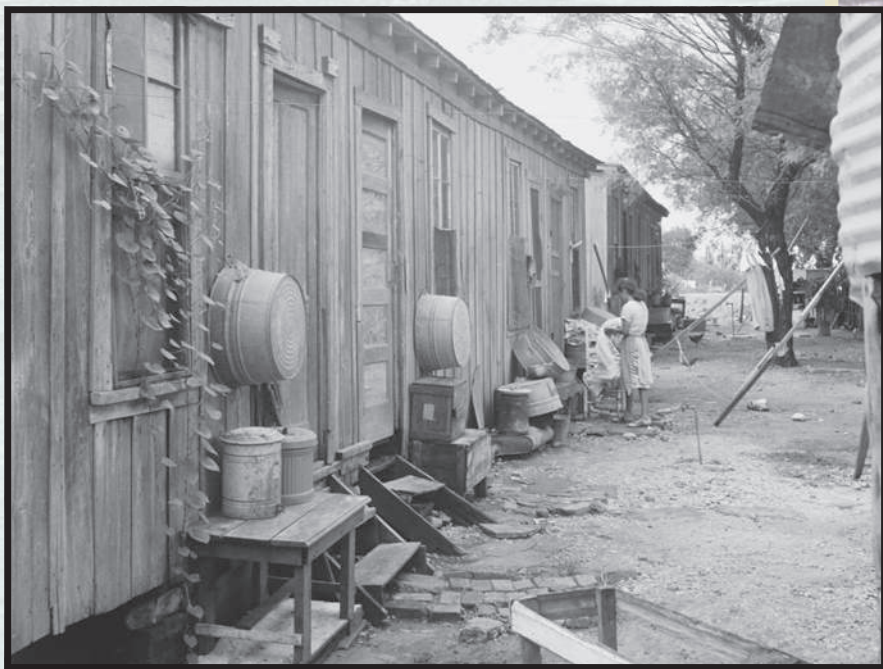
Meanwhile cities were in a fierce competition for the investment opportunities presented by this restructuring. Cities from Sacramento to Phoenix to Dallas to San Antonio, including cities in the south, all engaged in growth outwards and at the same time in the re-gentrification of older established neighborhoods. Many times, this meant the razing of older neighborhoods. The question remains “where do all the families that have had to live through that chaos go?”

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 seemed to be the answer to this complex “social problem.” The problem, though, was that housing was not approached as a social issue, it was seen as an economic “gold mine,” and as such it ended up in the hands of private interests who were more interested in profit than solving a social problem. Indeed, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s meticulous analysis of housing and the Black community in the Post-World War II housing reforms provides a devastating picture of how black families fared in those reforms. (Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor) Caught in a vicious triangle of greed by the real estate industry, the financial institutions and governmental institutions, Blacks found themselves in a lopsided market of exchange value, where the houses they were sold consistently were lowered in equity while whites benefited from a market of use value (or home value) where the equity consistently rises with the market. Aside from a profound exposition and critique of the racial politics of real estate, her study points to the need for developing a community basis for addressing a system that heretofore overwhelmed individual families. The question then is not only how is this done but who are the main actors in providing an opportunity for community to grow and develop?

Shifting our focus to San Antonio, Texas, poverty has been for all of the 20th century a grinding reality with families crowded into living conditions where apartments, called “corrales” (corrals in English) were literally organized around a single water faucet, that is if they had water. Without saying, health care for most poor families was for all practical purposes delivered in the emergency room at the Robert B. Green Hospital downtown, the only public hospital in San Antonio. The public schools in the poor neighborhoods were intensely segregated and poorly funded, not to speak of the intense starvation wages that were the rule. Indeed, poverty in San Antonio after World War II stubbornly remained a pervasive reality.

## San Antonio: A Colonial Reality

It was not until the 1960s that Mexican Americans had any presence in the governance of San Antonio. From 1951 to 1987, the city was dominated by a White business coalition, the Good Government League, whose primary goal was growth and expansion. Health care for most poor families was still for all practical purposes delivered in the emergency room at the Robert B. Green Hospital downtown. The Mayor at that time, Walter McAllister, explains how they (Mexican Americans) just aren’t motivated to improve themselves like the Anglos, adding “just too bad they (the police) don’t crack them over the head more than they do”. (1970 NBC Report). The Good Government League’s masterpiece was the construction of Hemisphere Park in 1968. The



Conceived at a time when housing, schools, and public facilities were legally segregated, Los Courts were built to provide affordable housing for San Antonio's majority Mexican American Westside. Providing modern amenities along with social and recreational activities. Los Courts were a welcome change from the overcrowded and often poorly built row houses, called corrales (corrales), that were common along the Alazan and Apache Creeks in the early 20th century.

land upon which it was constructed was on 90 acres immediately south of downtown San Antonio.

Steve Bennett, journalist, found in his research on Hemisphere Park one of the oldest neighborhoods in San Antonio: “Just south of downtown, its people and architecture reflected the melting pot of immigrants — German, Polish, Alsatian, Mexican, African-American — who had established their homes in the area since Texas was a republic.” “It was a real mix of people, and architecturally, the neighborhood took a little of La Villita, a little of what’s now called La Vaca and a little of King William,” said Lewis S. Fisher, principal of Fisher Heck Architects, local experts in preservation and historic restoration. “It was a real San Antonio neighborhood.” (Steve Bennett) The end result was not good for anyone concerned in that neighborhood; the renters were left without any resources to find new homes and/or communities and older established residents lost homes that were there for generations. Beyond that, perhaps the most efficient tool in the move to return capital to the inner city was the establishment of Urban Renewal. As Marisol Cortez describes it:



"As with other cities globally since the 1960s, the move to return capital to inner city San Antonio has been framed by neoliberal theories of wealth generation through the attraction of "creative class" professionals and private investment. For the historically neglected neighborhoods peripheral to downtown, redevelopment has primarily meant the various displacements of gentrification: land grabs, privatization of parks and public spaces, demolition of historic landmarks and sacred spaces, and the expulsion of the poorest and most vulnerable residents from the urban landscape, primarily the poor and homeless of San Antonio's majority Brown and Black population. (Marisol Cortez "No Nos Moverán: Embodying Buen Vivir.")

According to John Salazar, the San Antonio Metro Region leads the nation in poverty. The demographics of this poverty, while taken for granted by the citizens of San Antonio is horrific. The overwhelming majority of impoverished families are Latinos,



with 62% with a high school diploma. The literacy rate in the impoverished areas is 25%. Lastly the per capita income is \$22,557.00. Considering that education defines the path to success in society, then it is not simply the very poor (19.22%) that are insecure in their housing. While there are impoverished communities throughout San Antonio and Bexar County from the southside to eastside, the incidence of a major part of this poverty is in the near westside. Ben Olivo, of the San Antonio Heron, points out:

But with development comes a downside. Some community members are concerned about the potential for mass displacement caused by rising property values, predatory practices by investors and code violation enforcements in a part of San Antonio many people consider the cultural heartbeat of the city. If the West Side gets gentrified, what's left?

Trinity University's Drennon echoes the same sentiments::

"It's going to be so beautiful, but at the same time, it's going to increase people's property values," she said. "If we do nothing to address that, the question becomes, 'Are we more comfortable with beautiful creeks or with the displacement of people?'"

Indeed, the profound class divide is clearly observable. Most of these families are there not because of choice but because of

availability of housing. But in a counter-intuitive sense, a second reason is because of community. "Aunque sea en pobreza, la gente tiene sus propias raíces en su comunidad" (Even in poverty people have their own roots in their community). Across the city, poor communities show their pride in their communities through their parishes, churches, schools – this despite the characterization of barrios as crime and drug infested. Indeed, this seemingly contradictory picture is true because communities continue to struggle with the social problems they face in their poverty.

## Veblen's Absentee Ownership in the Westside

The irony that we address in this essay is that in the westside today that we have an agency, The San Antonio Housing Authority, governed by a board of directors and a professional executive director from outside the very community that they pretend to know what is good for a particular public housing community in the Alazan Apache Courts. Or perhaps, their vision is based on the idea that the good of the many outweighs the good of the few.

One could argue that the good of the larger community, San Antonio, outweighs the good of the few, the 600 families in the Alazan Apache Courts (public housing built in 1939). The good can be defined by the fact that the Alazan Apache is seen as an eyesore, riddled by crime, drugs, and of course we must not forget poverty. As well the structures are old and dilapidated, beyond a reasonable effort to rehabilitate. We also have to add the plans to build middle class apartments that will provide the incentive for investment in a part of San Antonio that is, as I mentioned, an eyesore and not a good target for the development that San Antonio seeks as it attracts development away from the sprawling suburbs to the inner city.

The problem is, as the title for this subsection states, what we are witnessing is a leadership in an agency that knows only the business side of development. They are not part of that community that has been through thick and thin; a community that is being treated not unlike stock on a ranch: "round them up, move them out." Thorsten Veblen addressed the issue of powerlessness of communities in the face of the unfeeling competitive capitalist society in his book, *Absentee Ownership*. And, indeed, this continues, in different forms, to this day.

What we are witnessing today, and it is nothing new, is a public agency, whose goal is to address the issue of housing for the poorest communities, using their public power to displace communities to advance the interest of important economic actors in our community. The argument, of course, that has been advanced by the leadership at the agency is that they are planning new housing units for the dispossessed. (did I say dispossessed? My bad.). The flaw in the policy of erasing an entire community to build nicer units, from a Veblen concept of absentee ownership, is that renter occupants have no rights in the face of an aggressive economic take-over of the place of living of hundreds of families. Added to that, the promise made to displaced families has rarely been met. Finally, absentee ownership is in direct opposition to a community's right to living space.

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# Notas Y Más

March 2021

Community meetings and art events are currently on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Check websites, FB or call 210-228-0201 for virtual meetings and arts programming each month. [www.esperanzacenter.org](http://www.esperanzacenter.org)



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¡Mil Gracias!

## Displacement

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Through a long historical string of displacements San Antonio continues to place "growth and expansion" as a

priority over the communities that it has to serve. The leaders of this city, both political and private, have continued to plan with a blind eye to families and communities in neighborhoods as well in public spaces, such as public housing. The problem in a competitive urban market economy is the language of economic competition establishes a political narrative that negates the needs of communities.

## Conclusion

Hence, herein lies the critical issue. SAHA is insistent on displacing an entire community in the name of economic development, in the name of beautifying our wonderful city.



As it is, capitalist development has taken over as a priority by those who as absentee owners do not even have an interest in the public housing units except as a golden apple for developers. However, using public resources to seed development, SAHA's persistence on removing 600 families with no consideration for the intangible elements of a community, such as education, church, heritage, interrelationships, - the stuff that makes a community possible - flies in the face of a housing policy that has as its goal to house the poorest among us.

The good news that SAHA has canceled their plans to raze the Alazan Apache Courts in the name of development, however, is only the first step in the struggle against gentrification and its devastating impact on communities in the westside, southside and eastside. Not to rest on our laurels, the second step is to step outside the public housing struggle and revive what can be seen as community anchors, i.e., cultural centers, local museums - too many to mention. A third step is to build a united front of community associations, organizations, and advocates and convene a conference calling for a bill of rights that would address gentrification, displacement, rent control, and most important the right of families to their space in the city.

Endnotes available upon request from [lavoz@esperanzacenter.org](mailto:lavoz@esperanzacenter.org)