

“Seems Like the Ghetto”

Understanding the Image of East Cleveland

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to understand the decline of a specific community, Cleveland's historic inner-ring suburb of East Cleveland, as a set of troubled and constructed histories that were never inevitable. In particular, the essay takes up the use of terms like 'ghetto' and 'blight' in descriptions of East Cleveland to explore how the negative perception of the city has compounded the effects of its decline. The text begins with a brief introduction to the city, describing its transition from an 'elite' white suburb into a deteriorating, primarily African American, one. This is followed by an analysis of the many factors that contributed to East Cleveland's rapid decline, including suburbanization policies, racial integration and blockbusting, physical deterioration, and economic mismanagement. The essay's final section describes how public perception of the city has played one of the most harmful roles in shaping its development, identifying the city's image as equally important as its financial state or physical deterioration. Using East Cleveland as example, it poses the broader question: can the expectation of 'ghetto' or 'blight' beget just that?

It is my view that integration failed in East Cleveland because neither group really wanted it to succeed. The white population fled the city due to fear and ignorance... Black citizens were simply living the American dream of finding a good home in a good community. Integration was not their primary goal. They wanted the same things which brought my parents to East Cleveland.

- Robert Dreifort, Former East Cleveland Resident, 2012¹

In a spurt of curiosity one day in 2017, I ran a search on YouTube for East Cleveland, an inner-ring suburb of Cleveland, Ohio and a city just down the hill from where I grew up. Among the first titles to appear were names like “Abandoned East Cleveland,” “Cleveland’s Worst East Side Hoods,” and “Drive Through the Ghetto Wasteland of East Cleveland, OH.”² Although these disparaging titles were intended to be provocative click-bait, they didn’t surprise me. The way those videos portrayed East Cleveland was not so far off from the image marketed to me growing up. I had heard the City was getting rid of traffic lights because there wasn’t enough traffic to warrant the upkeep. I saw some pretty roughed up houses when I would drive through the neighborhoods. One high school friend of mine would roll her eyes and tell me she didn’t like coming to my house because I lived near – she would whisper – “the ghetto.” Her condemnation of the neighborhood stuck with me. Did I? Was it?

The City of East Cleveland has been in a near-constant state of fiscal emergency since 1988. The city of 17,000 has an annual operating cost of about \$17 million, but each year draws in only \$10 million in tax revenue, so it struggles to provide even basic services for its residents. The city is over 93 percent black. The median household income is \$19,500 and the poverty rate is over 40 percent.³ In the fall of 2016, the City’s last ambulance broke down and it had to take a loan from nearby Oakwood Village,⁴ followed by two borrowed salt trucks from the Ohio Department of Transportation, since its two were temporarily out of service.⁵ In recent

years, the City has been discussing a possible merger with neighboring Cleveland to halt what seems like a downward spiral of decay and debt. However, after a dramatic mayoral election recall in 2016, those talks have been put on hold.⁶

Although once considered a select suburb of Cleveland and home to part of famed ‘Millionaire’s Row,’ today East Cleveland is one of Ohio’s most distressed communities, sitting on decades of physical decay and a state of fiscal emergency a generation long. How and why did this inner-ring suburb change so drastically in only a few decades? This essay aims to understand the decline of East Cleveland as one case study in the evolving identities of inner-ring suburbs in the 21st century. It is centered on the argument that the patterns that emerge in East Cleveland are contrived conditions manufactured through a series of discreet but related actions and forces, and not an inevitable turn of events. In particular, this text considers the way public perception of the city’s identity, especially through the lens of terms like ‘ghetto’ and ‘blight,’ continues to play one of the most powerful roles in shaping real forces within the community.

BUILDING EAST CLEVELAND

East Cleveland was the City of Cleveland’s first suburb. A small territory immediately to the east of the main city, East Cleveland occupies only about three square miles. It was first settled in the early 1800s by a

handful of Scottish and English settlers but grew slowly alongside its western neighbor throughout the 19th century, incorporating as a city in 1911.⁷

In its early decades, East Cleveland was considered an elite suburb for wealthy locals. Euclid Avenue, known as ‘Millionaire’s Row’ for its collection of ornate mansions built for local magnates, extended from downtown into the new suburb and carried with it the city’s wealth and prestige. In 1873, John D. Rockefeller, East Cleveland’s most notable Gilded Age resident, purchased a 248-acre estate in the city and built a family mansion, the ‘Homestead,’ overlooking the lake. His son would later donate most of that land to the cities of East Cleveland and Cleveland Heights to create Forest Hill Park and develop some of the remaining land into a small French-Norman residential neighborhood modeled after Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City.⁸

At the turn of the century, the city’s population boomed and shifted towards the middle- and upper-middle classes, spurring the construction of a large number of homes. By 1920, East Cleveland was a city of over 27,000,⁹ and the population peaked in 1950 at around 40,000 residents.¹⁰ During these years, the city saw high rates of home ownership and a population that was almost exclusively white and largely locally-born. The neighborhoods were primarily residential;

many people worked in white collar or manufacturing jobs downtown and could commute easily by public transit to and from the city.¹¹

A NEW EAST CLEVELAND

While East Cleveland’s development was fairly stable through the first half of the 20th century, the 1960s brought rapid and lasting change to the city. While the housing stock and infrastructure began to show signs of age and the downtown job markets slowed, the city also experienced a swift population turnover from majority white to majority black. Coincident with these changes, East Cleveland began to take on a very different image than in the first half of the century.

Suburbanization and Urban Policies

The post-war suburban housing boom left East Cleveland largely untouched. The city, whose housing stock was built primarily before 1920, was small and already developed to capacity with residential units, leaving little space for new development after World War II. Social trends in the post-war era promoted single-family homes, yet only about one in four of the city’s homes matched that typology, one of the lowest ratios in the state. While East Cleveland had been a trendy neighborhood in previous decades, in the 1940s and 1950s its layout and housing styles were going out of fashion. As younger families bought houses in the newer second suburban ring, the population of East Cleveland began to age, and the modest decline in the city’s popularity opened up space for new residents to move in.¹²

As post-war suburbanization drove white East Clevelanders out to new neighborhoods, urban renewal policies helped usher new black residents in. East-side Cleveland



Figure 1: John D. Rockefeller Home, Forest Hill, 1910 [The Cleveland Memory Project, 2018].

neighborhoods like Hough, Glenville, and Fairfax – all sites of race riots during the Civil Rights Movement – became targets of mayoral urban renewal schemes in the late 1960s and 1970s. The new neighborhood development aimed to rehabilitate the damaged neighborhoods while also dispersing some of the crowded population. However, as thousands of properties were torn down, black residents found themselves with little Section 8 program assistance and no place to go in the city. East Cleveland, full of spacious, affordable homes, was a commonplace to settle.¹³

Racial Integration in the Suburbs

Histories of post-war American cities tend to focus on the suburbanization of white families, but that trend was quickly followed by a black suburbanization movement. While we tend to think of ‘white flight’ as whites leaving urban downtowns, in Cleveland the term also has significance in the city’s inner-ring suburbs. In 1960, only three percent of the Cleveland area’s African American population lived in the suburbs. By 1970, that number was 14 percent, and in 1980, 27 percent of Cleveland-area African Americans lived in the suburbs. The period from 1960 to 1980 represented a significant and rapid integration of suburban neighborhoods, and inner-ring suburbs like Cleveland Heights, Shaker Heights, East Cleveland, and Warrensville Heights saw the most dramatic changes in their populations.¹⁴ The African Americans involved in Cleveland’s suburbanization were mostly local: between 1960 and 1970 alone, 23,000 African American Clevelanders moved across the border to East Cleveland.¹⁵

On an individual level, African American Clevelanders had many motivations to move into the suburbs, but there were also many regional forces that led to such a rapid and linear move. Eastside Cleveland neighborhoods were at capacity, especially following the demolition of many

properties in the Hough, Glenville, and Fairfax neighborhoods due to urban renewal policies, so the African American population needed to expand geographically. Coupled with a drop in industrial and manufacturing jobs in the center city, this made downtown residents look outward.¹⁶ Those who were able (usually families with a higher socio-economic status) chose to leave. Historians like Andrew Weise, author of *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, cast cases like this as an example of “Suburbanization by Spillover,” which suggests that instead of operating as an independent suburb of Cleveland, East Cleveland became a spatial extension of the city when African Americans moved in. Weise offers this conceptual conflation of city and suburb as one explanation of why, today, East Cleveland might feel like “an inner-city suburb with all the problems of the central city.”¹⁷

In the 1960s, a move to the suburbs still came with overtones of self-improvement, and the income of suburban residents surpassed that of urban residents for the first time. Alongside the contemporary Civil Rights Movement, there was also a feeling that following the white trajectory into the suburbs was indicative of some positive effects of the movement.¹⁸ But the primary reason African Americans came to East Cleveland in the 1960s and 1970s was their desire to own a home. In 1969, 40 percent of the new African American population cited home ownership as their primary reason for moving, and East Cleveland had plenty of affordable homes to offer.¹⁹

It comes as no surprise that, like most white neighborhoods of this era, East Cleveland did not greet racial integration warmly. Many white families, accustomed to their cultural homogeneity, were fearful of black neighbors and worried what a changing population might mean for the neighborhood. This racial anxiety became prime fodder for local real estate agents looking to capitalize on the situation. “There certainly wasn’t a welcome

wagon here,” remembers Mae Stewart, one of East Cleveland’s first black residents; “[realtors] would call some of the neighbors and say, ‘The neighborhood is changing. Maybe you’d better sell and get out.’”²⁰

Blockbusting, the practice of encouraging homeowners in certain neighborhoods to quickly sell their homes at low rates for fear that minority races will move in, was common practice in East Cleveland, which can be seen in the city’s resettlement patterns. Black families slowly moved into the city one block at a time, beginning at the eastern border and spreading westward. Each neighborhood took on its own new demographic, with more established families taking the larger properties in neighborhoods like Superior-Rozelle, and younger, less established families taking the more modest properties in neighborhoods like



Figure 2: Kenneth Grady, in front of 14524 Terrace Rd., a home rehabilitated by East Cleveland Development Corporation (The Cleveland Memory Project, 2018).

Chambers-Mayfair. In only a few years, the city changed from an aging white population to a largely black one filled with young families and children.²¹ But while the change in the city’s population occurred over a very short period of time, conditions in pre- and post-segregation East Cleveland were very different.

Physical Deterioration

When African Americans moved into East Cleveland in the 1960s and later decades, they were met not with the sparkling image of the new post-war suburbs, but with post-prime aging neighborhoods. Most of the city’s properties and infrastructural systems were built in the early decades of the 20th century out of materials that were more difficult and costlier to obtain in post-war America, meaning incoming black families were purchasing aging homes that were expensive to maintain. Meanwhile, renters were subject to the biases of East Cleveland landlords, who frequently reduced maintenance to their properties as soon as they realized the neighborhood demographic was changing. Some landlords would even subdivide their properties into additional units using cheap construction methods to further increase the profits they made off new residents.²² A 1967 survey showed that at the time, although 44.6 percent of the city’s population was African American, blacks occupied only 33.4 percent of all households. This suggests that black residents were living at a higher density than whites, further increasing the rate of wear on the properties.²³

As an added complication, many of these physical changes came with negative economic effects. Aging properties, redlining, and neighborhood re-segregation caused local property values to decline during the 1960s and 1970s. Subdivided properties meant East Cleveland had more residents putting stress on the city’s infrastructure and public resources with no additional tax revenue. Further, many local businesses packed up and followed their customer bases to the more distant suburbs. Storefronts either remained vacant or were replaced with less profitable businesses. East Cleveland quickly found itself in financial straits and began to cut back community services to save money.²⁴ Although East Cleveland’s new residents were not responsible for the local economic decline, its concurrence with the



North on Strathmore Ave. from R.O.W.

Figure 3: Looking north from the Nickel Plate Road right-of-way along Strathmore Ave/Missouri Ave, 1922 [The Cleveland Memory Project, 2018].



Figure 4: 1880 Idlewood Avenue, 1929 [The Cleveland Memory Project, 2018].

racial integration of the city conflated the two issues in the public eye and quickly bred a negative image of the city as a declining black community, perpetuating the feedback loop of disinvestment that continues to the present.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION SHAPES CHANGE

“It’s a rough area. If they put a listing out, it lasts a long time. People know about the crime, the poverty level, all the subsidized housing that’s over there, the water department, the police department. People tend to stay away from East Cleveland, if they can.”

- Charles Glaster, Cleveland Heights Realtor, 2001²⁵

Although many concrete actions contributed to the rapid transformation of East Cleveland, one of the most influential forces in shaping this city is a very abstract one: public perception. When Cleveland Heights Realtor Charles Glaster described East Cleveland in his 2001 account, he mentioned the measurable conditions – crime, poverty, subsidized housing – but he cast them in terms of the public understanding: “people know about [them],” he says, “people tend to stay away from East Cleveland.”

Former resident Robert Dreifort’s description of East Cleveland’s integration process demonstrates the way white communities fled the city based on “fear and ignorance.” Dreifort suggests that when East Cleveland residents saw African Americans moving into their communities, they recalled nearby neighborhoods of Hough and Glenville, both in Cleveland, which transitioned rapidly into black communities in the middle of the century and were hosts to major race riots during the Civil Rights Movement. Following the riots, those neighborhoods had

a negative identity in the public eye, and East Clevelanders feared that their community could soon look the same way. For some white households, that fear led them to move to another community. For others who either could not or did not want to move, there was another available option: switch school systems. Dreifort, who attended East Cleveland’s Shaw High School in the 1950s before the major integration of the city, implies that white residents of newly black Cleveland neighborhoods would falsify addresses to attend his still predominantly white school.²⁶

During the 1960s and into the present day, the Forest Hills neighborhood of East Cleveland remains one of the wealthiest and whitest communities in the city. It is also geographically separated from the other neighborhoods – perched atop the steep hill and ridgeline that becomes neighboring Cleveland Heights and buffered by Forest Hills Park. In the 1960s, young children in this neighborhood attended Caledonia Elementary School, which served the isolated neighborhoods abutting Cleveland Heights. As those children grew older they moved to Kirk Junior High School, which served the entire city. Between 1960 and 1967, there was little population change (neither in number nor demographic) in the Forest Hills neighborhood, but the Caledonia School System saw a significant drop in its enrollment. Further, many students who attended Caledonia Elementary School during that decade did not continue on to Kirk Junior High the following year.²⁷ This study indicates that as white families watched their neighborhood integrate, they pulled their children out of public schools. While we cannot pinpoint the exact motivations of each singular household, the collective reaction of white families to an integrating neighborhood contributed to the gradual racial segregation of the East Cleveland school system.

Public perception plays a significant role in the identity and success of any neighborhood. We expect that different groups will gravitate

towards specific areas based on their values, cost of living, and available amenities. In the case of East Cleveland, however, a superimposed identity, based on local precedents, racial stereotypes, and lack of understanding, exacerbates and compounds the problems the community already faces. The people and institutions who construct these identities are not those who bear their consequences.

THE IMAGE OF EAST CLEVELAND

"It used to be one of Cuyahoga County's best communities. Now, this is the ghetto. Looks like the ghetto, feels like the ghetto, seems like the ghetto."

- Earl Wilson, East Cleveland Resident, 2013²⁸

Today, although East Cleveland is no longer undergoing rapid demographic change, its public identity still plays a large role in determining conditions in the city. Like in the provocative video titles on YouTube, terms like 'ghetto' and 'blight' appear frequently in language about East Cleveland and are consequently grafted onto the city's public image. In his seminal book *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, The History of an Idea*, author Mitchell Duneier makes the case for an increased understanding of the history and implications of the term "ghetto." What originated as a word to describe a segregated community of Jews has morphed in the American consciousness to a taboo term describing neighborhoods of concentrated crime, poverty, and blackness. Duneier names Pepsi-filled baby bottles and hyper-policed neighborhoods as among the many layers of cultural signals that get conflated into a complex understanding of "ghetto."²⁹

In Arthur Little's 1969 report on East Cleveland, he writes, "it is not a slum or a ghetto; its housing is not seriously deteriorated, its city services are not

inadequate, and its schools are not badly overcrowded, understaffed, or poorly run."³⁰ The report reveals that even when the city did not meet their definition of a slum or ghetto, there was a public consciousness – perhaps a public fear – that it had the ability to become one. In 2019, East Cleveland cannot satisfy most of the criteria this report laid out half a century ago. Today, their statement reads like a sort of ironic foreshadowing and begs the question, can the expectation of 'ghetto' and 'blight' breed 'ghetto' and 'blight'?

One of the most significant consequences of the correlation between East Cleveland's concentrated black population and the city's distressed condition is the ease with which the public can laminate the two characteristics into a causal relationship. Yoonmee Chang's description of the "culturalization of class" in her 2008 book *Writing the Ghetto* describes the phenomenon through which we perceive socio-economic status to be an inherent element of a minority culture.³¹ In this case, we can use Chang's term to describe the way public perception of East Cleveland grafts poverty and its consequences onto "African American culture." This tendency is particularly dangerous, not only because it perpetuates reductive stereotypes and reinforces prejudices against a disadvantaged community, but because it influences public action. East Cleveland was in part formed by the racial biases of its community, and the city continues to struggle with consequences of past and current prejudices. Scholars like Richard Rostein describe the ghetto with two critical characteristics: a government-supported siloing of a minority group into certain geographical areas and the establishment of barriers to their exit.³² One could easily fit this formula onto East Cleveland, but whether you view East Cleveland as a ghetto likely has a lot to do with how you understand the term.

'Blight,' once a kind of horticultural disease and now a physical indicator of neglected

landscapes, is similarly sticky in its application to urban environments. In 1975, an article about East Cleveland in *Call & Post* newspaper noted, “vacant homes and buildings create an appearance of blight.”³³ By employing the phrase “appearance of” before the word “blight,” the author suggests that vacant buildings do not create blight, but rather that they *suggest* it. This simple change of phrase powerfully recasts the condition of ‘blight’ as something we perceive and gives the viewer agency in building the community’s identity. When phrases like ‘ghetto’ or ‘blight’ are viewed through this lens, we understand them as applied terms with the power to influence real action within a community.

Scholars like historian Colin Gordon have previously cast ‘blight’ as an economic indicator – a source of speculation. An area can be deemed ‘blighted’ when it no longer holds the potential to generate income for investors.³⁴ Although investors may have a rationale for why they think an area is or is not a good site for development, to call an area ‘blighted’ is to make a projective judgment based on a perceived future of a neighborhood. ‘Blighted’ communities are often condemned to disinvestment by governments and local corporations, making manifest their likelihood to fail and rendering the uncertain certain. East Cleveland is a

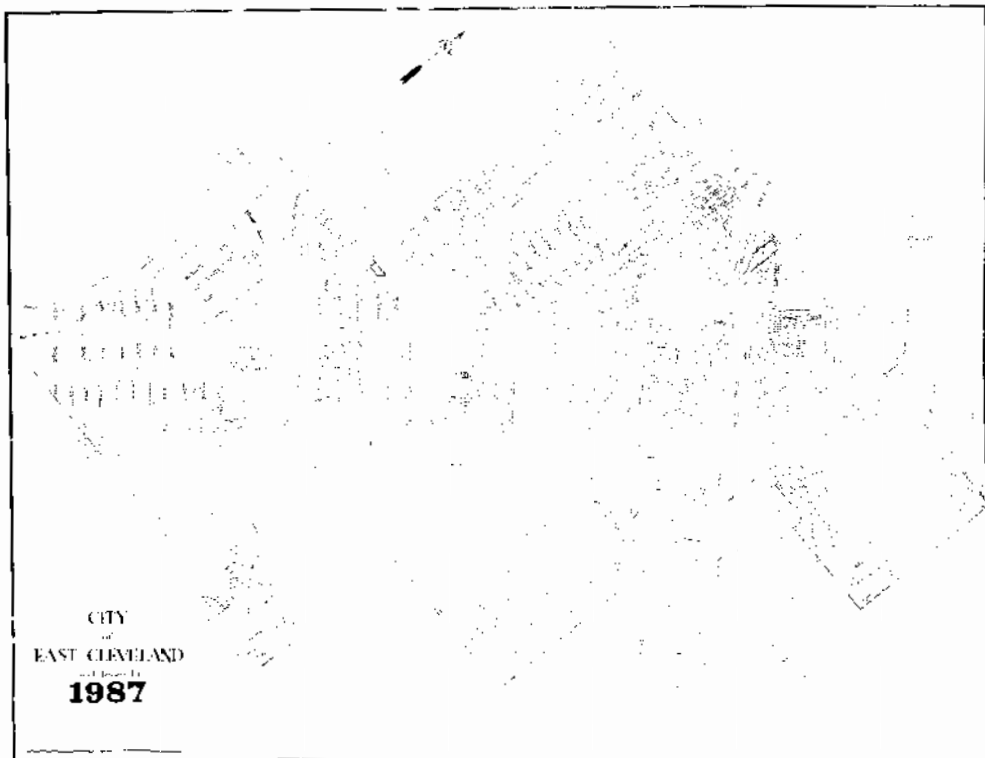


Figure 5: Map of East Cleveland, 1987 [eastcleveland.org, 2018].

community with plenty of available land, located within walking distance of Cleveland's booming University Circle neighborhood and only two miles from Lake Erie. These features could make investment in East Cleveland economically viable; however, negative stereotypes and racial anxieties prevent developers from investing in the community. The visibility of East Cleveland's troubles acts as justification for further discrimination and inhibits positive change. We need a deeper public understanding of the nuanced history of East Cleveland in order to invalidate the city's current negative reputation and open the door for reinvestment.

CONCLUSION

Those who see the City of East Cleveland as more than its struggles are leading small-scale resistance movements against the city's negative reputation. Vivian Thompson, one of many determined residents, claims that she frequently goes directly to City Hall with her complaints about the City's neglect. "They know that I'm not going to allow that grass to go uncut," she says, "I pay taxes."³⁵ A local nonprofit brings music programming to East Cleveland public schools in a time when schools are slashing arts budgets.³⁶ Last winter, local volunteers gave their time

and labor to renovate East Cleveland's Martin Luther King Jr. Civic Center.³⁷ While these actions are encouraging, the community will need more than grassroots movements to lift it out of decades of discriminatory practices; it will need investment at a structural level. Andy Nikiforov, leader of the local Lutheran Housing nonprofit, notes, "people feel that, if somebody else cares about where I live, that makes it easier for me to care about where I live."³⁸

East Cleveland is a city with historical and cultural significance, beautiful turn of the century architecture, and residents whose stories and lives carry impactful narratives in the development and identity of the Cleveland area. There are many individuals and organizations who are fighting to repair the struggling community and many who find a lot to love about the city. When journalist Erick Trickey was writing his often-referenced 2001 article, "Welcome to East Cleveland," he stopped and spoke to an anonymous man at the local train station. The man spoke about the poor living conditions in his apartment, his difficult landlord, and the commonpresence of drug dealers. Still, he explained that he wouldn't trade his city for even the ritziest neighborhood on Cleveland's east side: "Besides that," he says, "I love East Cleveland...I'd rather be here than Pepper Pike."³⁹ ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Richards is a current Master of Architecture candidate at the University of Michigan's Taubman College in her final year of study. Originally from the Cleveland area, she has long been interested in the urban development of communities throughout the city. Emily also holds a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Virginia.

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