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Gentrification and the Ethics of Home

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Abstract

Gentrification is the subject of a recent wave of books and scholarship, continuing debates regarding the responsibilities of the “gentrifiers” and the impact of gentrifying landscapes on marginalized communities. This project looks in a different direction, using a multi-media approach to investigate the ethics of home in relation to aesthetics, architecture, capitalism and the culture industry. Strongly informed by the critical thought of Theodor Adorno, five essays bring multiple disciplines and theories together: Marxist geography (David Harvey, Neil Smith), architecture (Sarah Goldhagen, Lester Walker), philosophy and history (Walter Benjamin, Adorno), African American literature (Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, Pauli Murray), and decolonial literature and thought (Ousmane Sembène, Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire). Incorporating citations and literary passages, as well as the author’s own photography and linocut prints, the project images the contradictions inherent in the idea of home and emphasizes the impossibility of living an ethical life under capitalism.
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In my first weeks at Duke I was fortunate to meet my advisor, recognizing even then that my studies here would be profoundly influenced by our conversations and his enthusiasm. My gratitude extends beyond the classroom—I will keep these materials close wherever I travel next. Thank-you.

A big thank-you to Super G Print Lab for providing studio time and the space so that I could return to art-making and execute the prints found herein.

This project was an opportunity to investigate the idea and aesthetics of home, and it is so very obvious to me that my passion for this subject matter begins at the beginning. This project has been informed by my love for my childhood homes. Mom, you have always built us a home full of care and love, empowering me to shape my own spaces, to tear down walls, to paint, and to hang art. You are remarkable, and you have phenomenal taste.

Finally, thanks to my partner. Because I want to share walls with you.
Introduction

If you are headed anywhere in Durham, know that there is no single best route to getting there. And you may find yourself, on multiple occasions, wondering just how certain streets carrying the same name end up zig-zagging and skipping across the city, leaving off and picking up in unpredictable locations. In the winter of 2017 I found myself stuck at a dead end with a view of the city, incredulous. It turns out you can’t get to half of the East Umstead addresses if you turn onto Umstead from Fayetteville Street. Backtracking, feeling confident in my directional movement but uncertain regarding proximity, I cut through to South Roxboro Street taking three consecutive left turns. There, on the right, East Umstead appeared, a dog-leg and a football throw from my dead-end.

The history of Durham is imprinted in the discontinuities of its streetscapes. Picking up my friend, herself a life-long resident of Durham—an abolitionist and organizer, an ex-prisoner and a grandmother—I was moving, ignorantly, among the symbols and ruins of St. Theresa, a neighborhood of the Hayti district. Hayti had once been a thriving black business and residential district, a proud community unto itself with a growing black middle class. Hayti was systematically torn apart in the 1960s with the initiation of “urban renewal” projects and the construction of Highway 147.

As we pulled away and headed back toward downtown, I navigated out of the past and into a jarring image of the present Durham and its incongruous landscapes. After turning right, Scout Drive carried us uphill, opening up to a strange, discordant view at the intersection of Scout and East Enterprise. The shaded, low-slung bungalows found on Umstead had been replaced, and all I could see were stretching two-story, brand-new homes puncturing a wide-open sky. These nearly identical homes, painted cheery colors, loomed over passersby with steep front porch staircases. Large, rectangular homes perched on small, newly-sculpted, raised lawns. We drove around the block, down Scout, looping around to South Street, whose homes were smaller but similarly packaged, with colorful siding, white trim, new sidewalks and freshly paved front walkways. We climbed back up South Street, turning left at Enterprise to complete the short circuit.
The following project is a multi-media attempt to explain that first, lasting impression of the new houses at Southside. It is, broadly, an investigation into the aesthetics of gentrification, arguing that aesthetics are also a matter of ethics. The incorporation of photographs, my own lino-cut prints, film stills, and passages from novels are a form of interruption, breaking up the essay narratives and “imagining” the world. Five essays explore different but related themes, getting at a variety of perspectives and ways of thinking. The first, “Accumulation,” relies on the work of Marxist geographers David Harvey and Neil Smith, challenging the argument that revitalization efforts provide economic advantages to everyone equally. Smith’s theory of uneven development exposes gentrification as an increasingly effective mechanism for the movement of capital, evidencing that the conditions leading up to “revitalization” in Southside were always already dictated by the interests of capital. The second essay, “Environment,” brings together Walter Benjamin and the fascinating, recent work by scholar and architect Sarah Williams Goldhagen. Both insist that our memories, our histories, and our identities are connected to our built environments and the aesthetic experiences they afford (or do not afford). The following essay, “Proximity,” approaches the fear of riot and rebellion through imagery provided by novelists and writers. It is an effort to both interrogate and acknowledge the origins of the unspoken fears of gentrifiers and its outward manifestations. Theodor Adorno’s critique of bourgeois life underpins the analysis in both the fourth and final essay. “Fetish” looks to the architectural styles of the middle and upper-class home and identifies the significance of our current fetishization of the home and home goods in today’s consumer economy. “Gentrifier” brings back Benjamin alongside decolonial thought to reveal the way the home of the gentrifier exposes a wound, what I call a “failure of living.” This final essay is also an acknowledgement that we are all complicit, to some degree, as automatic participants in the machinations of capital—and that the idea of home is one full of contradictions. This project rejects popular and political impulses to offer solutions. This failure of living has no “solution.” Our current responsibility is rather to interrupt and re-think our situation with a diversity of perspectives and in a multiplicity of mediums and forms.
In that regard, I have interspersed within the following pages both my own black and white photography and four linocut prints. The prints were a modest and experimental approach to see the homes and streetscape of Southside with a different kind of intensity and curiosity. They, hopefully, betray my interest in connecting color, proportion (and disproportion) and linework to this experience of looking closely. As with all artworks, the process itself, and the result, deviate from my original intentions in interesting ways—overall, they open onto a beauty I didn’t expect to find.
Uneven development is social inequality blazoned into the geographical landscape, and it is simultaneously the exploitation of that geographical unevenness for certain socially determined ends.

*Neil Smith, Uneven Development* (207)
1.1 “Southside Revitalization: Master Construction Plan – Revised 08.21.12” Source: durhamnc.gov/DocumentCenter/View/2664. Author focused on houses in “South Street West,” “The Triangle,” and West Enterprise Street portion of “Enterprise Drive.”
I. Accumulation

Is Southside neighborhood revitalization or gentrification? Sifting chronologically through the last seven years of local news, the prevalence of the former term becomes eclipsed by the latter. The Chronicle, a Duke University news publication, titles a news article in October of 2017 by citing a Southside owner: “Gentrification is not a myth, it’s really happening” (Cicchi). The homeowner, who moved into a home in the first round of construction in 2014, was uniquely positioned to speak to the real impact of the ongoing development of his neighborhood. Both his testimony and the overall tone of the article make it clear that the Southside revitalization project fell far short of its goal of providing affordable housing. The massive collaborative effort—bringing together town government, local banks, nonprofits and academic institutions—brought 48 new homes to the neighborhood, and “about 26 of them were reserved for purchase by low to moderate income residents” (Cicchi). Yet the original, optimistic plan to create equitable housing has been overshadowed by an influx of “gentrifiers”—a typically middle to upper class, educated, and white population of working professionals and young families. Southside offers this upwardly mobile demographic a supply of newly constructed 3 to 4-bedroom homes, averaging 2,000-2,200 square feet. This transplanted population and the transforming landscape of Southside is driving up the cost of living in a previously low income, majority black neighborhood. The price of the houses most recently built by home building company Thayer Homes are priced at $499,000. Not only do the new homes usher in a wealthier population and culture, the older homes and their inhabitants face a precarious situation—many will not be able to keep up with the rising cost of living and increased property taxes. Those who have lived longest in the area, who have long wished for improved public infrastructure and assistance, are being displaced just as those resources have become available in the service of “revitalization.” Cicchi quotes one of these original residents, James Eller, who has lived on South Street since 1958:

“I feel like it’s just a matter of time before someone from the city comes to tell me that I’ve got to move or get my house up to code,” Eller said. “And I don’t have the money to fix it.”
Eller said that prior to the revitalization project, there had been no interest in enforcing the code. Although the project has improved city services in Southside and created new features like street lamps and freshly painted crosswalk lines, this stands in stark contrast to the lack of commitment when Southside was a mostly black neighborhood.

“Basically, this part of South Street, everybody is white,” Eller said. “It’s a shame that in the 50s they didn’t want to be around us. Now, all of a sudden they want to be around us. They want to be in our neighborhoods.” (Cicchi)

While there are an increasing number of voices criticizing the redevelopment project, some still maintain that the project offers insight on how to do it right next time. In other words, while Southside is an example of how revitalization could go wrong, it does not have to go wrong. In the following pages I insist that these projects will only ever have limited outcomes for creating affordable housing. Revitalization is a mythical, yet marketable, urban planning concept as long as the conditions of capitalist exchange continue to shape our economies and landscapes. In the pages ahead, I apply the Marxist geography of David Harvey and Neil Smith’s theory of uneven development to the story of Southside. Both Harvey and Smith pick up with sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s idea that capitalism produces space and that, furthermore, this space reproduces geographic economic disparity, setting up capital with new opportunities for exploitation. Gentrification is perhaps the most visible and controversial contemporary urban phenomenon. It also may be the best demonstration of how capitalism drives inequality, and it exemplifies the ways that housing market actors, even unwittingly, reproduce a pattern of crisis and revitalization that ensures the survival of capital and the continued displacement of poor people and people of color.

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In his 1984 text, Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space, Neil Smith demonstrates how our geographies—from the local level to the global—are partitioned and defined by capital in search of profit. This production of space has evolved over time. Some argue that the first instance of capital transforming space was the process of enclosure in England in the 16th century: by way
of new legislation coupled with bloody enforcement, land that had been formerly cultivated and grazed by small farmers was “enclosed” and awarded to specific owners. This literal fencing off of land ultimately ended the practice of common land farming and cast farmers into a new, landless population, one that would feed the creation of a new, wage labor force during industrialization. Additionally, enclosure was possibly the first clear demonstration that a capitalist society could facilitate the privatization of public goods. Privatization continues today, in all parts of the globe, empowering the rich to legally and/or extra-legally steal, obtain, or negotiate ownership and access to collective resources. That power is distributed through the creation and division of space, resulting in significant changes to the landscapes and conditions in which people work and live.

This shaping of space is an often overlooked but fascinating component to understanding our local histories. Before modern technological changes, new industries arose only in geographical proximity to raw material resources. Industry also required a concentrated and local workforce in order to keep wages low. Distance would mean higher labor and transportation costs. Thus, many towns in North Carolina were founded through the growth of the textile mill industry. As Claudia Roberts Brown writes in her book, Carrboro, N.C.: An Architectural & Historical Inventory, there were fifty-two one-industry towns in North Carolina in 1880, and that number increased to an estimated 125 towns in 1910 (12). Company towns like Carrboro saw significant numbers of houses constructed and owned by the mills and rented to mill workers. Mill owners had a significant hand in shaping not only the local neighborhood landscape, but also the interior space of the home through the use of standardized floor plans. By influencing what kinds of resources were dedicated to social life, the local mill owners also hoped to improve their profit margins by cultivating the character of its workforce:

Mill owners commonly provided housing for the mill workers…Grouped near the mill, the houses would also further support the close association between mill and worker…By providing numerous amenities, wages could be kept low and activities outside of the factory could be regulated to encourage high performance at work. (15)
1.2 Untitled. Winter 2018.
While new industries—particularly technology industries—continue to shape our landscapes by impacting local economies, capital is rearranging space on the global scale. Free market actors—firms, monopolies, banks--facilitate the continued growth of exchange economies, renegotiating our space both rural and urban, creating extreme disparities between resource rich areas and resource poor areas. For Smith, this renegotiation is in fact the reproduction of uneven development, and it is uneven development that sustains capital through economic crises such as the housing market boom and bust.

Key to this argument is an understanding that capital can be both fixed—invested in the built environment—and it can be unfixed, or circulating, able to move across borders, and quickly between actors, functioning in what Smith calls “spacelessness.” This mobility allows capital to survive the instability of location-based wealth—in other words, it means that capital can select for the most lucrative new locations for urban development and also avoid the risks associated with underdevelopment. Additionally, as originally profitable locations become more developed and profits decrease with increased capital accumulation—say, rent prices hit a ceiling, or new locations for development become sparse or expensive—capital becomes unfixed, seeking out new sites for exploitation. As Smith writes:

...Capital attempts to seesaw from a developed to an underdeveloped area, then at a later point back to the first area which is by now underdeveloped, and so forth. To the extent that capital cannot find a spatial fix in the production of an immobile environment for production, it resorts to complete mobility as a spatial fix; here again, spatial fixity and spacelessness are but prongs of the same fork. Capital seeks not an equilibrium built into the landscape but one that is viable precisely in its ability to jump landscapes in a systematic way. This is the seesaw movement of capital, which lies behind the larger uneven development process. (199)

Utilizing a Marxist approach, Smith reveals that uneven development is the geographical image of a system that can only reproduce itself through economic dis-equilibrium. The urban landscape provides the best proof of this movement of capital.

Thus, conditions producing gentrification must relate to the phenomenon of suburbanization and, then, the return of capital to the city. At the height of suburbanization, resource-rich populations and their economic activities moved outside of metropolitan areas, taking capital and investment with them. With
the development of suburban housing and commerce, ground-rent prices increased, opening up opportunities for significant and rapid profits for developers and new businesses. At the same time, the inner city experienced underdevelopment and capital neglect, all compounded by fraying public infrastructure and the ever-dwindling resources of local government agencies. Finally, capital was drawn back to the inner city upon the confluence of a number of factors. In the context of residential housing, the most important of these factors was the devaluation of urban neighborhoods. Urban planners, real estate developers, investors, and local government actors recognized the significant gap between current and potential rent price. Smith explains:

At some point, the devaluation of capital depresses the ground-rent level sufficiently that the “rent gap” between actual capitalized ground rent and the potential ground rent (given a “higher” use) becomes sufficiently large that redevelopment and gentrification become possible. The inner city, which was underdeveloped with the suburbanization of capital, now becomes a new locus of development (or rather redevelopment). (200)

In a later article, “Gentrification and the Rent Gap,” Smith clarifies that “ground rent” should be understood as land value—therefore value (in terms of monetary price) is connected to location. Proximity to the city center, as the city center itself experiences reinvestment and revitalization, leads to higher potential ground rent. Smith adds that the rent gap is also a “historical gap in that it results from a complex pattern of investment and disinvestment in the built environment” (463).

Gentrification, however, would not be possible, or certainly not as prevalent, without the assistance provided by additional actors such as banks, the state, and other agencies and institutions. This is because “fixed capital,” particularly in the form of housing, is not as lucrative as other forms of capital investment. Citing Harvey, Smith explains that “the built environment tends to be under-capitalized… because of the large scale of such investments, their long turnover period, and their tendency to be collectively consumed” (168). A sufficient condition for investment and development arises when local government initiates a project, in collaboration with banks and other funding sources, signaling that resources will be directed to formerly resource-poor areas. Capital will be all the more likely to invest
once development, in the form of renovation or new construction, is already underway. While the original intention for a local investment project may be affordable housing, the actors involved are always already committed to reproducing the conditions that feed capital, and those are the conditions that will consistently undermine the possibility for real equitable land use.

The Southside revitalization project is the perfect demonstration of this pattern of community-sponsored uneven development. Gentrification doesn’t tend to happen because a few individual actors decide they will take advantage of low rent in a predominantly black neighborhood, particularly a neighborhood with high crime rates. As Smith writes: “Upper middle-class immigrants to a run-down neighborhood do not move into slums…they move into buildings already fixed up or newly built, and this inevitably involves substantial capital investment in gentrifying neighborhoods along with social change” (GRG, 463). Before construction at Southside, most residents agreed that the neighborhood was a dangerous place, with high drug activity and gang-related violence. Falling within the old district of Hayti, the history of Southside cannot be separated from the legacy of racism that underpinned the urban planning of the 60s which tore apart the fabric of the once-vibrant Hayti community. That urban planning also went by a euphemistic name: “renewal.” In May, 2011, Indy Week reporter Samiha Khanna covered the looming vote for the first plans for development at Southside. In her piece she references a 2009 survey revealing that fewer than 13 percent of Southside’s homes were owner occupied. Lauren Taylor, in a paper published on the Duke University WordPress site, Urban Economics, details the conditions in the Southside and adjacent Rolling Hills neighborhoods in early 2013, just before the first construction began. The statistics, gathered from government websites that have since been updated or removed, paint a stark picture:

According to Neighborhood Scout, the Rolling Hills/Southside neighborhood, defined around South Roxboro Street and South Mangum Street, has a median housing value of $76,323, and 48% of houses are in the $0-$47,000 range. The area largely is comprised of renters and has an education level rating of 1 (5 is average for the US, 10 is most educated). Furthermore, this part of Durham is classified as among the 15% lowest income communities in the US and is made up of mostly black residents.
An example of the human cost of decades of city and investor neglect, and the persistence of entrenched racism, Southside could only become a site for redevelopment through a significant, collaborative effort on the part of multiple interest groups—city officials, nonprofit agencies, banks, and institutions. While both Khanna and Taylor report on the funding sources for the revitalization project, it is difficult to track just how many of these ultimately factored into the final plan. Khanna reports that projected total cost to be $48 million, utilizing $17.9 million in city funds. She also mentions $9.6 million available from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development loan, to be paid back by the city over 20 years. However, it is unlikely those HUD funds were available due to the ongoing effects of the national recession which resulted in cuts to many government assistance programs. Slides from a 2016 annual presentation to the City Council regarding the redevelopment of Southside and adjacent Rolling Hills (for affordable rental units) details a total of $59,295,293 used as leveraging for the project. These funds come from a range of sources, including $8.8 million from a Community Development Block Grant-Section 108 loan, part of a program run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development allocated for affordable housing initiatives and local infrastructure development. Additionally, the Home Investment Partnership Fund committed nearly $7 million alongside $3 million in equity from the for-profit developer hired for the combined Rolling Hills/Southside project, McCormack Barron Salazar. (Taylor also reports this developer was granted $11 million in tax credits for the first phase of development.) Duke University is also figured into this total with loan incentives amounting to $20,000 at the time of the presentation. Khanna reports in 2011 that the city had spent $5 million relocating residents and buying back their Southside homes in disrepair. She also states that the city had “committed to working with Self-Help [Credit Union] to build or renovate 40 properties to sell them to families with low to moderate incomes,” and that “the city will be able to contribute about $65,000 in subsidies per home, a total contribution of more than $2.5 million.” The 2016 City Council presentation reports that the Center for Community Self Help (Self-Help Credit Union) owned over 100 homes included in the redevelopment area, which accords with Khanna’s 2011 reporting that Self-Help had purchased 94 properties in Southside since 2006. Additionally, Cicchi’s 2017 article reports that Duke
committed $8 million in loans, earmarked for Southside revitalization, to Self-Help Credit Union. In summary, Durham—and thus its residents—alongside a number of other groups, committed substantial resources in a project that began with a very public goal to increase affordable housing, improve infrastructure, and jumpstart new investment in the neighborhood. Citing then-Mayor William Bell’s 2012 editorial defending the project, Taylor summarizes: “The goal of redeveloping Rolling Hills/Southside is to create a ‘high-quality, market-rate mixed-income’ housing development in Durham that will attract outside private investment and provide residents with an affordable and hospitable community to live in.”

All of these articles reveal that the many hopes for affordable home-ownership at Southside has manifested in years of significant labor on the part of many actors, including committed residents whose attitudes have ranged from hopeful to skeptical. After the human rights disaster wrought by urban renewal in Hayti, many original residents of Southside argued, as Khanna paraphrases, that the project was “really just a continuation of urban renewal that will steal people’s homes from under them.” The Cicchi article opening this essay indicates that there is now a general consensus: they were correct. Cicchi reveals the feelings of mistrust among residents who are skeptical of the good intentions of the actors involved in the project:

At a Durham mayoral forum in September [2017], some candidates said the Southside revitalization project was an example of unsuccessful affordable housing.

Mayoral candidate Sylvester Williams said the city’s investment in Southside showed that it was primarily concerned with the economic growth of the downtown area, at the expense of other low-income places. He noted that low-income residents do not have a place in the city.

“Is everyone being negatively affected equally?” Williams asked. “We’ve not seen a level playing field when it comes to people of color or people of lower income.”

Former city councilwoman Jacqueline Wagstaff, who also attended the forum, said that Duke led the Southside redevelopment because of its proximity to downtown and in order to benefit higher-income employees.

“There’s no poor people who can afford to live there anymore,” she said. “There is a whole initiative to have this kind of joyland in and around the [Durham
Bulls Athletic Park. They want to live, play and have a good time all around that ballpark, and Southside is within walking distance of that.”

Even the Vice President of the Office of Durham and Regional Affairs, Phail Wynn Jr., an original champion of the Southside project, recognizes that what began as an affordable housing project had become a prime example of gentrification. The article, in fact, closes with his thoughts regarding Duke University’s future involvement in urban projects:

As for new affordable housing investments in Durham's neighborhoods, Wynn said Duke will approach them with caution.

“Until we figure out how we can prevent our next project from becoming gentrified, we won’t do the next project,” Wynn said. “The first step is to figure out—so how do we prevent a reoccurrence of what happened at Southside?”

That very question, I argue, can only be answered by taking seriously the theory of uneven development advanced by Smith. Included in this is his explanation of capital’s movement from “fixed” space—i.e. in housing construction—to spacelessness, and from underdeveloped locations to developed locations. And as we have shown both in theory and in life, the movement to underdeveloped space, or devalued inner city neighborhoods, is facilitated by a number of actors who designate resources under the auspices of improving the quality of life for low to middle income families. We cannot answer Wynn without underscoring how the movements of capital continue to dictate who gets the windfall of benefits. This is true even in the context of the boom and bust housing market. Even in time of instability, resources continue to fall into the hands of the resource-rich, feeding an income and wealth gap that perpetuates a geography of devaluation and accumulation. As Smith writes:

The point is that periods of crisis are also periods of dramatic restructuring. Capitalism is always transforming space in its own image, but in periods of expansion this amounts to the filling in of patterns more or less set at an earlier period. Precisely during crisis are these new patterns set in an unprecedented restructuring of geographic space. (208)

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Another way to think of the movement between fixed and circulating capital is to see it in terms of use-value and exchange-value. Smith draws the correlation, writing: “The seesaw from developed to underdeveloped space and back again…is the geographical manifestation of the equally constant and necessary movement from use-value to exchange-value and back to use-value” (199). Use value is the value of things as they exist—as objects with tangible characteristics and serve a purpose in human activity. In this sense, use value is also relational. Smith argues that space is a characteristic of these relations and uses the house as an example:

Use-value is in the first instance a relation, and as part of the set of relations that determine a particular use-value are a set of spatial relations. This applies not just at the level of individual commodities where, for example, the use-value of a house is determined not only by its dimensions in feet and inches but also by its internal design, its proximity to transport routes, sewage lines, work, services, and so on. (114)

Harvey also discusses the use value of a house, enumerating many characteristics such as its ability to provide shelter, privacy, and “physical, social and symbolic (status) characteristics.” He continues, writing:

This use value is not the same for all people in comparable dwellings, nor is it constant over time for the same person in the same dwelling. Swinging singles, young married couples with children, old retired people, sick people, sports buffs and gardeners, all have different needs and consume different aspects of housing in different quantities in their daily lives. Each individual and group will determine use value differently. (159-160)

The exchange value of a house, however, is not variable or relational in the ways that use value is tied to individual needs and particular circumstances. Exchange value is an overriding value imposed by the marketplace, a determination (always fluctuating) regarding the worth of a commodity in terms of what it can be exchanged for—an exchange facilitated by the monetary system. Exchange value is the basis of capitalism and makes possible all activities involving investment, speculation, and capital accumulation. While use-values arise out of capitalist investment in “fixed” and physical places—houses, buildings, infrastructure—exchange-value keeps capital mobile, able to seek out new opportunities when profits dry
up or when other places offer more potential surplus value for investment. While a house is a place of domicile—one that may have lakefront views and good access to town roads—exchange value converts its use values into a price tag. As Harvey writes, “We must focus attention on those catalytic moments in the urban land-use decision process when use value and exchange value collide to make commodities out of the land and the improvements thereon” (160).

Harvey also applies the distinction between use value and exchange value to the relationships among housing market actors, revealing how different interests collaborate in the commodification of a home. His approach helps us better understand the capital interests of the actors involved in the Southside redevelopment project, demonstrating how efforts to create affordable housing become subsumed by the interests of capital. Quite simply, nearly all actors in the housing market have an overriding interest in exchange values, even though these exchange values tend to be generated through investment in use values (renovation, rehabilitation, or, above all else, new construction). Those least dependent on use values are realtors, who make more money the more often houses are bought and sold. High use value, in fact, may reduce turnover and work against the best interests of realtors. Harvey points to the practice of blockbusting during the era of “white flight” as an example of realtors, who, exploiting racial tensions, instigated high turnover and significantly altered the housing market, entrenching a landscape of racial inequality (164).

In the case of developers and home building companies, exchange values are generated by producing use values for future occupants. Because developers have to invest significant capital at the outset, work is driven by the pressure to realize substantial use value in order to reap exchange value profits. Because construction firms and developers are also competing against each other for bids and contracts, they also have a greater incentive to take on the more lucrative and fast-paced new construction projects rather than rehabilitation efforts. As Harvey writes, “Both these groups are interested in use values for others, only in so far as they yield exchange values to themselves” (165). The primary building company that has purchased lots and built homes in the Southside neighborhood is Thayer Homes. The Thayer Homes website provides an opportunity to critically examine the ways houses are now marketed
“I’m thinking back to one housing development that we were involved in, in which the houses were literally called ‘product.’ We were working on developing more product, which was kind of a shocking term because that’s not the way we view a house. And what was really being said was that we’re selling the image, we’re selling the material, we’re selling the things you see in a magazine, and you can pass that on to the next buyer. We’re not selling something that creates an enclosure for your life...I think at one time people built houses to encompass their lives and create this same kind of potential that you have with people with special needs. They created the potential to live a life they wanted. Now they create a universal potential for the standard family that can be sold to the next buyer.”

Barbara Winslow, in The American Idea of Home (43)
to the middle and upper class liberal demographic. Attention-grabbing banners advertise Thayer Homes’ awards, recognitions, community engagement, and accreditations as “green home builders.” A panoramic view of Durham at night alludes to the entertainment and excitement located a stroll away. All of these benefits can be considered use values—they have tangible impacts on the lives and experiences of future owners. But they also are clearly also exchange values, selling points, ideas and images that are bought and sold. Potential experiences are turned into commodities you can shop for online. Builders and developers increase their profits the more they can convert use values—in the form of both constructed space but also in the imagined and real affordances offered by geographical location and improved public infrastructure. A YouTube video uploaded to the company blog in May, 2016, follows Thayer Homes CEO Terry Thayer as he tours Enterprise Street in the Southside neighborhood, mid-way through new demolition (a majority of the trees in the background have since been cut down). His enthusiasm for the ongoing and future construction of “brand new homes” is related as an effort to “regenerate” the neighborhood. Referring to the new houses as “product,” Thayer reminds us how easily and unnoticeably a house, packaged and sold with all the imagery and associations attending the idea of a “dream home,” becomes a lucrative commodity and a return on investment.

The role of financial institutions is critical in all housing market activity and it their activities are always conditioned on projected exchange value returns. In the case of the combined Southside and Rolling Hills project, Self-Help Credit Union purchased over one hundred homes beginning the redevelopment process. Having started its commercial real estate development program in 1991, Self-Help positions itself as the leading actor in revitalization efforts across the state of North Carolina in both commercial and residential districts. Financing through Self-Help was facilitated by partnerships with local government and other institutions such as Duke University. The credit union proclaims on its website that it has rehabilitated more than 200 affordable homes for low-income families in North Carolina. Financial institutions, however committed they may be to equitable housing opportunities, must constantly negotiate risk and seek profitability in their investment and land-use decisions. Self-Help was undeniably impacted by the 2007-2008 housing market crisis, which undoubtedly impacted its
demoed this is kind of like what the neighborhood used to look like this

trying to buy over on that side as well so just one to show you
1.5


Sources: Bio--LinkedIn profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/terry-thayer-19458b52; Film stills--www.thayer-homes.com/blogs/ or at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEwippyiEzc.
decision making regarding the affordable housing objectives in the Southside neighborhood. Their control over financing opportunities directly impacted—and continues to impact—the landscape and the culture of the neighborhood. As Harvey writes: “financial institutions as a whole are involved in all aspects of real estate development (industrial, commercial, residential, etc.) and they therefore help to allocate land to uses through their control over financing. Decisions of this sort are plainly geared to profitability and risk-avoidance” (165).

Duke University, as another source of financing for applicants for Southside housing, also determined the demographic make-up of Southside residents. Duke’s offer of an affordable housing initiative of a forgivable mortgage loan program of $10,000 (per applicant) became another selling point for the project. Its proposal attracted the attention of a public looking for signs that the development project would offer equitable opportunities for lower-income residents. Eligible applicants had to have worked for more than five years at the University and earned less than $40,000 a year from Duke. Additionally, a two-person household would have to have a total income of less than $66,000. This opportunity would be granted to ten employees through an application process. Yet, according to the Cicchi article from October, 2017, while over 100 applications were submitted, only three employees were approved and received the loan. While the program, in writing, promised to create opportunity for low-income Duke workers, in reality those very workers were excluded on the basis of their credit scores or a lack of liquid savings. Those who did receive the loan were those who were likely not already systematically disadvantaged residents—in other words, the very people affordable housing projects promote as future beneficiaries are the same ones who, owing to the cyclical oppression of a class-stratified society, are the least likely to overcome hurdles instituted by banks interested in protecting themselves from risk. The distribution of resources cannot be untied either from the history of uneven development nor the legacy of slavery—both of which go hand in hand in constructing a white supremacist culture of unequal opportunity. Cicchi cites one of the three recipients of that loan, who remarks candidly, “What ends up happening though is that with people like me, you end up with a bunch of white, graduated or educated people who don’t maybe have a high income yet…So in terms of getting
a really diverse socioeconomic or racially diverse mix into the houses, it ended up being—while not entirely white—pretty darn white.” The barriers erected by financial institutions to protect them against risk and to ensure the accumulation of exchange values are the same ones that reproduce systemic inequality and uneven development.

In the case of Southside, the city also publicized that it would offer incentives and loans for prospective low and moderate income home-buyers. Governmental institutions are significant actors in the housing market, not only in the area of financing programs. They can impose constraints on development and have a huge influence on the built environment through zoning and land-use planning controls. They also determine how services and public goods (such as roads, access to waste facilities, access to green spaces) are distributed, thus impacting the use value of homes. The use value of homes in Southside have increased not just owing to their construction, aesthetics and amenities—the improvement of sidewalks, roads, and drainage are some of the many new use values subsidized by the allocation of government funds, all of which was a part of the revitalization process. Harvey also reminds us that government can change the rules of the housing game by aiding financial institutions, developers and the construction industry to ensure exchange value outcomes from use value inputs. Government plays a critical role, as noted above, because capital avoids investment in what can be called collective goods such as affordable housing or, more obviously, public infrastructure. Yet, as Harvey writes, “It is argued that supporting the market is one way of ensuring the production of use values—unfortunately it does not always work out that way” (166). Understanding that Southside is an example of gentrification rather than a catalyst for continued affordable housing development proves that government continues to work within the parameters of capital’s drive for exchange value and a landscape of uneven development. The attendant infrastructure improvements to the neighborhood are just another example of the unequal allocation of public goods for what are a majority of already resource-rich families.

Another actor in the housing market is the landlord. For landlords, as opposed to owner-occupants, earning exchange value is the primary objective—their capital interests lie in maintaining properties at the least cost while exploiting the tenants at the highest sustainable rent price. Rent is a form
of income for the landlord, a profitable investment in property. Unless the landlord uses mortgage financing to purchase the property, where the rental income is applied to the mortgage—and thus there is a greater stake in maintaining a consistent income over a long period of time—landlords are not interested in use values. In fact, use values may depreciate over time as landlords seek short term profit through exchange value. Upkeep and maintenance are costs that impinge on rent profits. But there is another factor to also keep in mind: landlords that anticipate redevelopment and “renewal” are dis-incentivized to care for properties with low-income renters. Because their properties are situated in prime locations, they understand the potential land use value could provide a lucrative pay off. In other words, they act in accordance with the rent-gap theory advanced by Smith. This behavior reproduces the conditions for the see-saw movements of capital: a neighborhood suffering from disinvestment and all of the social ills associated with poverty conditions eventually becomes a site for new investment. In the meantime, landlords are in fact disinclined to tend to their properties—after all, they can only charge so much for the tenants that are willing to live—or have no better choice than to live—in these unsafe locations. Smith cites sociologist Amos Hawley in his 1950 work, Human Ecology:

The residential property on high priced land is usually in a deteriorated condition, for since it is close to business and industrial areas it is being held speculatively in anticipation of its acquisition by more intensive and therefore more remunerative use. In view of that probability owners of such property are not disposed to spend heavily for maintenance or to engage in new residential construction. (174)

The anticipation of future gains results in the continued exploitation of a trapped and resource-starved group. To acknowledge that this population, in Southside and many other gentrifying cities, is majority black is to recognize also that uneven development also capitalizes on the persistence of a racist dominant culture. The geographic mapping of social inequality, and the exploitative nature of capital, makes sense of the fact that, as Harvey writes, “the poorest groups generally live in locations subject to the greatest speculative pressure from land-use change” (174).
Inherent in this exploitation are class power-relations. Harvey articulates this succinctly, stating “The consumers’ surplus of the poorest groups is diminished by producers of housing services transforming it into producers’ surplus through quasi-monopolistic practices (usually exercised on the basis of class monopoly power)” (174). Under capitalism, the resource-rich are always a step ahead, creating space to facilitate new profit margins. This also often involves the acquisition of public goods such as access to green spaces and centers of commerce. Even when opportunities arise for the resource-poor to benefit from environmental improvements, power relations contain and delimit opportunities for the vast majority because they cannot afford to play the market and take risks. Harvey names this phenomenon the “paradox of negotiating public goods,” arguing that “The poor are willing to incur external losses for a far lower transfer payment than are the rich. In other words, the rich are unlikely to give up an amenity ‘at any price’, whereas the poor who are least able to sustain the loss are likely to sacrifice it for a trifling sum—a prediction for which there is some empirical support” (81). So, while opportunities opened up by economic growth always overwhelmingly benefit the rich, the costs—displacement and socio-cultural change—is disproportionately shouldered by the poor. This reality is echoed by the question already posed by Williams at the mayoral town hall: “Is everyone being negatively affected equally?” (Cicchi).

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We have neglected one more actor in the housing market in terms of their interest in exchange and use values—the homeowner. Ultimately, it is impossible to truly separate an interest in use values from exchange values, and this gets at the heart of the question at hand: What is the meaning of home living under the conditions of capitalism? It is obvious that most homeowners are consumers of use-values: the value of the house it wrapped up in what Harvey calls their “desires and needs.” He continues, “The use value of the house is determined by the coming together of a personal or household situation and a particular house in a particular location” (163). At the same time, a house is an
investment. It is an opportunity to build and store equity. We can renovate a house to improve our daily experience of private life, but we may also do it because we know wood floors will add value if we decide—and likely we will—to put the house back on the market. We increase a home’s exchange value by adding use value.

And yet there is another circumstance to take into account while thinking of the interests of the home-owner and the contradictions of the home—the question of value itself—arising with the problem of the housing crisis and the boom and bust economy. As architect Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk reminds us, there are two traditions in this country, reflecting “a history of two methods of producing housing: people producing houses for sale and people producing houses for themselves” (3). Speculative real estate development is a volatile and shaping factor in the cyclical movements of the housing market. Both homeowners who buy primarily for use value and homeowners who buy primarily for exchange value suffered economically from the market collapse of 2007-2009. In Smith’s approach to understanding the movements of capital, he points to the idea, advocated also by Marx, that fixed capital is a “wholly inadequate form of capital,” and continues, citing Harvey, that “it is circulating capital, rather, that facilitates the survival of the capitalist class, albeit one which has had to ‘cannibalize itself’” (173). The ability for capital to become unfixed is what allows the most affluent market actors to survive economic recession. For the majority of homeowners who staked their financial stability in their homes, the housing crash of 2007-2009 demonstrated how a volatile housing market could have real, devastating material impacts on people otherwise confident in their life choices. The housing crash revealed not only the tenuousness of the middle-class lifestyle but also the true economic and power disparity between the “one-percenters” and the rest of us.

For even in the face of economic disaster, capital is reshaping our landscape to continue to exploit profits out of people, land, and labor. Crises, in fact, are an integral component in the perpetuation of capital’s see-saw movements. As Smith writes:

We need to look at some of the contradictory results of crisis, for no matter how disruptive and dysfunctional, crises can also be acutely functional for capital.
The mergers, takeovers, and bankruptcies as well as general devaluation (of commodities, labor power, machinery, money) and destruction of capital (variable as well as constant) that accompany crises also prepare the ground for a new phase of capitalist development. (170)

The disinvestment from neighborhood cities opened the way for eventual redevelopment that has led to an explosion in gentrification. Even if this redevelopment is initiated by public campaigns and public funds intended for affordable housing, the interests of capital are inevitably manifested in the exchange-value interest of housing market actors intent on avoiding risk and increasing profits. Smith argues, forcefully, and convincingly, that the gentrified urban landscape is not only the inevitable outcome of life under capitalism today, it is also an engine for capitalism’s continued stranglehold over our understanding of development and progress:

Gentrification has moved from an isolated event in select housing markets to a pervasive plank of urban planning policy. When combined with the global suburbanization of cities, this makes Henri Lefebvre’s prognostication of 1970 that urbanization now supplants industrialization as the engine of social change look prescient. City building has become a motive geographical force of capital accumulation, a source of massive surplus value production. (263)

The interest of capital, then, in building gentrified landscapes, is not to add use value to regions and provide housing for even middle-income residents. Gentrification is, arguably, a metaphor for today’s economic activities—a process of cannibalization and displacement, and the creation of tenuous prosperity for a dwindling and distracted professional class. It is, as we will see, a homogenizing process that extracts culture in order to commoditize and mass produce “difference.” It is making the idea of home something increasingly evasive and ambiguous. It means that gentrifiers, modern-day colonizers with even the best intentions, become complicit in reproducing a system of inequality that will not hesitate to cast them out of their own ranks of comfort in times of economic crisis. Under capitalism’s rule, in a world of uneven development that reigns as second nature, these times of crisis are in fact inherent to capitalism. Gentrification is a condition of life and landscape in the wake of socialism’s missed moment, while capitalism stands on its last, long legs.
1.6 Untitled. Winter 2018.
But I should confront myself at that age in quite a different way had I the courage to enter a certain front door that I have passed thousands upon thousands of times. A front door in the old West End. True, my eyes no longer see it, or the façade of the house. My soles would doubtless be the first to send me word, once I had closed the door behind me, that on this worn staircase they trod in ancient tracks, and if I no longer cross the threshold of that house it is for fear of an encounter with this stairway interior, which has conserved in seclusion the power to recognize me that the façade lost long ago. For with its columned windows it has stayed the same, even if within the living quarters all is changed. Bleak verses filled the intervals between our heartbeats, when we paused exhausted on the landings between floors. They glimmered or shone from panes in which a woman with nut-brown eyebrows floated aloft with a goblet from a niche, and while the straps of my satchel cut into my shoulders I was forced to read, “Industry adorns the burgher, blessedness is toil’s reward.” Outside it may have been raining. One of the colored windows was open, and to the beat of raindrops the upward march resumed.

Walter Benjamin, A Berlin Chronicle
II. Environment

Among the early thinkers of what would become critical theory, none rivalled the eccentric and dogged commitment of Walter Benjamin with his book and toy collection, his archives and his travel journals. Always carrying a signature blue journal used to record his thoughts, curiosities, quotes, and detailed descriptions, Benjamin believed that places connected us to our memories and thus to a particular experience of history. For Benjamin, collecting the objects of the world as images offered the possibility for redemptive thinking, something wholly different than the kind of thought constrained by the hegemonic methods of Enlightenment reason. In Benjamin’s travel writings, from Naples to Moscow Diary, city landscapes offer insight into the human condition in the midst of what he called the ongoing catastrophe of history. Looking specifically at A Berlin Chronicle, we see an acute, almost tedious attention regarding his own childhood memories and experiences of particular places such as rooms, staircases, or school buildings. Benjamin, with his unique, even obsessive and idiosyncratic commitment to capturing the details of his own memories—sensory and melancholy—seems to anticipate the work of scholars such as Sarah Goldhagen who insist that our understanding of the world and ourselves is tied to the places we have touched and that have touched us. In his writings, his poetic recollections, Benjamin reveals that our construction of the world and, perhaps, even the possibility of reconciliation—our exit out of catastrophe—are tied to memories that cannot be divorced from the strange and ephemeral experience of place.

I tell myself it had to be in Paris, where the walls and quays, the places to pause, the collections and the rubbish, the railings and the squares, the arcades and the kiosks, teach a language so singular that our relations to people attain, in the solitude encompassing us in our immersion in that world of things, the depths of a sleep in which the dream image waits to show the people their true faces. I wish to write of this afternoon because it made so apparent what kind of regimen cities keep over imagination, and why the city, where people make the most ruthless demands on one another, where appointments and telephone calls, sessions and visits, flirtations and the struggle for existence grant the individual not a single moment of contemplation, indemnifies itself in memory and why the veil it has covertly woven out of our lives shows the images of people less than those of the sites of our encounters with others or ourselves. (30)
In such remarkable passages, Benjamin demonstrates that thought moves regardless of the whims and wills of reason. He shows, too, that images and poetry are forms that free thought to cross a terrain of human experience too fleeting for our crass disciplines and sciences. For the genius of Benjamin’s epiphanic thought was connected to a kind of attunement to the world. Translator and friend, Jean Selz recalls his time travelling with Benjamin in 1932:

He was perhaps the only one who gave me with so much force the impression that there is a depth of thought where, propelled by rigorous logical reasoning, precise historic and scientific facts inhabit a plane in which they coexist with their poetic counterparts, a plane where poetry is no longer simply a form of literary thought, but reveals itself as an expression of the truth that illuminates the most intimate correspondences between man and the world. (qtd. in WBA, 5)

Benjamin’s work insists that alternative modes of thinking and writing can reveal the enormous ways in which the environment shapes people and their experiences. This endeavor connects Benjamin to Goldhagen’s interest in embodied cognition and architecture. As Goldhagen explains in the introduction to her book *Welcome to Your World: How the Build Environment Shapes Our Lives*, poetry, unlike anything else, describes the powerful effects of place on our conscious and unconscious selves:

“...I was not satisfied and was still searching for answers to how, and how much, the built environment affects what we think, feel, and do. Only creative writers, it seemed, captured something of what I was trying to explain. The associative, nonlinear, intuitive, and metaphorical thinking in poems and prose passages... crystallized some essential qualities of how people experience our built environments.” (xiii)

Word images, verbal performances of time and space, memory and melancholy, access something otherwise indescribable about the way our environment impacts us. And by including poetic epigraphs for each chapter, Goldhagen invigorates hers and our understanding of the interdisciplinary research she details throughout her book.

Benjamin—who faced Adorno’s criticism over the mystical aspects of his thought—likely would have expressed little interest in cognitive brain science in relation to the imagery of memories. But Goldhagen brings fascinating neuroscience to her investigation into the power of architecture. She
reveals that the process of recalling autobiographical memories requires a kind of mental visual
simulation of the place where the event occurred. Scientists believe this is because long term memories
are stored in the same part of the brain that helps us navigate space. Furthermore, “in forming such
memories, the brain may use not just the same general region that helps us to identify places, but the very
same cells...Place cells enable us to both identify a place and consolidate a long-term memory” (84). Big
lifetime events are remembered not just for their content, but come back to us with the image of where
they took place. Understanding this connection between environment and memory, Goldhagen advances
the idea that place itself is a crucial component to identity formation and thus our understanding of
ourselves, our histories, and our communities. She writes emphatically:

...We cannot recall a memory from our past without revisiting at least some elements of the place where the original event occurred—if not consciously, then at least nonconsciously. What follows from this is that place-bound experiences constitute the very framework for our sense of self and perceived identity. The built environment constitutes the foundation upon which our past, present, and future selves are constructed. (85)

Here, Goldhagen makes a scientifically-grounded argument that centers place as a key, often overlooked
component of human development. Alongside Benjamin, she proposes that our experience of places--
from corners in family homes to sterile waiting rooms—unlock truths about ourselves and our social
world. This idea sets Goldhagen on a mission to teach her fellow architects and the broader public that
the built environment has enormous influence over our well-being—and more specifically, over our
conscious and unconscious experiences of daily life. Her work is a call to action, as she argues that it is
only a lack of information and care rather than a scarcity of resources that prevents us from building,
living and working in healthier environments. She concludes:

Far from being a backdrop or merely some marginally important stage setting that we can ignore without consequence, the worlds we build construct the literal, actual scaffolding we use to cognitively construct ourselves as people, other people as human beings, and our relations with one another. Inevitably and logically, what follows from this is revolutionary. To a nearly incalculable degree, the sorry state of our built environments compromises and impoverishes in pervasive and concrete ways our lives, the lives of others, and the lives of our communities. (88)
The important findings of Goldhagen relate not only to the home, but also to the neighborhood, and the ways capitalism reinforces inequality through an impoverished built environment in the material sense as well as psychologically and aesthetically. In *Social Justice and the City* (1973), Marxist geographer David Harvey argues that the landscape of the city cannot be understood apart from the social processes that uphold capitalism. Together, the built environment and these social norms and interactions reproduce class and racial inequality. By interrogating traditional land-use theory that relies on outdated trickle-down and game-theory approaches, Harvey reveals that “capital clearly will flow in a way that bears little relationship to need or to the condition of the least advantaged territory” (112). For Smith, Harvey’s student, this leads not only to extreme economic disparity, but also produces landscapes of uneven development that sustain the ideal conditions for capitalism to thrive.

Critical to Harvey’s diagnosis is the idea that this uneven development, or in Harvey’s terms, this “differential disequilibrium in the spatial form of the city,” will open up or foreclose economic opportunities for particular groups—in other words, the environment created by social and economic disparity will continue to reproduce inequality. Harvey writes: “In general, the rich and relatively resourceful can reap great benefits while the poor and necessarily immobile have only restricted opportunities. This can mean a quite substantial regressive redistribution of income in a rapidly changing urban system” (64). The costs of displacement are material, social, and psychological—and all of these effects have ongoing material and social ramifications. Low income urban groups, usually majority black, not only are forced to renegotiate net-negative losses in terms of housing, transportation access, employment opportunities, and green space, they also must endure the formal and informal processes of containment perpetuated by a racist and classist dominant culture.

The process of displacement and reproduction of social stigma are natural outcomes of urban development because, on the whole, only a small group of actors have the power to determine land uses in both residential and commercial neighborhoods. As Harvey details, those who are most negatively
impacted by these decisions are the least organized even though they are numerically greater. They also face significant barriers in obtaining access to the decision-making processes—again, owing to the historic and systemic erasure of voices of people of color. Policy is slow-moving and formalized, and, coupled with the classist expectation of a requisite formal education and socio-cultural fluency, consistent community engagement and community victories are rare. As a result, a few, even well-meaning, political actors are shaping the environment, its material and its less tangible psychological effects, reinforcing the inequality they claim to combat. Harvey summarizes:

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Most of the decisions made on the physical planning of the urban system are likely to be made or strongly influenced by small and powerful oligopolistic groups. These groups are in effect rearranging the physical stimuli (a highway here, a power plant there) for large masses of poorly organized people. A few small influential subcultures within the urban culture are patterning stimuli situations for the other subcultures. (83)
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Furthermore, no universal cultural value can be placed on home and what home or community looks like. When a few people (white, upper-class, and male) make decisions about what “progress” looks like—even if their vision of “revitalization” is able to subvert the most lucrative landscape prospects for capital—this almost always does violence to racially and culturally diverse communities. Harvey additionally argues that resource-poor communities are more likely to connect their cultural identities to place than middle and upper income groups who tend to be very mobile. Referencing Leonard Duhl’s 1963 work, “The Human Measure: Man and Family in Megalopolis,” Harvey explains:

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Low-income groups… often identify very closely with their housing environment and the psychological cost of moving is to them far greater than it is to the mobile upper middle class. Well-meaning but culturally insensitive middle-class planners can consequently (through rehousing projects and the like) inflict heavy costs upon lower socio-economic groups… (85)
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If we agree with Harvey that the “rich can command space whereas the poor are trapped in it,” then it is all the more important to look at the ways the built environment—even aesthetically—reproduces long-term inequality (171). What and where, then, are these messages and symbols of difference located? How do they act on us, and how do we react to them? Harvey speaks the same
There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town... He had a bow-down command in his face, and every step he took made the thing more tangible.

Take for instance that new house of his. It had two stories with porches, with bannisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters surrounding the “big house.” And different from everybody else in the town he put off moving in until it had been painted, in and out. And look at the way he painted it—a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W.B. Jackson and the Vanderpool’s wore. It made the village feel funny talking to him... Then there was the matter of the spittoons... How could they know up-to-date folks was spitting in flowery little things like that? It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them. Maybe more things in the world besides spitting pots had been hid from them, when they wasn’t told no better than to spit in tomato cans.

Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (47-48)
language as Goldhagen when he states that “the shaping of space which goes on in architecture and, therefore, in the city is symbolic of our culture, symbolic of the existing social order, symbolic of our aspirations, our needs, and our fears,” concluding that if “we are to evaluate the spatial form of the city, we must, somehow or other, understand its creative meaning as well as its mere physical dimensions” (31). This creative meaning becomes manifest in the formation of our memories and ourselves, with material and psychological implications. The signals and messages built into our surroundings have the power to contain and suppress, or, alternately, to comfort and to explode our horizons of possibility.

Goldhagen investigates the power of the built environment through the idea that objects and space create “action settings.” While things suggest what environmental psychologists call “affordances”—for example, a chair makes us think of, and facilitates, sitting—action settings situate us in places that have multiple things and their affordances. And, as Goldhagen writes: “Those arrangements provide us with informational cues that are critical to our lives among other people, influencing us to act in patterned and socially normative ways” (196). Drawing on the work of Roger Barker and the environmental psychologists that continued his work, Goldhagen argues that in order to better understand both people’s “collective actions” and their “internal lives” we must uncover the way our “human habitats” impact our daily lives (198). Crucial to this is the idea that action settings “nudge” people into behaviors, promoting what Barker called “situationally normative” conduct (205). Harvey similarly suggests the importance of such work, writing that “if we are to understand space, we must consider its symbolic meaning and its complex impact upon behavior as it is mediated by the cognitive processes” (36).

Both Harvey and Goldhagen are insisting that space—whether it be the landscape of a neighborhood or the floor plan of a workplace or home—influences us both consciously and unconsciously to behave in patterned, socially normative ways. If those behaviors are reproducing a dominant culture that continues to delimit opportunities and foreclose on the possibility of more liberated modes of being, then aesthetics are a matter of ethics. This requires that we examine not only the most obviously dangerous and resource-poor landscapes, but also the spaces that reproduce capitalism by marketing images of prosperity in the form of mass-produced environments and homogenized space.
other words, it means we should also look at the effect of gentrified space on the human capacity to creatively imagine and produce otherwise worlds.

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Homogenized space, mass produced culture, and architecture in the wake of industrialization were themes of modernity that Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno opened up to the emerging field of critical theory. Much of Benjamin’s fascination with French poet Charles Baudelaire involved his attention to the changing conditions of life in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. His poetry captured a pervasive sense of melancholy within urban life and infused the grotesque into a revised romantic genre. As Goldhagen notes above, his poems, particularly those found in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, spoke to an evolving human experience inflected by the changing landscape of the city.

The history of the Parisian landscape pivots around the figure of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, arguably the first modern urban planner, commissioned by Emperor Napoléon III. Haussmann’s vision facilitated the construction of new parks, improved transportation infrastructure, and significantly increased residential housing. But he also ushered in the unequal devastation brought by capital and speculation and the social effect of a homogenized aesthetic. His vision realized the creation of wide boulevards patterned on a grid system, destroying both the medieval architecture and the meandering systems of alleyways that Baudelaire often featured in his poetry. These massive transformations favored uniformity of architectural aesthetics over the preservation of historically diverse traditions. In many ways, Haussmann ushered in an aesthetics of mass society which many critics have called reactionary. This opinion was prevalent among those who recognized that the new, wider streets also eliminated the possibility of erecting barricades in the event of worker rebellions, an essential tactic in the revolutionary battles waged in Paris over the prior century.

For Benjamin, Haussmann becomes a figure representing the evolving image [of] catastrophe. The process of urbanization that Haussmann initiated, which Benjamin named “Haussmannization,” saw
Fournel, in his eminent demonstration of Haussmann’s misdeeds: “…It all made for so many distinct small cities within the capital city—a city of study, a city of commerce, a city of luxury, a city of refuge, a city of movement and of popular pleasures—all of them nonetheless linked to one another by a host of gradations and transitions. And this is what is being obliterated... by the construction everywhere of the same geometrical and rectilinear street, with its unvarying mile-long perspective and its continuous rows of houses that are always the same house.” Victor Fournel, Paris nouveau et Paris future, pp. 220-221 (“Conclusion”).

[E12a,4]

Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project
the end of an era of revolutionary ferment. It also led to the demolition of the very arcades that Benjamin resuscitates as symbols of a changing metropolis in his famous and hefty *Arcades Project*. These arcades, beautiful, enclosed passageways, characterized by their raised ceilings, iron and glasswork, represented the transition to a consumer economy, and from a local to a global system of exchange. As they dwindled in number, the remaining arcades, increasingly shabby, became museums and archives, jumping off points for Benjamin’s own poetic montages that spoke to transformations in the human condition as we encountered a new age of commodification and technological change. In Convolute E of the *The Arcades Project*, titled “Haussmannization, Barricade fighting,” Benjamin brings together an assortment of citations from critics and fans of Haussmann’s work, ultimately imaging a story of two cities: the old city, with its Baudelairian flare and multiple histories and aesthetics, and the new city, with panoramic views, soaring rents, and a thriving, growing bourgeoisie with the luxuries and entertainments of the city at its fingertips.

Benjamin, Goldhagen, and many architects, point to Haussmannization as the first in a series of events that would entrench the use of the grid in designing and engineering urban and residential projects. This approach to land-use development facilitated the mass-production of materials, transportation, and construction methods. In the early 1900s through the early 21st century, the straight lines and right angles of modular square grid design promised to lower costs and improve efficiency. It meant that construction could be simplified and therefore projects could be built by unskilled labor (64). Goldhagen adds that some architects believed the increased use of certain house designs would impart a homogenizing aesthetic that would “help modern urban dwellers—who tend to be nomadic, moving place to place—feel comfortable wherever they went” (64). For critics like Goldhagen, Haussmannization and the proliferating use of the grid design created cityscapes with dehumanizing effects on inhabitants. The rise of open spaces, the elimination of private, sheltered public space, the categorization of location-based activities—recreation, work, residence—and the quantification of space (in rent-prices, distances, and floor-plans) continues to change the way we move through cities and neighborhoods as diverse individuals with (erased) cultural histories.
Designers, Goldhagen insists, continue to neglect the fact that humans experience their environments through “embodied cognition.” She writes, “People, in their bodies, experience objects and spaces not as point coordinates on a three-dimensional map, but dynamically and interactively,” which also means with sensory and spatial perception, and always with attention to the action settings that stimulate us. While Goldhagen uses remarkable architecture, such as museums and public sculptures, to evidence the ways we respond to floor plans, objects, shapes, and surfaces, these examples speak to all of the daily interactions with our less-investigated environments. For instance, in describing how the feeling of different surfaces impacts our cognition, Goldhagen points out that “any surface that does not enhance our experience of it diminishes it.” She continues: “Because tactile impressions involve our own movement or imagined movement (running your hand across the façade, for example), they activate our sense of ourselves as wholly engaged in our environments.” Furthermore, touch has remarkable cognitive impact, and even seeing texture stimulates our minds and bodies to simulate and imagine our responses to those surfaces. Goldhagen, in a longer excerpt, writes about the bodily cognition of wood as a design element:

Richly textured materials and surfaces—like the lava stones at Wright’s Imperial Hotel, or the Salk Institute’s travertine, concrete, and teak—elbow their way into our peripersonal universe by eliciting multisensory, emotionally rich nonconscious and conscious cognitions…People like wood. They are drawn to it for countless reasons. In comparison with metal, wood maintains a fairly constant temperature. Coloristically, wood skews warm, in hues of reddish-orange browns, a palette people tend to find appealing and subtly stimulating. Wood’s grain exhibits an appealing tension of pattern and irregularity. Because wood commonly appears in residential architecture, it simultaneously elicits associations of nature on the one hand, and domesticity on the other. (159)

As for Haussmann and the prevalence of space dictated by the grid-system, Goldhagen reveals that our cognition of space and our ability to navigate it occurs through an unconscious construction of hexagonal—not right-angled—patterns. She points to Frank Lloyd Wright’s home designs, relating his belief that people would be drawn to natural forms (think honeycombs) and that these would be “consonant with the dictates of human visual perception” (68). Wright’s architectural work anticipated,
“In Haussmann’s time, there was a need for new roads, but not necessarily for the new roads he built... The most striking feature of his projects is their scorn for historical experience... Haussmann lays out an artificial city, like something in Canada or the Far West... His thoroughfares rarely possess any utility and never any beauty. Most are astonishing architectural intrusions that begin just about anywhere and end up nowhere, while destroying everything in their path; to curve them would have been enough to preserve precious old buildings...” Dubech and d’Espezel, pp. 424-426.

[E5a,1]

Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project
remarkably, the recent findings in neuro-cognitive research, here summarized by Goldhagen: “Human spatial navigation is organized around our practice of nonconsciously, imaginatively triangulating the location of our body in space with two other proximate points, in order to help us find our way” (68).

Equipped with even a cursory knowledge of embodied cognition, the neighborhood and the interior of the home become sites of aesthetic interrogation, opening up onto serious considerations regarding place and being-in-the-world. As Goldhagen summarizes poetically, the multitudinous signals we receive from our environment “enmesh us and the people we see and imagine here, in this and only this place, in a richly constructed moment that engages so many of our senses” (169). Our engagement, say, with objects and interior domestic spaces, can stimulate us to recall memories and mentally reconstruct the histories of people and events that define who we are and want to be. Or, on the other hand, our objects can sit mutely, illusions of comfort, mass-produced and mass marketed—fashionable amenities with expiration dates.

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The argument for design that embraces the power of embodied cognition could also inform the debate about gentrification. For instance, it could help us understand the different consequences of building homes for particular families and histories of place, as opposed to building homes for a targeted, generalized demographic beneath the euphemistic banner of “revitalization.” For Goldhagen, the conditions of possibility for the former need not be incumbent on privilege and wealth, but rather in re-thinking the significance of our designs and the human cost of designs that deprive us of fuller, dignified lived experiences. The reality, however, is that the overwhelming majority of residential design is dictated by the same forces of capital that drive our economy of mass-reproduction. In an interview found in The American Idea of Home: Conversations About Architecture and Design, architect Jeremiah Eck remarks that “over fifty percent of all the houses that have been built in this country in the last thirty years” are single-family, development homes. He continues, “Most of those houses, the vast majority,
have hardly been designed at all,” concluding that “today there are so many bad houses” (156). Another architect, Marianne Cusato, remarks, “The building industry in the United States has moved toward building homes that are isolated from community, forming monocultures where every house in the neighborhood is the same size and so on. You can almost tell somebody’s resume and bank balance by reading their address, because every single person in a single neighborhood is the same…” (116). As the proliferation of new housing development takes over old city neighborhoods, real estate developers, construction companies, and manufacturers are making the design decisions. These decisions are always profit-seeking and driven by market forces—e.g. how fast they must complete the project (considering the pressure of interest rates from investors and banks), which products are used, and what labor is available. Many decisions have little to do with the final aesthetic impact or function of the home, as Goldhagen writes:

…Construction companies and the manufacturers of building materials, fixtures, and finishes give high priority to factors—for example, cost and ease of transport and storage—which relate tangentially or not at all to the needs of a project’s eventual users. Construction companies and manufacturers of products for the built environment take an approach to design analogous to that of the highly profitable home-furnishings giant IKEA, which mandates that designers’ products not only be easily assembled by consumers but also be easily stored in their colossal warehouses, with every product’s component parts fitting into packages that lie flat. (30-31)

These factors make it likely that a new Southside three-bedroom home, with 2,169 square feet and a price tag of $500,000, is also the kind of “product” that can get away with modelling itself after luxury while depriving its inhabitants of the kind of aesthetic considerations invested in homes built for the human body and mind. Again, Goldhagen reminds us that developers obey incentives to “employ established site plans and ready-made building designs; to rely on familiar, readily available, off-the-shelf materials; to use them in the most conventional ways; and to settle for standard (and more often than not, actually substandard) construction practices” (31). Real estate builders and developers continue to dictate the fashions in new residential home designs because they have a monopoly on the market and because reproducing the same set of floor plans and housing designs, using the same materials, is the best way to
assure profits. According to architect Barbara Winslow, this kind of profit over care in design is a homogenizing force that has overshadowed an old tradition of building diverse homes for diverse lifestyles, places, and histories. As she says, the proliferation of identical development homes “create a universal potential for the standard family that can be sold to the next buyer” (IOH, 43). Another architect, Lester Walker, explains that a premium is placed on first impressions:

“…Realtors think they have about fifteen or twenty seconds to sell a house. So these big home companies are designing for that first fifteen seconds, rather than designing a beautiful house that functions well with the site. They have these soaring two-story entryways that are designed purely to impress…” (IOH 26-27)

The surface of things, however, hold power beyond their ability to photograph well for brochures and websites. The single-family homes proliferating in the gentrified landscape may mimic the features of natural design and materials to earn fashionable style points, but they fail the test of bodily cognition. For example, Goldhagen writes, the “simulated woods found in the kitchen cabinets and flooring of such developments manifest little of the visual, textural and olfactory complexity that people yearn for.” This and other similar, hollow features of the development home, “constitute a catalogue of larger and smaller missed opportunities”—opportunities, Goldhagen argues, that would open up more fulfilling and heathier life experiences (27).

These missed opportunities characterize the contemporary world of residential architecture and its transition away from a tradition of vernacular house styles. This older tradition had been sustained by the practice of local builders designing and executing the construction of homes, utilizing passed-down methods and a fidelity to basic, durable and local materials. Walker bemoans the loss of the vernacular style, and its approach to problem solving in home design—approaches which utilized the skills of the builder as opposed to the impractical design features and fashions pursued by the architect, construction company or developers. Thus, the home made by a builder is attuned to its environment, and embraces its duty to provide shelter and responsibly respond to the community in which it is situated and the particular
It took Grandfather twenty years to achieve it. He lost his brick business and most of his land but he held on to one acre and built his house on it. He and Grandmother often went without food to pay for it and keep up the taxes. To his family it was more than a home; it was a monument to Grandfather’s courage and tenacity.

There was something solid and indestructible about Grandfather’s house. It wasn’t very large—it had only six rooms—and it wasn’t nearly so fine as his brother Richard’s house, but it was free and clear of debt and Grandfather had supervised the laying of each board and brick and shingle although he could see the work only through his fingers. It was as if he had built himself into the structure, for it had his stubborn character. It was sparingly constructed and unpretentious like himself. It wasn’t even a two-story house. He called it a story-and-a-jump because the two bedrooms upstairs were part of the steeply slanting roof and had only half windows and low slanting ceilings. Downstairs the small parlor and another bedroom were divided by the narrow hallway which joined the dining room and kitchen at the back of the house. The wall plaster had cracked from many settlings; the furniture was sparse and very plain; the rooms were small; but each room had a fireplace and in cold weather a fire blazed cheerfully on a hearth somewhere in the house.

It reminded me of Noah’s Ark perched on a little slope, its back hugging the ground, its front high on latticed brick underpinnings, and at each end a tall brick chimney built from the ground outside and towering above the roof. The place had a ragged beauty. Honeysuckle and morning-glory vines flowed over the sagging fences and covered the old latticed wellhouse...

Pauli Murray, Proud Shoes (25-26)
family which it houses. Again, Walker elaborates:

In the vernacular, I look for the quality, the general style, and the pragmatic functions, like the idea of shedding rain off the roof. The roof was designed a certain way to shed the bad weather in various climates for hundreds of years before architects got a hold of it. I could give you comparable examples of windows, siding, stairways, foundations, doors, walls, surfaces, and so forth that have been passed down through the years…

All of architecture relates to the various forces that are acting upon it. It always gets back to weather, site, culture, availability of material type, and so on. And if you allow the building to be a product of all those forces, it can be beautiful and simple. (IOH, 25-26)

Walker reminds us of the way things used to be, when homes were built locally, perhaps even by their owner or as a community effort. This may be a romantic vision of what a dream home is, rarely replicated, and extremely unlikely or impossible to execute in an urban context today. Yet he names some essential elements of what makes a home responsive to its geography and its inhabitants, elements that Goldhagen uplifts as aesthetic contributions to place and human experience. Materials and surfaces, simplicity and function—all of these could be elements of home design and should be redefined in the context of our times, with its attendant crises of climate change and socio-economic inequality.

The aesthetics of the built environment impacts experiences both inside the home and outside the home. It impacts the homeowners, the neighbors, and the passersby. In Southside, all but a few of the homes have been built within the last 4 years. Like a community rebuilding after a disaster, Southside looks completely different, with a new topography, a raised, treeless skyline, improved sidewalks, and newly paved driveways. Speaking to the challenges facing architectural design after the devastation of hurricane Katrina, architect Robert Ivy acknowledges the intangible, unrecoverable experiences of lost neighborhoods:

“When a city is lost, or a segment of a city is lost, we face something that’s more complex because it isn’t about the individual unit. It’s about the relationships of the pieces and parts. It’s all the things in between that are lost. It’s the space between the buildings that held the movement and the life. The value of these nuances—the built-up odors and tactile and sensory experiences—is very difficult to argue for in a rational and economic sense.” (IOH, 136)
Ivy acknowledges that there is no economic incentive to rebuild neighborhoods the way they were. While we know that gentrification is a stage, and a landscape, for capital accumulation, Ivy still hopes that something different could manifest, rediscovering those nuances that might connect a place to its history:

“...What is new can remember what was there and respond to it. We can’t build back what we’ve lost, and in some cases, we shouldn’t. In some cases, those buildings were ready for renewal. I think our challenge is that we have to devise a new urbanity while maintaining a sense of history.” (135)

The project of a “new urbanity” may be an admirable goal for the future of architectural design, but it will never be equitable as long as our landscapes continue to reproduce the inequality fueling capitalism. This inequality in manifested in the gentrified Southside neighborhood whose new homeowners are majority white, educated, and middle to upper class. Its large, colorful homes, manicured lawns, fenced-in yards, and treeless curbs have changed the way Durham residents navigate its streets and redefined who belongs where. Home security signs, “beware of dog” signs, and composting signs are only the more literal messages built into the gentrified landscape. As Goldhagen shows, environments and their action settings facilitate—or constrain—social interactions and help to “perpetuate the social order” (199). Spaces influence our identity formation in both conscious and nonconscious ways—they can connect us to our histories and fulfill our sensory yearnings, or they can be unhealthy, reproducing oppressive social behaviors and systems, imposing severe psychological distress. Goldhagen summarizes:

…People are constantly bombarded by the information we nonconsciously glean from the built environment and its objects, which stimulate us to think unbidden thoughts, feel unbidden emotions, and make (at best) half-conscious choices among socially patterned sets of conduct. (207)

Gentrification, and the historical evolution of its logic—evidenced in Benjamin’s image of an old and a new Paris—preserves the reign of capital while shielding its upper class inhabitants from the troublesome signs of those pathologies associated with poverty and difference. Interrogating the aesthetics of the
homes in Southside reveals the ways this new construction is a symbol of a “failure of living” and also, importantly, reconsiders what an ethics of home may look and feel like.
The old Paris bewails the monotony of the new streets; whereupon the new Paris responds:

Why all these reproaches? ...
Thanks to the straight line, the ease of travel it affords,
And if one’s eyes are good, one likewise avoids
The fools, the borrowers, the bailiffs, the bores;
Last but not least, down the whole length of the avenue,
Each passerby now avoids the others, or nods from afar.


[W12a,1]

Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project
...Any man who walks in the ways of power and property is bound to meet hate.

Zora Neal Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (48)
III. Proximity

Home security signs do more than mark and effect space, subliminally asserting the reigning value of property over human need. They also betray fear. They transform dwellings into fortresses, and declare the readiness of its occupants to engage the violent force of the state for protection. This fear is reproduced through formal and informal social and legal codes that contain and violate black and brown bodies, and criminalize poverty in order to maintain power relations. People who live in gentrified communities that border poor, black neighborhoods understand that proximity makes their property and comfort conspicuous. Whether the threat is real or imagined, the experience of domicile in a Southside dream home is impacted by this fear of theft and violence. At the repressed roots of this fear is the recognition that such violence is a response, perhaps even a mandate, in the wake of the violence of occupation, inequality, displacement, and the hierarchy of property over life. The riot, the most fearsome possibility, is particularly haunting because it contains a collective political power and a logic of revolution. In the depictions of mass revolt and violence below, we are provoked again to ask whether it is possible to formulate an ethics of home under the conditions of colonialism, racism, and capitalism.

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“I’m talking about this place, Jo, this cul-de-sac with a wall around it. I’m talking about the day a big gang of those hungry, desperate, crazy people outside decide to come in...” (Butler, 55)

In Octavia Butler’s novel, Parable of the Sower, even the most basic symbols of material comfort mark communities as potential targets of violent intrusion. In this dystopian story, catastrophic circumstances provide the opportunity for readers to interrogate their idea of home and the tenuous social and economic conditions that make community possible. Imagining a future United States in the aftermath of devastating climate change, unregulated free markets, and police corruption, Butler’s young protagonist anticipates the dangers facing her neighborhood of eleven households. In this world of extreme scarcity, brutal violence is perpetrated by drug-crazed mobs while the desperate “street poor”
scavenge in the wake of their destruction. Only a wall and its gate separate Lauren’s community from the chaos on the outside. Rare excursions venturing beyond the wall bring grim encounters with nameless dead and the nearly-dead. The sound of gunfire becomes so common that the community is shocked when a stray bullet penetrates the gate and kills a child. Their small gardens, fruit trees, and rabbit dens are a prized source of sustenance, but they also mark their community as a target for the desperate. For Lauren, the challenges that come with adolescence and its search for autonomy are exacerbated by a pervasive and constant sense of vulnerability, by her proximity to violence, and her understanding that an attack from the outside is inevitable.

God, I hate this place.
I mean, I love it. It’s home. These are my people. But I hate it. It’s like an island surrounded by sharks—except that sharks don’t bother you unless you go in the water. But our land sharks are on their way in. It’s just a matter of how long it takes for them to get hungry enough. (50)

The walls of Lauren’s community are first breached by thieves who steal property and food. The attacks grow progressively more organized and murderous when suddenly, in the middle of the night, the gate is breached. Homes and bodies are plundered, fires take over the neighborhood, and only Lauren and two other inhabitants survive.

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Set within the context of post-colonial Senegal, Ousmane Sembène’s novel Xala offers both grotesque and comical imagery to portray a different kind of rebellion. In its final scene, beggars rise up against the tragic character, El Hadji—a businessman who, like many of his wealthy associates, profits from maintaining the exploitative and corrupt practices of the recently departed colonialists. The scene, also depicted in the author’s film adaptation, is led by a beggar whose land inheritance was stolen through El Hadji’s corrupt maneuvers. This beggar gathers a crew of the outcast and abject, the crippled
At this early morning hour the suburb breathed with the well-being of its peaceful existence.

A maid with a little girl trotting by her side reached the fork in the road. Immediately the child let out a scream of fear and clung to the maid. Then they both screamed. Their sharp cries alerted the neighbourhood. Doors and windows opened and were immediately shut again...

“Inform the station right away. Go on! It’s a riot...”

...Walking abreast across the entire width of the road came a procession of lame and blind people, lepers, legless cripples, one-legged cripples, men, women, and children, led by the beggar. There was something repulsive about the procession, which gave off a fetid smell of ragged clothes...

...The beggar rang the bell. Then rang again. A pause. The maid opened the door. She drew back startled, nearly falling over onto the steps. Leading the way, the beggar pushed open the door, followed by his retinue. Some struggled crawling on to the verandah. They went into the sitting-room and settled themselves down as if it belonged to them...

A cripple with a degenerate’s head and runny eyes stuffed the crockery into a sling bag. Opposite him a one-armed man was using his remaining limb to heap in front of him all the shiny objects he could find...

“All your past wealth – for you have nothing left – was acquired by cheating. You and your colleagues build on the misfortunes of honest, ordinary people. To give yourselves clean consciences, you found charities, or you give alms at street corners to people reduced to poverty. And when we get too numerous, you call the police...”

Ousmane Sembène, Xala (107-111)
3.4-3.5 Film Stills. *Xala*. 1975. Films sans Frontières. 1:57:32, 1:57:38
and the diseased to march on the businessman’s home. Pouring through the door, the ragtag and odorous lumpen-masses crawl over furniture, raid the refrigerator, hoard the cooking ware, and try on clothing to shrieks of laughter. In the film, when the surprised El Hadji asks whether the beggar is there to rob him, the answer is no—he is there for vengeance. El Hadji must strip naked and allow the assembled crowd to spit on him. Sembène describes the horror of the scene through El Hadji’s daughter, who represents a common, conflicted figure: while she claims to support the revolutionary cause, she herself lives the material and psychic comforts bestowed by her upper-class position—a privilege bestowed by the luck of birth to a resource-rich family:

Rama herself was bursting with anger. Against whom? Against her father? Against these wretched people? She who was always ready with the words ‘revolution’ and ‘new social order’ felt deep within her breast something like a stone falling heavily into her heart, crushing her. (111-112)

For Rama, this moment of recognition—that political ideology does not atone for her privileged position in a corrupt society—opens onto a sense of hopelessness and guilt. In this rendering of rebellion, Sembène’s “street poor” do not achieve any significant material gain but rather the satisfaction of naming their exploitation and shaming one of their oppressors.

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Uncovering the political and psychological dimensions of colonial rule, theorist Frantz Fanon argued that the lumpenproletariat were a population ready for revolution. By revealing the conditions of colonialism that created and contained the vagrant, criminal, and prostitute, Fanon counters Marx’s rejection of the industrially unproductive population, centering them in his narrative of liberation. Cast out from society and the relations of colonial production, the lumpen-masses are free of the shackles of both false consciousness and the social taboo against violence—having always been an abject population, they are free of the pervasiveness of colonial thinking. With military guidance from leaders of the
In Kenya, during the years preceding the Mau-Mau revolt, the British colonial authorities increased their intimidation tactics against the lumpenproletariat. The police and missionaries coordinated their efforts in the years 1950-51 to respond appropriately to the enormous influx of young Kenyans from the countryside and the forest who, unable to find jobs, took to stealing, debauchery and alcoholism, etc. Juvenile delinquency in the colonized countries stems directly from this lumpenproletariat. Similarly, drastic measures were taken in the Congo from 1957 onwards to send back to the interior the “young hooligans” who were disturbing the peace. Relocation camps were opened and assigned to the evangelical missions under the protection, of course, of the Belgian army.

The formation of a lumpenproletariat is a phenomenon which is governed by its own logic, and neither the overzealousness of the missionaries nor decrees from the central authorities can check its growth. However hard it is kicked or stoned it continues to gnaw at the roots of the tree like a pack of rats.

The shanty town is the consecration of the colonized biological decision to invade the enemy citadel at all costs, and if need be, by the most underground channels. The lumpenproletariat constitutes a serious threat to the “security” of the town and signifies the irreversible rot and the gangrene eating into the heart of colonial domination. So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals, when approached, give the liberation struggle all they have got. Devoting themselves to the cause like valiant workers...

*Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (81-82)*
insurrection, the street poor would become the heart and the might of the revolutionary movements of the colonized:

In fact the insurrection, which starts in the rural areas, is introduced into the towns by that fraction of the peasantry blocked at the urban periphery, those who still have not found a single bone to gnaw in the colonial system...It is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead. The lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people. (80-81)

Fanon’s radical advocacy for violent insurrection, centered around the “spontaneous” energies of the exploited underclass, challenged those thinkers who believed revolutionary action belonged to an intellectual vanguard and a traditional, Marxist conception of the working class. Fanon’s work continues to challenge the materially comfortable armchair revolutionaries to confront the social constructions that stigmatize and pathologize the destitute, the sick, and the criminal. Insisting on the participation of the lumpenproletariat, Fanon shows that interaction with and proximity to the homeless and disenfranchised are pre-conditions of revolutionary action.

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Butler, Sembene, and Fanon each image scenes of social outcasts, criminals, and the poor expressing violent agency. Violence—regardless of whether it can be argued as ethical—flows out of conditions of scarcity orchestrated by systems of capitalist domination. To talk about middle-class fear is not only to expose the pervasiveness of racist and classist assumptions that “other” those beyond the metaphorical and tangible walls of comfort. It is also to recognize that there is a seemingly contagious repression of the above images—repressed because they reveal that property and comfort, amidst legalized displacement and institutionalized scarcity, can become reasonable targets of theft and re-appropriation. Instead of thinking of gentrification as a “regenerative” approach to eradicating crime, gentrification is exposed as a form of colonization that, should explosive social and political conditions
arise, foments the conditions for its own destruction. Additionally, on a smaller scale, individual instances of theft, vandalism or violent crime no longer appear as aberrations but as systemic symptoms of the disease of unequal housing and the unequal distribution of resources.

Yet what if the lumpen-masses have power simply through the threat of violence? David Harvey’s “blow out theory” offers an interesting argument that suggests that poor groups have a means to change power relations. Just as realtors exploited the housing market with blockbusting tactics to stimulate “white flight,” middle-class perceptions of danger associated with the proximity of minority and poor neighborhoods could lead to an exodus from newly gentrified neighborhoods. Harvey writes:

Yet poor groups have a singular power…in that richer groups in contemporary society do not take easily to living in close geographical proximity to them. The poor therefore exert a social pressure which can vary in its form from a mere felt presence, through a gross exhibition of all those social pathologies associated with poverty, to a fully fledged riot. The latter helps to open up the housing market to the poor most marvelously (172-173).

This is an alternative scenario, one that Harvey favors over the prevalent land-use theory, which argues that new development provides more opportunities for the lower class to eventually move into better housing. This argument, proposing a gentle “filtering” process has, according to Harvey, little evidence to support it. He argues that such housing never becomes truly affordable for those with few resources. Instead, the “blow out” theory proposes that an affluent, newly developed community will fear the encroachment of poverty and crime (reversing our critical assessment of gentrification as the encroachment of wealth and cultural appropriation) and choose instead to vacate the neighborhood and cut their losses. Harvey summarizes: “Social and physical pressure is exerted at the bottom end of the housing market and this is transmitted up the socio-economic scale until the richest are pressured to move…” (173). In this formulation, the resource-rich are able to move to “safer” locations (impossible in the extreme conditions constructed in Butler’s Parable of the Sower) and thus the social and psychological experience of economic stratification serves as a check on housing market forces.
And yet, immediately after proposing his “blow out” theory, Harvey dismisses its plausibility. He writes, “this formulation is, however, clearly unrealistic for the rich possess the political and economic power to resist encroachment…” (173). Additionally, Harvey works within a model where socio-economic groups are geographically located next to those just above or below them on the socio-economic scale. Thus, the perceived social behaviors of groups bordering the rich isn’t nearly as offensive as the behaviors of the most destitute (the lumpen-class). And with the backing of police violence, the rich are hardly likely to move unless they want to.

Contrary to Harvey’s model, today’s gentrification is pervasive, and in cities such as New York, the rich do, in fact, border poor neighborhoods. The see-saw movement of capital manifests in a new mass movement of wealth into the city, as the mobile upper class seeks the proximity of entertainment and leisure as much or more so than the proximity of the workplace. Overall, however, the gentrifier’s confidence in the law and its enforcement ensures that “blow out” is a phenomenon that has yet to make an impact on the mobility and aspirations of the rich in this current phase of gentrification.

Interestingly, Harvey’s argument also suggests that the “intermediate groups” are left “squeezed between a social pressure emanating from below and an immoveable political and economic force above” (173). In other words, middle-class gentrifiers suffer the most from a fear of hostile or undesirable social behavior because they are most likely to be geographically located near minority and poor neighborhoods. Certainly, in Durham, there are many new developments in more exclusive locations outside of the city for those that feel the “squeeze.” And yet, Durham gentrification continues to spread, currently lapping at the edges of regions that were once thought to be too poor and too crime-ridden (including East and South Durham). New businesses, restaurants, and tourism are the more visible, and palatable forces of this phenomenon. The less visible are those legal and political forces that reproduce material inequality and a legacy of racism that began with slavery.

A hidden network of capital and a hegemony of force helped make the redevelopment at Southside possible. Yet to look closely at those dream homes, to note the undercurrent of unease walking around the treeless block, is to know that the mechanisms of capital that built the neighborhood could also
destroy it. At the very least, those mechanisms have no interest in realizing this place as a *community* and a set of *homes*. And while many homeowners see their home as a vehicle for achieving wealth and stability, the housing bubble and the accompanying economic recession from 2007 to 2009 proved that middle-class life is also precarious. Speculation, mortgage debt, and predatory, unregulated lending could again cripple our economy. Today, the abyss between need and profit, between home and house, encapsulates the condition of inequality that structures not only economic power(lessness) for certain demographic groups, but also constructs the urban landscapes that we navigate—and that navigate us.

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And so, while the gentrified neighborhood itself reproduces the violence of displacement, othering black and brown bodies and criminalizing poverty, the presentation of middle class culture is another kind of veil: it conceals the fragility of middle-class status and comfort. We are reminded of Butler’s dystopian novel, an image of what “middle-class” looks like under extreme conditions of scarcity.

The shooter either fired at someone who was in front of the gate or fired at the gate itself, at the neighborhood, at us and our supposed wealth and privilege… (50)

There is a sincere and provocative argument to be made that there is no such thing as the middle class, only middle class “culture” (a culture itself worthy of critique). By insisting that those who call themselves the middle class are actually part of the working class, we acknowledge the real possibility that a shock to the job or housing market, a personal loss, or an illness in the family could cast a household into poverty.

Butler’s *Parable* forces us to imagine the stakes and the horrors of life as “automatic subjects” under capitalism. Isolationism, aggressive individualism, the instinct to close our doors to need and even each other—these social behaviors, coupled with the barbarism of neoliberal economics and the disintegration of welfare, education, health systems, and our environment, create a disaster so urgent that
we become distracted from uncovering the roots of our oppression. The machinations of capitalism and the alienating effects of commodity culture do more than just conceal the systems that oppress us: the situation, in its most dire and perverse manifestation, will be one in which it is near-impossible to hold our oppressors accountable. Such a future is depicted in Butler’s narrative, and it is a world where the monopoly of force is concentrated in the hands of the few, where the condition of life for most is one of homelessness. In this world, human relations are marked by hostility, fear, and greed.
IV. Fetish

Home is an important figure, idea, and vehicle in Theodor Adorno’s book of aphorisms, *Minima Moralia*. This collection of short and remarkable meditations poetically and devastatingly evidences Adorno’s memorable line, “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (39). The book’s parts are organized by year, with passages written in 1944, 1945, and its third and final part spanning 1946-1947. For many scholars, *Minima Moralia* is understood to be a kind of guide to living the least wrong life. Adorno, maintaining fidelity to his philosophical concerns, characteristically writes in the spirit of the negative. In the perilous and shocking years immediately following the Holocaust, he reveals to us the impossibility of living—making the idea of house and home one of ethics. To persevere, intellectually and practically—as a human endowed with creature needs for shelter, food, and love—is to adapt a critical perspective of the world under capitalism and in the face of ongoing catastrophe, one that must tirelessly remember that all comfort is won at a cost to others, both the living and the dead.

For Adorno, as well as countless other European intellectuals and artists, perseverance meant displacement, exile, and perpetual unsettlement. In a certain, obvious sense, Adorno argues that the privileges of home—the ownership of property, the supposition of normalcy, and the barbarity of pursuing material comfort amidst tremendous suffering—make the pursuit of “home” a selfish and immoral occupation. But Adorno goes much farther, thinking of the private life as one attached to the idea of a *house*, with an architectural *style*, filled with an assortment of *objects*, taking his critique to the same arena of interrogation as Goldhagen. He argues that everything that made a house a home in the past, aesthetically, is now desecrated by the consumer culture of capitalism. The rise of entertainment-obsessed bourgeois culture corresponds to the increased alienation of individuals from one another. The mass-production of goods has led to the increasing disappearance of things—objects—that hold meaning and unique value. Adorno writes in a remarkable passage:

The best mode of conduct, in face of all this, still seems an uncommitted, suspended one: to lead a private life, as far as the social order and one’s own needs will tolerate nothing else, but not to attach weight to it as to something
still socially substantial and individually appropriate… Today we should have to add: *it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.* This gives some indication of the difficult relationship in which the individual now stands to his property, as long as he still possesses anything at all. The trick is to keep in view, and to express, the fact that private property no longer belongs to one, in the sense that consumer goods have become potentially so abundant that no individual has the right to cling to the principle of their limitation; but that one must nevertheless have possessions, if one is not to sink into that dependence and need which serves the blind perpetuation of property relations [emphasis mine]. (39)

In Adorno’s time and in ours, the home cannot redeem its inhabitants or exclude them from complicity in the machinations of capital. Instead it becomes the locus of his critique, a focal point in understanding how catastrophe is tied to our objects and environments.

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A popular book in any architecture student’s library is Lester Walker’s *American Homes: The Landmark Illustrated Encyclopedia of Domestic Architecture*. With his own meticulous and clear drawings and floor plans, Walker accounts for the evolution of American housing from the early styles of the Indians and the settlers, to the California Ranch and the Split Level. It captures and articulates the development of awe-inspiring architectural innovation alongside the more mundane and short-lived trends, a compendium of built dwellings reflecting changing notions of home.

In his entry, “Jeffersonian Classicism,” Walker relates the significant architectural influence of Thomas Jefferson, illustrating his famous home, Monticello, and speaking to Jefferson’s advocacy for architecture as a “civilizing force” (100). He goes on, writing, “His advice to American tourists in Europe was, “Architecture is worth great attention. As we double our numbers every twenty years, we must double our houses…Architecture is among the most important arts; and it is desirable to introduce taste into an art which shows so much…” (100). Jefferson represented a new movement among the upper classes of the United States to reclaim the home as symbol of refinement and status. His designs incorporated a fidelity toward classic styles, reflecting, to a degree, the reactionary and nostalgic taste of the upper class: “His appreciation of Roman architecture during his European travels (as American
minister to France, 1785-1789) had convinced him that the Roman orders were the fundamental discipline of architectural design and he based all of his buildings on these classic principles” (98). His style and his philosophy, realized in the estate of Monticello, represent the significant ways architecture plays a part in the historical, triumphalist narratives of the southern United States. These narratives, alive today, continue to draw from imagery of bygone eras, insisting on the superiority and refinement of the Western or colonial aesthetic. Yet many people reject this narrative, calling out the white supremacist ideology undergirding its imagery and perspective. For them, Monticello is best understood as a site of excessive cruelty, whose fifty-nine years of construction depended on the bondage and blood of generations of enslaved families. The objects—houses, estates, plantations—of that “civilizing force,” juxtaposed against the barbarity of slave labor, reveal a pattern of ostentatious design conditioned on human suffering. Jefferson becomes a stark representation of the way demonstrations of wealth, symbolized and messaged via the built environment, reproduce inequality. Monticello additionally becomes an example of how aesthetic imitation has manifested in housing styles, pointing to the cultural practice of mimicry as a means to achieve social recognition and power.

Yet even the history of popular residential design, as opposed to the exemplary architecture of the elites, has reflected this trend of imitation and a fascination with the imagery of comfort, success, and even luxury, shaping social conditions over the last two centuries. Domestic architecture offers another arena within which we can interrogate the ways personal needs and wishes—real or socially constructed—impact our landscapes and our ethics. Significantly, like the fashions of clothing, home designs have always followed popular trends. For instance, the Monterey style, begun in California in 1835, was invented by a New Englander who blended the native two-story house plan with the Spanish and Mexican adobe. This hybrid immediately became a prototype for neighbors to mimic, and “Yankee” features, like wooden interior staircases, replaced the older adobe designs. This style and its popularity continued to influence modern California architecture into the 1930s and 1940s (116). Another style, the Craftsmen, became prevalent in the first decade of the 20th Century, but continues to influence modern home styles, with its smaller size, emphasis on natural materials like wood and tile, “livable” aesthetics,
and built-in features. The Craftsman Style was the most significant influence on the Bungalow Style, which, among all of Walker’s illustrated entries remains the most common single-family house style in the United States. There are many varieties to the bungalow, but all tend to be low-slung, typically one story, sometimes two, with a wide porch and projecting roof lines. Walker highlights the fact that the bungalow is credited with introducing the front stoop to neighborhood homes, producing a new common space for social interaction. He writes: “The stoop became a distinctive part of the architecture of the suburban bungalow by providing a semipublic transition place between the front porch and the connecting walkway to the sidewalk and the street. The stoop was a place to sit and talk, for children to play, or to simply pause before entering the privacy of the porch or house” (185). The bungalow is the most common house style in the Durham area, and the most sturdy, simple and elegant bungalows have become attractive projects for those with the resources to invest in rehabilitation and renovation. Many of the homes that were demolished for Southside revitalization would have been either bungalows or of the Craftsman Style.

The bungalow, as Walker explains, represents both “the best and the worst in American architecture” (185). This is because it was the first style that would be reproduced on a massive scale through the innovation of home “kits” and a growing contractor-builder industry. For the first time, homeowners could order a house in a catalogue and have a local builder put the shipped pieces together. Walker writes, “Plan books and monthly journals made it possible for any contractor or future homeowner in any part of the country to erect a bungalow” (185). They were, for the most part, a low-cost opportunity for families recovering from the economic downturn at the end of the century. Proliferating alongside the growth of a speculative housing-market, the bungalow became a key fixture in the suburban landscape, and its modest character reflected the values of a growing middle class. This style was, therefore, a sort of one-size-fits all opportunity to own a piece of the “American dream.” In this way, it simultaneously anticipated the future of pre-fabrication and suburban housing developments, while reminding us of a time when paradise looked humble: a wide, shaded verandah, a stoop to greet neighbors, and a simple, comfortable one-story floorplan.
If the bungalow provides an image of the middle-class experience of the early 20th Century, what is the architectural style of the successful middle class today? How do we read the houses of Southside neighborhood, and what do they tell us about the look of success, dreams, our history and our identities? As architect Robert Ivy argues, “We should be able to look at the buildings we are currently making and take the temperature of who we are. We’ve been able to do that historically for thousands of years” (Ioh, 138). At the same time, architect Jeremiah Eck believes it is impossible to read the single-family homes that have proliferated in housing developments over the past thirty years. He also references Walker’s work to highlight the fact that none of these homes are truly “designed,” asserting that they are not responsive to their place and time, or the needs of their inhabitants. He explains:

…When we’re talking about architectural houses and the kinds of icons that Lester Walker’s American Homes: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Domestic Architecture shows, those are prototypes for a particular style and rarified types. But today there are so many bad houses. It’s hard to know in a hundred years what Lester would draw to represent the suburban house of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. There is no clear picture of what it should be… (IOH, 156)

Eck is suggesting not only that houses no longer reflect who we are, but that it is hard to imagine how we would translate our cultural identity into a contemporary aesthetic for homes today. There are, of course, plenty of architectural styles and details built into our residential landscapes, yet all of these are imitations of previous forms, demonstrating hollow kitsch and nostalgia. Architect Richard Meier points to the developer as a poor replacement for the designer, interested only in tapping into recycled ideas about style and form that translate well with the average home-owner: “In order to give people a choice, they’ll do a pseudo-Tudor house, pseudo-colonial house, pseudo-contemporary house, and God knows what else. But it’s just changing the front door appearance while keeping the same basic organization of the building” (IOH, 6). Such “designs” tap into what people are already familiar with, reproducing a stock-standard house and floor plan that projects a kind of universal homeowner with universal needs and desires.
So, again—why is there no clear picture of what our contemporary homes should look like? I would argue that just as capital has produced a landscape of uneven development in its image, capital has impoverished the aesthetics of our homes, reproducing sameness through what Adorno calls the “culture industry.” In order to understand how we ended up with what Goldhagen calls the “sorry state of our built environments” we have to look to the fetish character of the commodity under capitalism. The desire to own, alter, and expand our dwellings, to make them responsive to our cultures and identities, and to seek beauty—all of these are human impulses, outlets for our creativity and expressions of agency and imagination. Yet the new homes of gentrifying neighborhoods, with their repetitive, large designs, fitted with elements of the bungalow, and ornaments of a hodge-podge of historical styles, continue to suggest that success looks like a universal single-family house—a house that can be found in the north or the south, east or west of the country. These homes do not reflect people, their histories, and their varied desires, but rather second nature under capitalism. Adorno, while writing in the aftermath of the horrors of war, understood that the objects of our culture, including our homes, reflected and reproduced the conditions of ongoing catastrophe. Using Adorno and Benjamin, I propose that we cannot understand the house and the aesthetics of the house without speaking to the fetishization of home, a contemporary reality where wishes—perverted by the machinations of consumer culture—have become needs. The condition of living is currently one in which our obsession with objects and the imagery of home continue to make fulfillment—and human experience without the purpose of exchange—impossible.

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The analysis of home now shifts toward its contemporary relationship to fetishism. In this approach, the house and its objects are commodities revealing that home is a site of both exchange and use value. Because use value is defined in part by wishes and desires, it becomes suspect, influenced by the machinations of capitalism, and thus, exchange value. Commodities have the characteristic of fetishes because they are more than objects that can be exchanged for other objects—they are receptacles promising the fulfillment of our dreams. Furthermore, the fetish is a replacement, and one that under-
develops or severs the individual from their underlying desire. Following Freud, the fetish is a substitute for a normal sexual object, preconditioned by the “diminution in the urge towards the normal sexual aim” (250). The fetish becomes overvalued, even while there is a rational understanding that the fetish is a fantasy object. The fetish cannot ultimately bring fulfillment, yet the object continues to hold power. The idea of the “dream home” manifests a wish for social recognition, citizenship, inclusion in the middle or upper class, and/or financial stability. Beneath all of these wishes there is, likely, another, intangible “need”—love. We may be able to rationalize that purchasing the house, remodeling the house or buying the new couch will not truly bring fulfillment, but in the meantime, it is the next-best thing. As Marx explains in *Capital*, the fetish character of the commodity results from the substitution of social relations (and all of characteristics of those relations—in other words, humanizing experience) with the products of labor. As people are alienated from one another, they seek the very experience they have foreclosed upon in the objects of capitalism, objects that are marketed specifically to simultaneously dictate our desires and promise to fulfill them. In order to facilitate the cycle of desire and consumption, however, no commodity can bring total satisfaction—they must perpetuate a manufactured “need.”

In *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Benjamin describes how popular fashion and the entertainment industry establishes a “cult of commodities,” writing: “Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish wishes to be worshiped” (153). Investigating the idea of “luxury,” Benjamin asserts that the “phantasmagoria of capitalist culture reaches its most brilliant display in the World Exhibition of 1867” (153). For Benjamin, the exhibitions help produce second nature, one in which commodities, stripped of “intrinsic value,” alienate us from each other and from nature. This is accomplished through an entertainment industry that associates wish-fulfillment with power, Empire, and popular fashion. He writes:

The world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of commodities. They create a framework in which commodities’ intrinsic value is eclipsed. They open up a phantasmagoria that people enter to be amused. The entertainment industry facilitates this by elevating people to the level of commodities. They submit to
being manipulated while enjoying their alienation from themselves and others.
(152)

Furthermore, pointing to the artwork of J.J. Grandville, whose illustrations of French social life rendered people as composites of other animals and objects, this fetishism is grounded in an impulse to attachourselves to things or the “inorganic.” Fetish objects—commodities—impede fulfillment, reproducing the need it claims it can fulfill, a cyclical phenomenon that is facilitated via the fantasies promoted byfashion: “Grandville extends fashion’s claims both to the objects of everyday use and to the cosmos. Bypursuing it to its extremes he discloses its nature. This resides in its conflict with the organic…Against the living it asserts the rights of the corpse” (153). Fashion and fetishism, hand in hand, distance us from our humanity and attaches us to dead things.

Adorno takes a closer look at the idea of luxury, asserting that luxury goods are the fetishized objects of culture under capitalism. Like artworks, luxury items are characterized by their one-of-a-kindness, a purposelessness inherent in those things that do not enter into exchange relations. On the one hand, Adorno maintains that certain luxuries, displayed ostentatiously, are artificial displays intended to convey social status. Referencing Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Adorno points out that such demonstrations by the wealthy do not ultimately satisfy their needs (119). Comparing a Cadillac to a Chevrolet, he argues that while the former costs more, “only minor rearrangements in production would be needed to turn the Chevrolet into a Cadillac,” and that the “basic pattern of the mass-produced article” is the same for both vehicles (120). Thus, Adorno argues that luxury itself is purged of that which originally made it a source of happiness: “So luxury is sapped. For amid universal fungibility happiness attaches without exception to the non-fungible” (120). Only that which is qualitatively unique, that which cannot be mass-reproduced, offers fulfillment. Adorno writes: “Rampant technology eliminates luxury, but not by declaring privilege a human right; rather, it does so by both raising the general standard of living and cutting off the possibility of fulfilment” (119). Luxury isn’t disappearing because economic inequality is disappearing—rather, it is disappearing because capitalism produces the
selfsame, a society “based on fungibility”—in other words, a society built on the exchangeability of goods:

The utopia of the qualitative—the things which through their difference and uniqueness cannot be absorbed into the prevalent exchange relationships—takes refuge under capitalism in the traits of fetishism. But this promise of happiness in luxury in turn pre-supposes privilege, economic inequality, a society based on fungibility. Thus the qualitative itself becomes a special case of quantification, the non-fungible becomes fungible, luxury turns into comfort and finally into a senseless gadget. This vicious circle would put an end to luxury even without the levelling tendency of mass society… (120)

Adorno recognizes that the luxury good has the draw of a fetish, but like a fetish, its promise is based on a lie: under capitalism, the qualitative and unique is conditioned on the existence of inequality, and that inequality is reproduced by the domination of exchange value. Taken further, I would argue it is not simply the domination of exchange relations, but the *sublimation* of use value for exchange value. Additionally, Adorno goes on to assert that the “mode of existence which private property has now adopted” is one in which those rare goods which cannot be put to use in exchange—and even those antiques or artworks, “objects of the highest quality”—end up looking like “junk,” when located anywhere outside of the museum (120). In conclusion, “modern, practical luxury is a contradiction in terms” (120).

The idea of the luxury good, then, is one of contradictions. The conditions of possibility for luxury are disappearing as mass-production takes over our consumer economy. But these conditions were already endangered because use value is increasingly identified with exchange value. At the same time, the fetishization of commodities continues, at once producing desire and impeding fulfillment. We can see this cycle playing out in the marketing of the image of home and home goods—particularly in marketing oriented to middle and upper-class home-owners. While the houses in the Southside neighborhood tend toward homogeneity in terms of size, materials, and aesthetics, they are all advertised as “dream homes.” These homes boast of modern interior design and quality, sustainable features and amenities. But as Adorno writes, these homes may raise the general standard of living, but they also cut off the pleasure associated with the unique. Architect Paul Goldberger speaks to the “risks of success in
design,” continuing, “we live in a time in which the dream of the Bauhaus—that modern design of decent quality is not only available but also actively sought by the mass market—has been fulfilled, in effect, by IKEA and places like it. The price we are paying is that as we are raising the floor, we’re also slightly lowering the ceiling…” (149). He later adds that now we see “far greater interest and sympathy for design in the marketplace, but it does push us toward a kind of homogeneity. This stuff is ubiquitous” (150). With design dictated by developers who are both beneficiaries and producers of mass-media marketing, expensive homes can be poorly designed or universally well-designed, but, generally, they are all unremarkable.

Furthermore, in the case of many new housing developments, the building real estate industry has little incentive to pursue innovative design because banks are less interested in loaning money to projects that can’t promise high home resale value. In turn, successful building companies tailor their home designs to reproduce what architect Kenneth Frampton calls “nostalgic imagery.” Frampton continues, arguing that “a kind of middle-class and upper-middle-class consensus has developed about what is desirable residence,” even though the quality and aesthetics may, in fact, be lacking: “The imagery is more or less simulated, but the actual details of the windows, the entrance, and all the rest are very crudely handled. They’re not refined works” (66).

Thus, for banks, developers, builders, real estate agents, and even homeowners, the value of a home is always related to exchange value. Even while marketing schemes—say of the Thayer Homes website, or the home goods advertised on television—present use values to the shopper, these use values cannot be untied from the wish-industry manufactured by the culture industry. In the end, the levelling-down of aesthetic taste and experience leads to the permissibility, even the demand, for homogeneity. As goods become accessible to more people, “luxury” items become fetish-objects, objects of desire even while the buying public rationally understands they cannot produce lasting satisfaction. Another architect, Sarah Susanka, points out that modern life is characterized by the continued process of wishes becoming “needs.” She summarizes:
“Wishes and needs are a fascinating issue because we have all sorts of wishes that we think of as needs. The wealthier a culture becomes, the more we believe that the things we wish for are absolute needs… It used to be that very few people had televisions. And now that’s one of the basic fundamentals of life. It’s no longer in the wish category, it’s in the need category. (35)"

Consumer commodities, including the house and its objects, appear to satisfy needs yet foreclose on a kind of fulfillment that Adorno associates with experience. Like Goldhagen, Adorno insists that even the smallest interactions between humans and their environments have profound effects on who we are. Unlike Goldhagen, Adorno takes a negative view of new technology and innovation. For him, these changes intensify human alienation, distancing us from each other while making us complicit in a mode of being where relations are exclusively outcome-oriented (e.g. productive, profitable, efficient). In the following passage, Adorno describes how the evolving form and function of objects—such as doors and windows—subject us to their “ahistorical demands,” creating us in their image, a “new human type.” These interactions prove that new objects no longer participate in meaning and memory, and no longer provide opportunities for “experience” that connect us to our social, interactive, sensual, habitual, and aesthetic yearnings. He writes:

Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility. It subjects them to the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects. Thus the ability is lost, for example, to close a door quietly and discreetly, yet firmly. Those of cars and refrigerators have to be slammed, others have the tendency to snap shut by themselves, imposing on those entering the bad manners of not looking behind them, not shielding the interior of the house which receives them. The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things about him… What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove, no gentle latches but turnable handles… Not least to blame for the withering of experience is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus, either in freedom of conduct or autonomy of things, which would survive as the core of experience, because it is not consumed by the moment of action [emphasis mine]. (40)

The ubiquity of objects meant for function and exchange, thus, also make us ahistorical subjects, and impede our ability to enter into meaningful relationships with others. While the fetishization of home
...The habitations of such young bohemians resemble their intellectual household. On the walls the deceptively faithful colour reproductions of famous Van Goghs like the ‘Sunflowers’ or the ‘Café at Arles’, on the bookshelf the boiled-down socialism and psycho-analysis and a little sexology for libertines with inhibitions... the duly marveled-at Oklahoma folklore and a few noisy jazz records that make you feel at once collective, audacious, and comfortable. Every opinion earns the approbation of friends, every argument is known by them before-hand. That all cultural products, even non-conformist ones, have been incorporated into the distribution-mechanisms of large-scale capital, that in the most developed country a product that does not bear the imprimatur of mass-production can scarcely reach a reader, viewer, listener at all, denies deviationary longings their subject matter in advance. Even Kafka is becoming a fixture in the sub-let studio... The subjective precondition of opposition, unco-ordinated judgement, is dying out, while its gesticulations continue to be performed as a group ritual.

Theodore Adorno, Minima Moralia
“132: Expensive reproduction” (207)
reproduces consumer society and the machinations of capital, our built environments, including our new homes, fail to stimulate and engage our original, social nature. As if caught in a spell, we continue to seek out the “new”—illusions of prepackaged sentiment, distractions to keep us producing even during “leisure” time. Adorno thus bemoans the loss of “tenderness” between people, writing:

The practical orders of life, while purporting to benefit man, serve in a profit economy to stunt human qualities, and the further they spread the more they sever everything tender. For tenderness between people is nothing other than awareness of the possibility of relations without purpose… (40-41)

The aphorisms within Minima Moralia comprise what is likely the most emphatic condemnation of the bourgeois lifestyle. In so doing, Adorno insists that the objects of home and the dominant role of entertainment culture reproduce the barbarity of modern existence under capitalism. While thinkers such as Goldhagen fail to acknowledge that “dwindling experience” ultimately serves the interests of capital, they agree that our objects and environments have the power to delimit our ability to live healthy lives and form loving relationships. As Goldhagen writes about architectural design:

The built environment affects our physical health and our mental health. It affects our cognitive capabilities. And it affects the ways we form and sustain communities. The built environment affects each of these facets of our lives, and because they are related to one another, it does so in ways that are mutually reinforcing. Our asphalt-draped cities starve us out of a healthy ongoing relationship with nature. Wherever we look—at infrastructure or urban areas or suburban settlements; at landscapes or cityscapes or individual buildings, the bottom line is boring buildings, banal places, and hoary landscapes. (17)

For those architects concerned with the idea of community, sustainability, and particular—rather than universal—needs, the house is an active site of possibility. For Hadley Arnold, this has to do with love, reminding us of Adorno’s defense of tenderness:

There is some link between putting that skylight in the roof and trying to create a sense of a durable home, not only a well-made house but a sense of participating in a landscape and a community in such a way that you could imagine the next generation wanting to take care of it as well…There’s really just one word in there that’s the critical one—‘love.’ If you don’t feel something about that landscape or that sky or that sun or that tree or the child
Arnold and Goldhagen offer us positive images of the home and what Adorno’s “experience” looks like. They are also thus articulating use values for the home such as access to nature and social life, and intangibles like the creation of spaces that facilitate adventure and day-dreaming.

Looking at the home of the gentrifier, however, requires that we take a critical look at use value and the fact that the conditions of life today force the identification of use value with exchange value. Our desires and wishes are always already influenced by the messaging of the mass media and what Neil Smith calls capitalism’s “levelling-down” of human nature. We are barraged by advertisements and popular narratives that image an “ideal” home alongside idealized experiences. These images are often nostalgic or kitschy, as they always are appropriated from previous iterations. They continue to build off the trope of a “middle-class” and the ultimate American dream of owning a single-family home. The fetish-character of the home as a commodity means that we are misplacing our desires in objects that will not, cannot bring fulfillment. The idea of home is now a pastime, one that feeds our impulse to consume, all the while foreclosing on our ability to seek out the kind of fulfillment the dream can only intimate in nostalgic form. The abyss between Adorno’s tenderness, Arnold’s love, and the obsessive character of our home-fantasies grows. Meghan Daum writes in the forward to The American Idea of Home:

Real estate turns us into predators. We can stalk a house online or from the street. We can obsess over it, fight over it… We can watch home design programs on television twenty-four hours a day. We can become addicted to Internet real estate listing sites as though the photos and descriptions were a form of pornography… (XII – XIII)

Even the unique or luxury item—an antique or a one-of-a-kind piece of art—is inevitably consumed and transformed by second nature and reification. Home renovation shows exalt rehabilitated, old materials: a recovered barn beam becomes a mantel, a 19th century armoire is stripped and sanded, an old lamp becomes a “focal point.” The culminating reveal, a montage of before and after takes, casts a spell: here is another dream home, promising a certain fashionable and idealized lifestyle. We become
addicted to the object that promises wish-fulfillment no matter whether the object is new or old. We project our fantasies onto it and such value becomes dependent on the possibility of its fetishization. In a world of reification, use values are no longer dictated by individuals and human relations, but by the machinations of capital and mass-culture. The landscape of the gentrified neighborhood images this reality in the erection of homogenous, brightly-colored, two-story homes.

Smith makes a stunning argument about the roots of this reproduced sameness by turning the capitalist argument against socialism on its head. While capitalists argue that the elimination of scarcity will lower standards of life and the quality of life for all, Smith points out that this is exactly the reality we live under capitalism:

We have seen that it is capitalism which reduces everything to a sameness, and tends to equalize everything in its path. The notion that socialism will be more of the same comes not from an understanding of the socialist movement but from a projection of the realities of capitalism. At root it comes from a predictable and vulgar blindness to the distinction between use-values and exchange-values—predictable, because this blindness lies at the root of much bourgeois ideology. The tendency toward equalization under capitalism represents the victory of value over use-value; it is equalization in use-value terms as a dictate of value. (204-205)

Here, Smith points to the failure of “bourgeois ideology” in its sublimation of use value for exchange value. By combining Smith’s argument with a critique of culture, the condition of living becomes one in which the popular, fetishized idea of home perpetuates the domination of capital over human need.

By demonstrating the increasing fetishization of home we make the argument that the vast majority of new homes, and specifically those erected in the Southside neighborhood, demonstrate the end result of the “luxury” commodity under capitalism. Arguably, the Bungalow Style home represents a turning point in residential architecture: on the one hand, its various designs responded to a time period and a place, yet on the other, it anticipates the rise of mass production and a home industry that would increasingly manufacture a set of universal needs and marketable “use values.” These false, “levelled-down” needs are reinforced by capital’s search of profits, materialized in the design choices dictated by banks and developers focused on resale value instead of building homes responsive to people and places.
As architect Barbara Winslow puts it, use values no longer reflect individual needs and aspirations, and the home is not understood as an “enclosure for your life.” She reflects:

I’m thinking back to one housing development that we were involved in, in which the houses were literally called ‘product.’ We were working on developing more product, which was kind of a shocking term because that’s not the way we view a house. And what was really being said was that we’re selling the image, we’re selling the material, we’re selling the things you see in a magazine, and you can pass that on to the next buyer. We’re not selling something that creates an enclosure for your life… I think at one time people built houses to encompass their lives and create this same kind of potential that you have with people with special needs. They created the potential to live a life they wanted. Now they create a universal potential for the standard family that can be sold to the next buyer. (IOH, 43)

This criticism is, ultimately, aimed at the gentrifier, whose purchase of a home and of an image can only provide the illusion of success. With Adorno’s critique of the bourgeois lifestyle, and his assertion that “the house is past,” we cannot but understand the Southside homes as reflections of a failure of living. As Goldhagen convincingly argues, wealth does not result in healthy or fulfilling built environments. Furthermore, our obsession with new objects transforms us into ahistorical subjects, our domestic movements tailored to fit the exclusive expectations of functionality under exchange relations. Ultimately, our homes no longer reflect us because there is no “us” to reflect. With the realization that our homes reflect the conditions of non-living under second nature, we may begin to consider the ways the idea of home must be challenged. If, as Adorno concludes, it is “part of morality not to be at home in one’s home,” we can only begin to image an alternative by responsibly imaging the state of dwelling today, turning our gaze on the home-owners and the home, exposing its contradictions and its spectacle. While an ethics of home evades us, we may nonetheless construct the missed moment, picking out fragments of our humanity manifested in the architecture and aesthetics of the homes of our past, our present, and our not-yet.
The house is past.

Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia (39)
“This is their home; mine too. Home is not a little thing.”

“I’m not saying it is. But can’t you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don’t mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past, the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sign and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good! –there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that, Pat. That place…”

*Toni Morrison, Paradise* (213)
V. Gentrifier

For Adorno, the horrors of the 21st century are visible to the critical eye in the objects that increasingly dominate our daily lives, distracting us from meaningful—and purposeless—relations with each other. Casting the home as a fetish-commodity is a means for cultural criticism to not only reveal how use value has been absorbed into exchange value, but to prove that there are, indeed, deep human and social needs that are always already unmet and unfulfilled. Turning the gaze toward the home of the gentrifier exposes the fact that material comfort betrays its own lack, aesthetically revealing the wound imparted by the conditions of life under capitalism.

Adorno suggests that this wound is found in the superficial appearance of things and activities that cast the illusion of health and happiness. True to his philosophical approach, Adorno activates a negative dialectic, exposing cultural and social behavior as markers of deficit, disease, and psychological torment. An example can be found in Minima Moralia with an entry titled “The Health unto Death,” a clever reversal of Kierkegaard’s The Sickness unto Death:

Just as the old injustice is not changed by a lavish display of light, air and hygiene, but is in fact concealed by the gleaming transparency of rationalized big business, the inner health of our time has been secured by blocking flight into illness without in the slightest altering its aetiology. The dark closets have been abolished as a troublesome waste of space, and incorporated in the bathroom. What psycho-analysis suspected, before it became itself a part of hygiene, has been confirmed. The brightest rooms are the secret domain of faeces. The verses: ‘Wretchedness remains. When all is said, / It cannot be uprooted, live or dead. / So it is made invisible instead’, are still more true of the psychic economy than of the sphere where abundance of goods may temporarily obscure constantly increasing material inequalities. No science has yet explored the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable, an equable, practical frame of mind… (58-59)

Drawing on figurative language and the image of the closet, Adorno asserts that the state of our “inner health” is one of illness, and that just as an “abundance of goods” in the marketplace distracts us from seeing the “increasing material inequalities,” the outward appearance of “sociability” and cheer betrays
psychological damage. The craze for the “new,” prevents people from acknowledging that it there is no moral lifestyle under capitalism. Additionally, the “practical frame of mind” is an “adaptation” to the non-experience of living in a world of exchange relations. In a separate aphorism, Adorno again returns to psychology to explain the way the entertainment industry masks the proliferating state of homelessness and despair in the wake of war and economic upheaval. The poor psychological state of the bourgeois class has long been and continues to be the result of the alienation of people from one another and from their things. Included in this development is the social exclusion of divergent behavior, behavior which Adorno recognizes as natural. He writes:

Anyone who wants to move with the times is not allowed to be different. Psychological emptiness is itself only the result of the wrong kind of social absorption. The boredom that people are running away from merely mirrors the process of running away, that started long before. For this reason alone the monstrous machinery of amusement keeps alive and constantly grows bigger without a single person being amused by it. It channels the urge to be in on the act...Most closely related to them are addicts. Their impulse reacts exactly to the dislocation of mankind that has led from the murky blurring of the difference between town and country, the abolition of the house, via the processions of millions of unemployed, to the deportations and uprooting of peoples on the devastated European continent.

While conditions of living for the poor and displaced continue to worsen, the middle and upper classes continue to “absorb” into a conforming mass, bewitched by the culture industry and narratives of progress. This retreat from reality, manifested in socially normative behavior, only increases the “psychological emptiness” of the affluent.

The argument that psychological malady is a consequence as well as a condition of life under capitalism connects Adorno to decolonial thought. In his 1950 text, Discourse on Colonialism, Aimé Césaire depicts the European colonizer as one who loses his humanity through his complicity with Western barbarism. Writing that “colonization works to decivilize the colonizer,” Césaire suggests that while there may be no justice in the face of violence, the perpetrators, and civilization, suffer from a kind of “regression,” much like a disease. He writes: “We must show that...each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact,
civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread…” (35). A similar imaging of disease occurs in the testimony of one of the beggars—a leper—in the final scene of Ousmane Sembène’s Xala. Confronting El Hadji, the corrupt businessman whose riches were won through theft and exploitation, the beggar shouts:

“I am a leper! I am a leper to myself alone. To no one else. But you, you are a disease that is infectious to everyone. The virus of a collective leprosy!” (111)

His accusation rings with revelation: El Hadji represents the machinations of greed and power. He is a participant and beneficiary of the systems of domination that kill and displace. The leper confronts the bourgeois subject with an image of his own inhumanity, an inhumanity that multiplies suffering. The idea of a “collective leprosy” further suggests that the diseased subject is one of many, part of a diseased and complicit upper class.

Targeting the subjecthood of the oppressor, Césaire and Sembène reject the banal arguments defending colonial exploitation. Nationalism, narratives of progress, bureaucracy and claims of legality are exposed as violent mechanisms that enforce economic and racial hierarchies. It is just this kind of violence that Benjamin rejects in his essay “Critique of Violence.” In this work, Benjamin argues that the reason for the commandment “Though shalt not kill” does not concern “what the deed does to the victim,” but rather, “what it does to God and the doer” (251). This remarkable and shocking perspective insists that just—or “divine”—violence cannot be determined by law, power, or force, but rather by considering how the act transforms the doer (and God). For Benjamin, the commandment “exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it” (251). Placing morality squarely in the hands of the community and individual, Benjamin insists that the terror of violence should not be measured by the victims and their suffering, but rather in the damage it renders on those who do the harm. In a world where the disparity between rich and poor only widens, the “doers” are those who remain distracted by the entertainment culture, trapped in ongoing cycles of economic
5.2 Untitled. Winter 2018.
crises. The “doer” is the gentrifier, whose “right” to purchase a home and whose right to property does not excuse but rather inculcates him in an idea of “justice” proposed by a violent legal and social order. As Benjamin scholar Gil Anidjar explains, “It is a tradition of violence, the legal tradition Benjamin describes, that is ruled by the intention to preserve itself—and God knows it has. Today still; today especially. It is a tradition that, Benjamin makes clear, is defined by blood” (167).

In such a formulation, the argument against gentrification does not rely on measuring the degree of suffering that is imparted on the displaced population, nor on recognizing that the legacy of slavery is an ongoing force of oppression and containment. In this sense, Benjamin offers a controversial perspective. Yet this approach opens up and emphasizes the wounds of middle and upper-class culture, wounds exposed through the focused critique of its objects. As sites of obsession and fantasy, the fetish-character of the home, the failure to resurrect use value and its inevitable identity with exchange value, manifests an image of this collective leprosy. The home of the gentrifier, the objects within, and the landscape of the gentrified neighborhood, tell the story of a missed moment. The depraved aesthetics of gentrification, the failure to generate meaningful, “purposeless” experience, reveals the condition of life under capitalism and the banishment of utopia.

This loss speaks to the impossibility of imagining otherwise. Neil Smith suggests that the idea and the promise of revolution itself has become remote and ambiguous:

In many parts of the world, we seem today to be unable to conceive of social revolt and the possibilities it might bring. As Donna Haraway, one of our most creative thinkers, once admitted to an audibly stunned audience in the mid1990s: “If I had to be honest with myself, I have lost the ability to think of what a world beyond capitalism would look like.” She was only voicing what has become a broad if implicit loss of political imagination in many of us. (266)

It may be naïve or simplistic to connect the ability to imagine a utopic future with the goal of re-imagining the house and the home. Today, the image of the single-family home continues to (falsely) represent success, stability, and recognition. It falsely promises to fulfill human needs that are rendered inaccessible by the conditions of capitalism and the inequities that feed it. The home cannot excuse or
liberate. An ethics of home can only be conditioned first on the possibility to image the violence that the idea of home itself wreaks upon the inhabitant.

For Adorno, the only, inadequate solution is “to lead a private life, as far as the social order and one’s own needs will tolerate nothing else, but not to attach weight to it as something still socially substantial and individually appropriate” (39). He insists that we must live with the consciousness that “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (39). His stance takes into account the fact that we cannot live without possessions, but that property itself betrays the gross inequalities dominating the globe. Yet to wholly reject the inherent value of our things is to have a “loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too” (39). I would argue that Adorno’s demonstration of the irreconcilable nature of home is itself an image that opens up onto possibility.

It is, furthermore, an opportunity to consider how the home of the gentrifier represents the missed moment of revolution. We now live with technologies that could eliminate scarcity, that could house and feed everyone. Such a home, however, would look very different, connecting us to community and our shared needs. But perhaps this kind of home, engendering a practice of revolutionary care that tends to our multiplicity of cultures, histories, and needs, is itself a requisite for the moment of revolution. The fetish of the single-family home has eclipsed the important work of reimagining “home” itself. The impediment remains an inability to foster consciousness among a public far more interested in conforming to the fashions—and images—of media representations of success and power. Architect Robert Venturi recalls his failed attempt to introduce residential architecture responsive to the economic and social conditions of the working class. His story illustrates the failure of the American people to recognize the exploitative conditions of capitalism—to fail to see themselves as the proletariat, and to insist on the idea of a “middle class” that seduces the public into believing the success-narratives constructed by the ruling elite. He explains:

We designed a slab building, and it turned out that the low-income people in America did not want to live in that kind of building. They wanted to live in single-family houses. They had hoped that they could improve their condition and become bourgeois. The irony was that, in Europe, the proletariat was
distinguished as low income and they would live in high-rises. In America, there was no proletariat class; it was believed that those people were temporarily low income, and they would increase their wealth and their standing and then they were going to move into houses...the building I designed...had to be blown up because they were not appreciated by the people who lived in them and could not be maintained. (IOH, 62)

Capital ensures its survival not only through the entertainment industry but also through the reproduction of uneven development. The greed and poor taste exemplified in the development home are perpetuated by banks and real estate industries, who, driven by profit, avoid the risks associated with innovative housing. Kenneth Frampton recognizes the unsustainability of the single-family home while naming the very forces that perpetuate this dominant image of home:

You could argue that the individual house is a problem in itself. In the end, I would argue that one shouldn’t live in individual houses; one should live more collectively. In the past, I’ve been involved with low-rise, high-density housing, and I still believe in the concept. But it is very difficult to convince the society that one can live a valued middle-class life like that. Such is the unreal premium placed by clients, banks, and mortgage companies on the individual private house standing on its own ground. (IOH, 70)

“Revitalization” is the most recent, and most insidious narrative manufacturing the image of an “ethical” home. Home-owners, urban planners, resource-rich community members, banks and politicians benefit from a narrative of progress while their policies and initiatives offer opportunities only for a select few—early arrivals whose uplifted stories temporarily distract the public from noticing the proliferation of large and unaffordable homes. The word and idea of “revitalization” becomes generative when it is exposed as a lie. In Southside, homes were demolished, trees were felled, earth was moved, reshaped, and carpeted with sod. Here “vitality,” imaged in the cheerful colors of new homes, is predicated on the severance of historical ties, and an egregious disinterest in the life-giving affordances of the natural landscape. The gentrified neighborhood violates the space, time, and movements not only of the people and events it displaces but the people that take up new residence as well. As Goldhagen reveals, an impoverished built environment betrays itself in the shine of its superficial surfaces and its marketable designs. Seduced by a narrative of “arrival,” the gentrifier fails to recognize the tenuousness of their
material comfort, and the ongoing catastrophe upon which capitalism is conditioned. Revitalization heralds itself as a solution to an unsolvable problem: the impossibility of an ethics of home. And just as Adorno suggests, the imagery it generates—of the pure and sanitary—and its idealization of “new beginnings” is only a reiteration of the same old program. This reproduction of the same, hand in hand with the uneven and inequitable development of our landscapes, facilitates capital’s quest for new profits. Revitalization promises an arrival that will never materialize, and in so doing, distracts us from recognizing that the “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”
5.4 Untitled. Winter 2018.
Works Cited


*Xala*. Directed by Ousmane Sembène, performances by Thierno Leye, Myriam Niang, and Seune Samb, Films sans Frontières, 1975.