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Cultural Chronicles – Uncovering the Legacy of Oppressive Black Architecture in Memphis and Other Cities

Architectural structures and the spaces they create are not neutral; instead, they mirror the values and power dynamics of the societies in which they are constructed. This observation is particularly noticeable in the buildings African Americans inhabited throughout American history. Nevertheless, Black architecture has yet to be recognized as a culturally significant field within academia. To tackle this issue, this paper seeks to expand the architectural discourse by exploring what constitutes Black architecture. Specifically, we will investigate the histories of five houses that hold a particular place in African American historical architecture:

- The barrack,
- The slave cabin,
- The shotgun house,
- The housing projects,
- The Black suburban homes.

Our investigation will delve into the repercussions of each style, the societal goals in establishing each class, and the policies passed that instigated their creations. We will emphasize the connections between these styles and how each type has changed over time. This exploration will allow us to scrutinize Memphis' architectural choices, placing them in the broader context of architectural trends at the national and regional levels. Exploring Black architecture's evolution will also help us comprehend how architecture can contribute to racial inequality in our society. We aim to challenge the notion that architecture is only a symbol of beauty, shape, and form and instead recognize its potential to perpetuate subjugation, oppression, and control.

Keywords: African American History, Architectural History, and Housing

Introduction

In the heart of Memphis stood a small single-family home, a time capsule of memories and history. Purchased by my grandfather in 1975, seven years following the 1968 Fair Housing Act, it was an improvement over the LeMoyne Gardens Housing Projects in which my grandparents grew up. As a child, the house seemed massive, but looking back, it was a small three-bedroom house where I played hide and seek with my cousins. It is significant to me because it was the place where I often visited and celebrated my first Christmas. Incidentally, it also exposed me to pockets of racial residential segregation, a housing crisis, and historical buildings defaced with graffiti. My fascination with my grandparent's house and observing the decay of other surrounding structures led me to investigate the history of Memphis.[1]

Memphis sits along the Mississippi River in Western Tennessee. In the Antebellum South, it was prominent due to agriculture, lumber, and slavery. After the Civil War, Memphis' Black population increased from 3,000 to approximately 20,000. Many formerly enslaved people sought protection from the Union Army. The changing demographics led to the Memphis Massacre of 1866, where White mobs burned several Black houses (Ash 157). Redlining policies later influenced housing discrimination in Memphis. These policies were a systematic denial of various services to Black American residents.

Through redlining, sizable, Black-populated areas like Orange Mound were outlined with red on maps to warn mortgage lenders. In turn, isolated Black neighborhoods suffered lower levels of investment than their White counterparts in the northern, southern, and eastern regions along Poplar Avenue. In yellow-lined areas, real estate agents practiced blockbusting, buying homes below value to perpetuate depreciation. This practice quickened "white flight, the mass movement of the White middle-class from cities to suburbs" (Bradley).

Working-class Whites moved beyond the city's eastern boundary, first to Frayser and Whitehaven and later to Germantown, Cordova, and Collierville. There, they built hospitals, schools, roads, and shopping centers. In 1984, the I-240 freeway loop directed businesses away from inner city Memphis toward the suburbs. This procedure also intensified white flight and led to the disinvestment of Memphis' inner city. Today, East Memphis has the highest concentrations of educational attainment, wealth, and jobs. In Memphis, 42 percent of Blacks own a home compared to 72 percent of Whites (Bradley).

The awareness of Black Memphians lacking the power to shape their environment catalyzed my inquiry into the history of Black housing. This exploration led me to consider Memphis' architectural choices within the broader national and regional trends. What emerged from this analysis was a striking revelation about the profound influence of our society and culture on architecture. It became evident that the designs of Black housing were not merely products of architectural ingenuity but rather intertwined with the nation's complex history of inequities and oppression.

[1] This paragraph is original and not plagiarized. The author wrote this paragraph for a graduate school application in 2018 and uploaded it to Course Hero in 2019.

In his 1994 thesis "Precedent in African American Architecture," Dr. Lawrence Sass described African American architecture as a system that "prioritizes the use of space over building form" (35). Essentially, Black architecture prioritizes simplicity, aiming to accommodate multiple individuals without fixating on geometric mechanisms or specific materials. The primary concern is creating a space where those who work can find rest.

Yet, it is significant to highlight that African Americans lacked the authority to make these design decisions. Instead, the concept and form were preordained, dismissing their perspectives and constraining them from controlling their living spaces (Hooks 146). A Black American wishing to design their own house was a fantasy (Hooks 149). This lack of agency in architectural choices underscores the deeply ingrained systemic inequality that continues to shape the built environment for many African Americans. From slavery through Jim Crow, African Americans faced severe restrictions on determining their housing conditions, creating a legacy that limited their ability to envision a future beyond their current locations. A closer examination of the origins of Black housing in the United States, particularly in Memphis and other cities, can reveal the public policies and architectural practices that shaped these buildings and spotlight the limitations placed on African Americans in controlling their living environments. This historical context is crucial for recognizing how architecture has played a role in perpetuating inequality.

The Beginning: The Rise of Colonial-Era Barracks and Their Role During Slavery

Our examination will begin with an analysis of barrack-style housing, the earliest American colonial housing for enslaved individuals. We will discuss its features and societal goals in establishing the style and compare early African laborers' living standards to those of English colonial settlers. Since Memphis was not established until 1819, delving into the barracks offers a basis for comprehending the initial structural layout of Black housing and how this design decision impacted the development of later buildings in Memphis and other cities.

In late August 1619, twenty-one Africans arrived at the American colonies in Virginia aboard a ship called the *White Lion* (Kendi and Blain 3-4). Due to a lack of research on enslaved colonial housing, apart from Anthony Johnson, who later lived on a tobacco farm in 1640 (Gates et al. 00:05:00-00:10:00), there is little information on the type of housing African laborers resided in during the early years of colonialism. The housing in 1619 was not intended or built for these laborers, who were given Christian names and baptized. Furthermore, since Virginia lawmakers had not yet established slave laws, these individuals were considered indentured servants rather than enslaved under English Common Law (Pogue and Sanford). Howard Zinn argued that the different treatment of these twenty-one Africans indicated their enslavement ("Drawing the Color Line"). However, because African laborers lived close to English servants, we could speculate that they were considered indentured servants rather than enslaved people (Schlotterbeck 150).

Therefore, the barrack was likely the earliest colonial living facility for African and English settlers, but there was a juxtaposition between their living conditions.

English settlers considered the barracks a permanent living arrangement. Historian Dennis J. Pogue argues that the barrack initially served as a temporary holding cell for African laborers who survived the middle passage (Pogue and Sanford). Captors packed several unrelated people into these structures. Those who worked the land to grow corn and tobacco for export possibly lived in barracks-style housing with insufficient accommodations. Some planters separated barracks by gender.

For Africans, the structural layout of a barrack could be analogous to the barracoons, the Spanish word for a hut or slave pen. Barracoons were thatched African huts used by slave captors to temporarily transport and hold enslaved people until they boarded the slave ship. (Kingston 373). Both buildings had straw roofs and vertical timber walls. Both structures imposed "control over their workers" by limiting access to food and privacy and dictating movement (Pogue and Sanford). While the barracks were initially a typical living facility for non-indentured English settlers in Jamestown, unlike the barracoons, they gradually became a more permanent residence for captured Africans. In addition, racially segregated barracks were not the standard during the early years of American colonialism. John Schlotterbeck argued that Africans boarded with English servants in these buildings due to their indentured status (Schlotterbeck 150).

Although little information exists regarding the construction date of the first barrack, archaeologists have discovered a 26 x 16-foot barrack site in James City County dating back to around 1690 ("Barracks Reconstruction"). Interestingly, in 1995, Jamestown Rediscovery archeologists found a barrack from 1607 to 1610 ("Barracks Reconstruction"). This barrack may have been a spacious two-story building measuring 18 by 54 feet ("Barracks Reconstruction"). Other barracks, like barracoons, were typically long, single-story structures. However, in urban areas, some barracks were two stories or more. This research suggests that the barracks varied in general square footage.

While non-indentured English settlers later resided in timber-framed homes, early planters forced African laborers and indentured servants to continue living in cheaply constructed barracks (Gruber). Designers built these homes using mud and stud or wattle and daub techniques, typical colonial construction methods that utilized square vertical timber walls to support a mixture of mud, clay, sand, and straw. Mud and studs prevented rainwater from reaching the base of the walls. Chimneys were near the center of the building, and African laborers used them for heating and communal cooking. These chimneys were wood-framed and covered with clay. The barracks had a dirt floor, a wooden door, and open windows for daylighting. While English settlers had fully furnished homes, furnishings for Africans were minimal.

Historians identified the colonial barracks as earth-fast. These buildings had forked structural posts seated directly into the ground without footings. A current barrack site located in James City only contained rotten posts. This housing style accommodated twenty to forty Africans and English servants during the early years of American colonialism. But by 1630, lawmakers defined Englishmen as White Christians and Africans as Black heathens (Kendi and Blain 11). Policymakers labeling Africans as heathens stripped them of the Christian safeguards they once had and prevented them from becoming indentured servants. After colonial Virginia legislators passed laws allowing free people to enslave others in 1661, enslavement became the only option for many Africans (Henderson and Olasiji 243). Planters would use the

redefined status of African, now Black, laborers to justify substandard living conditions compared to their English, now White, counterparts (Kendi and Blain 13). As the number of enslaved people increased and many American colonial leaders outside of Virginia passed slave laws, slavery became a more defined institution, and houses were constructed specifically for the enslaved.

The rise of slavery did not mean enslaved Africans ceased to live in the barracks. A large brick barrack constructed in 1791 was next to George Washington's Mount Vernon Farmhouse (Pogue 4). This building contained four bedrooms and held sixty to eighty people. Each bedroom had one fireplace, but like the Jamestown barracks, the brick style had only one entry. The barracks on Washington's farm also had built-in bunks. Historic preservationists from Middle Tennessee State University identified a four-pen brick barrack-style building in East Tennessee. Designers constructed this slave house in 1843 (Gardner et al.). In addition, following the Civil War, plantation owners converted several slave barracks into tenant shacks in Memphis (Greene 14).

Due to economic factors, smaller plantations in the Deep South maintained barracks during the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Henderson and Olasiji 103). Washington, on the other hand, was outside the norm. Pogue speculated that Washington wanted stricter control over his slaves (11). Still, outside of Washington, most wealthy colonial planters changed their slave houses from barracks to log cabins, later termed colonial slave cabins, by the mid-1770s.

The Introduction of a Permanent Architectural Fixture: The Slave Cabin

Single-family cabins represented one of many quartering schemes on large plantations. Edward A. Chappell wrote that selecting the log cabin was due to many factors: the number of enslaved people, economics, social standing, and forced emigration (157). However, once children and older enslaved people populated the plantations, the barracks were associated with unmarried, childless enslaved people. Philip D. Morgan argued that transitioning from the barracks to the wood cabin meant slave settlements became more "communally oriented over time" (103). By 1775, the Virginia slave population had increased naturally through reproduction. This demographic shift led to the rise of slave children, which fostered family groups, replacing previously large clusters of early enslaved single men.

Consequently, the proportion of slaves born in Africa declined, marking a significant change in the composition and social dynamics of the Virginia slave population (Carson and Lounsbury 448). Due to this, slave settlements were more communal, and wooden log cabins became the preferred permanent architectural structure over barracks for slave families in the eighteenth century.

The ideal slave house was simplistic. It did not require traditional American amenities like columns, pediments, stairs, elevated spaces, or ordered rooms that would take up volume. The program of a slave cabin was work and rest, but the architectural layout of these buildings was to consider family formations. Where do enslaved children and their mothers sleep? How do partners reside with one another? Hence, farmers designed and constructed smaller private cabins to shelter

a half-dozen occupants with familial bonds and provide some security for married couples and their children.

Although the exact date of the first slave cabin's construction remains unclear, scholars have discovered written records of a Virginia slave cabin dating back to 1675 (Davidson). The most common building form was a single-cell or duplex. The single cell was a one-story single-family unit with one to two rooms. These single cells were elevated 2 feet from the ground (Orser 151). The duplex was a one- or two-story, two-family unit in one building. Two families were accommodated in separate rooms within a single cell, while a duplex could house up to four families.

The dimensions of a slave cabin were considerably diverse (Sanford and Dennis 6). A standard depth for a single was 16 x 18 feet (Carson and Lounsbury 157), which provided some space for upstairs bed chambers. Others were 8 x 8 feet or 18 x 20 feet, but a 16 x 32-foot duplex was more spacious than a single cell (Pogue and Sanford). The norm for interior spaces was 140 square feet, but the layout of a slave cabin depended on the master (Pogue and Sanford).

The arrangement of slave cabins varied, with some arranged like villages and others spaced approximately 50 feet apart. Enslavers placed some homes in a single file along a road or near the plantation. Slave cabins closest to the master's house were more valuable than cabins further away.

The colonial house was wood framed with vertical posts knocked into the earth (Davidson). The gabled roof and walls were made of thin wooden boards nailed in a horizontal row to fit the building frame. Slaveholders regulated domestic enslaved people into wood-framed kitchen houses. These houses, unlike the slave cabin, had superior roof shingle materials, but both buildings were still of inferior quality compared to the main plantation house. They were cheap in value and low maintenance. Enslavers forced multiple people to share living spaces. Eventually, small attics became communal living spaces for domestically enslaved people.

Over time, these buildings evolved into earth-fast log cabins with no foundation. Designers cheaply built duplexes, but many had wood trim boards and interior plaster walls. (Pogue and Sanford). Planters provided a brick-stone fireplace or hearth to keep residents warm, but windows were unglazed.

Earlier log cabins had minimal windows covered with wooden shutters. Near the fireplace, archeologists have discovered pits or deep holes for storage. Because many enslaved people had access to little or no furniture, they occasionally slept on the dirt floor and were forced to form more pits to acquire additional space for residents to sleep. Numerous people crowded in one to two rooms with little privacy highlighted the difficult living conditions and the ingenuity of those who had to make do with limited resources in cramped quarters. To the master, social standing or relationships dictated privacy and autonomy. For instance, George Washington's cook, Hercules, was given a private quarter with a key. Accounts of log cabins in George Washington's Mount Vernon indicated they were sparsely furnished (Carson and Lounsbury 148). Adults slept on a flat wooden structure called a mean pallet and had a small table and cooking utensils. Enslaved people used brick or stone fireplaces to prepare meals and produce light.

Chappell, credited with coining the term "building hierarchy," contended that a racial caste system determined the quality of slave housing (164). Under this system, enslaved individuals classified as a permanent underclass inhabited substandard

slave quarters, while White residents, ranked superior, enjoyed access to the highest living standards. The racial caste system influenced the materials used in the construction and architectural design of homes. For example, a high-status White house was a spacious wood-framed building with a shingled roof, but a slave home was often a substandard log cabin with no foundation. The legacy of this hierarchy can still be seen today in the historic preservation of White properties over slave dwellings. Eighteenth-century White properties were insulated and protected, while slave homes were often substandard and prone to deterioration. Due to their poor structural quality, many colonial slave cabins were decimated by 1790.

Therefore, planters designed improved slave quarters to accommodate the enslaved. Because more native-born enslaved people successfully negotiated their autonomy and living conditions, some had better housing conditions. Scholars argue that this shift was due to the American Revolution, the Enlightenment Period, and the Abolitionist Movement.

However, on numerous plantations across the American South, including Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and later plantations in Memphis, the log cabin persisted as the standard architectural choice for enslaved individuals (Pogue and Sanford). A former enslaved person in Memphis described living in framed, whitewashed slave houses where three or four families lived, typically arranged on each side of a street that traversed the farm (Andrews 380). These log cabins, characterized by their rudimentary construction and meager amenities, contrasted with the luxury of the main plantation house, serving as a poignant reminder of the profound disparities in living conditions between the enslaved population and their enslavers.

To address these disparities, some farmers replaced wood with brick (Crass 126). Unlike wood, which could rot or mold, brick was sturdy, long-lasting, and fireproof. These antebellum slave cabins also had insulation and ventilation to improve the health of enslaved people. Windows were glazed (Pogue and Sanford). The interiors of these brick cabins were coated with whitewash to cleanse and disinfect them. Most brick houses had side-gable roofs with shingle materials, which were less leaky than the roofs of log cabins. The dimensions of these buildings remained the same. Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century, the sizes of these brick cabins increased to approximately 230 to 250 square feet (Pogue and Sanford).

Although these efforts enhanced some living standards, they did not guarantee uniform or adequate housing conditions (Carson and Lounsbury 175). Many post--American Revolution slave dwellings still contained uninsulated brick covers and had no foundation. The floors were either plank or dirt, and each cabin had a fireplace with a brick hearth. Rather than improving housing conditions, planters sized or relocated slave cabins to express control over their slaves. Scholars have argued that brick slave housing was a method to visualize the master's strong labor force (Crass 126). Planters viewed brick siding as an aesthetic that blended with the landscape or showed dominance to the viewer. Jefferson, while still utilizing wood for his antebellum cabins, incorporated insulation but employed pathways to regulate and control the movement and positioning of his slaves. Jefferson ordered enslaved people to navigate a plantation without being seen. Mabel O. Wilson discussed the hidden passages in her essay Notes on the Virginia Capital: Nation, Race, and Slavery. She wrote,

> In these other designs, the high ground, both natural and man-made, provided Jefferson the opportunity to architecturally reconcile the paradox between freedom and slavery by placing some of the slave dependencies beneath the main living spaces in rooms and passages hidden from view. This way, the white-columned neoclassical building appeared to visitors as an idyllic beacon of democratic values overlooking sublime nature unsullied by the presence of these spaces in which unsightly slaves toiled to make the land fertile and the lives of white citizens comfortable (42).

Thomas Jefferson's approach to slave accommodations at Monticello reveals a complex interplay of design and control. While some provisions were made for the comfort of enslaved individuals, there was a deliberate concealment of their presence, emphasizing the priority of "white citizens" (Wilson 42). Furthermore, the architectural distinction between Monticello and the slave cabin becomes a poignant metaphor for the power dynamics at play. Early iterations of Monticello's design unveil a fascinating aspect of its floor plan, notably the arrangement of columns into octagons. The octagonal design expanded the space and incorporated numerous entry points, providing Jefferson with various pathways to move freely within his mansion.

In contrast, the slave cabin did not reveal column patterns but rather living arrangements, such as the kitchen or bedroom. The focal point was how families occupied the space rather than the structure's form. The slave cabin floor plan was also notable for its limitations. Because the Monticello floor plan had multiple entryways, the building symbolized Jefferson's control over his space and destiny. Enslaved people, on the other hand, had no space or control to move through their homes, as the limitations of a single-entry square plan reflected the confined agency of enslaved families. Hence, antebellum slave housing represented a paradox. Even if the planters believed they were improving the lives of the enslaved, their living conditions were still under control to appease White comfort.

Nonetheless, the improvements to the slave cabins played a factor in preserving their condition in the post-slavery period. Today, many wooden slave cabins no longer exist due to extreme neglect, but many brick slave houses remain. We should also note that Black Americans faced violence in free states. For example, New York City planners seized Black homes in 1857. The area is now Central Park ("Before Central Park").

Black Impact on an Architectural Fixture from Africa to Memphis: The Shotgun House

Like the brick slave cabin, the shotgun house, which emerged during the same era, marked a significant evolution aimed at enhancing the living conditions of African Americans. Initially employed as a slave dwelling akin to the traditional slave cabin, the shotgun house transformed into a residential structure during the Jim Crow era. This architectural change represented a tangible shift in Black housing. While the standard slave house persisted as a rudimentary wood or log cabin, the shotgun house, more commonly found in Haiti and New Orleans, distinguished itself with its community-ornamented design. The dual roles of the shotgun house, whether as

slave dwellings or residential homes, emphasized the enduring struggle for housing equality and improved living conditions for the enslaved population, reflecting the dynamic nature of African American housing.

Unlike the slave cabin or the barrack, the shotgun house uniquely contributes to American vernacular architecture. However, scholars have engaged in debates over this assertion. According to Jay D. Edwards, architectural historian Sam Wilson suggested these houses originated in the New Orleans Creole faubourgs (suburbs) in the early 1800s (64). On the other hand, John Michael Vlach, the author of "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy," theorized that the shotgun house originated in the Yoruba Tribe of Africa (67). Despite these conflicting theories on the origins of the shotgun house, many anthropologists and shotgun preservation groups have supported Vlach.

The term "shotgun" was first derived by Fred B. Kniffen in 1936 (Edwards 171). Kniffen referenced the word as a conventional folk term in Louisiana (62). Still, other historians argued that this word originated from the room format, where one could shoot a bullet from the front to the back. In addition, others have derived this term from the Yoruba word, togun, meaning home or gathering place. However, because architectural historians have questioned its origins, it is unlikely the term shotgun originated in Africa.

Compared to the shotgun house, the Yoruba tribal houses or huts had a similar rectangular frame. These huts varied in room number. Some huts contained two to eight rooms. The countless rooms in the floor plans suggested that developers freely increased their square footage. In addition, they had multiple exit options, which provided superior circulation patterns (Vlach 64-66). The walls were made of solid mud and were one-half to two feet thick. The roof was gable-like and made of straw. When Yoruba enslaved people arrived in Haiti, they maintained their cultural roots but were not permitted to increase their square footage or units. The Haitian rural house floor plan shows that rooms were limited to two to three. Therefore, multiple entryways were a feature for circulation (Kniffen 62). The rural Haitian slave quarters were a fusion between the African hut and the traditional timber-framed house. These rural buildings also had a rectangular plan with solid mud walls and steeply pitched straw roofs with a side entryway. Typically, these rooms measured 25 feet wide, with no hallway connecting them to the adjoining rooms. Instead, the entrance was parallel to the backside. Houses in urban Haiti were wood framed with a gable roof, but the shotgun house became narrow due to urban density. Narrowness meant a finite amount of square footage was allowed in an urban landscape. In addition, the front entryway, along with room doors, was fabricated to align with the rear entrance. This change allowed the resident to smoothly walk through adjacent rooms since these buildings lacked a hallway. Now, the shotgun house featured room-to-room connectivity, but it sacrificed bedroom privacy. Another significant shift in the urban style was the development of the porch, which provided a sense of character for the house and interconnectedness between residents via the streetscape (Vlach 58).

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Haitian Revolution, approximately twelve thousand free and enslaved Haitians migrated to New Orleans, LA. Many free Blacks and enslaved people brought the urban shotgun house style to the New Orleans suburbs and slave quarters (Cross 182-184). Despite subjugation, these homes represented their connection to Africa and their cultural traditions (Mansart).

The oldest known shotgun house in New Orleans dates to 1833 (Vlach 51). Like the slave cabin, the New Orleans shotgun house had a variety of styles. There were single, duplex, and camelback shotgun houses. Although the average square footage varied, most were 400 to 1,000 square feet. Some had hipped or gabled roofs, but Vlach argued that "floor plans were fixed and changed only with cautious innovation" (51). Many shotgun houses in New Orleans were Creole-style, but they also joined the Italianate, Greek Revival, Spanish Colonial, Creole, Eastlake, and Federalist townhouse architectural styles (McRae 23-30). Unlike the other housing types previously discussed, the shotgun house was uniquely fluid. One's culture and values determined the facade and elevation, but the floor plan layout was consistent. The roof provided an attic as a buffer between the occupant and the sun. Unlike the slave cabin, the shotgun house had a front porch to symbolize American culture, landscape, and community.

The parallel windows were uninsulated, and the room arrangement was basic. Two or more proportional rooms connected without a hallway meant the front door aligned with the back door. Some had foundations, but posts or concrete blocks held up others. An improvement to these homes was their spaciousness. The narrowness allowed for better circulation and less congestion for the occupants, but privacy and local amenities were minimal due to the room-to-room connections. These functional homes were not considered fine architecture but were seen as a reasonable solution for housing the poor in New Orleans.

Yet, Edwards claimed the shotgun house was not a popular building style in New Orleans (171). White and Black French Creoles strongly preferred Creole cottages (Edwards 64), but the shotgun house style spread throughout the American South after the Civil War. These new versions of the shotgun house were tiny and lacked amenities, reflecting the economic constraints of the time. However, lumber's abundance and low cost in the 1880s made construction more accessible, contributing to the widespread adoption of the shotgun house as an affordable housing solution despite its modest size and basic features.

Memphis saw the emergence of shotgun districts for the working or middle-class African American population. These shotgun subdivisions had housing units that were the smallest permissible on a lot, ensuring compliance with fire safety regulations (Johnson 9). In these subdivisions, row houses—continuous rows of single shotgun houses and duplexes—were spaced just five feet apart. The Italianate style was the most popular architectural style in these neighborhoods, but the Spanish Colonial style was also standard (Johnson 21). The Delmar-Lima Historic District was one of the first shotgun subdivisions available to various races in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Johnson 7). Eugene J. Johnson and Robert D. Russell, authors of *Memphis: An Architectural Guide*, described a historic row of craftsman shotgun houses on Wells Avenue. These houses had square brick pillars and round columns supporting the front porches (Johnson and Russell 93).

Due to restrictive black codes (Nittle), many freedmen were compelled to work as sharecroppers or domestic laborers and could only reside in shotgun houses or repurposed slave quarters. These homes dominated the lower parts of the Mississippi Valley but did not possess the decorative style typically associated with New Orleans shotgun houses. Freedmen were usually accommodated in substandard houses constructed with wood siding and had to rely on outhouses due to

inadequate sanitation facilities. Later, many Black and White tenant farmers lived in these homes and faced economic hardship and unsanitary conditions. Elvis Presley and William Christopher Handy were both born in shotgun houses and worked as youth tenant farmers (McPherson and Wilson 55). Most freedmen lived in poverty and rented slave quarters or shotgun houses in exchange for work. Due to the poor quality and limited living conditions of homes occupied by Black tenant farmers, these buildings were later called folk houses, slum houses, or shack houses.

The Unraveling in Memphis and Beyond: Segregated Housing and the Housing Projects

It is essential to note that a specific building type, such as the shotgun house, did not characterize segregated housing. Instead, it represented a systematic manifestation of how Jim Crow policies enforced segregated Black housing. Following the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman proposed an initiative that would provide 40 acres of land and a mule to some enslaved individuals. However, the policy was promptly abandoned after Lincoln's assassination, resulting in the loss of land for many.

Unskilled freedmen often resided in impoverished conditions, including slums, deteriorated shotgun houses, or repurposed former slave cabins. In contrast, skilled freedmen who had initially served as enslaved cooks, valets, blacksmiths, and in other capacities had the advantage of earning wages for their work. With their income, these skilled individuals could save and sometimes invest in land or construct homes. These gains marked a significant step toward economic independence and homeownership. In 1870, 11,000 African Americans had acquired $1,000 in real/or personal holdings, while 157,000 managed to move out of the propertyless group, and 43,268 had become landowners (Schweninger 4-5). According to the Washington Post, at least 200 established Black towns and communities existed nationwide in 1888 (Brown). African Americans controlled 16 to 19 percent of the U.S. land based on the 1900 census (Gilbert et al. 55). By 1910, 426,449 out of 1,741,019 families owned a farm or a home (Schweninger 4-5).

In Memphis, African Americans constructed numerous Victorian buildings in the prosperous, integrated Vance and Beale Street neighborhoods during and shortly after Reconstruction. One notable structure was the Queen Anne-style mansion of the first Black Southern millionaire, Robert R. Church (Crawford 13). Although there is little information on when Church built the house, Roberta Church and Annette E. Church, family members of Robert R. Church, described the property as follows:

> The Queen Anne style of architecture was three stories high. On the first floor, it contained five rooms; one was a double parlor, and there were halls in the center of the house. On the second floor were five bedrooms: one servant's room and four family rooms. On the third floor, situated on the first floor, there was a long double room and two rooms. It had a basement, a servant's house, a laundry on the back, some horse stables, and a large lot. The lot the house was built on ran back to the next street, which was Humphrey (Crawford 1).

This description of Church's house is emblematic of African Americans' broader struggle and triumph during Reconstruction. Freedmen, who previously had

limited autonomy in designing their living spaces, now had the opportunity for self-expression. Other Black Memphians, like Robert Church, chose a variety of architectural styles, from Victorian to Picturesque and later Craftsman. Although Queen Anne was loosely based on English Medieval prototypes (Mcalester 239), this style reflected one's descension to a wealthy status in Memphis from 1840 to 1890 (Gary 32). Therefore, Church embraced an architectural style that was both fashionable and a stark contrast to the oppressive structures of the past. This architectural shift signaled a move towards modernity and individuality after emancipation.

However, these gains would be short-lived. Public and private entities would soon push for the spatial separation of Blacks and Whites. This decision meant African Americans could be denied equal access to similar housing facilities as their White counterparts. The Supreme Court would uphold this practice with the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. It affirmed that racial segregation laws did not violate the 14th Amendment. Hence, segregated housing forced many African Americans to endure unequal access during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Lawmakers enforced segregated housing through various methods. They drafted racial covenants restricting White developers and real estate agents from constructing or selling homes to African Americans. Redlining, the refusal to loan or insure someone deemed a financial risk, was used to deny services to Black American residents. Developers and policymakers outlined sizable, Black-populated neighborhoods with red ink. Red meant a warning or hazard to mortgage lenders. This practice isolated Black areas and encouraged low investment. Developers, in contrast, outlined large, White-populated neighborhoods with green ink. Green symbolizes promise and future development. Hence, White communities received more economic investment.

An instance of this was the redlining of an integrated working-class Memphis neighborhood on Wells Avenue during the 1930s. Wells Avenue was an industrial hub and thrived in the 20th century as a prominent region for vibrant manufacturing industries, attracting many working-class Americans seeking opportunities. The influx of these Americans led developers to design a historic row of craftsman shotgun houses with jerkinhead roofs. Initially, these homes were reserved exclusively for White Americans. However, over time, African Americans began to occupy them and live alongside White Americans (Hopkins and Oates).

However, city officials enforced segregated housing after the Public Works Administration constructed Lauderdale Courts Public Housing and Dixie Homes in 1938. White Americans were permitted to live in Lauderdale Courts, while Black Americans were required to live in Dixie Homes. As additional housing became available to White Americans, many left Wells Ave., and African Americans became the dominant group. Consequently, Wells Ave. was redlined by 1952, resulting in economic disinvestment and the disappearance of manufacturing jobs (Hopkins and Oates). Today, the area has the highest poverty rate in Memphis, and the historic row of shotgun houses has vanished. Only two houses remain. One retained its architectural features, and the other lost its distinctive character.

The 1930s saw the Roosevelt Federal Housing Administration enforce redlining policies, while the Supreme Court affirmed racial covenants as legally binding documents in the 1926 decision Corrigan v. Buckley (Martin 732-734). Although the Supreme Court overruled its conclusion in 1948 with Shelley v. Kraemer (Gonda),

it was only in the 1968 Fair Housing Act that Congress nationally banned racial covenants and redlining. As a result, Shelley v. Kraemer remained unenforced for many years.

One could argue that redlining policies contributed to the slum clearance movement (Farooqi). The federal government sought to address the need for low-income housing by improving urban infrastructure or destroying ghetto or slum neighborhoods (Farooqi; Meyer 142). Whether a Black home was in a poor or upper-middle--class neighborhood, city officials stigmatized it as dilapidated or low-quality housing. This classification led Memphis housing officials to order the destruction of the then-integrated Vance neighborhood in 1941 to make way for Foot Homes Public Housing and later Cleaborn Pointe Housing in 1953 (Lauterbach). Slum clearances intentionally targeted successful African Americans in the neighborhood, including Robert Church, whose Queen Anne-style mansion was deliberately incinerated by the Memphis Fire Department in 1953.

Even if African Americans abided by segregation laws and racial covenants, they still faced violence. In the 1950s, Georgia officials displaced over a thousand Black people by flooding their homes in Oscarville, GA. The town is now Lake Lanier (Kerns). A White mob destroyed Black homes in Tulsa, OK, between 31 May and 1 June 1921.

As African Americans strive to establish themselves as designers who have the autonomy to control their houses and neighborhoods, these efforts are undermined by segregationist practices like redlining, racial covenants, slum clearances, and racial violence. These policies prevent them from achieving their objectives and fully realizing the vision of equitable and self-determined communities. Instead of African Americans deciding their living conditions, these government-sanctioned practices force them into housing projects, depriving them of the chance to create safe, thriving spaces.

The first public housing projects came into existence after World War I. The Hoover Administration initiated the program by authorizing the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to distribute limited housing loans to various public housing projects (Sandeen). Under Roosevelt's New Deal Policies, the Public Works Administration Housing Division replaced the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and developed seven housing projects. The earliest plan was the Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia, PA. German architects Oscar Stonorov and Alfred Kastner designed these houses between 1933 and 1934. Stonorov insisted on the Zeilenbau formation, which consisted of long, shallow apartment blocks organized in parallel rows. The Zeilenbau formation was radical (Denzer 1). Modernist architects believed housing the masses could only be solved by large-scale planning, not the traditional European style of narrow buildings with small interior courtyards (Denzer 1). Le Corbusier's audacious vision to reconcile communal living with light, space, and greenery also inspired Stonorov.

Many modernist architects and developers reinterpreted Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, and Unité plans to construct public housing in the American North. His designs were economical, low maintenance, and required few amenities. Concrete was also cheap and popular among architects and local officials. Some contractors used brick instead to limit taxpayer funding. The LaGuardia Houses in New York had a similar design to Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, which displaced

1,650 people (Mele 118). Although incorporating Le Corbusier's vision was bold, developers ignored essential amenities like job security, public transportation, food accessibility, and funded schooling (Curtis 449). Hence, Corbusier's theorem was never fully incorporated (Curtis 449). Instead, these buildings slowly formed into remote warehouses that neglected residents. Brutalist complexes like Paul Rudolph's Shoreline Apartments suffered structural problems (News Editorial Board). Minoru Yamasaki's low-cost housing scheme, Pruitt–Igoe, in St Louis, MO, was described as a substandard and cheaper version of Unité (Marshall).

In Memphis, the Colonial Revival and Minimal Traditional styles were prominent for public housing. As Americans confronted the Great Depression and later World War II (WWII), the federal government sought to promote a national identity that celebrated the country's colonial past, a time perceived as simpler, and the principles of the American Revolution were clearly defined. Residential architect J. Frazer Smith attempted to revive American colonial architecture by designing Lauderdale Courts Public Housing. This White-segregated housing complex replaced a Black neighborhood in 1938 (West 143). Elvis Presley was a famous tenant who lived there from 1949 to 1953 with his parents (Yellin). The group home was three stories, contained 66 buildings with 449 units, and held two-to-five-bedroom apartments (Allen). The reinforced concrete and finished brick veneer siding gave the apartments an American colonial aesthetic. The open shared spaces also promoted community among residents. Lauderdale Courts Public Housing is one of the few remaining public housing complexes in Memphis due to its historical significance.

These early projects in the North and Memphis were exclusively for White residents (Gross 00:00:00-00:35:40; Rothstein 105). Because racial covenants and redlining policies limited Blacks from renting, there was a shortage of affordable housing for Black citizens. As a result, lack of housing became a persistent problem throughout the first half of the 20th century. African Americans who sought accommodation in the Memphis Dixie Housing Complex were placed on a waitlist while housing for Whites was readily available (West 142-143). In Detroit, people unable to receive housing moved to the slums or into dilapidated shotgun houses (Thomas 60). After WWII, the federal government promoted subsidized slum clearances, but many Black communities, like Robert Church's Vance neighborhood in Memphis, were demolished and replaced with group homes. LeMoyne Gardens, constructed in 1941, had a style akin to Lauderdale Courts Public Housing, but this project was two stories tall, contained 60 buildings, and possessed 500 apartments. The project cost $1,446,043 and had tile roofing instead of copper roofing ("LeMoyne Gardens Public Housing Project")

The housing projects were superior to the shotgun house because residents had access to running water and indoor restrooms. Early shotgun houses, on the other hand, had outhouses for sanitation purposes. Nevertheless, like the previous housing styles, several "Negros" were packed into these group homes (Lovett 1). Many of these low-income public houses also had significant structural issues: "poor insulation, water leaks, and infestations" (Krishna and Traynor). My mother remembered the ceiling at LeMoyne Gardens collapsing on my great-grandmother (Osayamwen).

As White Americans moved into the suburbs, African Americans increasingly gained access to public housing. However, this phenomenon later termed white flight, led to significant disinvestment in many inner-city areas, severely affecting

African American communities. The exodus of financial resources and support systems that helped white American families left black neighborhoods struggling with social isolation, economic instability, poor transportation, and high unemployment rates (Curtis 449). Despite initially having similar income levels as White Americans, financial instability and the racial wealth gap grew as White Americans accessed the suburbs with aid from Federal Housing Administration mortgage loans and GI grants, while Black Americans, limited to only public housing by 1954, were excluded from these financial programs due to federal redlining policies.

Princeton Professor Leah Boustan compared the patterns of Black migration to the White suburban movement in the 1970s. She argued that between 1940 and 1970, every Black arrival in a Western or Northern metropolitan area correlated to two Whites leaving a city (Boustan). For example, in 1950, Boston's 95 percent White population had over 750,000 White residents (Gibson and Jung, Table 22). By 1980, the city's Black population quadrupled, from about 40,000 to 127,000 (Gibson and Jung, Table 22). At the same time, more than 360,000 White Bostonians moved out (Gibson and Jung, Table 22). Memphis had a 63 percent White population and a 37 percent Black population in 1950 (Gibson and Jung, Table 43). Forty years later, the Black population increased to 54 percent while the White population decreased to 44 percent (Gibson and Jung, Table 43).

By the 1970s, the nation's capital was a majority-Black city, and Baltimore, Detroit, New Orleans, and Birmingham were not far behind (Boustan). As the mass outflow of Whites opened public housing for African Americans, the rapid expansion of urban Black neighborhoods influenced urban renewal programs like the highway system to block Black people from entering majority-white suburban zones. For example, a prominent Black community located on Jefferson Street in Nashville, TN, was destroyed due to the development of the I-40 Interstate in 1968. The physical and economic barriers created by the highways in Nashville and other cities led to a new segregation method that isolated Black inner-city neighborhoods from suburban White communities and employment opportunities. In these settings, Black men continue to have the highest unemployment rates of any gender/racial group. Due to high unemployment, these inner-city areas, including the housing projects, were vulnerable to crime and the drug war.

A Short-Lived Promising Future: The Rise of Black Suburbia

Contrary to popular belief, African Americans did not solely live in inner-city housing projects during the rise of the 1950s suburban boom. U.S. Census data reveal a more diverse settlement pattern where African Americans established suburban communities. These suburban settlements were not limited to one geographic region but existed both in preexisting northern towns and newly constructed southern towns. The dispersion of African Americans into the suburban areas underscores the dynamic nature of demographic and residential shifts. The 1950 census found that 35 percent of Black households owned their homes (Wake). By 1970, the number had increased to 42 percent (Wake).

The enactment of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which forbade "housing discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin" (Fabry), might have been

a factor. The bill also made violence against African Americans who attempted to purchase a home in a predominantly White neighborhood a federal crime. Although the law presented a governmental shift in Black housing policy, Congress passed it after Black homeownership rates had already increased, and federal officials were ineffective in enforcing it (Rothstein 105). As a result, African Americans still encountered persistent obstacles when attempting to access predominantly White suburbs and were subjected to neighborhood violence until the late 1980s (Rothstein 106). For instance, after the Fair Housing Act, the removal of formal segregation barriers allowed affluent Black Memphians to explore traditionally white-dominated neighborhoods like Frayser and Hickory Hill (Bradley). Unfortunately, this integration did not shield these areas from a troubling pattern of disinvestment, echoing the historical neglect seen in redlined neighborhoods (Bradley).

Professor John W. Frazier et al. speculated that the soaring Black suburban population from the 1950s to the 1970s was an economic factor. He wrote, "In 1955, Black men working full-time earned less than two-thirds the average income of their White counterparts. However, by 1975, Black male income rose to 77 percent of White males with the same full-time employment" (Frazier et al. 86). His research suggested that African Americans who made strides to close the racial earning gap and obtain a growing number of white-collar jobs emerged into a vibrant Black middle class. Consequently, our focus will be on three distinct categories of Black suburbs.

Type 1

The first type of suburb experienced a decline in its White population but an increase in its Black population. These neighborhoods were in Northern areas like Maywood, NJ, East Cleveland, OH, and the American South. Demographic data indicated African Americans who resided in these semi-integrated subdivisions tended to be of a higher socioeconomic status (Roof and Spain 15).

Developers originally designed these older homes for White Americans. Due to this, the structural conditions were superb compared to the Black housing projects. In Memphis, my grandfather purchased a two-bedroom house for his parents in a semi-integrated neighborhood. These houses had access to running water and indoor restrooms like the housing projects, but improvements included better insulation, no water leaks, and no infestations. Yet, the age of these homes made them less appealing to the White population. Over time, they became a hand-me-down to African Americans who wanted to live in the suburbs. These mature homes required ongoing maintenance and quickly transformed into costly repair projects for African Americans. The high cost of maintaining these homes was also due to high-interest--rate loans and redlining policies (Taylor and Hill 153). Still, some families kept their homes. New York Times writer Jacquelynn Kerubo wrote about Evelyn Polhill, an African American woman who purchased her three-story Bedford-Stuyvesant house in 1958 from a German couple. She and her husband maintained their New York brownstone for 63 years (Kerubo). However, many black families who attempted to live in these neighborhoods still faced violence. For instance, in the 1950s, a home in a predominantly white area of Memphis was bombed after a black family purchased the property (Lauterbach).

Type 2

The second type was new suburban developments in Richmond Heights, OH, and Inkster, Detroit. Developers designed these houses in new African American neighborhoods, but some were in semi-integrated areas. Between the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government approved a surge of housing construction projects, which previously only endorsed White suburban developments after WWII.

The expansion of these Black suburban houses depended on many factors, but rising Black incomes were significant. Black median family income increased by about 6 percent between 1960 and 1967 (Kornweibel 196). After 1960, increased wages influenced many African Americans to move to the suburbs more rapidly than Whites (Kornweibel 196). By the 1970s, Black suburbia was a cultural phenomenon with 4.6 million residents (Kornweibel 196). Fifty-two percent of these individuals, including my grandparents, originated from the metropolitan city and 22 percent from other areas (Kornweibel 196). Despite the historical shift, these homes possessed more structural concerns than Type 1. Their appearance created the illusion of a standard--quality house, but it was not. These houses were prone to deterioration because of poor construction or maintenance (Rothstein 42-43). They often contained inadequate sewers, water facilities, and electrical wiring. My mother recalled two fires in my grandparent's house due to faulty electrical wiring (Osayamwen). Over time, these homes became dilapidated due to their inferior structural quality.

Type 3

Type 3 also had a growing Black population, but these were suburban rings surrounding many large inner cities. These suburbs rapidly expanded due to the displacement of Black people who resided in dilapidated or demolished housing projects between the 1970s and 1990s. (Kornweibel 197). Another factor was the income cap. According to Richard Rothstein, Black residents who lived in public projects were economically diverse (32-33). Mixed-income public housing meant more housing advocacy. High-income residents had the connections to advocate for better living conditions in housing projects (Rothstein 32-33).

By the 1960s, The Department of Housing and Urban Development enforced income limits by capping higher-income residents from assisted living. Due to this, many African Americans moved into the suburbs, and poverty was more concentrated in the housing projects (Rothstein 32-33). While these African American incomes seemed higher among people who resided in the housing projects, they were considered low-income in the suburbs. Since a decent percentage of the people who lived in these suburban homes were low-income, the housing prices were minimal compared to Type 1 and Type 2. In addition, these low-value areas lacked adequate sewers and water facilities and had faulty electrical wiring (Kornweibel 197). Their status also made local Black communities vulnerable to violence, crime, and the crack house.

A crack house was a 24-7 residential drug home that sheltered users and providers of narcotics. The people who populated these homes varied in gender, but most were African American and Hispanic. Two interviewers recalled their experience in a crack house.

Interviewer 49 stated:

> Some of them was like houses, some of 'em was like vacant buildings that you did not think nobody stayed there… but you had to go around the alley and come in through the back. And it was real dark back there (Mieczkowski 71).

Interviewer 70 stated:

> The house had iron-arm or guard doors with only one door because he (the dealer) was on the third floor… And you were served through the iron door. No one came in. Money in, crack out, and close the door (Mieczkowski 72).

Some crack houses were abandoned and converted. Regardless, these dwellings devastated many low-income inner-cities and suburban neighborhoods by devaluing Black homes nearby. Many hard-working low-income families, including my great-grandmother, were forced to live next to a crack house for many years after they purchased their homes. These crack houses decreased the home value and intensified the Black ghetto stereotype. The consequence was the War on Drugs, leading to the mass incarceration of many Black men.

Rising incomes led to Black suburbia, but White Americans controlled Black living spaces. White developers limited African American choices by providing access to acceptable but separate suburbs on the edge of existing cities. Despite purchasing properties that reflected suburban architectural styles, including Minimal Traditional, Cape Cod, Colonial Revival, and Ranch Styles, they had access to low-quality houses. At the same time, their White counterparts enjoyed modern appliances and building materials (Harris 258-260). Although the federal government made progress in implementing racial justice policies, many Black Americans still live in racially segregated neighborhoods that constrain them from building generational wealth (Loh et al.).

Today: The Gentrified House

The historical journey of African Americans from slave cabins to suburban homes reflected a complex narrative of systemic challenges. African Americans were compelled against their will to inhabit various architectural forms. Still, even when they played a role in designing their homes and neighborhoods, they were intentionally targeted through mob violence or racist federal policies. Today, despite settling in communities, often not of their choosing, African Americans face the hardship of gentrification, where they are economically displaced and unable to benefit from new economic opportunities.

Gentrification typically entails more affluent individuals displacing current residents, transforming the neighborhood's overall character. German-British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term when she noted the trend of middle-class individuals displacing working-class residents in 1960s London (Glass XVII). White middle-class homeowners were buying low-income houses in White working-class areas, leading to an economic transformation of these places and the displacement of many low-income residents from their neighborhoods (Glass XVII).

While this process is often associated with urban areas, it can extend to various housing types discussed previously. In the United States, gentrification has targeted

neighborhoods and houses characterized as abandoned housing projects, shotgun houses, and Type 3 suburban neighborhoods. However, it is essential to recognize that gentrification can affect many other areas, including Type 1 and Type 2 suburban neighborhoods. American city officials saw gentrification revive inner cities due to large-scale abandonment. Many properties had little value for landlords and investors, and post-white flight middle-class residents wanted to return to some of these areas (Hamnett 47).

In 1970, gentrification gained popularity among real estate developers who saw a lucrative gain (Lees 7). A deregulated Wall Street resulted in 151,755 jobs added to Manhattan's financial sector from 1977 to 1987 (Gottlieb). As highly paid bankers flooded New York, developers renovated older apartments to give young professionals easy access to their Manhattan jobs. Job increases resulted in a neighborhood transformation that displaced many Black welfare tenants in Brooklyn Heights. Like Boston and San Francisco, other cities would soon follow as booming tech and finance industries attracted young Ivy League professionals (Gottlieb).

By the 1990s, city officials saw gentrification as a strategy to improve the income levels of impoverished inner cities. Under the Clinton Administration, The Department of Housing and Urban Development established the HOPE VI Program. This program provided grants to city officials to "eradicate severely distressed public housing" (Fosburg et al. I). The goal was to address housing needs. Consequently, LeMoyne Gardens and Foot Homes Public Housing Projects in Memphis were demolished and replaced with gentrified houses and parks (Dries). These areas became mixed-income, but many residents moved to Type 3 Black suburbs due to rising rental costs.

Between 2000 and 2010, the influx of Northerners moving to the American South led to the gentrification of older Type 1 and Type 2 Black suburban neighborhoods (Badger et al.). In recent years, vulnerable inner cities that experienced disinvestment and white flight have seen a resurgence of White residents.

New York Times writer Jacquelynn Kerubo discussed how gentrification impacted Ms. Polhill's Type 1 neighborhood. She wrote:

> When Ms. Polhill and her husband bought their three-family Bedford-Stuyvesant house in 1958, 10 years before the Fair Housing Act was enacted, white families fled the city and headed to the suburbs as Black families moved in next door. The German couple who sold them the house left in a hurry. Now, their home is highly desirable and out of reach for many Black people in her network (Kerubo).

Kerubo's report stipulated that when Black families moved into Ms. Polhill's neighborhood in 1958, redlining forced White families to flee, which subsequently caused declining property values. However, as White families returned, property values increased. Rising real estate costs for gentrified homes made neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant inaccessible to African Americans (Kerubo).

In theory, the concept of gentrification was amicable. Gentrification had the potential to improve low-quality neighborhoods. If an area was promising to developers, its investments could strengthen the possibility of jobs and housing opportunities. In addition, an upscale residence could encourage cleaner neighborhoods and crime reduction. However, due to the legacy of redlining policies, a disproportionate number of the wealthy residents who could afford to live in gentrified houses

were White. Bankers still denied African Americans conventional mortgage loans despite having similar incomes (Glantz 00:00:00-00:11:03). African Americans were also likely to be dismissed for home improvement or equity loans, even if they occupied historically green-outlined neighborhoods. White neighbors tended to be approved regardless of whether they lived in green or red-outlined areas (Goodman and González 00:15:35-00:27:35). Considering this information, a gentrified house was not only defined by its building type but the way modern-day whiteness controlled how a neighborhood improved. The Brookings Institute found that African American communities with White homeowners got a boost in property value and investment. However, Black "homes were undervalued by $48,000 per home on average, which amounted to $156 billion in cumulative losses" (Frey). Hence, homes tied to blackness were less valuable, and African Americans did not benefit from living in gentrified neighborhoods. Instead, they were vulnerable to higher living costs, police harassment, vacancy, and mass displacement, influencing eviction and high homeless rates (Desmond and Gershenson).

Planners have considered using historic preservation as a mechanism to slow gentrification. The City of Memphis Housing and Community Development office sought to boost economic investment by establishing the Memphis Heritage Trail—a comprehensive community redevelopment initiative designed to commemorate African American accomplishments ("A Living Celebration"). However, there is a strong racial bias against preserving Black architectural structures. According to Casey Cep, slave cabins and shotgun houses were historically excluded from National Register consideration because they lacked elegance or "architectural significance." When historians noticed these structures, they had no "physical integrity to merit protection" (Cep).

Additionally, listed properties were often devalued, underfunded, or even demolished. State and local governments also had more discretion to ignore the harm their ongoing construction projects had on historic African American sites. For instance, although the Tennessee Historical Commission placed parts of Robert Church's former neighborhood on the National Register of Historic Places (Gary), the area was still demolished and gentrified by the mid-2000s. What remains are two Italianate houses surrounded by vacant lots and crumbling buildings. While preservation could ease gentrification, the continued desire for European history still dictates which areas improve and which rot in despair.

Conclusion

As I walk through my late grandparents' house and pass by their three aging bedrooms, I realize their journey to purchase a home reflected the dreams of millions. These people wished for a better life but could not dream beyond their "fixed locations" (Hooks 151). As Black architecture evolved, many Black Americans faced barriers when accessing affordable and safe housing and were often limited to specific neighborhoods due to economic and social constraints. These systemic inequalities have perpetuated a cycle of poverty and exclusion, with African Americans being disproportionately affected by housing insecurity, eviction, and homelessness. Awareness of the historical injustices of oppressive Black architecture can illuminate inequality and the need to provide equitable designs for the most vulnerable.

It is essential to recognize the ongoing struggle for agency and self-determination in the built environment for marginalized communities and to work towards creating more equitable and just spaces for all. By acknowledging the legacy of discriminatory architecture in Memphis and other cities, we can form a just society where everyone can access safe and equal living spaces, fulfilling the dreams of those like my grandparents, who sought a better life through homeownership.

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