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– HOW NON-RESIDENTS DERAIL DEFENSIVE DEVELOPMENT: The Magnet School and Failed Wawa Gas Station in Coral Gables, Florida

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Throughout the United States, the growth-focused policies of local governments have caused disruption and displacement in previously neglected and marginalized minority-dominated areas. Some communities have responded to these threats by embracing defensive development, proactively engaging in the economic regeneration of their neighborhoods to resist outsider-led gentrification. A largely unexplored question in this literature is how can non-resident stakeholders derail defensive development? Using data gathered through a qualitative case study of a historically Black and Bahamian neighborhood's plan to secure a revenue-generating Wawa gas station, I found that the conversion of a community school to a magnet program posed challenges to defensive development. My findings reveal that because non-residents developed a sense of attachment to the school, they felt entitled to influence decisions about the area surrounding it. As school choice becomes increasingly popular, I argue that community-based organizers, policy makers and researchers need to consider how parents could potentially disrupt the neighborhoods in which their children attend school, not only in stymieing defensive development but also affecting other local land use decisions.

Introduction

Since the 1990s American cities have been undergoing a revival that has been linked to changes in global governance and economic structures that took root in the 1970s (Sassen, 2016). As a result, inner-city neighborhoods that experienced decades of neglect are now in the cross hairs of developers and government officials who wish to capitalize on their potential for revenue generation (Slater, 2017). This has led to reverse blockbusting in minority-dominated neighborhoods (Hightower and Fraser, 2020), the eviction of renters (Newman and Wyly, 2006; Huq and Harwood, 2019) and the stigmatization of entire communities to justify the forced displacement of residents (Crump, 2002; Gustafson, 2013).

Those at risk of losing their homes and businesses to such land grabs have been fighting back. Some have done so through overt political acts of confrontation rooted in Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city (Annunziata and Rivas-Alonso, 2018; Elliot-Cooper *et al*., 2020). In other cases, rather than resisting change, communities working through local organizations have embraced the possibility of bringing new life into their cherished neighborhoods, embarking on what Keil (2009) has referred to as 'rolling-with-it neoliberalism'. One such strategy of community-led revitalization, aimed at preventing gentrification-induced racial turnover, is what Boyd (2008a) has termed 'defensive development'.

Such minority-led development, while rooted in ideals of racial uplift (Boyd, 2005), nonetheless represents place disruption and thus controversy. Studies have noted that there are often interracial tensions between residents and entities such as banks, developers and city officials who are regarded as barriers to community-led renewal (Boyd, 2008b; Moore, 2009; Anderson and Sternberg, 2012; Somashekar, 2020). There can also be intra-racial class-based conflict amongst members of the same minority

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group (Boyd, 2005; 2008a; 2008b; Hyra, 2006; 2012). The latter can be the consequence of new development being beneficial to the propertied middle class at the expense of the renter or working class. Furthermore, those seeking to foster new development in a neighborhood may be constrained by historically embedded spatial disadvantages (Lake, 1996; Rothstein 2015) and resistance to change grounded in previous experiences of racialized economic marginalization (Pattillo, 2010).

In this article I seek to address the question: how can defensive development be disrupted by non-residents? I find that defensive development can become derailed by individuals who, despite having transient ties to a neighborhood, declare a strong sense of place attachment to it. Prior studies have highlighted that such individuals may use civic engagement (Stiman, 2019) or public protest (Greene, 2014) as a means of guarding against unwanted change. The findings from this case study reveal that causing delays can be a powerful tool for disrupting development. The ability to engage in such action is the consequence not only of the relative power and privilege of the actors involved, but also the legacy of racial spatialization that continues to limit the ability of communities of color to exert control over the use of space in their neighborhoods. How non-resident neighborhood stakeholders can exert influence over plans for neighborhood revitalization is illustrated through a case study of an attempt at defensive development in Coral Gables, Florida.

Using data gathered through digital ethnography (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017), firsthand interviews, and archival research, this article finds that an act of defensive development, supported by a Homeowner's Association (HOA) in a historically Black and Bahamian neighborhood, was derailed by the parents of children attending a nearby magnet school. Although the parents generally did not live in the vicinity, they claimed that their use of the school made them neighborhood stakeholders who should be included in local land use decisions. When the city and the HOA pushed back against these claims, emphasizing that the parents' transient presence in the neighborhood delegitimized their protest, the parents responded by filing a lawsuit that halted construction of a HOA-supported and city-approved Wawa convenience store and gas station.

This article contributes to the literature on defensive development (Boyd, 2008a; Moore, 2009; Anderson and Sternberg, 2012) by highlighting a previously unconsidered challenge to implementing neighborhood change: contending with individuals who seek to exert influence in an area despite their limited residential, economic or cultural ties to it. At a time when school choice is becoming increasingly popular (Riel *et al*., 2018), I argue that community-based organizers, policy makers and researchers need to consider how parents could potentially disrupt the neighborhoods in which their children attend school not only by stymieing defensive development but also affecting other local land use decisions.

Opportunities and challenges of defensive development

In the United States in the 1970s, federal dollars were taken away from local governments leading to city administrations scrambling to meet the resulting budget shortfalls. This was a part of a broader process of neoliberal economic restructuring that resulted in the rolling back of government-supported social services (Peck and Tickell, 2002). While this led to the emergence of urban social movements organized around issues such as housing, unemployment and poverty, Margit Mayer (2009) explains that, by the 1980s, cooperation became more common than opposition. She describes this transformation as follows, 'Local governments discovered the potential of community-based organizations for helping them solve their fiscal as well as legitimation problems, and the movements shifted their strategies "from protest to program" in order to put their alternative practice onto a more stable footing' (*ibid*.: 364). While some organizations focused on being resource brokers, meeting specific social needs like

childcare (Small, 2006), others took on larger roles aimed at shaping neighborhood development (Hyra, 2006; Boyd, 2008a; Moore, 2009; Anderson and Sternberg, 2012; Levine, 2016).

In her study of a historically Black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, Michelle Boyd (2008a) found that community organizers tried reversing the area's economic fortunes through community-led development. This was geared towards encouraging the Black middle class to move back into and invest in the neighborhood. It involved exalting the area's past as a site of Black unity and accomplishment, organizing events to create new opportunities to engage with the place, and fighting to save buildings of historic significance. She refers to this insider strategy of mitigating gentrification led by outsiders such as government officials, developers and White newcomers as 'defensive development'.

Making an area a tourist destination and desirable for middle-class consumption does not, however, guarantee a change in economic fortunes or prevent the displacement of existing residents. Studies have shown that neighborhoods being gentrified by Black rather than White residents have a harder time attracting retail investment (Moore, 2009; Somashekhar, 2020). Furthermore, Boyd (2005) notes that Black community development organizations must function within a political environment based on the myth that all Blacks share a common interest. As a result, 'that requires African American elites to articulate how their agenda advances the interests of all Blacks' (*ibid*.: 269). This can result in development strategies being justified as 'uplifting the race' despite leading to unequitable class-differentiated outcomes, such as property owners benefiting from selling their increasingly valuable assets while rising rent gaps in the same neighborhoods put the poor at increasing risk of being priced out (Hyra, 2006; 2012; Boyd, 2008a; 2008b). Despite these challenges, local governments' focus on attracting capital investments and generating tax revenue makes defensive development, with its orientation towards 'rolling with neoliberalism' (Keil, 2009), a potentially viable strategy for slowing down displacement and loss of community revenue to outside interests.

It should, however, be noted that geographically embedded racialized inequalities can limit the agency of those seeking to economically revitalize a locality. This may, for example, lead to some areas being torn down and remade for middle-class consumption (Crump, 2002; Gustafson, 2013) while the undesirable zoning status of others may be preserved to justify the siting of controversial businesses like liquor stores or strip clubs (Rothstein, 2015). Another related constraint is the type of opportunities available for economic development. Consider the following hypothetical scenario presented by Robert W. Lake (1996): an impoverished community is forced to decide between economic extinction and allowing the construction of a waste dump that generates jobs and revenue. In such a case, choice is in essence constrained by uneven power relations which have deep, historically embedded roots.

Another factor that can complicate neighborhood change is attitudinal differences towards certain types of new development shaped by the prior experiences of residents. For example, in her study of Chicago's North Kenwood-Oakland neighborhood Mary Pattillo (2010) noted that the press implied that Black-middle-class resistance to the construction of new public housing was a form of NIMBYism. However, she found that, for some, this resistance emerged from having lived in communities that were forced to contend with the negative effects of the state-led concentration of poverty in Black-majority areas. Extending this logic, if we return to the example presented by Lake (1996), some may see a waste dump as a revenue generator while others may just as legitimately view it as a hostile act of remarginalization. Thus, while community-led development may offer an opportunity for the economic self-determination of a neighborhood, it is important to keep in mind the structural limits and complicated social milieux within which this may occur.

Non-resident stakeholders and place attachment

Place disruption caused by gentrifiers moving into neighborhoods has been well documented. It can lead to long-term residents becoming alienated from their surroundings that change to accommodate the tastes and preferences of newcomers (Valli, 2015; Elliot-Cooper *et al*., 2020; Tuttle, 2022). Studies have captured how dogs being walked (Drew, 2012), changes in the permitted usages of public parks (Checker, 2011), and schools being taken over by the priorities of neighborhood newcomers (Freidus, 2019) can disrupt extant residents' sense of place. This process often unfolds gradually, leading some scholars to liken gentrification to a form of slow violence (Cahill and Pain, 2019; Pain, 2019). Popularized by Rob Nixon (2011) this term highlights that the effects of manmade environmental disasters can linger and impact communities far beyond the time of initial crisis. The uneven temporality of gentrification poses challenges to mounting and sustaining an effective response (Lees and Robinson, 2021).

Urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s laid the foundation for the subsequent gentrification of many affected neighborhoods (see Pattillo, 2010). This was also a time when schools for Black children were reorganized, in response to the mandate of integration. This had the immediate consequence of the loss of an important form of social infrastructure (Dempsey and Noblit, 1993; Brown, 2016). Less is known about the longer-term consequences of this change, specifically the impact of a community school being converted into a magnet program (Posey-Maddox *et al*., 2014; Jordan and Gallager, 2015). Studies that examine how changes to amenities can foster gentrification provide clues regarding what may happen. The conversion of an ethnic supermarket to an upscale retail chain (Anguelovski, 2015) or the creation of a new public park (Harris *et al*., 2020) have been noted to attract new, higher-income residents who not only heighten fears of displacement through rent increases but also alter the social mix of neighborhoods. In both these scenarios place disruption is caused by residential gentrification. What happens when an amenity attracts patrons who are not gentrifiers but individuals with non-existent or weak residential ties to a neighborhood, who develop a strong sense of place attachment to it?

As the term indicates, place attachment refers to the affective connections that people have with places involving, 'an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions' (Low and Altman, 1992: 5). Such connections arise from factors ranging from how long a person has lived in a place, their social ties in an area or even through their use of place specific amenities (Manzo, 2003). For example, Renee Zahnow (2024: 10) found that places like gyms, community centers, sports clubs and places of worship can engender a sense of place attachment because they offer, 'a temporary place-based identity that binds people who come together with a similar purpose or objective'. Place attachment can lead to mobilizations against unwanted change.

In his study of two gay neighborhoods, Theodore Greene (2014: 99) found that non-residents positioned themselves as community stakeholders because of a shared sense of identity stemming from their participation, 'in the cultural, social, and political life of a local area'. This resulted in people asserting what was and was not permissible in said neighborhoods based on being members of the community that shaped the area's social fabric. For example, heterosexual neighborhood residents were chastised when they tried to stop two gay men publicly displaying affection at a drag queen race who refused and retorted, 'After all, this *is* a gay neighborhood' (*ibid*.: 108).

In her study of second homeowners, Meaghan Stiman (2019) found that individuals she labelled as 'city speculators' bought second homes both for their use value and exchange value. To protect the latter, some of her interviewees were actively involved in neighborhood associations, fighting zoning laws and combating developments they regarded as financially harmful. Thus, despite the transient status of these homeowners, they were still able to significantly impact the neighborhoods

they invested in. In some cases, non-residents or transient residents may be motivated to exert influence over a neighborhood due to both financial investments and deep cultural connections. One such example is highlighted by Marcos Feldman and Violaine Jolivet (2014) who noted that property-owning Cuban American elites exercised social control in a neighborhood then dominated by non-Cuban Hispanics as a means of influencing economic development and maintaining their political power. Collectively these studies indicate that non-residents motivated by a strong sense of place attachment to a neighborhood, could derail initiatives they deemed undesirable, such as defensive development, that were spearheaded by residents.

It should be noted that attachment alone may not be enough to cause or disrupt change. This may also require the availability of economic, political and cultural capital to influence decision making. Consider the case of a historically Black church in Washington DC's Shaw neighborhood (Hyra, 2015). Its patrons were predominantly former area residents who came to the church on the weekend. When they sought to increase the church's imprint on the neighborhood by using a schoolyard for parking space, they were challenged by residents who viewed the church's activities as disruptive. The residents, whom Hyra identified as gentrifiers, used their connection to local politicians to prevail, and caused the Church, which was founded during the Civil War, to move out of the neighborhood.

Methods

In following the best practices of case-study research (Yin, 2018), the findings of this article emerged from the use of multiple data sources. I reviewed 79 posts on a Facebook page created by the protest leaders called Gables Accountability Project (GAP) and press coverage related to the conflict.[1] I also watched and transcribed the recorded proceedings of two city commission meetings. In doing so, I acted as a digital ethnographer who, 'takes on the role of processing the collection of texts and graphics made available on digital mediums and engages in making sense of the meanings portrayed through texts or graphics' (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017: 2). I also conducted interviews with five parent protestors and a sixth with a prominent West Grove community activist who opposed this development.[2]

Following Robert Emerson and coauthors (1995), I open-coded the transcripts from the interviews and commission meetings, as well as the content of the Facebook page. Through this process I was able to detect several recurring themes that I then narrowed down through focused coding. For example, I noticed that, while parents were complaining about what they did not like about the gas station, they were simultaneously describing what they loved about the school. This helped me draw a conclusion about why parents decided to stake their claim to a place which at first glance they appeared to have little invested in.

Initially unable to secure interviews with the HOA members, I sought secondary data sources to understand how a gas station became a desired development. I reviewed over 100 Miami Herald news articles about the HOA's activities dating back to the 1970s as well as government documents, specifically a 2009 memorandum sent to the Miami-Dade County Commission, minutes of a 2019 County Commission meeting and a legal opinion issued by the City Attorney of Coral Gables in 2020 (Miami-Dade County, 2009; 2019; City of Coral Gables, 2020c). About a month after completing this review, two members of the HOA agreed to a joint interview. They confirmed many of the conclusions I had drawn from the secondary data and provided new insights into their decision to support the construction of a gas station.

1 There were 37 instances of media coverage between October 2020 and August 2022.
2 'West Grove' is the name used by the City of Miami to refer to the Black and Bahamian community of Coconut Grove which abuts the Black and Bahamian community of Coral Gables.

This case was initially presented to me as being an act of community resistance to outsider driven place disruption. However, after my first round of data collection, I realized that the individuals leading the protest did not live in the neighborhood and the second round of data collection revealed that, in fact, a group of individuals living near the development site were championing it. This surprising discovery set me on the path of engaging in an abductive inquiry (Reichertz, 2010). This begins with the formulation of possible hypotheses to explain unexpected observations, followed by the derivation of predictions from hypotheses which are then tested through a search for facts. Based on my observations I hypothesized that varying instrumental motivations underlay the engagement of the actors involved in this conflict. This led me to explore the literature on defensive development, place attachment and transient neighborhood stakeholders. My data was subsequently analyzed using these concepts.

Background: the school and the vacant lot

The lot on which the Wawa gas station was supposed to be built is located at the intersection of Grand Avenue and US 1. It lies at the eastern edge of the city of Coral Gables, bordering the community of Coconut Grove. Coconut Grove is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Miami, predating the official establishment of the city of Miami itself. It was home to Bahamian immigrants who came to South Florida starting in the late 1800s, some of whom were later employed by developer George Merrick to build the city of Coral Gables (Dunn, 1997). In subsequent decades, they were joined by Black migrants primarily from Georgia and the Carolinas. During the era of legal segregation, a strict color line was maintained between the Black neighborhoods and the surrounding White neighborhoods of Coconut Grove and Coral Gables. The Black residents of these areas, who all suffered the same indignities of the Jim Crow era, saw themselves as members of one community, a feeling that was reinforced by their children attending the George Washington Carver School.

G.W. Carver was a place where teachers nurtured the talents and academic abilities of their pupils (Miami Law, 2017). Many graduates went on to pursue esteemed careers as teachers, doctors, lawyers and nurses, with some returning to teach at their beloved alma mater (Turner, 2017). The end of school segregation is regarded as a bittersweet moment that gave Black children access to opportunities they were previously denied, but which also contributed to a breakdown in community ties (Cooper and Martin, 2022). The last senior high school class graduated in 1966 with subsequent cohorts being bused or forced to walk to newly integrated high schools outside the comfort of their neighborhood. After several years of contending with falling enrollment, G.W. Carver, now just elementary and middle schools, became magnet schools in 1987. Despite this change, it remained a source of community pride and identity, with the HOA petitioning the City of Coral Gables in 1991 to grant the school historic designation status. Until 2017 it was used by the HOA for their meetings, and even now it remains the site of yearly gatherings of the G.W. Carver High School Alumni Association.

For many years after the change to magnet status, the school's low rankings and location in a predominantly Black neighborhood led to parents living outside the neighborhood being resistant to sending their children there (Veiga and Madan, 2015). However, the arrival of a new principal in the mid-2010s turned the school's fortune around, making it a sought-after destination for families across the county. What began as a school for Miami-Dade county's Black children now has a predominantly White and Hispanic student body.[3]

3 According to the National Center for Education Statistics in the 2022–23 school year, about 63 of the 566 students at G.W. Carver Elementary identified as Black, 478 identified as White or Hispanic and the rest either Asian or belonging to two or more races. Out of 971 students in G.W. Carver Middle School 34 identified as Black with 889 identifying as either White or Hispanic [WWW document]. URL: https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?ID=120039000389 (accessed 17 May 2024).

While the racial composition of the school changed, the area around it remained home to many individuals of Black and Bahamian ancestry, some of whom take pride in living in houses they can trace back multiple generations (Turner, 2017). Across from the school, on the corner of Grand Avenue and US 1, is a vacant lot. During segregation it was mixed-use space occupied by residences, a gas station and stores that catered to the area's once bustling Black community. Most of these structures were torn down as a part of a wave of urban renewal in the 1970s and 80s. Once the lot was cleared, Miami-Dade County left it undeveloped for decades. It was during this time that the HOA was established. Its members forced the city to reckon with its history of racist civic neglect[4] while also fighting county-led plans to construct new housing in the form of apartment buildings and town houses.[5] As a result of these efforts, the MacFarlane Homestead and Golden Gate retained their character as middle class, single-family home communities.[6] The HOA's activism led to the City of Coral Gables embracing this once neglected area and investing in the preservation of its history and historic homes.[7] The HOA's success in creating and preserving housing made them well positioned to develop the vacant lot.

In January 2003, the HOA acquired the lot from the County for a $10 per year lease. This was a part of a program where the County leased land to developers and non-profits at almost no cost if the lease holder committed to developing the land into affordable housing and creating jobs in a local community (Robertson, 2020). To realize this vision, the HOA partnered with a development company called Redevco that had experience working on similar projects. What follows is a description of the circumstances that impeded the HOA's development plans for 17 years and led them to eventually settle for a Wawa gas station.

The HOA initially proposed a mixed-housing site plan that was rejected by Coral Gables. I could find no explanation for this decision in the documents I reviewed. The partners responded by approaching the County in 2006 seeking approval for a commercial retail development called 'Bahamian Village'. Negotiations with the county about how many jobs the new development should create and the city's resistance to changing the lot's zoning were among the factors that prevented the HOA from securing business partners and created years of delays. Dissatisfied with the HOA's progress, in 2015 the County threatened to take the land back, leading to HOA and Redevco suing the County in 2015. Coral Gables intervened, adopting a settlement agreement that would essentially fast-track any future development by having the City Attorney sign off on site modifications after just one review by the Board of Architects and without any new public hearings, including in front of the Planning and Zoning Board. The impact of this victory was dulled when in 2016 illegal power lines forced Bahamian Village LLC, to sue Florida Power and Light to have these lines removed. One of the HOA members I interviewed summarized the situation as follows: 'It's death by delay'. In 2017 the HOA was able to celebrate the long-awaited opening of its community center. The opportunity to turn the rest of the land into a commercial enterprise arrived in 2019, in the form of a Wawa gas station and convenience store.

Intra-racial conflict, transient stakeholders and the derailment of defensive development

– Is that what you would like to see at the gateway of your community?

It should be noted that in the nearly two decades it took from acquiring the right to develop the land to securing a contract with Wawa, West Grove became increasingly threatened by gentrification. In addition to the demolition of apartment buildings that provided affordable housing (Lipscomb, 2018), this took the form of reverse blockbusting

4 McGarrahan, E. (1988). Crack house burns down. *The Miami Herald*. 13 March.
5 McGarrahan, E. (1988). Neighborhood of neglect. *The Miami Herald*. 5 May, p. 20.
6 The MacFarlane Homestead and Golden Gate are the two neighborhoods that make up the HOA.
7 Tomb, G. (1995) Black Gables wins historic designation. *The Miami Herald*. 3 February.

(Hightower and Fraser, 2020), with developers buying up properties from longtime residents and redeveloping them into luxury homes that are selling for significantly higher rates (Robertson, 2019; Parrish, 2024). Such changes have led to a sense of alienation in a once familiar place, fraying the strong social ties characteristic of this neighborhood.[8] In addition, the property acquisitions and legal filings led to Bahamian Village LLC acquiring significant debt. It is within this context that the HOA sought out a development that could generate the substantial revenue needed to help existing homeowners maintain their houses and remain in place.

The Wawa did not have the universal support of the HOA membership, with one individual eventually joining the lawsuit filed by GAP. A prominent West Grove community activist, whom I interviewed in December 2022 and who supported the parent's campaign, explained their opposition to the Wawa as follows:

> You have mixed views on that development, because on one hand, you have the MacFarlane community who the land has been given to, and they were in favor of it because for years, they had been trying to get something developed on that land and had not been able to do that. So, I could somewhat sympathize with their thought process was like all these years have gone by, we've not been able to get something and now we finally have a development that is gonna go there. The flip side of it was, is a Wawa representative of what you would like to see at the gateway of your community?

Despite these conflicting views, eager to see the land put to productive use, the HOA leaders moved forward with their plans. When I asked the HOA members I interviewed how the Lola B. Walker Foundation, the nonprofit wing of the HOA, envisioned using the funds generated by the Wawa, I was presented with the following vision:

> You take care of your community. You make sure that an elderly person here, they can't afford to replace their roof. But you can help defray the costs and whatever else. And your plumbing is broken? Yeah, we know you can't afford to do that. But you know, this place. You know, there are parts of the neighborhood, up in the Golden Gate, that still need to be hooked up to the sewer system. You need to pay to have that done. That's what the foundation would have done (interview with members of the HOA, May 2023).

The Wawa went through the City of Coral Gables expedited review process. People living in the immediate vicinity of the plot were informed of this impending development. Forty-eight residents of the MacFarlane Homestead and Golden Gate areas signed a form attesting to the fact that they were adequately informed about the Wawa and supported the project. However, no one communicated directly with the school across the street, the district school board member or the Coral Gables School and Community Relations Committee. The parents of the children of G.W. Carver Elementary variously claimed that they learned about this development from rumors or a city insider who acted as a whistleblower. Once they realized what was happening, they erupted in protest.

– Place attachment and protest by transient stakeholders

During the public comments section of the City of Coral Gables commission meetings on 27 October and 7 December 2020 (City of Coral Gables, 2020a; 2020b),

8 Gibson, T.V.A. and F. Brown. (2022) 'Commons for justice project' interview by M. Brown, N. Guevara and A. Mehta-Kroll, 30 May [WWW document]. URL http://dpanther.fiu.edu/dpanther/items/itemdetail?bibid=FI24022201&vid=00001 (accessed 17 January 2023).

which were held via Zoom, 43 parents of students from G.W. Carver Elementary, G.W. Carver Middle and Sunset Elementary (a feeder into G.W. Carver Middle) zoomed in to voice their concerns about the impending construction of the Wawa. Their tones ranged from plaintive to enraged. The tenor of their protest and the substance of their concerns is well summarized in the following statement made by a protestor during the city commission meeting held on 27 October:

> We beg you to listen to your gut which tells you that putting a gas station directly across from an elementary school, so directly across that the crosswalk leads to six pumps is wrong. Wrong for so many reasons like the increased traffic in an area that cannot already handle the flow of cars. Dangerous emissions only steps away from the kindergarten classrooms that face Grand Avenue. And alcohol and cigarettes accessible to very susceptible teenagers.

By looking up the addresses provided by the parents during these meetings I found that many had their children attending G.W. Carver Elementary by choice. Furthermore, families for whom this was the assigned school did not live in the neighborhoods surrounding the planned Wawa. A close examination of what the parents said revealed that, while they did not have residential ties to the area, their opposition was rooted in a sense of place attachment to the school. This became evident through three overlapping narratives becoming a recurring theme in how the parents talked about G.W. Carver Elementary and Middle School.

First, parents emphasized their long-term relationship with Carver, and by extension the length of their presence in the neighborhood. Many appeared to equate being a Carver parent with being a member of the community, as indicated by the following public comments:

> Carver Elementary is the assigned school for my two children. In total we will have ten years in Carver Elementary and Carver Middle. In total because we will spend the next decade at Carver, I believe we are a part of the community that is directly affected by building a gas station on Grand Avenue, less than 300 feet from the school's front door.

Second, with their use of 'I' and 'we' some parents emphasized how long they had been with the school implying that being school parents imbued them with a sense of place identity. That is, they saw the school as being an important part of not only their children's lives but their own. This was highlighted in statements such as: 'I have two children currently attend Carver Elementary and my oldest son also attended Carver Middle. I have been a part of the community for over 8 years now' and 'I know you all will respond to accordingly and give us the opportunity, again to, to have a say in this given that we are the ones closest to the Wawa gas station and would be affected most greatly'.

Finally, parents shared that they were drawn to Carver for what it had to offer their children: a high-quality education that included an excellent foreign language program in a diverse learning environment. One GAP member I interviewed in March 2022 alluded to this instrumental orientation, referring to Carver Elementary parents when explaining, 'Because again, they could send their kids wherever they want, you know, they could go to Coral Gables Prep, they could go to other schools. So, these are parents, they're not racist. They're embracing the diversity experience'.[9]

9 The reference to racism is related to comments made by a city commissioner. He did not use the word 'racist' but alluded to the fact that the parents' opposition to a community- led development that went against their interests, could be perceived as racist.

On the one hand the parents portrayed themselves as neighborhood stakeholders who were rooted in the school community, on the other hand they attempted to wield their mobility as a tool to get the government to succumb to their demands. The following comments were made during the October 27th City Commission Meeting:

> It's unthinkable that Coral Gables would allow this to happen to my neighborhood school. If this project moves forward parents will not send their children to Carver Elementary any longer and I believe the school would be decimated.[10]

> It's not my neighborhood school but I chose to send them there this year attracted by its rich history and the opportunity to be a part of a community that's on the up and up. Now that I know there's going to be a Wawa built in front of the school I may have to reconsider that decision.

While the parents used their transient status to assert their power, the HOA tried to push back against the parents' assertion that their presence in the neighborhood somehow entitled them to have a say in their plans. They highlighted this in a letter they submitted to the Mayor and Commissioners of Coral Gables:

> We understand that the PTA [Parent Teacher Association] of Carver Elementary School have begun a social media campaign against the above development of which we are 50% owner. We are disappointed that parents who do not live in our neighborhood and only come into it twice a day feel the need to dictate our community needs without understanding the over 40 years of gentrification that has been imposed upon us. The site is specifically designed to create jobs and be a source of funding for our historic preservation, homeownership and education for our youth (Lola B. Walker Homeowners Foundation, City of Coral Gables, 2020a).

Similarly, the Coral Gables City Commission asserted that the Wawa was a legitimate project that had the city's support. The general sentiment is reflected in the following statement made by one of the commissioners:

> As a backdrop to all of this, and I've met with the homeowners of the adjacent property, they spent years, if not decades constantly being told what they can and cannot do with their land, in some cases wrongfully, are not being permitted to do what they can do with their land. And what I see here, frankly, even though it comes from the best intentions or places is, just someone else coming along and telling them what they can and can't do with their land, even though the law is written says they can do this (City Commissioner, *ibid*.).

Dismayed at what they considered to be the City Commission's dismissive attitude and unwilling to accept defeat, the protestors sued to stop construction and launched a PR campaign to discredit the approved siting of the Wawa.

– Non-resident stakeholders disrupting development

The lawsuit filed by GAP alleged that the settlement agreement that the City of Coral Gables negotiated with the county, which allowed the City Attorney to approve new plans for the site without engaging in the public notice process, was a form of contract zoning. This is when 'a local government effectively bargains away

10 The parent making this comment did not live in the immediate vicinity of the school or proposed Wawa.

its discretionary power to grant a development approval in exchange for a benefit or a concession given by a developer outside of a public hearing' (Rothenberg, 2007). Since the lawsuit argued that the City of Coral Gables violated its own charter by making an exception for how it approved the Wawa, it was important for these claims to be made by Coral Gables residents. As previously mentioned, the protesters not only lived outside the immediate vicinity of the school, but many also did not live in Coral Gables. Due to the nature of the lawsuit, only parents who were Coral Gables residents were asked to volunteer to be plaintiffs.

While the parents had to redefine what made them legitimate stakeholders for legal purposes, I received no indication from my interviewees that this led to a loss of support from parents who were not represented in the legal proceedings. In contrast, the protest to stop the Wawa gained momentum as the plot was prepared for construction. A month after the lawsuit was filed, GAP learned that two oak trees would be cut down. This sparked calls to save the trees with rhetoric on GAP's Facebook page painting the Wawa as a form of environmental injustice. Building on the interest created through this new point of conflict, GAP organized forums for candidates in the 2021 City Commission election to give parents and concerned voters a chance to gauge who would support the campaign against the Wawa if elected.

According to GAP's Facebook page, over a hundred parents showed up for the candidate forums and legal proceedings related to the lawsuit, both of which could be attended via Zoom, indicating that there was a sustained engagement in the case. The parents earned plaudits from the Miami-Dade School Superintendent (GAP Facebook Post, 27 April 2021) and the press, their transient status in the neighborhood not appearing to dim the enthusiastic support they received. Their efforts were even recognized by the Miami-Dade County PTA, which awarded the G.W. Carver Elementary PTA a Legislative/Advocacy Award (GAP Facebook Post, 16 May 2021). They received a similar award from the Florida-wide PTA a month later. A parent I interviewed indicated that the effort required to keep people engaged in this fight was possible because of the remote work possibilities available to professionals such as themselves during Covid-19: 'I spent during the pandemic, a huge amount of my own personal time on this, much more. I mean, it became like a full-time job at some point. And this year, after the pandemic kind of eased, and I had to get back into my routine of normal work' (interview with a member of the G.W. Carver PTA, March 2022).

As the parent protestors elevated their status as defenders of the school and neighborhood, they also worked to undermine the legitimacy of the Wawa siting. The PTA member I interviewed also informed me that some members of GAP had prior experience working with the news media and that they used these skills to build connections with journalists and bloggers, providing them with talking points reflecting the parents' perspective. Given this insight, it was then less surprising to note that three pieces published by different outlets in quick succession supported the parents protest and were critical of the Wawa siting decision (Miller, 2020; Robertson, 2020; Westerfield, 2020). Furthermore, as the Wawa protest was unfolding, a blogger who wrote several pieces about this case was also the Chairperson of the Coral Gables School Community Relations Board who stood with the parents (Fernandez 2020; 2021; 2022a; 2022b).

Much of the media coverage portrayed the HOA as hapless victims caught up in the schemes of a greedy developer and a corrupt city administration. One popular blogger implied that the developer bribed the residents to go along with the plan for the Wawa (Ladra, 2020; 2022). Others insinuated that there was corruption in City Hall with statements such as 'Coral Gables has gone to uncharacteristic lengths to make sure something, anything was built on behalf of the aging homeowners granted the property' (Robertson, 2020) and 'The project was approved following backroom deals by the office of the City Attorney, dating back 7 years, to acquiesce the needs of

the developer' (Fernandez, 2021). Such sentiments were echoed by my interviewees, a further indication of the feedback loop between the local press and the protestors. These tactics did not affect the City Commission who remained steadfast in their support of the HOA's desire to see the Wawa built.

However, after a year of legal maneuvering, the judge adjudicating the case refused the city's motion to dismiss, finding that the lawsuit had grounds to move forward. In response to these developments, Wawa ended its agreement with the HOA. At the time of this article's writing in spring of 2024, the land remains a vacant lot.

– The role of race

As mentioned earlier in this article, the parents of the children attending the school were predominantly White and Hispanic while the HOA members advocating for the Wawa were Black. At first glance, these facts indicate that the conflict over the Wawa was a racialized struggle between two groups. However, when one considers that some HOA members and West Grove community leaders supported the parents and that the White and Hispanic City of Coral Gables Commission supported the HOA, the neat, racialized dichotomy between Wawa supporters and protestors falls apart. While race did not play a prominent role in the alignment of the different actors involved in this conflict, it affected how the siting of the Wawa was perceived. Consider the following comments:

> 'We're tired of 20 years of outsiders telling us what's best for our community, as if they know better', she said. 'What's happening is unfair and I think a lot of it has to do with discrimination. The only way I'll give up on that property is if I'm dead' (Judy Davis, a member of the HOA who supported the Wawa siting, see Robertson, 2022b).

> 'The city seems to have tried to placate a community that's being victimized again', he said. 'This only happens in Black neighborhoods. It would never happen across the street from a school in a White neighborhood. One of my clients is a Black homeowner and she's worried that her property value will plunge' (David Winker, attorney representing GAP, see Robertson 2022a).

How does one make sense of these comments knowing that the warring sides in this conflict were defined by interracial alliances? A clue is provided in the second part of Mrs. Davis statement to the Herald:

> 'Nobody cared about a gas station when it was a Black school, and Old Smokey was spitting so much ash and dust on us that we couldn't go outside for P.E. class', Davis said, referring to a notorious trash incinerator that was shut down in 1970, leaving a toxic legacy of contaminated soil. 'That property has been dormant for years and nobody tried to develop it until we did' (Robertson, 2022b).

Rather than seeing the conflict over the Wawa as a standalone event, both Mrs. Davis and Mr. Winker viewed it as a part of the broader history of racial spatialization in the neighborhood. Appearing to lean on the well-established fact that communities of color are disproportionately subjected to the siting of unwanted facilities in their neighborhoods, Mr. Winker made the case that the Wawa is a part of this broader process of environmental racism. Mrs. Davis offers proof of such a history of harm in the neighborhood but argues that contesting the siting decision of a gas station at a time the school is predominantly non-Black represents an assertion of privilege which leads to the remarginalization of her Black neighborhood.

The parents' attachment to the school was rooted in its value as not only an academically exemplary but also an ethnically diverse learning environment. They found common cause with community members who viewed a gas station across from their beloved community school as an affront to the historic role it played in the history of the neighborhood. These individuals hoped any new development would embody a distancing from the indignities imposed during segregation rather than what they viewed as a reminder of the inequities of the past. The anti-Wawa camp was therefore brought together by place attachment to the school stemming either from the contemporary usage of this facility or nostalgic recollections of a time when it served as an incubator of Black student success. Members of the HOA also had strong, affective connections to the school. However, their investment in the vacant plot led them to view the Wawa as an asset. While race thus played a role in affecting how the different actors involved viewed the conflict, the divisions surrounding the Wawa were more closely aligned to the instrumental motivations of the actors involved.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has presented the case of a community-based organization whose attempt to proactively resist the threats posed by gentrification was stymied by a group of non-resident stakeholders who mobilized against them. Being a case study, the conclusions drawn from it are limited in their generalizability. Nonetheless, they have implications for potential future research pertaining to the role of non-resident stakeholders in shaping neighborhood development and the challenges of community-led development being wielded as a tool of resistance to gentrification.

Studies on defensive development have shown that, when neighborhood change increases property values by bringing in higher–income residents and revenue-generating businesses it can benefit middle-class property owners (Boyd, 2008a; 2008b; Hyra, 2012). However, this case indicates that, when a proposed new development must contend with the lingering effects of racial spatialization that has laid the groundwork for community outsiders to gain a foothold in a predominantly Black space, the positive relationship between neoliberalism, property ownership and development gets murky. More specifically, this case implies there are several factors that can contribute to defensive development becoming derailed by non-residents.

In their literature review, Linn Posey-Maddox *et al.* (2014: 453) note that it is unclear if 'urban school change may catalyze or exacerbate the gentrification process'. This article has showed how a magnet school became a source of place disruption by derailing defensive development and thereby potentially leading to the advancement of gentrification. Further research is needed to understand whether this outcome was exceptional or an indicator of a new form of place disruption that will become more prevalent with the growth magnet and charter school programs across the United States.

Second, the idea that time can be wielded as power has been highlighted in studies about neglect imposed by government officials (Lees and Robinson, 2021) and private landlords (Huq and Harwood, 2019; Elliot-Cooper *et al*., 2020). The outcome of the Wawa fight indicates that time can also be leveraged by those without direct control over space. That is, the ability to cause delays and diversions may be a powerful tool to overcome the advantage of property ownership. One way to diminish this threat would be for communities to broaden their conception of those who might consider themselves neighborhood stakeholders and consider what challenges they may pose. Gaming out potential points of conflict or even directly engaging with these individuals could serve as a means of preparing for or pre-empting resistance to change. Relatedly, I argue that community-based organizations and local activists should leverage the news media as a resource, demanding that attention be paid to how historic injustices constrain their agency. This could serve as a potential means of making allies of outsiders by helping

them understand the constraints within which they operate. Perhaps this will increase their chances of rolling with neoliberalism rather than being crushed by it.

Finally, in the case of the Wawa the intraracial conflict that took place was an intraclass conflict with some members of the Black and Bahamian community siding with the parents. However, it is possible that in other instances if it is the working class opposed to new development proposed by their middle-class counterparts, they may find new interethnic allies in their attempts at resisting unwanted change, if they too have community outsiders who have gained a foothold in their neighborhood like the magnet school parents. This may lead to the creation of new, yet to be documented alliances, in the literature on resistance to gentrification.

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