

INTRODUCTION

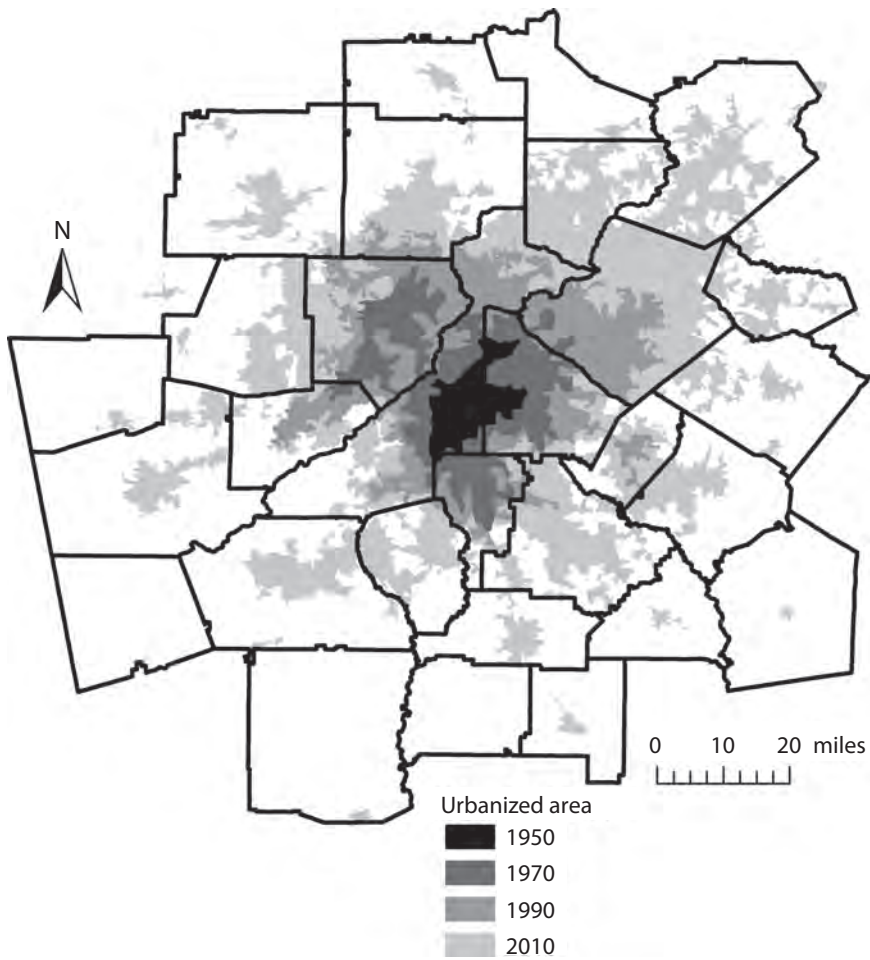
IN THE FALL OF 2020, Atlanta was all over the national news. It was the place that made Georgia the only blue state in the South, helped seal the election for Joe Biden, and put the U.S. Senate in Democratic hands. It is the capital of the South, still laying claim to being the “Black Mecca,” as tens of thousands of Black households move to the region each year, while also developing into a multiethnic metropolis. In terms of urban form, the area is simultaneously a preeminent example of both suburban sprawl and twenty-first-century gentrification.

A growth-above-all development ethos permeates the region and is rooted in the city’s twentieth-century expansion. Like some other booming Sunbelt metros, Atlanta has combined a continuing reliance on public-private partnerships and a state and regional planning and policy regime that excessively caters to capital, often at the expense of its poorer residents, who are predominantly Black and Latinx. As the city proper has become a hot commodity in the real



Map 1. The Atlanta metropolitan region

estate arena and is no longer majority-Black, the region has inverted the late-twentieth-century poor-in-the-core urban model to one where less-affluent families face exclusion from the central city and more-affluent suburbs and are pushed out to lower-income, sometimes quite distant suburbs, usually farther from mass transit, large public hospitals, and other essential services.



Map 2. The urbanization of the Atlanta region, 1950 to 2010

At this writing, the Atlanta metropolitan area is the ninth largest in the country and likely to climb into the eighth spot in the not-too-distant future. The metro grew from 4.1 million people in 2000 to just over 6 million by 2019. The city of Atlanta comprises less than a tenth of the region’s population and, while its population has been increasing since 1990, and especially since 2010, the growth and spatial expansion

of the region's suburbs continue to outpace the city's gains. Map 1 illustrates the region, indicating the location of the city of Atlanta and the five most built-out core counties that account for over sixty percent of the metropolitan population.¹

Map 2 illustrates the historical patterns of urbanization in the region, showing its growth out from the oldest parts of Fulton and DeKalb Counties, into Cobb, Clayton, and then Gwinnett Counties. Then, in more recent decades, greater residential densities have spread around the region, although the fringe counties, especially to the South, continue to be mostly sparsely populated.

FOUR KEY THEMES

This book focuses on four key, interconnected themes in the evolution and restructuring of Atlanta in the twenty-first century. The first is the major racial and economic restructuring of the region's residential geography, including the city proper. The city of Atlanta has, since the 1990s especially, been undergoing a period of increasing, highly racialized gentrification, which accelerated after the foreclosure crisis. Meanwhile, although Atlanta experienced significant Black suburbanization earlier than many other metropolitan areas, since the 1990s the suburbs, as a whole, have experienced increased racial diversity and poverty. At the same time, in many majority-white suburbs, the encroaching racial and economic diversity, which has included growing Latinx and Asian as well as Black populations, has been met with significant resistance and deliberate efforts to maintain whiteness and economic exclusivity. Lower-income families, mostly households of color, have faced racialized displacement and exclusion not just from the gentrifying city but also from the more affluent suburbs in the region. These suburbs have done this not just through the traditional tools of exclusionary zoning or building codes but also through large-scale redevelopment projects aimed at parts of their communities from

which they have cleared away “tired” older apartment buildings and replaced them with new housing and commercial development that caters to a more affluent and, often, whiter population. Both in the city and the suburbs, racial and economic residential change has not simply been the unintended outcome of growing wealth in the region. Rather, these patterns of exclusion are key results of decisions made continually and repeatedly by policymakers and planners at the local and state level.

A second theme of the book is the failure of the city of Atlanta to capture a significant share of a tremendous growth in local land values. Local governments could have channeled a substantial portion of such growth into providing long-term, affordable housing for its less-affluent Black residents. Generating large increases in property and land wealth through processes that leave much of it severely under-taxed and unavailable to benefit ordinary residents makes little sense. Moreover, places like Atlanta need to create sustainable funding streams to provide affordable, stable housing for existing and prospective lower-income residents. A focus only on the direct displacement of “legacy” residents is understandable because such families have often lived through periods of disinvestment, wealth extraction, and decline, only to find that they can no longer afford to live in a place when it is redeveloped. But eventually, the number of legacy residents will decline, even if direct displacement is minimized. Suppose local actors pay no attention to the long-term provision of affordable housing options in places experiencing strong gentrifying pressures. In such a case, they would become places of racial and economic exclusion, reproducing segregation in different parts of the region. Reshuffling poverty out to remote suburban areas can leave lower-income families worse off than when they lived closer to public transit, major public hospitals, and other critical services.

A third theme of the book is the critical role of state government in constraining and enabling how development and redevelopment

occur and whether the interests of those most vulnerable to exclusion and displacement are given serious consideration. Though it has become an increasingly blue region, Atlanta still has to operate in what is still effectively a red state, at least when it comes to state politics and policy. Moreover, even if the state legislature fell under the control of Democrats someday, it is unclear how much this would affect the policy environment for housing and real estate development. Georgia is a strong property-rights state where landlords and mortgage lenders benefit from a legal regime that gives them most of what they want and provides few protections for renters. The topic of “local control” is a highly normative one. When it comes to providing local governments with the power to exclude affordable housing through exclusionary zoning or building codes, local control usually prevails. But local authority does not extend to allowing local governments to provide for stronger tenant protections, rent control, or fair housing ordinances in their communities. The state legislature has been quick to preempt such measures.

The final theme of the book, and its key overarching narrative, concerns the political economy of urban change and the presence of inflection points. These are periods during which particularly consequential policy decisions are made that have a disproportionate impact on the trajectories of a place and have direct and long-lasting implications for racial and economic exclusion. The forces reshaping the city and its suburbs, including those that displace and exclude, are not the product of anonymous, impersonal, “free markets.” Rather, these forces are generated through a political economy of actors working towards redeveloping space that houses less-affluent, racially diverse populations and works to remake places for a more desirable residential base and the businesses accompanying them. Highly organized and deliberate planning studies and processes, together with the force and subsidy provided by publicly financed redevelopment, are brought to bear. Of course, there are many smaller, atomistic transactions that also play a

role, but the projects that move markets, like the Atlanta Beltline, or the “revitalization” of Sandy Springs’ North End, are the results of political choices and processes and are executed through extensive, often multi-year planning exercises. These projects get funded by general obligation bonds, tax increment financing districts, and other financial schemes from the “public-private partnership” toolbox. Urban regimes or suburban redevelopment machines are called into action or formed to gather political support for these projects, often through a network of elected officials, homeowner associations, and real estate firms and consultants. The focus of this book is not on contributing to the now long-running debates over whether biracial urban regimes, growth machines, or homevoter power are the most influential force at play in shaping the city and its suburbs. They have all contributed to the restructuring of, and exclusion within, the region.

In Atlanta’s case, there were several key inflection points since the 1990s, times at which institutions and actors made decisions that furthered a trajectory of racial and economic exclusion, instead of ones that could have provided a more inclusive path in which lower-income people of color were not relegated, with little apparent consideration, to some other, less attractive location. An early inflection point was the period around the 1996 Olympics. Various decisions were made that effectively set the stage for long-term gentrification and exclusion in the city, focusing primarily on making the city more attractive to a more affluent set of prospective citizens. Another inflection point occurred in the city with the early planning and design of the Atlanta Beltline. This project concentrated speculation and housing demand in a corridor encircling the city’s core, leading to strong increases in gentrification. Instead of securing a substantial amount of land for developing affordable housing early in the process, the city and the Beltline organization chose instead to prioritize a quick rollout of parks and trails, which themselves fueled further housing demand. The period during and after the foreclosure crisis presented another inflection

point. Land values plummeted and vacancies mounted across the region, while insufficient efforts were made to secure housing stock and land to provide a sizable base of long-term affordable housing as some bulwark against the coming wave of gentrification and rising rents. Instead, in the city and in many suburbs, a great deal of low-cost property flowed into the hands of speculators and investors.

Some have argued, and will continue to argue, that Atlanta's leaders have made mostly good policy choices in shaping the city's and the region's trajectories. For example, in a boosterish history of the city in the latter decades of the twentieth century, a former local columnist argued that the corporate-led white-Black governing regime had repeatedly picked "the right fork in the road."² If a city's or region's primary goals are simply to grow its population and land values, such claims could be argued to have merit. If, however, cities and regions are judged more on the welfare of their less-powerful and less-affluent residents, arguments that leaders in the region have made mostly good choices become much harder to accept.

ATLANTA AS A PARADIGMATIC CASE FOR GROWING, GENTRIFYING CITIES

The significant changes that have occurred in Atlanta and how policy-makers, real estate market actors, and others have fueled and shaped these changes make Atlanta a paradigmatic case for regions undergoing profound transformation and investment pressures, i.e., emerging hot-market metros. Lessons from Atlanta's last twenty-five years are helpful in considering what could happen to other cities that are undergoing—or might be vulnerable to undergoing—similar regional housing market pressures within a context of weak state and local policy environments that tend not to give much attention to the welfare of lower-income families and households of color. Atlanta provides a case of a region experiencing very strong growth pressures with little pol-

icy attention aimed at capturing the benefits of that growth for the region's working-class residents or for protecting lower-income households from racial and class exclusion and housing market instability.

While each metropolitan area is unique, and rarely do different regions exhibit very similar trajectories over long periods, a significant number of metros, especially in the South, have experienced changes in recent decades that resemble Atlanta's in some important ways. However, few cities have undergone quite as much transformation.³ At least five other large metros have experienced changes similar to Atlanta over the last two decades, for example, Tampa, Richmond, Nashville, Austin, and Denver. All have seen significant growth in their metropolitan populations, with all but one (Denver) experiencing growth of more than thirty percent from 2000 to 2019, with Austin leading the pack at seventy-eight percent. These metros experienced growth in their central cities as well, with Austin experiencing the most significant growth at almost fifty percent. Richmond, Nashville, Tampa, and Denver experienced growth of between seventeen and thirty-one percent over the nineteen years, a similar order of magnitude to the city of Atlanta's twenty-two percent growth.

These regions have also exhibited several signs of gentrification, although usually not to the degree that Atlanta has. All saw some increase in the ratio of the city's median family income compared to its corresponding suburbs, although none of the others have yet reached the point where the central city's median income now exceeds the suburbs', which is now the case in Atlanta. These cities also saw declines from 2000 to 2019 in non-college-educated populations, who are often the most vulnerable to exclusion and displacement. These declines ranged from ten percentage points in Richmond to nineteen percentage points in Denver, although none were as substantial as Atlanta's twenty-two percentage-point decline. These metros also experienced a significant suburbanization of poverty. The ratio of the city-to-suburban poverty rates increased by at least sixteen percent in all six metros. The

median increase was about thirty percent, with the largest increases in Richmond and Atlanta, at forty-five percent and forty-one percent, respectively.

Atlanta also provides a cautionary tale for cities that have not yet experienced strong, measurable gentrification pressures but that could, in the not-too-distant future, be vulnerable to such pressures and the same kinds of exclusionary trajectories that Atlanta has seen over the last three decades. In fact, Atlanta policymakers persisted in acting as if the city would remain starved of higher-income residents and jobs for a long time. They focused primarily on trying to attract higher-income residents without preparing for the potential “turnaround” that was to arrive relatively swiftly as the twenty-first century arrived. More critically, their policies actively supported and encouraged “clearing the way” for investment aimed at a new race and class of Atlanta resident. If cities want to take a different path, one that maintains space for existing and future lower-income residents, they need to act early if they seek to maintain diversity and minimize racial and economic exclusion. The later they begin to react to such changes, the more it will be an attempt to catch a gentrifying tiger by the tail.

Even though other cities have been experiencing some of the same types of pressures as Atlanta, it is not accurate to suggest that Atlanta is narrowly representative of some larger cohort, even among this growing and gentrifying group of cities. The city itself has been ranked by two different reports since 2015 as among the five fastest-gentrifying cities in the country, and the data used in both of these studies did not account for continuing, robust gentrification in the later 2010s.⁴ The region is also distinct in its substantial Black population, second only in total magnitude to the New York metro. As a share of the metropolitan population, Atlanta is the nation’s leading large Black metro, with about thirty-five percent of the population being Black. At the same time, the region is increasingly multiethnic with Latinx and Asian residents now accounting for about twenty percent of the population.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into five main chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 brings the reader up to speed on the history of residential development in Atlanta, from its founding before the civil war to the end of the twentieth century. I draw on a remarkable breadth and depth of scholarship, including a trove of wonderful books that each tend to focus on a different period or aspect of the city's growth and change during the twentieth century. The chapter pays particular attention to the political economy and governance of the city and how that impacted residential change, including the well-known Atlanta urban regime politics described by authors such as Clarence Stone, Tomiko Brown-Nagin, Alton Hornsby, Larry Keating, Maurice Hobson, and others.

Chapter 2 examines the largest redevelopment project in the Atlanta region, and arguably one of the most “transformative” projects in the country in the last twenty years, the Atlanta Beltline. The chapter delves into the political economy of the key planning and policy decisions at various stages of the project, especially as they relate to housing affordability, gentrification, and displacement.

Chapter 3 focuses on racialized gentrification and exclusion in the city of Atlanta since the 1990s and the forces that contributed to these patterns. It explores what I term the “dysfunctional public finance” of the city of Atlanta, in which the land values in the city skyrocketed after the foreclosure crisis while the city's coffers did not capture much of this growth due to excessive subsidies given to corporations and developers and a systematic under-taxation of larger commercial real estate. City leaders made grandiose campaign pledges to spend hundreds of millions on affordable housing but later complained that the funding was just not there to deliver it.

Chapter 4 describes the impact of the subprime and foreclosure crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s on the region, and the responses to

the crisis. It identifies failures at all levels of government and the opportunities that were missed to secure more land and homes for affordable housing purposes. Instead, hundreds of thousands of housing units flowed from homeowners, including many Black and Latinx homeowners, to private investors over this period.

Chapter 5 examines developments and changes in the suburbs over this time, including the growing overall diversity of the suburbs, including larger Black, Latinx, and Asian populations, while a group of more-affluent, whiter suburbs tried to resist this encroaching diversity as much as possible. The chapter describes some of the more exclusionary activities of wealthier suburbs, including large-scale displace-and-replace redevelopment projects that resulted in significant racial and economic exclusion. It also discusses housing precarity along Buford Highway, an important corridor of immigrant businesses and residents.

The book's conclusion ties together many of the lessons from these chapters. It ends with discussing what recent political trends could mean for the development trajectory of, and continued exclusion in, the region. It also calls for avoiding a "market-inevitability" fatalism which suggests that nothing can be done to redirect or alter the sorts of trajectories described in the book. It reminds the reader that the events and consequences described are not simply the result of apolitical, atomistic market forces. They are shaped heavily by institutional actors and processes. The city is a politically constructed space whose conditions and trends reflect many key policy decisions over time. No single decision is likely to reverse the exclusion continually experienced by those facing the worst housing precarity. But how major redevelopment projects get done, how they are financed, and the rules under which real estate markets operate are all policy choices, and these choices can and do make a difference.