

Spatial Imaginaries and Propertied Realities: Understanding How Property and Highway Planning Are Tangled up in Urban Planning's Whiteness Problem

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Abstract

Scholars have readily illustrated how European settlers' colonial ideas of property influenced the formation of race. Yet, as the role of land and property changed within an American context, so too did the relationship between race and property. With emancipation and urbanization, cities began to confront racial mixing, leading to a movement to racialize not just individual property, but also entire places. This resulting racialization of place became acutely challenging for communities of color in the mid-century with the implementation of the new interstate highway system. While the disastrous impact of the highway system on communities of color has been increasingly researched, scholars have paid far less attention to how race shaped individuals' propertied realities in the face of these federal and local actions. Using Austin, Texas, as a case study, I examine how the planning for the Interregional Highway 35 (IH-35) threatened Anglo, Black, and Mexican East Austin residents' property. Ultimately, I assert that each community's response was shaped by its race-based property realities. I conclude with a

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brief discussion on the broader implications of urban planning's spatialization of the intertwining ideology of White racial advantage and property, and what it means to current efforts of racial repair.

Keywords

White; Whiteness; race; property; zoning; highways; urban history; Austin; Texas

Introduction

Like cities across the country, Austin, Texas, changed rapidly throughout the twentieth century. In 1900, the city had steadily grown and diversified. Newcomers settled across the 640 acres of the small state capital's planned footprint. Increasingly, Anglo, Black, Mexican, Middle Eastern, and Asian families pushed at the city's edges, with less affluent and non-White residents settling around the outer boundaries of downtown (Barnes, 2015; Humphrey, 2023). African-American families settled among four freedmen communities; most Mexican-American families moved into an ethnic enclave just west of West Avenue. While racial communities often overlapped in public spaces, they developed their own religious, community, and educational institutions, including higher education institutions that served both White and Black residents and a city-wide public school system (Humphrey, 2023).

Amidst the population growth and diversification, Austin struggled to keep up with municipal amenities. Leaders readily embraced the new field of city planning as a tool for urban modernization. While in 1905, the city still "had few sanitary sewers, virtually no public parks or playgrounds, and only one paved street" (Humphrey, 2023), 23 years later, the City of Austin commissioned its first comprehensive plan (Koch & Fowler, 1928). Alongside the usual recommendations for municipal modernization addressing zoning, traffic planning, parks and playgrounds, fire protection and sewer expansion, the Dallas-based engineering consultancy Koch and Fowler introduced another facet of the emerging urban planning practice: residential racial sorting. The 1928 Plan strongly encouraged the City Council to address its racial mixing problem by codifying East Austin as a "negro-district." Acknowledging that the issue of racial sorting could not "be solved legally under any zoning law known to [them] at present [as] all attempts of such have been proven unconstitutional," Koch and Fowler (1928: 64) recommended "drawing" the negro population to the area by providing Black-serving facilities such as schools and parks. Yet, while not explicitly recommended in the plan, residents also recall the City using "push" factors, such as refusing to provide city services to residents of color not located in East Austin. Thus, Austin's introduction of formal urban planning is synonymous with the formal introduction of codified race-based spatial patterns, as well as a choice to reshape East Austin as the city's non-White neighborhood.

Though Koch and Fowler did not officially address the city's growing Mexican community in their plan, records indicate these residents were also pushed eastward in larger efforts to remake West Austin in the image of Whiteness (Acosta, 2001; Humphrey, 2023). These Mexican families purchased homes and opened up businesses in the lower portion of East Avenue, later known as the East Cesar Chavez neighborhood (Humphrey, 2023). While Mexican families lived through East Austin, often next to Black and Anglo families, the heart of this community was south of 6th Street to the Colorado River and along both sides of East Avenue.

Unlike the City's approach to control Black residential patterns, Mexican-Americans faced less stringent racial containment. For example, while the City ensured Black-serving schools and parks were centralized over a mile from West Austin's farthest edge, many Mexican-origin students were assigned to Palm School, which sat on the west side of East Avenue (Mitchell & Pettis, 2022). Indeed, many race scholars have studied Hispanics' complex placement as a racial "other" in the American racial hierarchy (see Fox and Guglielmo 2012 for an overview). This murky social status, as this paper will illustrate, can be accompanied by its own set of challenges, which can be easily overlooked when using the common racial binary frame, as Fox and Guglielmo (2012) show.

Despite Koch and Fowler's urgent calls for racial segregation, Austin's approach to racial segregation remained varied on paper, in practice, and in planning. Oral histories with East Austin residents of all races recall childhoods with neighbors and friends of multiple races, including Anglo immigrants of German and Swedish descent, far into the 1940s (Rice Gardner, 2018; Ruiz, 2014; Simond, 1983; Moberg, 1984). It was within this context that the State of Texas and the City of Austin decided to locate Interregional Highway 35 (IH-35)² along East Avenue, thus hardening the city's racial dividing line into a highway. In the process, the Texas Highway Department would acquire 168 properties and 156 acres of land, mostly along the east side of the boulevard, disproportionately impacting the Black and Hispanic communities over their White West Austin counterparts (Kimble, 2024: 23). Exploring the intersection of a State's highway development plans, a City's racial zoning policy, and a neighborhood of racially diverse residents, I examine the enduring legacy of property's entanglement with Whiteness and what this intertwining history means for urban infrastructure planning as a spatial practice.

I begin this paper with a discussion on the historical connection between property, race, and place. Next, I illustrate how East Austin's main boulevard, East Avenue, served as a margin, a juncture, and a racial dividing line. I follow with an examination of each community's response to the highway implementation process. I find that the Anglo, Black, and Mexican

² The proposed Interregional Highway 35 (IH-35) would become Interstate 35 (I-35) after the federal Interstate Highway Act; however, due to the time frame of this paper, I will refer to the highway by its original local name, IH-35, to maintain consistency with the original sources.

communities' responses were shaped by both their spatial imaginaries, but also their uniquely racialized experience of property, which I refer to as their "propertied realities." I conclude with a discussion on the implications of the intertwined nature of race and property, and conclude with a reflection on what this means for recent transportation infrastructure planning efforts interested in racial redress and repair.

Literature Review

Property Shaping Race

Race scholars have largely agreed that property shaped racial formation in the United States (Glenn, 2015; Omi & Winant, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Harris, 1993). The clearest evidence for how race shaped property is through the contradictory ways settlers applied race to non-White inhabitants. Early European settlers, eager for new property, faced the reality that the Americas were not in fact empty *terra nullius*, but rather inhabited by sovereign native nations with whom they would need to negotiate treaties (Harris, 1993; Omi & Winant 2015). Settlers thus racialized indigeneity to be not only incompatible with property, but to eliminate their competing claim to the land through a "subtractive" racial structure (Tuck & Yang, 2012: 12). European settlers first began with ideological racialization; they defined Native Americans as primitive and savage and thus incompatible with property ownership (Harris 1993). Yet, this logic was tenuous, and in conflict with their newfound Enlightenment ideologies espousing the *Universal Rights of Man*. Settler law thus made indigeneity subtractive, developing miscegenation laws that "diluted indigeneity such that mixed people were disqualified for tribal membership and therefore for coverage by treaty rights and entitlement to land allotments" (Glenn, 2015: 60). To settlers, Native Americans served as a racialization in which each "Indigenous generations [is] less authentic, less Indigenous than every prior generation in order to ultimately phase out Indigenous claims to land and usher in settler claims to property" (Tuck & Yang, 2012: 12).

Meanwhile, settlers shaped Blackness in opposite terms. Because slavery was in service of White property—with African-Americans recognized as property, as well as in service to White land—settler laws racialized Blackness to be additive. The "one drop rule" argued that no matter the dilution of African-heritage the status of Black perpetuated (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012). This construction of racialization served as a tool to propagate the enslaved population, allowing Whites to easily expand their labor force and grow their property (Glenn, 2015). Following emancipation, Whites relied on this expansive racial structure to ensure Black Americans broadly remained non-competition for White property through legal measures such as the Black Codes and Jim Crow (Harris, 1993; Mills, 2022).

Though contradictory in their structures, Native and Black identities both had rather straightforward implications for a White Supremacist approach to property. How Mexican residents' identities interplayed with property was more ambiguous, and thus settler law struggled to racialize them consistently (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012; Glenn, 2015). Through the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans in the newly expanded U.S. were granted American citizenship and thus had the right to retain their property. However, these property owners were often light-skinned elites with Spanish ancestry (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012). Because citizenship was already racialized as Whiteness in the U.S., this treaty provision further perpetuated the interpretation of early Mexican-American citizens as quasi-White (Glenn, 2015). Yet, when it came to matters of legal power, Mexicans were rarely counted as White. As more Mexicans came to the U.S. in the early 20th century, often with more indigenous features and serving as agricultural laborers, the American legal system began to further codify their racial status as "colored" and "non-White." In turn, Mexicans increasingly faced racial residential containment akin to Black residents (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012; García, 2018; Glenn, 2015). Ultimately, Whites continued to inconsistently racialize Mexican-Americans in whichever way best served White supremacist ideology (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012; García, 2018).

Race Shaping Urban Place

As non-White communities relocated to cities and built communities, White urban elites developed new tools to racialize not just property, but place (Freund, 2007; Lipsitz, 2011; Williams et al., 2023). Freund (2007) argues that as Whites grew "deeply invested in new ideas about the relationship between race and property" (p. 8), they developed a new racialized metropolitan political economy. Whereas early American settlement brought questions about *who* had the right to land and property, twentieth century America faced questions of *where* people had the right to own their property based on their race. Leaders of urban planning and real estate led the charge for explicit race-based exclusionary neighborhood zones. Quickly deemed unconstitutional, White leadership continued to innovate new racially exclusive tactics masked by economic rationalization (Freund, 2007; Goetz et al., 2020; Lipsitz, 2011; Williams et al., 2023). Darien Williams and his colleagues (2023) poetically call this dual strategy "Whiteness as property and the Whiteness of property" (pp. 506–507, emphasis theirs). The White obsession with property's White purity required fortification against proximate non-Whiteness for the purpose of value retention. This economic emphasis became the root of what Lipsitz (2011) calls the White Spatial Imaginary—an ideology that values *exchange value* (or profitability) over *use value*; selfishness and individualism over collectivism; and exclusion over inclusion. The lasting effects of the White Spatial Imaginary on communities of color and their property is exemplified through the implementation of the federal interstate highway

system, to which I turn next.

Scholars have increasingly documented the racial harms of the interstate highway system against Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and Asian urban and suburban communities through their displacement, destruction and division (see Avila, 2014; Taylor et al., 2023; Ramirez et al., 2024; Connerly, 2002; Kimble, 2024). In cities like New Orleans, Miami, St. Paul, and Los Angeles, highway projects destroyed the hearts of cultural commercial corridors (Avila, 2014, Taylor et al., 2023). In other instances (particularly in the Jim Crow South), local planners used highway infrastructure to harden social and legal racial boundaries into physical divisions, such as in Birmingham, Atlanta, and Austin (Avila, 2014; Connerly, 2002; Kimble, 2024). While local planners also used highway projects to clear “blighted” lower-income European ethnic communities, Avila (2014) points out that these White ethnic groups, unlike their non-White counterparts, were nonetheless able to relocate to newly developed suburbs, often further facilitating White flight.

Avila (2014) contends that highway planners targeting of “Black commercial districts, Mexican Barrios, and Chinatowns and desecrating the land sacred to indigenous peoples” (p. 3) was not so much targeting “people of color but the spaces in which they lived” (p. 52). Put differently, the case of the interstate highway system illustrates the racialization of *place*. Despite the racially disparate outcomes, the federal government’s original proposed routes cut through White and non-White communities at an equal rate (Taylor et al., 2023). Yet, White communities in Los Angeles’ Beverly Hills, New Orleans’ French Quarter, and New York’s Lower Manhattan were able to successfully defend their neighborhoods from destruction (Avila, 2014). The protection of these White places and their residents’ property rights weakened non-White’s right to property. After all, government leaders needed somewhere to locate the highways. Because the U.S. had been largely divided into a racial binary of White and non-White spaces, choosing *where*—while also protecting White property rights—meant that essentially every American urban highway committed racial violence on communities of color “so that [W]hite people could get home faster” (Kimble, 2024: 23).

Race Shaping Property

So far, I have examined how property shaped race and how race has shaped place. Now I turn to how race reinforces property, particularly in the case of the interstate highway program. Scholars have detailed how race shaped the success and failures of collective efforts to defend one’s property (Avila, 2014; Connerly, 2002; Ramirez et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023). These scholars find that White neighborhoods were more able to stop highway implementation, and that few neighborhoods of color succeeded in halting their federal and state government

from carving through their neighborhoods, except in some cases in which non-White residents built coalitions with White residents (Avila, 2014; Connerly, 2002; Ramirez et al. 2024). Nonetheless, these collective efforts to protect property are still at a neighborhood—or place-based—scale. Thus, due to the spatialization of race, it becomes hard to examine how race shapes *property* rather than just *place*. Further, little research has explored community responses to eminent domain beyond protest. Looking specifically at Texas, Kimble (2024) provides an insightful examination of contemporary responses to continued highway expansion that aims to consume Black and Brown land. This article aims to add to Kimble's (2024) recent contribution by offering a historical and theoretical lens to understand how racialized properties shaped community response to early highway implementation.

Methods

Within this historical analysis, I use Molina's (2013) relational approach to examine how racialized property realities influenced the implementation and response to IH-35 for East Austin's Black, Mexican, and Anglo community. To do so, I constructed a timeline of the infrastructure project, triangulating key milestones and dates from Austin's flagship newspaper, *the Austin Statesman*, and then reviewing the parallel archived meeting minutes from the City of Austin's City Council Meeting. To understand racial dynamics of the City Council meeting minutes, I triangulated personal details of relevant names using Ancestry.com's U.S. Census record search function. Additionally, I referenced over 40 oral histories from community elders that were collected between 1984 and 2019. The majority of the transcripts came from the 1984 East Austin Tri-Ethnic Oral History Project—which focused on the experiences of the neighborhood's Black, Hispanic, and White residents—and the Carver Museum's 1986 "Sixth Street: The Image of the Black Entrepreneur" exhibition which focused on the period from the 1890s–1920s. Additional referenced transcripts were recorded for various other local history projects and contained a tag for "East Austin" in the Austin Historical Society archive. I supplemented oral transcripts with articles from Austin's alternative weekly newspaper, *Austin Chronicle*, and other community blogs and resources.

This research's methods are limited in a few ways. Firstly, this research relied on digitized sources, as this work was conducted remotely and as the archives were in the midst of moving offices. The already digitized transcripts tended to favor Black East Austin community leaders, many of whom went on to have illustrative careers. Thus, this sample risks class selection bias among participants, as the voices of lower-income and working-class Black residents are likely underrepresented. Due to the smaller sample of Mexican-American participants, I supplemented oral history transcripts with feature articles from the *Austin*

Chronicle on East Austin’s Mexican history, as well as community-based and legal documents that reflect community sentiment towards the past and desired future of their community.

Before the Highway: East Avenue as a Gathering Space and a Dividing Line

The Koch and Fowler Plan selected East Avenue as the city’s Black-White dividing line. Early photographs show the street as a large and bumpy expanse. However, as a part of a city-wide beautification effort, the City paved the Avenue in 1930. East Austin resident Joe Sanchez remembers the street’s paving with pride, sharing that his father “was part of the construction crew that not only paved the *Calle* [Avenue], but ‘paved nearly every other street in town’” (Acosta, 2001). Indeed, after its paving, the Avenue became a gathering space for Mexican and Black residents alike, though the Avenue served as a more prominent social space for Mexican residents. When Sanchez recalls *la Calle Ancha*—what the Mexican residents sometimes called East Avenue—he remembers people hanging out in the *parketas* along the lower parts of the expansive boulevard. Like many Mexican plazas, the *parketas* became spaces for music, gathering, and informal vending. Folks would sit on their porches, Sanchez said, and watch when “the *negritos* would come down and we’d play baseball” (Acosta, 2001) in the center median spaces. East Avenue became home to many Mexican institutional assets including the East Avenue Baptist Church, Primera Iglesia Bautista, and Palm School, which was the first school to educate many of the Mexican-American students (Barnes, 2015; East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood, 2010). Shaping *la Calle* and its *parketas* into a space of Latino urbanism (Rios, 2010), Mexican-American residents adapted the public street into an open public space, asserting a lively social life into the space of medians, and negotiating a pluralistic understanding of these spaces through informal commerce and culture.



East Avenue looking south from 12th Street after it was paved in 1930 (Ellison Photo Co. 1930).

Black residents also made use of East Avenue's parklets further north, adjacent to the predominantly Black portion of the neighborhood between 11th Street and 12th Street, which they called East Avenue Park. While the park was accessible and lively according to residents, it did not hold the same cultural value and amenities as the community's other (and more centrally located) park. Black elders, in their testimonies of the neighborhood, would only loosely reference the Avenue, if at all. Most memories connected to Huston College, which, before its move in 1952, sat across from East Avenue Park. One archival photograph from 1947 captures the school celebrating their convocation in the park's open area, though no residents recounted this event as a tradition. A handful of residents described the college's bands playing in the park, during which "the families met and had a nice time talking" (Hardeman, 1986; Corcoran, 2023). Another resident described how a man would sell watermelons there. Ada Simond, who moved to the neighborhood in 1915, described the space with the most detail, sharing a story of one weekend out with her siblings:

On Sunday afternoon I'd like to take the children for a walk. I was the oldest of all of the six, and we'd take them for a walk. There was a little place on East Avenue, what is now 35, and right in front of where Safeway is there was a little park. It was the only place where there was grass. There was a curb from 12th Street to 11th Street. There was a curb area, and there was grass, Bermuda grass there, and there was a little bandstand thing there. And there were trees there. But the rest of the street was all rocks, mountains and mountains of limestone. We could go there, and the children could play on the lawn. (Simond, 1983: 18)

Despite the positive memories, however, few Black elders mentioned the park.

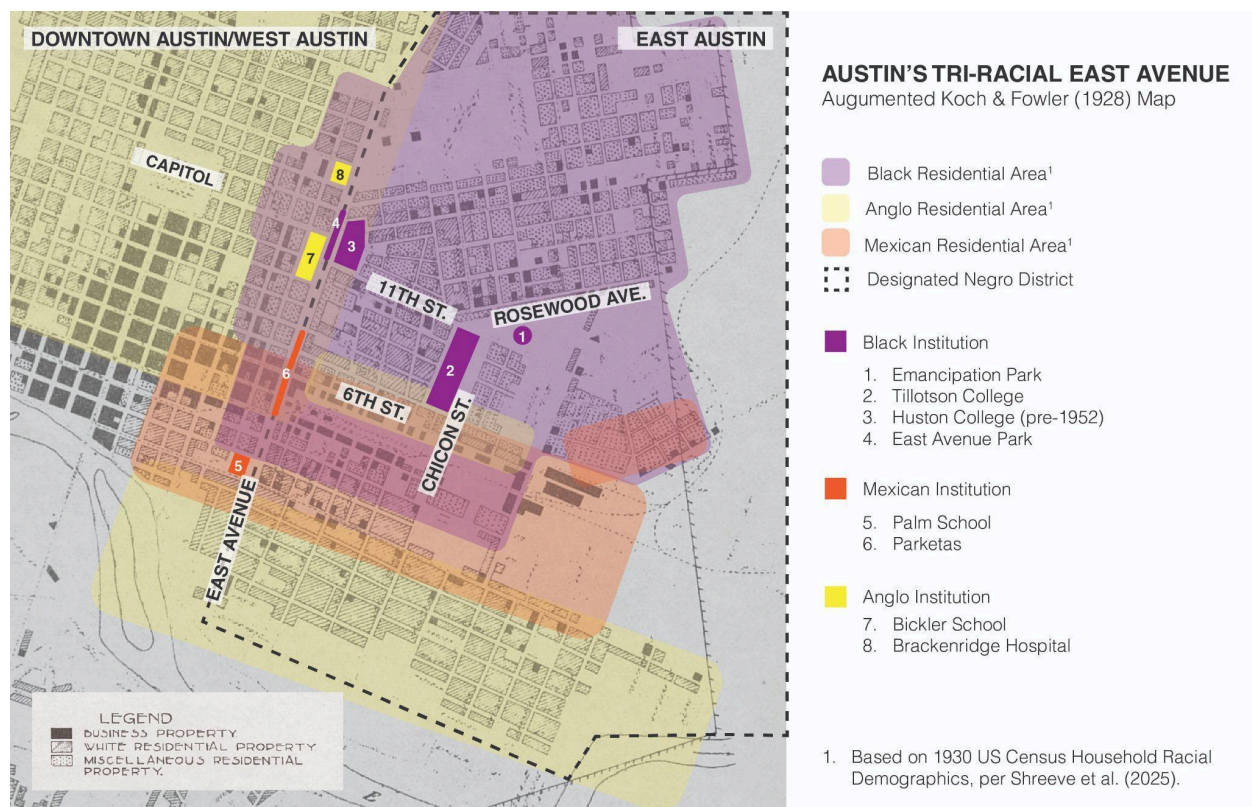
While East Avenue formally served a racial divider for the whole city, it divided Black, Mexican, and Anglo residents differently. The Koch and Fowler's 1928 Plan only specifically referenced *negro* segregation. As a response, Black East Austinites developed a completely self-sustaining community within its bounds. Ora Houston described that East Austin was "a complete community east of the interstate. [...] We had pediatricians, we had doctors, we had everything that we needed east of I[H]-35" (Houston 2021, 3). With East Avenue as the furthest edge of the community, however, community and City efforts concentrated Black cultural and institutional wealth about a mile east of the Avenue on Chicon Street.

One factor that further limited Black East Austin's connection to East Avenue was that the property owners directly along the Avenue were largely White, even into the late 1940s. Though the City had designated East Austin as the *negro* district, and its residents were largely Black and Mexican, the properties directly along East Avenue, particularly further north, were

owned and inhabited by Anglo immigrants. According to Vonny Rice Gardener, German families owned property on both sides of the Avenue around 19th Street, and Swedish families owned the properties around the 16th Street area known as Swedish Hill (Rice Gardner 2018).

Thus, as a formal line and a public space, East Avenue held a rather different role for Mexican, Black, and Anglo Austinites. While the Avenue represented a central space shaped by a spatial imaginary of publicness, sociality, and informality for the city's Mexican-American community, for Black Austinites, the Avenue was not a space of inclusion, nor a space of autonomous community ownership. Rather, it was a tenuous City-enforced periphery buffered by Whiteness. The lack of White references to East Avenue in transcripts and meeting minutes, despite the many White property owners, suggests that for White Austinites, it was merely another avenue. Thus, the threats of East Avenue's transformation into IH 35 beginning in the 1940s had different implications for each community. In the following section, I examine how the spatial imaginaries of each community come together with their propertied realities to shape their varied racialized responses.

Implementing IH-35 and the Racialized Propertied Responses



Partial map of Austin with East Avenue as the center line. Base layer from Koch & Fowler 1928's map on racial zoning. Augmented by the author with qualitative data, historic imagery, and 1930 US Census racial data.

White Response: Zoning Up, Cashing in, and Moving Out

Because the 1928 Plan designated East Austin as the “negro district”, little popular or scholarly attention has been paid to the White residents that owned property along both sides of IH-35. The actions of the White property owners along East Avenue largely support Lipsitz's (2011) White Spatial Imaginary conception, while contrasting the current literature's documentation of ethnic White communities' (often successful) highway protests (Avila, 2014; Taylor et al., 2023). I find evidence that the Anglo East Austin residents had little interest in defending their property. Instead, they developed a tactic of zoning up, cashing in, and moving out of East Austin. I also contend that the highway implementation further facilitated, and arguably financed, racial sorting.

Unlike in other instances of interstate implementation that relied on condemnation (see Avila, 2014; Caro, 1974), Austin leaders publicly declared interest in purchasing the property for fair compensation ahead of the project. After conducting a study of the land necessary, the Mayor appeared before the Council on March 4, 1947. The meeting minutes reported:

The necessity of getting a competent group of three men to appraise the land on East Avenue for the highway, [...] He stated that the City would have to appraise the land, make an offer and negotiate, and failing in negotiation, would have the right of condemnation, but that the City wanted to pay a reasonable and fair price for the property. (City of Austin, 1947b: 1045)

The mayor's comments suggest a recognition of property as a right and a respect for the anticipated exchange value of property. Because the Mayor made this declaration at the City Council meeting, in front of a largely White audience (non-White attendees are indicated as “colored” in meeting minutes), this statement was arguably oriented towards the White property owners that would be impacted. This could have included Mexican-American property owners who were sometimes legally considered White, and were specifically marked as White in the 1940s US Census (Fox & Guglielmo, 2012), yet I did not find evidence of Spanish surnames in the meeting minutes.

Anglo property owners within the highway's right-of-way largely responded to plans for IH-35 as an economic issue. Rather than contest the highway to protect their property, as many other White communities across the country did (see Avila, 2014; and Taylor et al., 2023), the Anglo East Austinites used the political tools available to them to extract exchange value from the planning project. The first documented residential statement to the highway came in January 1946, when J. A. Nelson, a Swedish-born resident, came before the council to inquire if

the City would be buying property for the highway's right-of-way. The City Council had yet to set up a process, and responded inconclusively to Nelson's request. In late March of 1947, three weeks after the Council and Mayor had announced their process, Nelson promptly returned to the Council and "asked that the City give him a definite answer regarding the price the City is going to pay for his property" (City of Austin, 1947a: 1129). This time, the Council stated that they were "working on the matter as rapidly as possible and that within the next few days [...] and that as soon as the survey is completed, the City will make him an offer" (City of Austin, 1947a: 1129). Despite the highway's physical displacement, this early language between leaders and White property owners focused on economic negotiation, with both the Council and the property owner valuing expediency. Further, the owner was interested in his property's exchange value, and the City recognized his right to be compensated fairly.

As the IH-35 plans progressed, Anglo residents along IH-35 focused on extracting additional exchange value from the process. Between 1947 and mid-1948, several property owners appeared before City Council to request commercial zoning status for their East Avenue properties. These requests were largely granted, with no discourse documented in the meeting minutes. By June 1948, however, the *Austin Statesman* reported that this "increasing number of requests for commercial zones" was causing friction, as "many of [the requests were] for prospective development where owners expect to get a higher price for their property" (Zoning Policies, 1948: 6). In response, the City council declared that "city zoning policies will be left undisturbed on such thoroughfares as the Inter-regional Highway [...] on which the City now is engaged in buying right-of-way" (Zoning Policies, 1948: 6). In a change of tune from the early leadership statements, one of the City Councilmen chided these property owners, referring to these rezoning efforts as "speculative zoning," and further suggested that the council should seek a means to "change back" previously up-zoned properties back to the least intensive land-use designation of "A Residential."

Anglo residents argued for their rezoning in practical terms of responding to the infrastructure project, however. According to the lawyer representing property owners, S. T. Wells, the owner:

[p]lead[ed] for the changes on the grounds that all of the property along [IH-35] will be commercial property as soon as the highway is completed, and that same would be undesirable as residential property on account of the heavy traffic that will be on the highway. (City of Austin, 1948: 763)

The transformation of East Avenue into IH-35 would affect the fabric of the neighborhood for all residents, and the owner sought to reap financial benefit ahead of any land acquisition. The

issue of upzoning continued into the following year. In an article from May 1949, reporters write that “the City Council [...] bogged down in a hearing on a proposed zoning amendment providing for commercial establishments on East Avenue from First to the north city limits [...] to set back 25 feet from the property line” (Zone Debate, 1949: 18). In the hearing, a dozen property owners “complained that the 25-foot setback requirement would confiscate their properties and in some instances would [make] properties unusable for commercial development” (Zone Debate, 1949: 18). Indeed, these property owners left no element of property law unturned in their efforts to negotiate value.

Beyond the interest in zoning up and cashing in, affected Anglo residents had varying responses depending on where their property sat in relation to the racial divide. While property owners on both the east and west side of East Avenue sought to increase the exchange value of their property through commercial zoning, only residents on the west side argued against the transformation of their residential place into a commercial area. Despite the loss of land to right-of-way purchasing, I found no record of Anglo protest on the east side of East Avenue in over three years of City Council meeting minutes nor in the newspaper. On the west side however, many residents argued against the neighborhood change in a defense of the “place.” One unnamed property owner protested:

on the grounds that as a newcomer to Austin he bought his home there knowing it to be a residential section, and invested everything he has in this home; that he does not want a tourist court or filling station in his backyard. (City of Austin, 1948: 763)

C. N. Avery Jr., joined in this protest, stating he had collected “some 100 persons who had signed a petition opposing the change” (City of Austin, 1948: 763). Yet, East Austin Anglo property owners had also purchased in a residential area; they, too, had invested in their homes; they also faced rapid requests for new commercial designations. The difference, of course, was that East Austin was not a *White* residential area. While West Austinites were fighting to preserve their increasingly exclusively White residential property, East Austinites were extracting surplus value from properties tied to devalued non-White space. Perhaps their eagerness to sell their properties was in an effort to relocate to a new, exclusive White space.

Acting from the White Spatial Imaginary (Lipsitz, 2011), the Anglo property owners along East Avenue saw an opportunity for individual financial benefit through a collective effort to commercially zoning their previously residential properties. Rather than contest their displacement alongside their Black and Mexican neighbors, the Anglo East Austin residents worked to not only avoid economic loss due to eminent domain, but to reap additional financial benefit from the infrastructure project that allowed them to move towards White space. I assert

that the lack of backlash to the highway plans was because the highway plans were in service of the White Spatial Imaginary and further racial sorting. With the City's concerted efforts to racially sort the city in the two decades prior to the highway, the right-of-way purchasing process facilitated White East Austin homeowners to change status from resident to commercial property owner, increasing the exchange value in the process. Thus, the White response to the highway implementation was not to fight for their residences or community, but seemingly, it was an effort to zone up, cash in, and, most likely, move out.

Black Response: Marginal Use, Marginal Relevance

Despite East Austin's many Black-led institutions, I find that Black East Austinites had few property or institutional stakes on East Avenue directly. Thus, I surmised the lack of interest in oral histories and newspaper articles around the implementation of IH-35 indicates the change initially held little meaning to community members. East Avenue was already a dividing line; transforming the Avenue into an interregional highway held little symbolic value to Black residents. As mentioned, Anglos owned most property directly along East Avenue despite the area's increasingly non-White population. I found no evidence of anti-highway resistance in oral history transcripts, city meeting minutes, nor the newspapers. If oral histories mentioned the highway at all, Black participants often stated it as a neutral fact. As many Black East Austinites chose to move to the area to have access to modern amenities that other freedmen towns were refused, the highway may have represented further modernization, particularly for the middle class Black families. Interestingly, oral history interviewers often seemed more interested in the topic than interviewees, with interviewers sometimes prompting respondents multiple times about the "loss" of East Avenue. This suggests the highway holds more contemporary importance to race issues in Austin than it did historically. Even after prompting, however, respondents rarely offered sentimental attachment. I contend that this tepid response can be explained by a spatial, ideological, and propertied reality.

Ultimately, IH-35 further entrenched the margin of Black Austin, pushing consolidation of community cultural resources around the neighborhood's central node. Prior to 1928, Black institutions dotted the city and East Austin. However, City racial containment efforts forced Black institutions to consolidate in the center of East Austin at Chicon Street and Rosewood Avenue, about a mile to the east of the Avenue. As the margin of East Austin, East Avenue was never the community's cultural home.

Of note, Huston College, an HBCU founded in 1900, did sit on East Avenue at 12th Street. East Avenue Park, the name for the green space in the median of East Avenue, sat across from the college. Yet, both Huston College and East Avenue Park had more prominent

counterparts in the central part of the neighborhood that better embodied the Black Spatial Imaginary (Lipsitz, 2011). The area's original university, Tillotson College was founded twenty years earlier than Huston College; Emancipation Park was not only the neighborhood's venue for the annual Juneteenth celebration, it was autonomously owned. Emancipated slaves had collectively purchased private land to found the park in 1906 (Austin Parks and Recreation, n.d.).



Above: view of East Avenue Park from Huston College before it moved in 1952 (Ragolia 2016). Below: Emancipation Park, founded on land bought in 1906, sits at the heart of Central East Austin. (Emancipation Park 1909)

When Huston College merged with Tillotson College in 1952, the former institution joined the latter's campus on Chicon Street, further concentrating resources eastward. Though this relocation could have been due to highway plans, I found no specific evidence that the

interstate plans *caused* Huston to merge, nor did leaders articulate that the highway plans caused the move to the other campus. Leaders described the merger as a means of consolidating resources to the two institutions that often struggled with adequate funding (HT History, n.d.). With the discussion of right-of-way purchasing along the boulevard having begun in late 1946, the college's leadership may have very well taken the infrastructure plans into consideration when determining the move, finalized in 1952. Nonetheless, Tillotson had a larger campus, was the more senior institution, and sat near Emancipation Park, making the location selection logical regardless of the highway plans. Ultimately, the strict racial containment of Black residents into East Austin, followed by the continued consolidation of community assets around its central node meant East Avenue no longer housed any key Black institutions. With little use value, IH-35 merely hardened the space's role as a margin.

Mexican Response: Pushing Back On a New Dividing Line, Fighting for Community Space

Unlike Anglo residents that sought exchange value, and Black residents who lost little use value due to strict racial containment, the Mexican community along East Avenue was deprived of both financial and social remedy through the implementation of IH-35. While previously the beautiful East Avenue and its *parketas* had served as a point of pride and a space for gathering, the highway was a symbolic and physical division. Not officially racially contained to East Austin, the Mexican community and its institutions had settled to span both sides of East Avenue. Thus, the highway designed to reinforce the formal Black-White boundary severed Mexican residents from their own community institutions: Mexican East Austin students had to cross a highway to reach Palm School, as did churchgoers who attended East Avenue Baptist Church. Further, as Joe Sanchez described, the Mexican homeowners along East Austin had "sunk their roots in deep, buying property there on the *calle* [avenue]" (Acosta, 2001). At the time of the IH 35 implementation, "there were still some Hispanics that lived down on First Street, but they [the City] got them moved out" (Rice Gardner, 2018: 55). Indeed, Joe Sanchez's family had moved to a home on East Avenue in the mid-1920s where they remained until 1946, when they moved around the corner to East 6th Street, timing which aligned with the City's purchasing of right-of-way (Acosta, 2001). Bernardino Verastique, another East Austinite, described the highway ramifications more explicitly:

Mom was a beautician back then. She bought three little houses on Eighth Street and when the highway was being built, people came to our house... and offered mother fantastic amounts of money. She wasn't interested in selling, and then the city condemned her houses, to get the right of way, and the city gave her what they wanted to pay. Grandmother stayed in the last house near the French Legation, but it was eventually condemned, taken by eminent domain. (qtd. in Acosta, 2001)

While the Anglo families up the street jumped at the opportunity to be bought out, the Mexican residents were tied not just to their property, but to their place. Their spatial imaginary extended beyond their property, and into the reimagination of publicly-owned land of the *parketas* serving as a collective and informal gathering space. Looking through the meeting minutes, Verastique's mom never appeared before the council to up-zone her property, nor did other residents with Spanish surnames. For families like the Verastiques, staying in the community was more important than cashing out. While the Mayor and City Council had originally taken the stance that they would pay fair amounts for properties, Mexican residents' refusal to engage with the exchange value property process left them facing the City's condemnation process. Because the federal interstate system implementation was one of the first large-scale uses of eminent domain, these residents had few tools for recourse (Taylor et al., 2023).

Perhaps Mexican residents did not seek to negotiate their property zoning at City Hall because they were unfamiliar with the process (as most residents at that time would be). Perhaps, additional factors such as language, voting status, or other racial barriers played a role. However, the tools that Anglo residents sought to extract value only worked if one was detached from place and had somewhere else to go. For the residents who had no interest in transitioning their homes into commercially zoned properties, preferring instead to keep their homes and their community along the Avenue, few tools existed. These are the residents that became most affected by the implementation of the interstate highway system.

While testimonies and articles indicate many Mexicans moved within the neighborhood, thus staying connected to their community, the highway permanently erased the public space in which the community gathered. The Mexican community would continue to reassert their spatial imaginary, contesting the concrete that divided their community. Community groups opened a Mexican-serving college, developed grassroots activist organizations, launched street art programming, and have now spent multiple decades successfully advocating for a Mexican Heritage Community Center to stand on the west side of where East Avenue stood (East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood, 2010; Garcia, 2023; Garza, 1998; MACC, n.d.). While the urban planning process did see itself as compensating property owners for the loss of their property, the planning process did not and could not compensate community members for their loss of place. Outside of the conceptions of the White Spatial Imaginary, the planning process did not compensate or replace the public street space that IH-35 devoured. Its loss, like many non-White cultural community spaces lost to interstate highways across the country, is a lingering racial harm that the field must contend with.

Discussion

In this paper, I first detail the connection between racial formation, property, and racialized places. I then describe how this urban history shaped the disparate outcomes of the federal interstate highway system. In examining the unique multi-racial case of East Austin, I then illustrate how racialized place and the tools of planning fostered unique propertied responses for Anglo, Black, and Mexican residents. My findings support a growing body of critical planning literature that illustrates how urban planning generally, and property specifically, perpetuate White supremacy through supporting a manufactured racial hierarchy that harms and divides all non-White communities. Specifically, I find that for Anglo property owners, the implementation of IH-35 supported them in extracting additional exchange value from an under-valued non-White community. Further, the federal government underwrote this value extraction and facilitated their relocation, likely to exclusively White places. In this case, the state response to highway implementation was adequate remedy, as both the state and property owners operated inside a White Spatial Imaginary.

For Black residents, the early highway implementation was insignificant in the wake of brutal racial containment. Engaged with a Black Spatial Imagination around use value and collective autonomous governance, Black community had safeguarded their assets in the heart of the Black neighborhood core. Thus, this use of the highway as a racial margin neither affected exchange or use value. Rather, as contemporary social movements and scholarship have illustrated, Black East Austinites experienced racial harm from the continued reification of this hardened racial boundary to entrench racial segregation over time and the continued highway expansion over the following decades (Kimble, 2024).

For Mexican-American residents, however, the highway implementation represented a replacement of a key community juncture, akin to cases of New Orleans, St. Paul, and Atlanta. As a community that experienced freedom to settle outside the bounds of the Black-White racial map and the Black or White Spatial Imaginary, the highway implementation destroyed the cultural heart of the neighborhood, leaving high damage and inadequate remedy. As a community whose spatial imaginary defied ideas of private or autonomous property ownership, instead remaking space through the insurgent development of public land, the city planning tools and eminent domain process undercompensated residents. Though addressing exchange value, the process could not compensate for the strong place attachment to one's home, nor could it conceptualize remedying the collective loss of non-propertied community space.

The variation in each community's response raises a couple of key points. First, the case of East Austin illustrates that even through eminent domain and property loss, the state not

only supported White residents, but benefited them in granting their upzoning requests. Second, the multi-racial comparison illustrates the complexity of racial hierarchies. While Mexican-American residents escaped the strict and *de jure* racial containment of the Jim Crow South that their Black neighbors experienced, their relative spatial freedom led to, I argue, a deeper rupture through the loss of a community juncture. For Black Austinites who had spent centuries navigating racial violence, the initial highway implementation left little imprint on Black residents, as it merely made explicit the already-existing implicit racial boundary. This is not to say that one community group faced worse racial violence than the other, but rather to highlight how non-White groups who may have escaped White supremacy's racial violence in one area may in fact experience its downstream effects in another. Further, this case illustrates the way that sowing divisions across different communities of color supports White supremacy. If both racial groups had experienced the same sort of racial harm, perhaps the communities would have formed a cross-racial coalition to protest the highway. Instead, the Anglo support on the east side facilitated the State moving ahead. Aligned with the growing body of Whiteness in planning literature, this case clearly illustrates how urban planning has continually served Whiteness at the cost of all non-White community groups (Williams, 2020; Goetz et al., 2020).

Lastly, this case raises questions about the temporal elements of racial harm across the two distinct kinds of spatial harms of highway implementation. Contemporary social movements around removing I-35 illustrate that its placement and continual expansion harms both the Black and Mexican community of East Austin (Kimble, 2024). However, the reactions from Black and Mexican elders about the initial implementation varied greatly. This suggests that highway projects that served as racial boundaries may have had delayed harmful effects, whereas highway projects that damaged commercial corridors created a more immediate reaction. The temporal variation of racial harm between these two spatial harms—and what it might mean for current efforts of reparative justice—is ripe for future research.

Conclusion

As critical planning scholars, we must seriously and intentionally contend with what it means to inherit a propertied planning system. As the field has increasingly acknowledged its history of White supremacy and racial harm, we have appropriately pointed to the legacy of racial harm in housing policy and transportation planning (Goetz et al., 2020; Williams et al. 2023). We must also push ourselves further to understand what a propertied system cannot offer. We must ask, as Dorries (2022) does: *what is planning without property?* Our propertied system, as it currently stands, cannot offer compensation for the use value and collective value of non-propertied loss. Yet, this loss is profound. East Austin's Mexican-American community

has spent the last seven decades contesting the concrete that claims their collective space. Yet, the highway hardens further and continually widens. Gentrification has spiked living costs in the neighborhood, and displacement has ensued (East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood, 2010). This is the contemporary racialized property response—one which can benefit residents who are interested in cashing in and moving out. But the challenge with cultural displacement is that the realized property value gains cannot purchase belonging elsewhere.

We must ask ourselves how we plan to heal our field's past harms. In 2024, the City of Austin received a large federal Reconnecting Community grant for their "community-centered initiative to create public spaces and amenities through the design and construction of caps and stitches," aimed at remedying the loss of East Avenue. This project is one of approximately 260 funded Reconnecting Community grants aimed at addressing the historic damage of the interstate highway (USDOT, 2023). Our challenge as planners is to expand our toolbox beyond our usual propertied responses. New public space that fits into the old property paradigm will do little to repair past scars or create new liberated futures if it becomes the latest tool for speculation and displacement. Instead, we must stare our racialized propertied history in the face. We must develop new tools to deliver justice, and we must challenge our spatial imagination to dream alongside the residents who refused to limit themselves to such limited propertied realities.

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