

Ormewood Park - Trolleys, Trolleys, and more Trolleys!!!

Neighborhood transformation has taken place throughout the world. There are many perspectives on the how and why it occurs as well as praises and criticisms. Urban renewal, beautification, and revitalization are some of the words used to describe the process but the term gentrification; when middle-class residents move to an area displacing low-income residents, dominates the conversation. The intown Atlanta neighborhood of Ormewood Park has gone through a similar transformation since 1990. Home values and incomes in the neighborhood have increased significantly over the last twenty years. Many factors have played a part in these changes. One thing that did not change is the sense of community that has existed since its earliest days, and in the last decade this community has grown even closer.

The term "Gentrification" was coined by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964. It is "the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial areas (Lees, Slater, Wyly, pg. xv, 2008). Some of the positive outcomes of gentrification are the stabilization of declining areas, increased property values, higher tax revenues, and increased diversity. Some of the negative results of gentrification include loss of affordable housing for low income residents, community resentment and conflict, and increased cost and/or changes to local services. (Lees, Slater, Wyly, 2008)

Gentrification takes place in several stages. The first wave of gentrifiers that move to a low-income area include single, white-collar workers; middle-class, single-parents; unemployed, educated young people; and self-employed, economically marginal young people. (Gottlieb, 1982 as cited in Hankins, 2007) These new residents renovate their homes, increasing the value of the property as well as those around it. As a result, property taxes increase for the entire neighborhood. For original, low-income residents who own their homes, this increase in

property taxes can be a financial a strain and may be forced to sell. Landlords may increase rents to cover higher taxes or because they realize they can get more money for the rental. For renters, the increase might be above their means and cannot afford to remain in their home. The most vocal argument against gentrification is the displacement of low-income residents.

The next group of in-migrants is known as regentrifiers (Butler, 2003 as cited in Hankins, 2007) and supergentrifiers (Lees, 2000 as cited in Hankins, 2007). Regentrifiers take advantage of the improvements made to homes by the original in-migrants. This group is generally more affluent than the initial gentrifiers. There may be a high turnover rate of these properties as owners are eager to profit from the increased value of their home. The final group of in-migrants are known as supergentrifiers (Lees, 2000 as cited in Hankins, 2007). Supergentrifiers are of a wealthy class and invest so much money into community development that it discourages any mixing with lower or even middle-class. (Lees, 2000 as cited in Hankins, 2007)

Gentrification can also play a role in unifying different races and classes. Many gentrifiers intentionally move to neighborhoods out of a desire to live among other social classes and races. It can create opportunities for tolerance and cultural diversity. However, Lees argues that this vision of mixed neighborhoods is not always the case. Original residents may not feel the same as the gentrifiers, which can lead to resentment and conflict within a community. (Lees, Slater, Wyly, 2008)

Oftentimes, original residents lose political power as new members of the community gain control of neighborhood organizations or start a competing organization that might dominate neighborhood. As property values increase with the influx of new residents, long-time residents are often displaced and those who remain lose their majority status and influence in

neighborhood organizations. In some instances, long-time residents will fight to keep this power while others do not. (Martin, 2007)

A Brief history of Ormewood Park (1892-1990)

Nestled between the well-known neighborhoods of Grant Park and East Atlanta, lies the working and middle-class neighborhood of Ormewood Park. Its tree-lined streets, friendly residents, and sense of community make the neighborhood a desirable place to live. In an age where society has become individualized, the residents of Ormewood Park have rediscovered the concept of community.

Ormewood Park was one of Atlanta's earliest suburbs built on what used to be dairy farms and pecan groves. In 1892, *Samuel W. Goode and Company* subdivided the land into 100 large plots. Prior to this period, most suburban residences were the domain of the wealthy but Ormewood Park offered the working-class the opportunity to own a home away from the hustle and bustle of downtown Atlanta yet still be able to commute to their place of employment with relative ease. As the *Atlanta Constitution* wrote on May 5, 1892, "Ormewood Park is a reservation that offers rare inducements to men of small means who wish to buy a site on which to build a home" (Garrett)

In the early 1900s, Aquilla J. Orme, an official at the Atlanta Electric Light and Trolley Company, extended the trolley line from Downtown to the Old Soldier's Home, a retirement residence for military veterans, located on Confederate Avenue. Ormewood Park takes its name from Mr. Orme and has adopted the trolley as its symbol. As one drives through the neighborhood, it would be nearly impossible to miss the small wooden trolleys, the emblem of Ormewood Park's identity, hanging from mailboxes and front porches. Residents can purchase a trolley from the neighborhood organization for \$25 and paint it as they wish. (SAND Website)

A major selling point for the neighborhood at the beginning of the twentieth century was its proximity to Grant Park. In 1912, the Interurban Development Corporation purchased and subdivided a section of Ormewood Park along Ormewood Avenue. Its sales brochure claims that lots are located only three blocks from Grant Park. However, the closest plot of land to Grant Park is nearly a half mile away and the furthest home in the subdivision is close to one mile away. Indeed, the art of exaggeration in real estate sales is not a new phenomenon. The ad also serves as a reminder of Atlanta's segregationist past, noting that it is a "Select White Residence Neighborhood." The Atlanta Race Riots occurred only six years prior as a result of racial tension in the city. Laws restricting the rights of blacks were part of this era and the city was legally segregated. Although Atlanta touted itself as a progressive metropolis, many of its policies as well as views of its white citizenry remained firmly entrenched in the past and Ormewood Park was no exception.

Following World War I, the economic climate of the 1920s fostered the development of Atlanta's bungalow suburbs (Crimmins, 1982). In Ormewood Park, many craftsman-style homes and brick cottages were built and on August 10, 1921 the neighborhood was annexed by the City of Atlanta (Assembly). Following this period of growth, Ormewood Park could not escape the effects of the Great Depression. Ninety-one year old resident Katherine Carter grew up in the neighborhood. Her father was a trolley operator on the line created by Aquilla J. Orme and she keeps a picture of him on his trolley in her home. The "Old Soldiers Home" designation of the line is clearly visible on the front of the trolley.

"During the Depression, Daddy lost the house and we rented up on the corner of Ormewood and Woodland. We lived there several years until he got back on his feet. He kept his job as a street car operator, but he had sold another house and the man didn't make any payments on it so the debt and three children made it difficult."

The post-World War II era saw a further subdivision of properties as small frame cottages and ranch houses were built, and it remained a working-class neighborhood for the next half-century. Although there was some "white flight" in the 1950s and 1960s due to desegregation, residents did not abandon Ormewood Park en masse. Many of Atlanta's neighborhoods saw an exodus of white residents as integration became a reality. (Kruse, 2007) While some white residents did leave Ormewood Park during this time, race was not the only factor. Ms. Carter witnessed this change but believes most of those who left did it for economic reasons. "Most of the people [in the neighborhood] were middle-income, blue collar workers. As they got better jobs, they wanted larger homes and moved from this area to the suburbs." Atlanta's real estate industry helped to create a perception that home values would decrease as a result of integration. In Ormewood Park, some residents did succumb to this fear and sold their homes, many of which existed as rental units for the next three decades, accepting Section 8 vouchers.

Small changes to the neighborhood makeup began in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of reverse white flight. In Ormewood Park, low home values offered the promise home ownership along with city life. This began a slow process of change that would serve as the foundation for the rapid transformation that took place in the following decades. Many rental homes remained during this period at the same time that some homes were being improved. Grant Park and East Atlanta were undergoing a period of gentrification, which contributed to Ormewood Park's transformation at this time. The final decade of the twentieth century transformed not only Ormewood Park, but most of the city of Atlanta.

The Olympics, dot-com era, and real estate boom – a perfect storm for transformation

In September 1990 when it was announced that Atlanta won its bid to host the 1996 Olympics, the city began a period of rapid transformation. Many residents hoped to make large profits by renting their homes to Olympic visitors during the games. The Georgia State Economic Forecasting Center identified 300,000 homeowners interested in renting their homes. Many Ormewood Park residents were caught up in the frenzy and invested money into home renovations expecting a financial windfall to come in the summer of 1996. Unfortunately for these homeowners, the supply of rental units far exceeded the demand. Of the estimated 85,000 rentals needed during the games, 55,000 hotel rooms were used and another 20,000 units were provided by friends and relatives of visitors. Private homes (8,000) and apartments (2,000) accounted for the remaining 10,000 rentals but at rates considerably less than originally hoped for. (HUD)

Although Ormewood Park homeowners did not receive the small fortunes they had envisioned, the investments they made increased the property values in the neighborhood. Chris Murphy has lived in Ormewood Park since the mid-1980s and witnessed the Olympic phenomenon. He recalls, "The Olympics pushed people to fix up their houses and rent them out to Olympic visitors so they'd make a bunch of money. It never happened but prices stayed high." The timing of the Olympics coincided with the beginning of the dot-com era and the late 1990s real estate boom that would last for the next decade. These three factors created a perfect storm for continued change in the neighborhood. Median home values nearly tripled from \$60,199 in 1990 to \$162,200 in 2000 (U.S. Census). Median household incomes doubled from \$20,067 in 1990 to \$39,032 in 2000 (U.S. Census). Mr. Murphy believes that the momentum of the rising real estate market brought a new class of people to Ormewood Park. "Home prices remained high as the dot com thing happened. People had lots of money to spend."

The economic transformation of Ormewood Park from 1990-2000, did not result in a drastic change to the racial makeup of the neighborhood. In 1990 the white population was 1,743 while there were 1,833 black residents (U.S. Census). In 2000 the number of whites increased to 1,772 while the number of blacks was 1,522 (U.S. Census). While Ormewood Park is racially mixed as a whole, there are pockets of the neighborhood that are not. The 1990 and 2000 census both indicated that the majority of black residents were concentrated in North Ormewood Park area and the Trestletree Apartments on Confederate Avenue. A drive through the neighborhood today confirms that those areas still contain the highest amount of black residents. However, Ormewood Park is certainly not completely segregated as many streets are a mix of black and white middle-income households.

Building a Community

Ormewood Park is bound together with five adjoining neighborhoods; Benteen Park, Boulevard Heights, McDonough-Guice, North Ormewood Park, and Woodland Hills, through the South Atlantans for Neighborhood Development, Inc. (SAND). The organization was formed in the 1970s to address issues in the community but its greatest impact has been felt over the last decade. SAND has played an integral role in community building, and neighborhood mobilization to fight crime. Ms. Carter praises SAND and its efforts to strengthen the community:

“It’s always been a close-knit community but now it’s more diversified. We have people of different incomes and different interests. SAND has done so much to bring people together. Usually people who move into the neighborhood today want to be involved. That’s something that surprises me [about the neighborhood]; the young people taking part in city politics, which is wonderful.”

Indeed, SAND does do a lot to foster community spirit. Aside from monthly meetings, the organization plans many events to bring residents together. On Saturday, May 10, 2010, SAND sponsored a "Trolley Painting Party" in which residents came together to paint their wooden trolleys that are displayed outside their homes. Over the month of April, many residents participated in "SAND Blast" on Saturday mornings in which they covered or removed graffiti throughout the neighborhood. Events sponsored by other neighborhood organizations, local schools, or charitable organizations are promoted by SAND through its website and internet blog.

When Mr. Murphy moved to Ormewood Park in 1986, he says it was a relatively safe neighborhood. "I didn't lock my door back then." The neighborhood was diverse and crime was not rampant. The following decade would force Mr. Murphy and the rest of Ormewood Park to lock their doors and take other measures to protect their property. As home values increased in the 1990s, so did criminal activity. City Councilmember Carla Smith has lived here for two decades says that "in the early nineties it was mostly sheds being broken into and lawnmowers being stolen. When home values went up, there was an increase in doors being kicked in and windows smashed to steal higher value items. Mr. Murphy agrees, "It was always a safe place to live. In the nineties the houses got fixed up and there was more stuff to be taken."

Councilmember Smith and other residents interviewed believe another factor may have played a role in the uptick in crime. "In the early 90s there were a lot of vacant houses." The 1990 Census indicates there were 151 vacant units compared to 1,436 occupied units. In 2000, the number of vacancies dropped by 20% to 122 with occupied units at 1,473.

Residents became more involved in their local Neighborhood Watch and installed security systems to fight crime. They also reached out to police in Zone 6 (the patrol zone that

Ormewood Park is a part of). However, the types of crimes that were occurring in the neighborhood were a concern to many residents. Mr. Murphy says that more juveniles are committing crimes and are more brazen than those in the 1990s:

“Most of the crime that happens here is by people who don’t live here. It’s a cut-through neighborhood from East Atlanta to Grant Park and when these guys drive through, they think we have stuff to steal. They’re not stealing lawnmowers anymore, today it’s flat screen TV’s and laptops.”

2007 was a particularly bad year for crime as the area saw a double digit percentage increase from 2006. More than one resident interviewed attribute this to the influx of Louisiana residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina, as many of its victims relocated to the Atlanta metropolitan area. Only January and September witnessed a drop in crime over 2006, however the decrease was by a mere 5% in each month. Residents in Ormewood Park responded to the increase in crime by mobilizing against it. In June of 2008, the idea of a neighborhood security force was addressed and quickly picked up steam. Trolley Patrol founder and president, Amanda Blocker, faced very little resistance to this new organization. “Break-ins were really bad. It was literally a door or two per day.” Ms. Blocker also noted that at the first meeting in late July 2008 to discuss forming Trolley Patrol, residents were very enthusiastic. In fact, fifteen households gave her checks to join at that meeting.

Trolley Patrol hires uniformed, off-duty City of Atlanta police officers to patrol SAND neighborhoods. The officers carry police radios as well as cell phones provided by the organization and are able to respond immediately to 9-1-1 calls. Residents can join the Trolley Patrol at a cost of \$30 per month or \$330 per year. Membership has many advantages. Each member receives a yard sign (similar to those used to identify home security systems), access to the Trolley Patrol Hotline connecting residents to patrolling officers, and the ability to request extra patrols around their home if they will be out of town.

Ninety households from the SAND community joined the Trolley Patrol and the first patrol began on December 15, 2008. Councilmember Smith thinks the timing of the first patrol added to the interest as many residents would be out of town for the holidays and felt more secure leaving knowing there would be extra police patrols near their home. Unfortunately, one month after the Trolley Patrol began watching over the neighborhood, tragedy struck. Well-known bartender John Henderson was murdered in cold blood while closing down Standard Food and Spirits on Memorial Drive in Grant Park. Residents from all of the local neighborhoods were shocked and saddened as many of them were patrons of the bar or friends of his. His murder received significant press coverage and even those who didn't know him were affected by his death as it was so close to home.

While John is dearly missed, some believe his death brought out a stronger sense of vigilance and community involvement in the area. One resident commented, "I don't know what it was, but suddenly people started paying more attention to what was going on in the streets." Ms. Blocker says there was a huge upsurge in membership in the Trolley Patrol as well as similar organizations in Grant Park and East Atlanta. Today, membership in Trolley Patrol has grown to over 200 households and the organization provides SAND neighborhoods with 33 hours of police patrols per week.

In 2009, its first year in existence, overall crime in Zone 6 (the Atlanta Police Department patrol zone that SAND neighborhoods fall under) was down 11% from 2008. More recently, January 2010 saw a 39% drop in overall crime compared to January 2009. (APD Website) The vigilance and dedication to neighborhood safety has made Ormewood Park a safer place. Ms. Blocker, a mother of two who also has a full-time job, does not get paid for her work as president of Trolley Patrol but is extremely active in the community and can often be seen with

Councilmember Smith driving through the neighborhood looking for suspicious characters. Ms.

Blocker says the first week of May 2010 has been a good one for Trolley Patrol:

“We’ve made two arrests in two days of convicted criminals in the neighborhood. Word gets around that there are cops in cars you don’t recognize because they’re unmarked. Our officers stop anyone who looks suspicious and checks them in the computer. A lot of them have records and we hope to get them out of the neighborhood.”

The internet also plays a crucial role in fighting crime in Ormewood Park. The Ormewood Park Google Group keeps residents connected and it is not uncommon to see a post on the neighborhood blog immediately after a suspicious individual is seen, and calls are immediately made to 9-1-1 and Trolley Patrol. Mug shots of known area criminals are posted on the group as well as descriptions of suspicious vehicles that might be casing the neighborhood.

Not only is the internet a useful tool in fighting crime in Ormewood Park, it has brought residents together in many other ways. The Ormewood Park Google Group is also a place for neighbors to ask questions, seek advice, and plan events. The Ormewood Park Parents Network on Yahoo! connects families where they can draw on each other for information such as childcare options and family activities. The neighborhood also has a Google Group dedicated exclusively to Ormewood Park gardeners to discuss their hobby. The mini-neighborhood of Glenwood Place, Portland Avenue and Warwick Street on the north side of Ormewood Park has their own Google Group, which its residents used to plan a very successful block party. Most of the planning was done through the group.

Continuity of residence is what helps a neighborhood maintain its character. One major factor that is keeping residents from leaving the area is the local charter schools. “The best thing about this neighborhood is that we can stay in our homes and send our kids to a good school.” This sentiment expressed by 25-year resident Rick Nace is echoed by parents throughout

Ormewood Park. Neighborhood Charter (elementary) School (NCS) and Atlanta Charter Middle School (ACMS) were created by parents dissatisfied with the choice of public education available to them. Historically, most gentrifiers that start a family opt to send their children to private school or move away from the neighborhood rather than utilize the public school system available to them. (Hankins, 2007) For many residents of Ormewood Park, private schools can be prohibitively expensive as its residents are primarily working and middle-class. The option to send children to the school they feel is best has helped to stabilize the neighborhood as parents are not thinking about where they might move when their children are about to start kindergarten.

The idea for the charter schools began in the late 1990s as residents in Grant Park mobilized to create a school in a neighborhood that had been underserved by public education. NCS opened its door in 2002 followed by ACMS in 2005. The opening of NCS was not without its issues. Originally supposed to be only a school for Grant Park residents, Atlanta Public School officials insisted that the neighborhoods of Ormewood Park and North Ormewood Park be included in the schools' attendance zone. The result was tension between the two neighborhoods rooted in race, class, and territorialism. Some Grant Park residents were unhappy with the loss of complete control over the process while Ormewood Park residents felt there was not a fair representation of its residents in the decision making process. The perception by residents of both neighborhoods was that Grant Park was largely middle-class and increasingly white while Ormewood Park was working-class and racially mixed. However, the demographic statistics are very similar for both Grant Park and Ormewood Park. Through mediation, a sharing of power was established between the neighborhoods. The opening of the charter schools have helped create a larger community and eased much of the tension between the

neighborhoods. (Hankins, 2007) On school days, the neighborhood resembles a scene from a century ago. Children walk, ride their bicycle, or are driven by parents (the only exception in this comparison) to school. Parents who escort their children have the opportunity to talk to each other and build stronger community bonds.

Many community events are centered around the charter schools. Each spring a fund-raising auction and raffle is held, complete with food, drinks, and music. Attendees can participate in a silent auction and raffles with proceeds benefiting both charter schools. Some of the items up for bid include student artwork and donations from local businesses such as gift certificates. Everyday Leaders is a community service club at ACMS in which students in the club perform service-learning projects that address neighborhood issues. The focus this school-year was on homeless animals in the neighborhood displaced as a result of the recent economic downturn.

The last two decades have brought many changes to Ormewood Park but one thing that has not changed is the sense of community felt by residents. Councilmember Smith moved here from west Texas in 1991 and has been an active member of the community since her arrival. Although she did not grow up here, she feels right at home.

“I don’t have a family here, but I *do* have family here. My neighbor and I keep an eye out for each other’s house when one of us is out of town. We are like a community you would think of from the 1950’s when everyone knows each other and looks out for each other. For everyone in the suburbs who look down on us they don’t have what we have.”

Ormewood Park is the embodiment of what a community should be. It has undergone a significant transformation over the last twenty years but the closeness of its residents has not changed. Originally a working-class neighborhood, its residents are now working and middle-class. The term gentrification may be used by some to describe Ormewood Park but many of its

residents would disagree. They do not see themselves as the "gentry." They are just regular people who enjoy living among friends, whatever race or class they may be. The vigilance of its residence has decreased crime and they have successfully opened two charter schools in cooperation with neighboring Grant Park. In an age when many people are focused on themselves, Ormewood Park is truly a neighborhood that cares about one another.

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