

Gentrification Beyond the Census: A Case Study of the Montopolis neighborhood in Austin,  
Texas

by

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## Introduction

Over the past four decades, neoliberal policies enacted by government at all levels have led to major changes in approaches to urban development. This period has coincided with a dramatic increase in gentrification, defined broadly as a transformation of the built environment through capital reinvestment and the displacement of longstanding residents – most often low-income people and communities of color – by more affluent and educated groups.

Gentrification is a gradual process that typically follows a series of well-known stages, but from a scholarly perspective, it takes time for the process to appear in census data and other numerical indicators that often serve as the foundation for gentrification assessments. By that time, however, gentrification pressures are likely to have already had detrimental effects on long-term residents. Given the time required for the political mobilization of a community, scholars who seek to use their research to support communities facing gentrification pressure need analytical approaches attuned to the early indicators of gentrification.

This paper uses a mixed methods approach to examine urban change in the neighborhood of Montopolis in Austin, Texas as a case study through which to trial an analytical approach to detecting gentrification in its relatively early stages. While most definitions of gentrification include changes to the built environment (i.e. revitalization) and population change (i.e. displacement), few studies include aesthetic and infrastructural change as a *measure* or indicator (among several others) of gentrification. To be clear, changes to the built environment alone are not sufficient empirical indicators of gentrification. However, given the increasing homogeneity of the aesthetics of gentrification, specific aesthetic changes can be important early indicators of the process. These indicators often appear on the landscape -- or in urban plans, development project proposals, architectural renderings, etc. -- long before gentrification is evident in census data or other quantitative metrics.



In the sections that follow I seek to provide the reader with a general understanding of how studies of early stage gentrification can expand to include analytical measures that go beyond demographic change. I begin with a broad explanation of the four selected methods for my study: demographic analysis, discourse analysis, zoning, and infrastructural and aesthetic analysis; followed by a quick historical background of the Montopolis neighborhood. Following this section, I begin my analysis using data from the 2019 Census; the adopted 2001 discourse written within the Montopolis Neighborhood Plan (MNP); the 2001 proposed zoning changes for Montopolis, as well as recent (2021) zoning requests for new-build residencies; and marketing for new-build developments of multifamily housing in Montopolis. By looking beyond traditional indicators of gentrification, my study aims to add another dimension of analysis; similar to Lees and Davidson's argument that, "Gentrification scholars need to allow the term gentrification enough elasticity to 'open up to new insights' and indeed reflect the mutations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of this increasingly active and somewhat different process" (Lees et al., 2007, 156).

## Methods

This research seeks to advance an analytical approach to assessing gentrification in its early phases; thus it is not guided by a specific research question. Instead, I explored a suite of methods designed to provide insight into various aspects of the gentrification process, and synthesize those insights into an overarching analysis. In assessing gentrification within Montopolis, the following methods were considered: 1) analysis of demographic change using census data; 2) textual discourse analysis of city planning documents; and 3) comparative inventories of land use and zoning (using the 2001 proposed zoning changes written for the Montopolis Neighborhood Plan compared to the current 2022 zoning); and 4) the analysis of aesthetic changes to the built environment.

## **Demographic Change**

Based on my preliminary research, I began with the assumption that gentrification in Montopolis has already proceeded far enough to begin appearing in the census record. Although the census record does have the ability to provide a baseline measurement for gentrification's magnitude, this term is still understood as a "term of class conflict that raises questions of equity and fairness" (Lees et al., 2007); thus additional methods of analysis are necessary. The process of gentrification is identified as having a long-term impact on several economic and social demographic measurements (Way et al, 2017). On a financial level, increased indicators for residential median income, rental unit pricing, homeowner property values, and higher-skilled employment sectors can be helpful in identifying patterns of gentrification within a neighborhood (Lees et al., 2007). Developers' ability to expand and continue a cycle of urban revitalization is contingent upon a population with a higher level of income. Retail and commercial industries purchase older properties with either the intent to demolish and rebuild or to repurpose the building into something 'creative' (i.e. industrial lofts), aimed at charging a higher premium for either sale or rent. As a result, members of the working-class, who have been historically linked to individuals of color, are displaced by the new middle-class (Lees et al., 2007).

Social indicators are dependent on changes within the age structure, racial makeup, and in the attainment of higher education. Neighborhoods who undergo gentrification are witness to population displacement, specifically focusing on people of color. Generally speaking, populations which contain higher concentrations of Caucasians in their mid-twenties, with at least a bachelor's degree, fall under a generic classification of gentrifier (Way et al., 2017). R.A. Beauregard said in his 1990 article on "Trajectories of Change: the case of gentrification", "The



data on residents and housing reflect the gentrification of the neighborhood. Median family income skyrocketed, minorities virtually disappeared, and educated professionals became dominant in the resident workforce” (860).

For this study, I focused on the 2010 and 2019 data profiles collected by the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. In order for my dataset to demonstrate a neighborhood scale of analysis, the profiles were filtered down into a census tract form that identified with Montopolis (Census Tract 23.12). Originally I wanted to analyze a complete decade of demographic change; however the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the 2020 US Census Report from being completed in a timely manner, so I decided to use 2019 as the closing set of data. My analysis focused on percent change between 2010-2019 for the following economic and social indicators: Population, Family Household Average, Median Age, Median Household Income, Employment by Sector, Commuting Trends, Educational Attainment, Availability of Housing Units, and Racial Makeup.

### **Discourse Analysis**

In the broadest, everyday sense, the term ‘discourse’ refers to the discussion of a subject, whether it be written or verbal. Within urban geographical analysis, discourse tends to refer to a system of attributing meaning and assigning value, which reflects and potentially disrupts power structures in a given time and place. The idea of discourse as a means for exercising power (Mullenbach 2021, Jacobs 2006, Lees 2004) draws our attention to how individuals or organizations impose their ideologies through a selective integration of language and culture (Lees, 2004).

Currently, there are two broad strands of thought within the study of discourse analysis. The first stems from a traditional Marxist viewpoint, where discourse “uncovers hegemonic



ways of thinking and talking about how things should be done that serve vested interests” (Lees, 2004). This agent-based strand focuses on the ways in which powerful people maintain their influence through the use of rhetoric and structural narratives, which emphasize noble and well-intentioned goals for the community; however, it can serve to benefit those in power and not bridge existing social divides (Mullenbach, 2021).

On the technical side, Fairclough’s approach to the first strand proposed a three-dimensional framework which covered: text analysis, discursive practice, and social practice (Jacobs, 2006). Text analysis identifies vocabulary, cohesive grammar, and the structure of the text, while the discursive practice looks at the context in which certain statements create a framework of understanding. The social practice technique requires an in-depth look at the ways discourse relates to a wider power structure and ideology (Jacobs, 2006).

Challenging Fairclough’s approach to the predetermined identity of actors, the second strand of discourse analysis focuses on how language, knowledge, and power all interrelate (Jacobs 2006, Lees 2004). This form of Foucauldian thought emphasizes how discourses “create their own ‘regimes of truth’ to a large extent to determine the acceptable formulations of problems and their solutions” (Jacobs 2006). Language within the Foucauldian conception of discourse actively constructs the actors and relations between actors, thereby removing any preconceived notions of hegemonic discourse. Narratives for this particular discourse were used to “establish an assemblage or contextual space in which policies were enacted” (Jacobs, 2006, 45) without imposing a one-sided agenda.

Keith Jacobs wrote, “discourse analysis is primarily interpretative in that those who deploy its methods are seeking to foreground the pivotal role that language performs in the realms of politics and urban governance” (46). I elected to conduct a critical discourse analysis on two planning documents that were adopted in September 2001 and added as an amended section to the City of Austin’s Comprehensive Plan. The first, referred to as the Montopolis



Neighborhood Plan (MNP), was collaboratively written by municipal and public stakeholders, who were directly and indirectly involved in the revitalization of Montopolis. The purpose of the MNP was to identify potential land uses, as well as how to improve both the transportation system and urban design of the neighborhood. The second document was drafted in conjunction with the MNP as an Implementation Tracking Chart, which provided detailed plans as to how the planning objectives were to be met. I chose these two documents for my analysis due to the “assumption that politics is an arena in which different interest groups seek to establish a particular narrative or version of events as a means to pursue political objectives” (Jacobs, 2006, 39). As there was already an understanding that Montopolis was undergoing early stages of gentrification, I was curious to see how the documents were influenced by the discourse of the political actors, and whether or not that discourse was being guided in a direction that supported continuous gentrification.

### **Zoning**

Previous scholars found that gentrification took place through three distinct waves, demonstrating the change in economic conditions and the nature of state involvement in the process (Payne and Greiner, 2019). Between the 1960s-1970s, there was substantial federal-assistance which drove urban revitalization. However, a decade later, the role of the state became secondary while the primary push for revitalization was led by an emerging ‘creative class’ of artists and bohemians (Florida, 2004). In 1985, the New York Real Estate Board was quoted as saying, “In simple terms, gentrification is the upgrading of housing and retail businesses in a neighborhood with an influx generally of private investment [...] and if displacement inevitably results from a neighborhood’s private market ‘rehabilitation’, then [...] zoning revisions [should] permit retail uses in less expensive side streets” (Lees et al., 2007, 156). By the 1990s, a third wave saw the return of the state as the primary player in the redevelopment strategy, specifically



taking charge of municipal decisions involving zoning and mortgage insurance for large commercial developers (Payne and Greiner, 2019), resulting in retaking the city for the middle classes (Peck, 2005).

As suburbs continue to grow in population, the need to ‘upzone’ for residential development becomes more urgent within municipal government. “The core logic behind upzoning is that in allowing municipalities to build denser housing, [it] will help to increase the housing supply and thus alleviate housing costs in high-demand real estate markets” (Davis, 2021, 1). Concerns from Montopolis residents (Young, 2022) reveal that developers of higher density properties are unlikely to designate these as falling under affordable housing requirements, thereby neglecting the needs of local community members, and promoting an influx of higher-income outsiders to take residency instead. With this in mind, gentrification is not far behind.

My analysis focused on how much the 2001 proposed MNP zoning had changed due to the anticipated higher demand pertaining to housing density. I looked for shifting patterns of commercial/industrial zoning being rezoned to become either mixed-use development or purely residential, with an emphasis on multifamily housing options (townhomes, condominiums, apartment complexes, etc.). The analysis also included neighborhood reactions regarding zoning changes, focusing on activists who had reason to believe that any development in their neighborhood was a form of threat promising gentrification (Young, 2022).

### **Aesthetic Change to the Built Environment**

The reinvention of the built environment focuses on the ways in which places are rebranded, and often neglects what the community needs (Berglund and Gregory, 2019). Developers look towards adding amenities that are considered “leisurely” for an affluent group to enjoy, specifically focusing on aspects of design to act as a creative and visual narrative (Lees



et al, 2008), while quietly displacing low income community members from being involved in the decision-making process (Berglund and Gregory, 2019).

Author Guy Julier discusses how place-identity formation goes beyond traditional methods in that, “it reveals the network of interests that link design production, regulation and consumption within urban locations” (869). His suggestion of ‘design’ being the “contributor to providing official or non-official ‘stories’” (871) can be viewed within current social media platforms and marketing strategies for new-build developments. These strategies focus on providing “linguistic cues to outsiders and citizens” (872), creating a neighborhood perception that is an “agglomeration of identities and activities” (872).

As urban development takes place within an area, the goal is to be able to ‘sell’ this new aesthetic to all residents in a positive and creative manner. Berglund and Gregory argue that, “it allows for engagement with curated experiences of ‘authenticity’ that mask traumatic pasts, present conditions of racial and economic disenfranchisement of the urban core, and the hardships of the people who make up the communities being replaced” (117).

For this portion of my study, I looked at how the aesthetic and marketing of new-build construction within multifamily properties set a precedent for gentrification in Montopolis. By identifying interior enhancements of rental units, built both prior to the early stage of gentrification and after, there was a clear indication in feature upgrades which developers deemed necessary. In order to market this new form of leisurely living property owners chose to digitally advertise their communities as Austin-based rather than Montopolis.

## Case Study Background



Figure 1-Reproduction of 1838 map (Source-Map Collection, Archives and Records Program, Texas General Land Office, Austin, TX.)

In the 1830s, Jesse Tannehill built a cabin on top of a hill and deemed the site ideal for the next up and coming town; however, the location was rejected in favor of a site closer to a number of tributaries (Smyrl, 2016). This new site was named Waterloo (See Figure 1), which in 1839 was renamed Austin. Due to the proximity of Austin's location, Montopolis did not experience a large population increase and remained agriculturally-based throughout the 1800s. After the Civil War ended, Montopolis was recognized as a Freedman's colony for newly emancipated slaves. For approximately fifty years, Black families took up sharecropping cotton as their economic staple, until prices began to decline after World War I. The pressure to regain economic independence then pushed a number of Black families to sell their land and pursue industrial jobs in the North, leaving only two Black families remaining with their land intact (McGhee, 2014).

In the 1920s the area began to show a significant increase in population, with the arrival of Mexican migrants into the territory (Smyrl, 2016), due to extreme flooding and drought forcing Hispanic residents to move north from the San Antonio region (McGhee, 2014). Once they reached Montopolis, they began to harness their skilled labor into sharecropping (See Figure 2), along the way forming neighborhood organizations that valued self-respect and pride for their community (McGhee, 2014).



Figure 2-Example of Travis County sharecropping  
(Source-City of Austin Public Library)

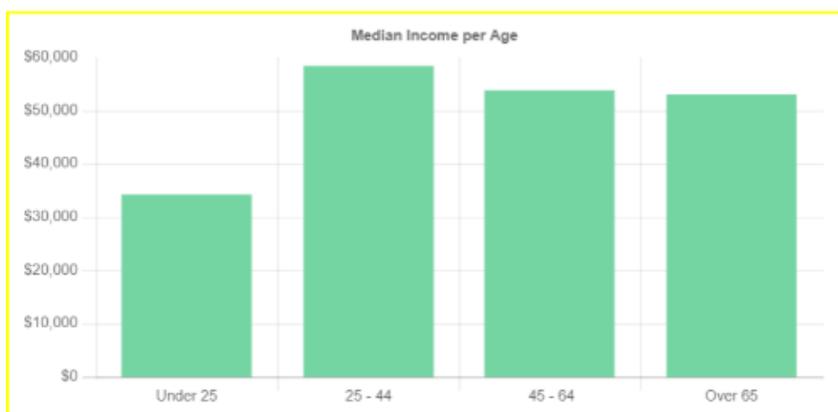
By the 1950s, the city of Austin began the annexation process, incorporating a majority of the Eastside's neighborhoods, including Montopolis, into Austin proper. It was believed that through annexation into Austin there would be an increase in municipal funding; however, during LBJ's 1964 'War on Poverty' agenda, Montopolis was dubbed "Poverty Island" by Reverend Fred Underwood (Montopolis CDC). This nickname was in reference to Reverend Underwood's observations during the first moment when citizens of Montopolis were able to voice their concerns in front of Austin's City Council (McGhee, 2014). He noted that the city had not rendered types of services that the neighborhood needed daily, such as paved roads and accessible bus routes, and the idea that Montopolis was "deserted" by the city wasn't too far from the truth (McGhee, 2014). Viewed as a pioneering priest, Underwood initiated several social programs focusing on education, transportation, healthcare, housing, and other social services in an attempt to integrate them with already-established municipal and civil services of Austin proper. In the decades that followed, city planners decided to take a more authoritarian lead on the development of Montopolis, resulting in an outcry from neighborhood activists (McGhee, 2014). The activists vocalized how Austin's development plan continued a 'tradition' of making the Eastside more inaccessible for long-term residents through large, high-end development projects. Reminiscent of the first city council meeting with Reverend Underwood, the voices of Montopolis were again being overshadowed by Austin's promise of opportunity for all residents.

In recent years, Montopolis has experienced a transition in population from blue-collar to a more predominant white-collar residency over the past two decades (Montopolis Neighborhood Plan, 2001, 4). Long-standing residents point to this transition in population demographic as evidence of ongoing gentrification (Griswold, 2020). Historically, the Eastside of Austin was neglected in the establishment of neighborhood planning and growth for success (i.e.. the lack of public infrastructure and access to knowledge) (Busch, 2017), yet these same neighborhoods are now drawing the attention of high-end developers focused on profits over the growing concerns of long-term residents being displaced.

## Analysis and Findings

### Analysis of demographic change using census data

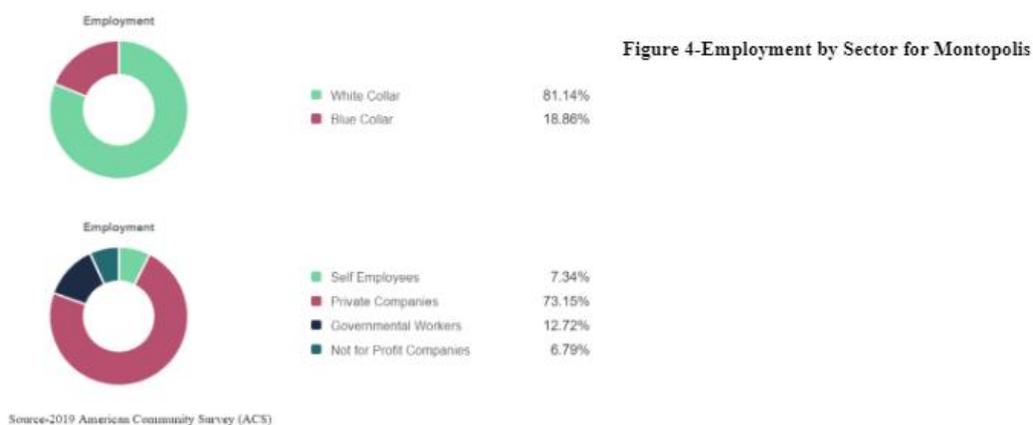
The Montopolis neighborhood (as a whole) saw a financial increase between 2010-2019, as measured by its median income increasing from \$37,000 to \$49,000. A closer review of the American Community Survey data shows that residents younger than 25 years of age earn on average \$31,000 a year, those between the ages of 25-44 make an annual average of \$54,000, while ages 45-64 are earning approximately \$38,000 per year (See Figure 3).



**Figure 3-Median Household Income for Montopolis |**

Source-2019 American Community Survey (ACS)

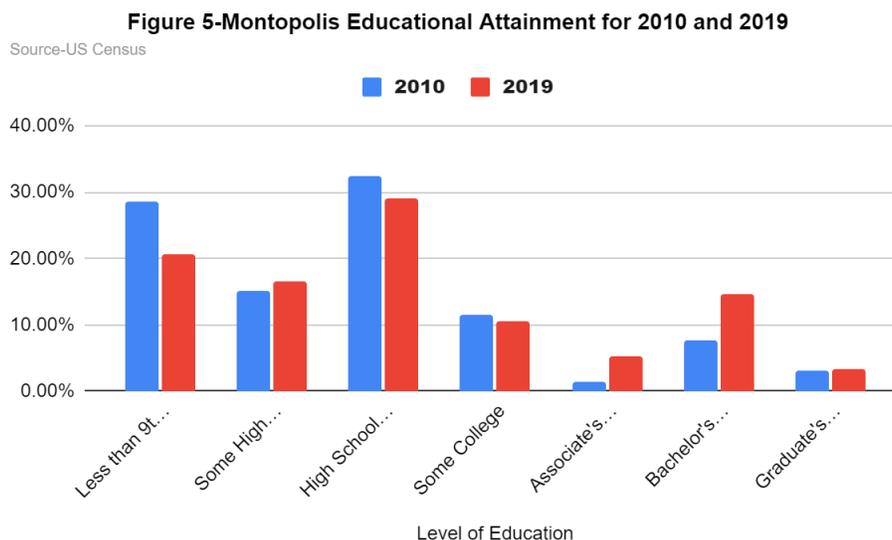
Older residents, who have reached the standard retirement age of 65 or older, bring in an estimated \$51,000 annually. A review of employment demographics (See Figure 4) outlines that the majority of these incomes are supported by three areas within the employment sector: self-employed (7.52%), private companies (72.44%), and government institutions (13.53%).



All three of these sectors have increased, with self-employed having the highest increase of 14.3% within the last ten years. Historically, Montopolis' local industries have predominantly been retail, hospitality, and construction, leading one to believe that most of the higher income wages are located outside of the neighborhood. Between 2010 and 2019 the data shows that transportation trends were also affected; bike use dropped by 25.3%, bus use dropped 1.2%, while car use increased by 3.8%. The increase in the use of cars as the primary mode of transportation supports the understanding that, with the increase of income, the majority of the Montopolis residents are willing to commute outside of the neighborhood for employment

Another factor in the demographic change of Montopolis was in the area of education. Between 2010-2014, the American Community Survey (ACS) 5 Year Summary showed that the neighborhood of Montopolis had increased 596% in the attainment of a bachelor's degree. Although this increase was dramatic, the total number of residents with bachelor degrees remained low. And by 2019, with the release of an updated census (See Figure 5) another 8.8%

increase in bachelor degree attainment was projected, bringing the neighborhood total to over 25%. Along with an increase in bachelor degrees, there was a 19.9% increase in resident attainment of a graduate degree, totaling over 9% of all residents living in Montopolis.



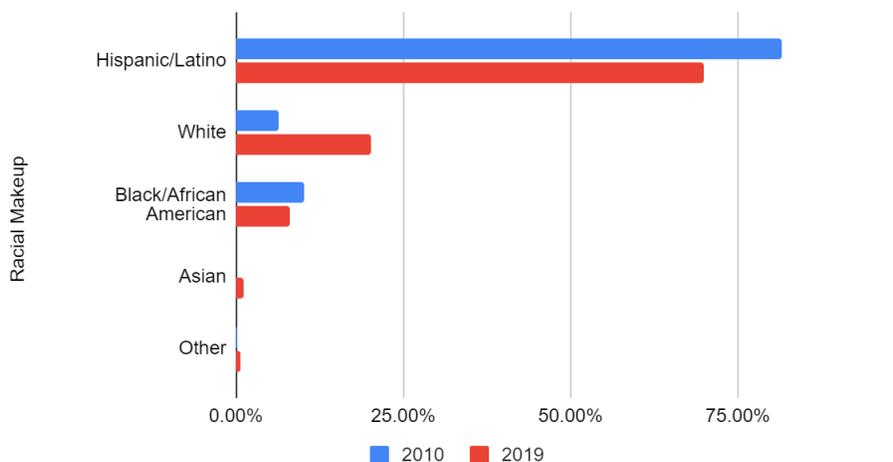
This change dictates what Gale was referring to in his 1979 model of gentrification, where “the most typical such household is [...] composed of one or two white adults in their late twenties or thirties. College educated, often possessing graduate education” (Lees et al., 2007, 34). The largest group of Montopolis (29.6%) still registers as having only attained a high school diploma as their highest education level, which can be a limiting factor in attaining a higher wage employment. Currently, the majority of Montopolis’ housing options (83.72%) are rental units designated as either low-rise or mid-rise multifamily properties. These properties, being relatively new in construction, are charging on average \$1500 for a one bedroom/one bath, 654 square foot apartment.

The racial makeup of Montopolis has also changed over these past two decades, with an overwhelming increase in both white and Hispanic populations, as well as a slight decrease in the already declining African American population (Goldsberry, 2015). According to the ACS 2010 database, Whites constituted 6.3% of the Montopolis population, which appeared to correlate

with the initial property development of several mid-rise apartment buildings, located to the west of Montopolis (See Figure 6).

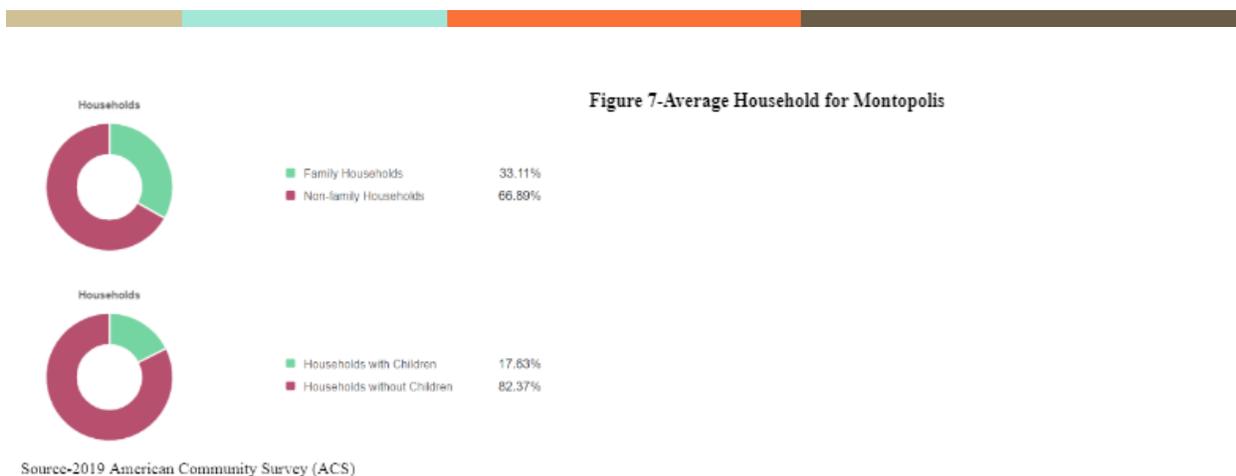
**Figure 6-Racial Shift in Montopolis (2010 and 2019)**

Source-US Census



However, by 2019 the percentage of Whites had dramatically gone up to 20.2, creating “an image most people have of gentrifiers [...] white yuppie ‘pioneers’ moving into low-income neighborhoods with dense concentrations of ethnic minorities” (Lees et al., 2007, 108). While the White population is primarily located on the northwestern outskirts of the Montopolis neighborhood, the increase in Hispanic community members residing on the eastern side of Montopolis Drive, currently constitute 69.8% of the neighborhood.

The turn of the century brought significant demographic changes within the Montopolis neighborhood. Since 2000, population increases in the area exceeded twenty-five percent, bringing the total population to approximately 15,875 as of 2019 (ACS). Although population had increased significantly during this period, only 35% of the total population was in a family household (an increase of only 0.1% since 2010) with 65% in non-family-related households (an increase of 1.4% since 2010), and a median age of twenty-eight.



This statistic indicates that the increase is disproportionately in non-family households (See Figure 7). Coinciding with this data, the number of children residing in an average three-person household decreased by 3.7%. The overall pattern demonstrates a younger demographic who do not see the need to have children by their late twenties, thus changing a historical pattern that began with the Baby Boomer generation.

### **Textual and visual discourse analysis of city planning documents**

Recent studies of urban policy have identified two major strands of discourse analysis, as it applies to forms of communication. The first strand of analysis follows a Marxist tradition of political economy and ideological language that uncovers particular hegemonic thinking, while the second emphasizes the Foucauldian idea that language, knowledge, and power are interconnected (Lees 2004, Jacobs 2006). Both forms of analysis emphasize how “language can influence the policy process in a variety of ways [...to] alter perceptions of interests and issues; it can promote particular policy agendas” (Lees 2004, 102). I examined the 2001 Montopolis Neighborhood Plan and the Implementation Tracking Chart, as these policy documents were drafted to provide an overview of the neighborhood’s future goals, as well as an explanation of the procedures taken to develop an action plan for each objective. Looking at each strand of discourse within our analysis framework, the evidence will demonstrate that urban policies are



written to appear progressive and supportive of residential concerns; however the language these documents use take a more ideological approach that allows, “higher levels of hierarchy [to] have the most positional authority, directing the initiative and enforcing objectives and goals, and garner power through their closeness to funding” (Mullenbach, 2021, 5).

The 2001 Montopolis Neighborhood Plan, amended within the City of Austin’s Comprehensive Plan, was compiled by a joint effort between city officials and thirteen stakeholders representing neighborhood residents and businesses within and near Montopolis. Viewed as components of a dominant discourse, these documents show the construction of a discourse led by the City of Austin and the University of Texas at Austin, which focused on to removing the feeling that Montopolis was isolated (MNP, 2001, 4). Planners were to address this feeling by focusing on expanding land use, transportation, and urban design. Linguistically, the planned document was written in a manner that echoes what Loretta Lees might categorize as “hegemonic ways of thinking and talking about how things should be done” (102). The plan’s opening statement provides a sense that due to the settlement being located on the “outskirts” (4) of Austin, there was a lack of uniformity in the “informal” (4) subdivision of land; this gives the impression that the City was slightly reprimanding them for past decisions. The tone then shifts to become more nurturing and supportive, as early planning studies conducted in 1985 saw the potential for “industrial expansion” (4), particularly in the eastern areas near the Bergstrom airport, which was being touted for its “potential for non-residential development” (4). By the end of the opening statement, the impression of isolation had dissipated as Montopolis was now to be a site “with direct access to the emerging freeway system” (4) and as having “potential sites for non-residential development”. In short, the way to eliminate being isolated is through city government-led development; which brings connectivity to the urban core and potentially drives gentrification.



Foucault's 'regimes of truth' emphasize a discourse that highlights "acceptable formulations of problems and solutions to those problems" (Lees, 2004, 103). This form of discourse was present throughout the 2001 Montopolis Neighborhood Plan, formally written as Objectives and Action Plans. For two of the targeted goals (Land Use and Transportation), a total of 11 objectives were laid out by the stakeholders, followed by a number of committee recommended actions, outlining how each objective would be reached. As a way to "focus on the wider construction of the urban" (Lees, 2004, 103), this form of discourse laid the foundation for its "stakeholder perceptions to show how wider discourses relating to the city can facilitate a benevolent and normalizing view of major urban restructuring" (Jacobs, 2006, 44). Taking a critical look at the implementation chart, I found that for each of the written action items there was an opportunity for any involved actors to provide commentary and/or make suggestions as to how the action could be achieved successfully. These remarks remained professional and informative for the public to follow, which helped when a project was not able to begin due to a lack of funding, or there was a need to push the action item to a later date.

The third target, Urban Design, took a different approach to addressing its individual goals, as the measurement is guided by visual aesthetics and not a specific, measurable action. "Providing a common basis for making consistent decisions about building and streetscape design" (Montopolis Neighborhood Plan, 22), the *Neighborhood Design Guidelines* established the discourse for "the building scale size and shape, orientation and site development with the streetscape" (22). Although the MNP did not specifically provide objectives or an action plan for these particular design goals, the implication that the guidelines would be utilized as a suggestive framework for decision-making was clearly present.

Keith Jacobs stated, "urban policy texts are usually written for a particular audience and that this is the most important factor affecting the presentation of material as well as the imagery and language used" (47). According to the adopted 2001 plan, Montopolis' future involves the

development of: mixed-income housing opportunities, a pedestrian-friendly environment, the incorporation of commercial retail, the maintenance of both public and private spaces, and the investment into physical infrastructure. The language within the 2001 plan clearly supports a more Marxist interpretation of discourse, in which development within Montopolis is being pushed towards an ideology that applauds gentrification, but in a tone that appears progressive for the neighborhood's end to isolation.

### **Comparative inventories of land use and zoning**



Figure 8-Example of current (2022) Single Family Zoning (SF-3) located along Frontier Valley Drive, Montopolis



Photo provided by Google Maps (1522 Frontier Valley). These SF-3, Family Residence, homes are a part of the new subdivision located on the east side of Montopolis.

As stated in the 2001 Montopolis Neighborhood Plan, Action Items 12-14 which focused on the “preservation” of single-family (SF) zoning (See Figure 8) within the interior of Montopolis, encouraged developers to construct newer subdivisions on smaller lots as a way to create more supply for the rising housing demand. Hamnett stated that, “in a market economy, the increase in the size and purchasing power of the middle classes has been accompanied by an intensification of demand pressure in the housing market” (Lees et al., 2007, 93); supporting the idea that these new-build subdivisions were catering to individuals with a higher price point.

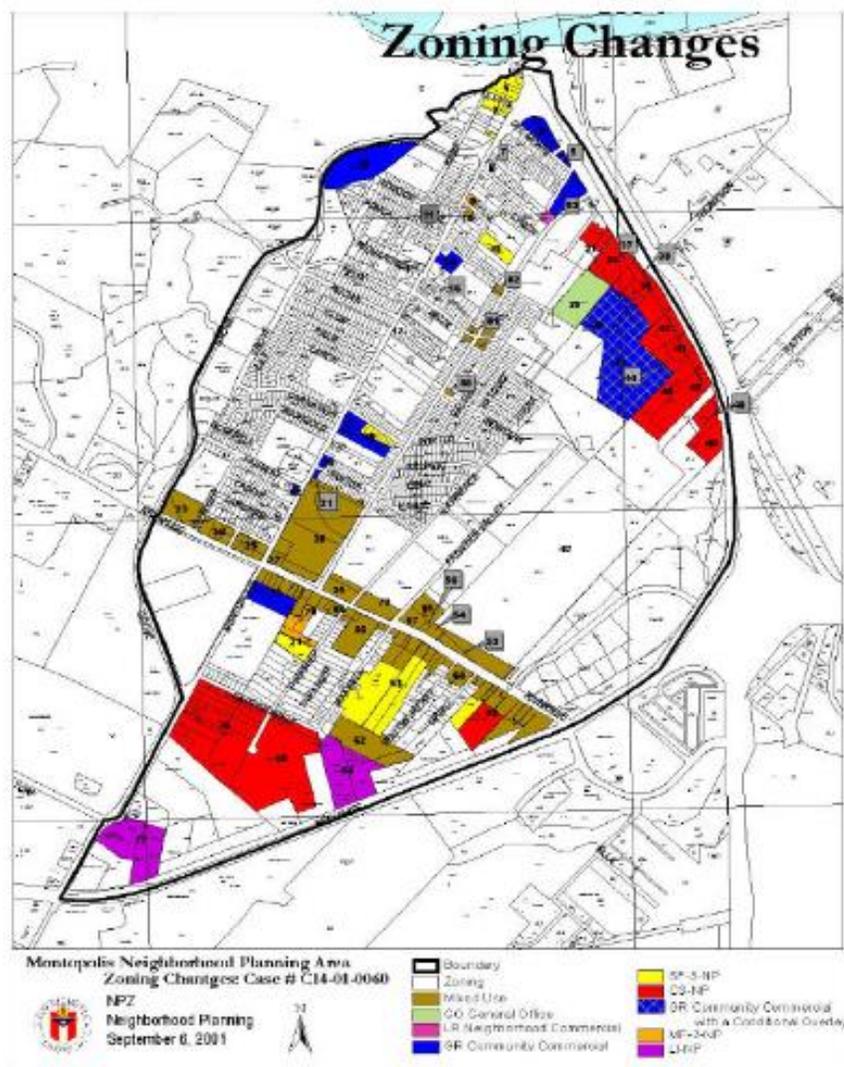


Figure 9- Map was created by the City of Austin Planning Department for the adopted 2001 Montopolis Neighborhood Plan

According to the City of Austin’s ‘Zoning Changes’ map from 2001 (See Figure 9), the largest increase was aimed at mixed-use (MU) development along the northern and southern sections of Riverside Drive (gold coloring), as well as a large section of Community Commercial (GR) zoning (dark blue coloring) in the northeast section of Montopolis, near South Highway 183. As of 2022, the original plans for Riverside’s mixed use development were adjusted to accommodate an increase in housing density by constructing more mid-rise residential options, including townhomes and condominiums (SF-6), as a way to not only capitalize off of the housing demand, but to increase property values with new-build developments.

The decision to upgrade zoning options has resulted in neighborhood backlash, as more residents are correlating these new housing options as signs of gentrification. In his 1990 article, “Trajectories of neighborhood change: the case of gentrification”, author R.A. Beauregard discusses how “the solidarity of the neighborhood is important for its stability, particularly with regard to its potential for gentrification” (869).



Figure 10- 2021 Aerial view of 3.12 acres (Lot 19), located east of Montopolis Drive, being requested for zoning change

Photo Credit-City of Austin

In February 2021, a recommendation for higher density zoning was requested by a developer to, “rezone the undeveloped 3.12-acre lot (See Figure 10) from single-family (SF-3) to multifamily (MF-6) land use.” (Young, 2021). In response to this request, members of the Planning Commission recommended that the developer set aside at least half of the new-build as affordable housing; however local residents are still unsure that these recommendations will be heeded, as there has already been a history of, “private developers often fall[ing] short on promises of affordable housing” (Young, 2021). As a result of the developer’s inability to come to a consensus with the Planning Commission’s recommendations, the 3.12-acre lot (Lot 19) has yet to be developed with new construction and remains zoned for single-family usage.

Although Montopolis’ neighborhood activism has convinced City Council that its internal single-family zoning should be protected, the exterior, which was historically not residential, has not experienced the same activist pushback in regards to economic development after 2001. One



particular area near the southern boundary of Montopolis, in between Ben White and Grove Boulevard, contains an array of five modern mid-rise apartment complexes and one housing development containing over one hundred newly designed homes. The average monthly rents for these apartment complexes range between \$1000-\$2200, while the housing prices begin in the \$500,000 range; this supports the idea that, “the supply of luxury housing produced by developers [has] played an important role in attracting” (Beauregard, 872) white collar incomes who can afford the amenities that come with new development.

### **Analysis of infrastructural and aesthetic changes to the built environment**

Berglund and Gregory stated that, “development goals privilege the attraction of affluent, upwardly mobile incoming residents” (117), which then requires that the environment visually match the tastes of that type of resident. Developers will provide design plans that feature modern amenities such as: car charging stations for electric vehicles, Zen garden and green spaces, etc. These forms of place-making strategies are seen as a “change in cultural symbols of leisure and elite consumption” (Berglund and Gregory, 118), which offers a new outlook on a “place not being a primary, singular product, but an agglomeration of identities and activities” (Julier, 2005, 872). Although these strategies are able to promote an increase in economic spending, the downside to this form of place-branding is the loss of the original neighborhood narrative by visually disregarding the name, Montopolis.



Photo-The Mont Apartments

Photo-The Monroe Apartments

Figure 11- Images of new-build construction located in the southeast section of Montopolis (2021)

Photo Credit-Google

Between 2020-2021, four luxury apartment complexes, located within the boundaries of Montopolis, opened their doors for business (The Mont, The Monroe, The Oaks @ Ben White, and Arise). These buildings were a mixture of garden-style communities and mid-rise multifamily, with common area amenities including: fitness centers, dog parks, outdoor pools (See Figure 11), covered parking, and detached garages. The level of enhancement was not limited to exterior aesthetics alone. Three of these communities (Arise, The Mont, and The Monroe) also included interior enhancements tailored toward a higher income demographic to include solid surface countertops, faux wood flooring, and stainless steel appliances.

Comparatively speaking, multifamily apartment complexes built in Montopolis, prior to 2010, did not contain a number of these interior enhancements. Interior images from Trove Eastside (2003), Grove Place (2004), and River Crossing Townhomes (1984) showed that the units offered laminate countertops, older/off brand fixtures, no backsplash in the kitchen area, white appliances, older kitchen cabinets, and white ceiling fans throughout the bedrooms.

A further separation from the Montopolis neighborhood community feel is within the marketing strategies which highlight the developments as being located in Austin, Texas.

Neighborhood links within each of the apartment’s websites used language that described their location as “in the bustling and trendy area of Southeast Austin” (The Oaks @ Ben White), a “vibrant community on the rise” in Riverside (The Monroe), a “residential community in Austin” (The Mont), and having the “incredible appeal of life in Austin” (Arise).



Figure 12-2022 Marketing Banner from Montopolis’s Aspire apartment complex website

Images of Lady Bird Lake, the Riverside Golf Course, and Zilker Park would flash on the screen, stimulating an enjoyment of the outdoors, while neglecting to mention the actual name of the neighborhood being lived in. It can be argued this form of marketing while highlighting the exuberant Austin lifestyle (See Figure 12), also contributes, through the inattention of neighborhood amenities, to the displacement of the local population.

## Conclusion

This paper used a mixed methods approach to examine urban change in the neighborhood of Montopolis in Austin, Texas as a case study through which to trial an analytical approach to detecting gentrification in its relatively early stages. The methods I chose for my study focused on the analysis of demographic indicators, discourse analysis of city planning documents, shifting patterns within zoning regulations, and aesthetic change within multifamily properties. I found that changes in demographics remained a baseline measurement of early stage gentrification, specifically looking at the increase in household income, educational attainment,



and racial makeup of the area. The data indicated an influx of college graduate, upper-middle class whites were “drawing benefits from the privileges and entitlements associated with the ‘white face’ of gentrification” (Lees et al., 2007, 215), supported primarily through higher paid employment. After reviewing city planning documents, the discourse analysis showed how hegemonic thinking can be tied to urban policy writing, where language and rhetoric highlight agendas that are supportive of development and gentrification. Zoning changes within Montopolis favored a mixed-use and community commercial form of development along the Riverside Drive corridor, which emphasized both economic growth and higher density housing to support the influx of white-collar workers. The marketing of single-family residences in Montopolis has remained key to preserving the impetus of community living; however, developers of higher density properties are not ready to give up just yet. These new-build properties provide an aesthetic that younger generations are eager to be a part of, which continues to drive gentrification in Montopolis.

Although this study was able to positively identify alternative measurements for early stage gentrification, there should have been an additional method that involved an ethnographic approach. If the key behind the study was to expand upon what researchers already know about gentrification, then providing a deep dive into the lives of those who are fighting gentrification would have been helpful to the study.

The subject of gentrification will continue to be a hot-button issue as long as there is a need for affordable housing and “previously disinvested areas become ‘younger, smarter, and richer’, resulting in the displacement of most (or all) of the original working class residents” (Tierney and Petty, 2014, 440). From a realist point of view, Sam Stein, wrote, “Gentrification is brutal, though rarely total, not only because colonizers always rely on the labor of a local workforce, but also because people always fight back: as individuals, as families (of birth and of



choice), as communities (local and international), as neighbors, and as a class. Most important, gentrification is not inevitable” (2019). As more individuals today are able to ascertain and redirect factors within early stage gentrification, the possibility of displacement disappears and a community perseveres.

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