

Angie Calvert

*Gentrification: A Community and Personal Account*

SOC-50 Urban and Community Sociology

University of Indianapolis

10/03/2017

Gentrification is a growing social phenomenon in neighborhoods surrounding central Indianapolis. New urban residents are moving from quiet suburban cul-de-sacs to experience the hustle and bustle of the city life. People are seeking neighborhoods close in proximity to their Downtown jobs, while enjoying the amenities of neighborhood bars, restaurants, and boutiques. City representatives, real estate investors, and entrepreneurs are raving about the “progress” taking place in Indianapolis. However, underneath all the new brightly painted condos sprouting up in every once empty urban lot, there is a rumbling. The voices of the residents who are not benefiting from changes taking place are echoing from front porches, social media, and newspaper articles all over the city. They cry out for fairer property taxes, help keeping their homes, and lower rents. These voices are largely unheard, as displacement spreads low-income residents farther and farther from the coveted donut neighborhoods, public transportation, and convenience of Downtown living.

Gentrification has descended on the Southeast Indianapolis neighborhood of Fountain Square and is quickly destroying a rich culture that once existed. It is squeezing out the poor residents who have lived there for four generations and replacing them with freshly planted middle-class and wealthy residents. There are accounts of culture clashes, predatory investors bullying elderly residents, and impossible rental rates. The once well-rooted social ties that existed are being scattered in the wind, as more and more families are leaving in search of affordable homes.

Fountain Square is not just any urban neighborhood to me. It has been home to my family for over sixty years. In every turn of its winding streets and bumpy alleys, it holds memories that capture our identity. The cracked sidewalks experienced first steps of my father, me, and my children. The narrow streets felt scraped knees from each of my siblings and

cousins as we awkwardly learned to ride bikes. Later, those streets witnessed our white knuckles while gripping steering wheels of our first cars. Churches throughout the neighborhood celebrated many family weddings and funeral homes have mourned for our dead. Backyards marked the years gone by with chaotic birthday parties. Living room walls within homes of Fountain Square rejoiced each new generation's arrival and looked on as we grew.

In the 1950's my paternal grandparents followed the trend of other Appalachians in a mass migration to Fountain Square Indianapolis. In the 1960's my widowed maternal grandmother relocated as well. Like many other Appalachians, my grandparents came from farming communities deep in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee and Kentucky. They came in search of labor jobs and affordable homes. Along with their few belongings, they carried with them a unique language, culture, and history. As white flight was rushing other white residents further from the city, the Appalachian families populated the old vacant houses and created a version of the small mountain villages from which they came. They formed tight networks among other newly planted family and friends from the South.

The Fountain Square my parents grew up in and I remember as well was not a dangerous place to live, as most outsiders believed. Loud boisterous stories spoken in deep southern accents could be heard from front porches and yards all around Fountain Square. People knew or knew of people on every block. Whole blocks were owned by singular families. When walking down the streets, it was not unusual to be called up to a porch to join the conversation. True to the Appalachian independent culture, kids took pride in their freedom and roamed as they pleased while their parents worked.

During the 1950's and well into the 1990's, Fountain Square earned an unfavorable reputation throughout the city. Others did not understand the noisy culture of the

neighborhoods' residents. The Appalachian cultural characteristics earned the Southeast the labels of "hillbilly" or "white trash" part of town. Outsiders saw the people as wild and stayed away. If you were not from Fountain Square, there was no reason to venture into the area. If you were from Fountain Square, you were proud of your neighborhood and challenged anyone with ill words towards the place you called home.

Appalachians came from isolated areas where resources were little and outsiders were treated with suspicion. They carried that sense of hyper-independence with them. The neighborhood created its own version of right and wrong. Police or governmental presence were not welcome or thought needed. Petty crimes were an acceptable way to make ends meet. Men and women alike settled their differences on their own and often on the sidewalks for everyone to witness. With honkytonks on nearly every corner, country music and drinking were prevalent in the area. Fountain Square residents enjoyed a freedom in expression marked by industrious, creative personalities and value on tight social ties. They did their own home repairs with any material available, no matter how it looked if it got the job done. In preparation for the popular informal gatherings, porches were crowded with any type of furniture used for sitting, whether it was made for indoor or outdoor use. All things and beings were collected and cared for. Yards were filled with collected knickknacks, stray animals, and young children.

The commercial corridor of Fountain Square into the 1990's had shops poor people could shop inside. What outsiders considered the "decline" of Fountain Square proper, residents saw as necessary stores that meet their needs. Antique and thrift stores occupied the old brick buildings. Clothing and random furniture pieces were splayed out on the sidewalk, hoping to entice a buyer. Restaurants and dollar stores sold cheap food. Taverns sold cheap beer. The locally owned supermarket had higher prices than a chain grocery, but was popular for its

proximity and meat selection. Children used the public library as their main staple of entertainment. Summertime as a child in Fountain Square was spent at the local public pool, library, broken down pocket parks, and wandering through the thrift stores. One could easily ride their bike from one end of the neighborhood to the other throughout the long hot days.

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, the first wave of middle-class gentrifiers settled in Fountain Square. They came seeking affordable historic homes in an urban setting. They participated in community events and either embraced the unique culture or at least did not try to change it. Many of my good friends come from the first wave. They are passionate, quirky individuals who thrive in unconventional surroundings. They came to Fountain Square for a place to belong. The longer they stayed and shared their own eccentric personalities, the more the Appalachians and their descendants accepted them and folded them into the neighborhood fabric.

I started working for the local Southeast community development corporation in 2009. By then, community organizing in the area had resulted in several strong neighborhood associations and groups made up of both new and old residents of Fountain Square. Through their efforts, came a quality of life plan for all Southeast neighborhoods detailing residents' needs. As a participant in some of the planning, I do not think residents were aware of the process of gentrification. We only wanted control over the destiny of our neighborhood. There was a heightened awareness of how neglected the Southeast side had been over the years compared to other wealthier neighborhoods in the city. The old suspicion of governmental representation was turned into a rage from being forgotten. Residents began to demand infrastructure repair and park equipment repair, as well as more attention to our failing public education system.

The second wave of gentrification in Fountain Square began around 2005-2010. During President Obama's leadership, federal dollars were funneled into urban neighborhoods across the country in an effort of stabilization. Community development corporations, like the one I was working at, received these dollars to use on rehabbing old homes in impoverished areas to sell to working-class families. The trick with the federal funding was organizations using the funds had a quick turnaround time to acquire properties. Our CDC bought up as many properties as they could and sold them for the highest cost they could to young professionals who were attracted to the neighborhood. Federal and state funding, as well as grant money, was being concentrated in urban areas to build up the commercial corridors, too. Ethnic restaurants and little boutiques replaced the diners and antique stores in Fountain Square one by one. The Cultural Trail plowed through Fountain Square in 2012. It created spacious and beautiful walking areas, a plaza on the square, and cemented the area as an "up and coming" area in Indianapolis.

The rise of community organizing and the funneling of funds towards Fountain Square both contributed to the third wave of gentrification being experienced now. As more people are attracted to the ethnic restaurants and boutiques, community events and homeownership also intrigue them. They are relocating to the neighborhood at a fast pace. Hip bars have replaced the old honkytonks and taverns to cater to the new residents' social needs and expendable cashflow. Young professionals, looking for closer proximity to Downtown offices and nightlife, find the neighborhood convenient and fun. Our street landscapes are rapidly changing character to attract a higher income population. Investors are buying up properties to quickly flip and sell homes for more than four times the cost a home sold just five years before. Now stand modern homes with slanted angles painted in fluorescent colors where old German built homes huddled together in dull hues.

Old Fountain Square residents and even the first wave of gentrifiers no longer feel at home in the neighborhood. Predatory investors approach old residents to buy their homes they have lived in for generations. When the seniors do not want to sell, they report the property to code enforcement for violations. The high fees force seniors on fixed incomes to sell. The homemade repairs, once proudly used on homes in the neighborhood, are no longer acceptable to new resourced residents. Fountain Square has become a place where poor people can no longer afford to live or repair their homes (or not) as they see fit. Their love of freedom, brought from the mountains, is being constricted. Loud front porch and street conversations are frowned upon, as the new residents scurry into their homes and do not come out. New neighbors report cars parked in yards and indoor furniture remaining outside too long. Children are not met with friendly faces but scowling looks as they roam the neighborhood. Social networks are shattered as families are uprooted as more and more residents disappear in search of affordable living spaces.

As time moves on, I feel more and more like an outsider in Fountain Square. New developments pop up like poisonous weeds, shocking me as I round familiar corners. The house next door to mine got a makeover, making my home appear worn and drab in comparison. Trim couples jog down the sidewalks with their designer dogs, as I chase after my rowdy children. A neighborhood that used to feel like it operated to the beat of my heart, now has an unfamiliar rhythm. The rhythm is new and foreign. It scoffs at the twang of guitars and fast fiddle tunes of my ancestors. I stumble along, tone deaf to the new more subdued sounds. To me, it is the song of a funeral procession of a forgotten era, sense of belonging, and a neighborhood that is no more.

Notes