



# Plantation Urbanism: Legacy, property and policing in Louisville, Kentucky

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## **Abstract**

Louisville, Kentucky is one of many cities throughout the Southern United States that still celebrates the brutal legacy of plantation culture. From an economy dominated by the plantation dynasties of bourbon, horse racing and tobacco, to the centering of bourbon whiskey as a culturally significant economic development engine and tourist attraction, to the city's flagship event, the Kentucky Derby containing elements of a memorial pageant to antebellum plantation regimes and their culture. This paper documents the legacy and consequences of urban redevelopment by Louisville's plantation dynasties in the Russell neighborhood and the connections between investment, surveillance and policing in the murder of Breonna Taylor. We will define the concepts of plantation capitalism and plantation urbanism as components of racial capitalism and monopoly capitalism that originated and are kept alive in the Southern US. This paper will explore how the legacy of plantation regimes reproduces a particular social management system that reinvents itself through economic diversification in real estate, planning, policing and surveillance, that we call plantation urbanism. The Russell neighborhood in Louisville is currently experiencing massive investment through public and private funding. We use examples of how private developers launch nonprofits to access philanthropic capital, and state support of private investment to illustrate how plantation dynasties hoard resources and exercise political control over time. This paper will document the historical and material forces of plantation regimes that drive state-led gentrification to create the unhousing of Black residents and the interlocking relationships of institutional actors in that process, among the government, philanthropy, the nonprofit industrial complex and the police.

## **Keywords**

Plantation urbanism, gentrification, racial capitalism, plantation capitalism, racial banishment, radical geography, Louisville, Kentucky, Breonna Taylor

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*“The plantation has always occupied a central place in US iconography. In recent decades it has been described as a dead, yet still romanticized, aberration killed off by the inevitable march of human progress. Although the plantation tradition has been relegated to the dustbin of history by some social theorists, it continues to survive among those who celebrate its brutal legacy. It is also painfully alive among those still dominated by the economic and political dynasties of the South which preserved and reproduced themselves through diversification and through the numerous new mobilizations.”* – Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*

## **Introduction**

Nancy Leong defines racial capitalism as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” (Leong, 2013, p. 2152). In the seminal book *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson says that racial ideologies shape every aspect of capitalism (Robinson, 1983). Robinson’s work is useful for understanding the concept of plantation capitalism since he argued that social constructs about race predate the evolution of capitalist industrial development. As Robin Kelley writes, “Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern system of racial capitalism dependent on slavery, violence and genocide” (Kelley, 2017).

The term “plantation capitalism” was first defined by Mark M. Smith in his 1996 essay, “Time, Slavery and Plantation Capitalism in the Antebellum South.” While Smith’s essay deals with the use of capitalist time-management systems and time sensitivities within pre-industrial slavery, our definition deviates from Smith’s framework. Specifically, we propose that the present economies in the South did not fully break from the plantation system, but rather diversified through new economic mobilizations that still employ the social management techniques of paternalism, subjugation and extraction that originated and were developed in plantation ideology and tradition. Plantation capitalism, then, is a managerial component of racial capitalism that originated in the Southern US, where political power and wealth are hyper-concentrated among a few plantation dynasties who employ mechanisms of hard and soft power to manufacture extreme poverty and deny Black people property, independence and full rights as citizens.

Historian George C. Wright described how Louisville elites preferred to use paternalism to control the Black population but, “like their counterparts in the Deep South, Louisville whites had no qualms about resorting to violence to suppress black aspirations for changes. The difference was that Louisville whites always made sure that it was done legally by the police. In Louisville the police force was an ever-present symbol of white authority reminding African-Americans to remain in their place and that any attempts to change the racial status quo would be met with resistance (Wright, 1985, p. 76).” In his history of lynching in Kentucky, Wright notes that most of the violence against Black people occurred “not because of supposed criminal activities but rather because of economic and social ones,” concluding that, “The most surprising aspect of my research on racial violence in Kentucky concerns the numerous instances of whites forcing blacks to leave their homes

and land” (Wright, 1990, p. 10). Thus the origins of racialized violence in Kentucky is rooted in Black dispossession and later legitimized through the state apparatus of policing.

Louisville, Kentucky played an important role as a slave market hub in the US internal slave trade, with the largest slave market located at Second St and Market St, directly across from what is known as Whiskey Row, highlighting the interconnectedness of whiskey and slavey in Louisville’s early economy (Hudson, Aubespain, & Clay, 2011). Although the plantation system was formally abolished after the Civil War, the southern economy’s industrialized mechanisms of structural-institutional reproduction occurred through what Charles Tilly called durable inequality (Tilly, 1998). In their work on slavery and school segregation, Reece and O’Connell note that “places reproduce inequality across generations by mapping social categories onto hierarchal power relations. This hierarchy is maintained through a process called opportunity hoarding, whereby the dominant group develops a virtual monopoly on a valuable resource or a method of resource acquisition” (Reece & O’Connell, 2016, p.43).

Following the Civil War, many high-ranking Confederate officers fled the Union-occupied South and migrated to the neutral site of Louisville, KY, where they formed a “Confederate Supremacy” and positioned themselves as the city’s elite political class. Wright notes that, “Nearly all of Louisville’s journalists, lawyers, realtors, and merchants were former rebels” (Wright, 1985, p. 21). These former Confederates quickly established a system of control that reproduced plantation management techniques in an industrial economy. In this setting, Black people were strategically allowed a certain level of paternalistic freedom in areas such as arts and culture while being completely denied political power and citizenship rights through land ownership. As Wright notes, “These white leaders did not fear Blacks because they remembered Blacks as being loyal and passive slaves. They were convinced that once they made the rules of their new order known the Blacks would do as commanded” (Wright, 1985, p. 23).

Our article connects this historic perspective to present day Louisville, where over the past decade the city’s owning class launched multiple real estate and urban greening projects in Louisville’s urban core, culminating in an interest in urban redevelopment and gentrification led by a coalition of philanthropy, private capital and local government. The Congress for New Urbanism held their annual conference in Louisville in 2019, describing it as a place where “New Urbanism meets the New Bourbonism” (Congress for New Urbanism, 2018). In this article, we argue that this combination of neoliberal capitalist urban redevelopment, plantation culture and plantation social management systems that create wealth through racial banishment, dispossession and policing of Black residents represent what we call plantation urbanism, and forms a straight, empirical line through to the legacies of settler colonialism and slavery.

Although Louisville transitioned from being at the center of the southern slave market before the Civil War to an industrialist city and part of the New South after the war, “there remained a great deal of ideological similarity between the plantation bloc and the merchant-led New South movement” (Woods, 1998, p. 80). As the renowned Black Studies scholar Clyde Woods noted, “although more formally oriented to accomplishing the goals of

manufacturing capital the [plantation bloc] possessed its own definitions of capitalist behavior. Like the planter bloc, it relied heavily upon the codes of ethnic oppression, class domination and British Victorianism” (Woods, 1998, p. 80). In describing the power transitions in the Mississippi Delta, Woods notes that “the final pillar of plantation bloc representation relied on reproducing the myth of Black progress and a companion myth of Black degeneracy. Both were used to support policies preserving the planter’s role as the final judge, jury and executioner of African-American life” (Woods, 1998, p. 80).

From our work at the Root Cause Research Center, we engaged in solidarity research, based on our belief that dominant institutions should not control the means of production for knowledge and data. We center communities impacted by poverty, dispossession and violence in our work and focus our research lens on systemic and structural factors. For this analysis, we gathered census data, archival research, policy reports, and open record requests from local government to unpack the legacy and consequences of urban redevelopment by plantation dynasties in the Russell neighborhood and the connections between investment, surveillance and policing in the murder of Breonna Taylor. We feel this research is critical to make clear processes of racial capitalism and white supremacy that have operated historically and into the present.

In the next sections, we focus on redevelopment in Louisville’s Russell neighborhood, which is located directly west of the downtown central business district, and across what is locally called the “Ninth Street Divide.” What was once a thriving Black business district, Russell suffered from fiscal abandonment until it was recently targeted for gentrification by local government and private real estate interests. As we discuss in the pages ahead, Breonna Taylor’s murder has trained renewed attention on the direct connections between police violence and gentrification. The no-knock search warrant that catalyzed the invasion of her home was part of a broader police operation aimed to enable an urban development plan instigated by the city and real-estate developers. As protests have filled the streets of Louisville, we have sought to transform the pain and anguish of the moment to draw attention to the long histories of such death and dispossession.

### **The Russell Neighborhood**

The Russell neighborhood in Louisville, KY was an important destination for Black settlement in the late 1800s. From 1880 to 1920, roughly 30,000 Black people moved to Louisville from the rural south, and many of them found a home in Russell. By the 1930s, Russell became the epicenter of Black cultural and economic achievement in Louisville. The neighborhood was home to Louisville’s Black middle class, as well as the Black business district that existed along Walnut Street (now Muhammad Ali Boulevard) (Hudson, et al, 2011).

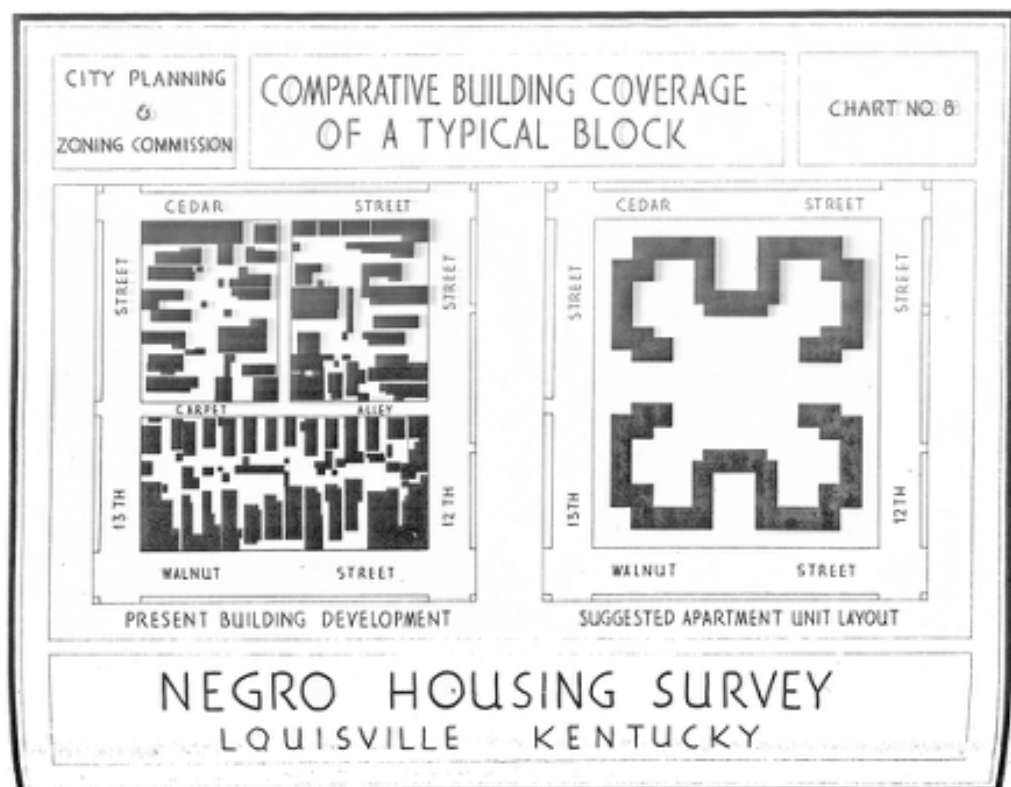
In 1917, the US Supreme Court abolished outright racial zoning in the landmark case from Louisville, KY, *Buchanan v Warley*, setting the stage for the creation of de facto racial zoning and the formal establishment of the city planning profession (Poe, 2015). In 1919, planner Harlan Bartholomew created the nation’s first zoning ordinance in St. Louis and

stated that the purpose of zoning was to “prevent the movement of colored people into finer residential areas” (Lovelace, 1992). Then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover convened some of the leading city planning professionals to create the Hoover Advisory Commission on zoning in 1921, and in 1924 the commission released a report stating that “a realtor should never be instrumental in introducing any race whose presence would be a detriment to property values” (Knack, Meck, & Stollman, 1996).

In 1932, as part of the city’s first Comprehensive Plan, Louisville real estate interests commissioned famed city planner Harlan Bartholomew to complete a study of what they called “The Negro Housing Problem in Louisville.” Bartholomew concluded: “There are a number of obstacles that are fundamental to any scheme for improving housing conditions among Negroes. [These include] A lack of desire among a large portion of the population for something better than they are accustomed to...If it were possible to create among the Negro masses a real desire for decent accommodations, the slums would automatically eliminate themselves.” As part of the report, Bartholomew recommended that large sections of the Black business district in Russell be demolished and be replaced with an institutional housing design (Bartholomew, 1932), as illustrated in Figure 1. A year after this document was published, the city began the process of demolishing parts of the Russell neighborhood to facilitate construction of the Beecher Terrace public housing complex and later the 4-lane surface level artery that came to symbolize the “9th Street Divide.” Bartholomew was instrumental in creating national policies such as the 1949 Housing Act, which allowed for the use of eminent domain in property appropriation, and the 1956 Highway Act, which paved the way for the demolition of neighborhoods that made these local initiatives possible (Lovelace, 1992).

**Figure 1**

Bartholomew’s  
Russell Design Plan.

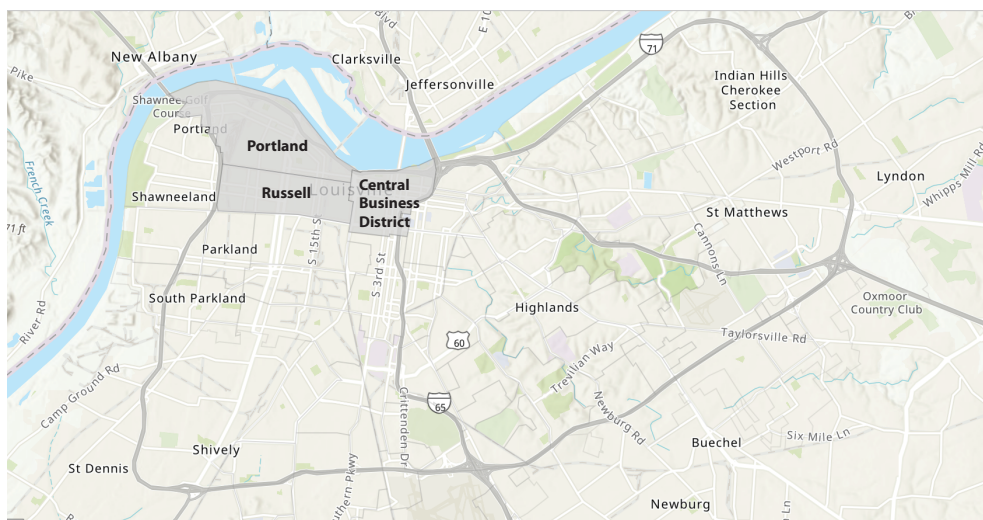


In Louisville’s 1938 Residential Securities Maps, produced by the Federal Government in partnership with local real estate and banking interests, the eastern section of Russell was characterized as the “worst area of the city,” with a “low type property and inhabitants.” These maps were created with local managerial consultants and set up the denial of Black land ownership for decades to come (Poe, 2015).

Racist socio-spatial practices continued into the 1950s. In 1951 the City of Louisville released a study titled “Public Services and Blighted Areas – A Study of Two Areas in Louisville, KY,” which found that even though over 60% of the housing in this area was not dilapidated enough to justify demolition, the social status of the residents would be the basis for complete demolition of large sections of the neighborhood (Louisville Planning Commission, 1951). Echoing similar processes seen in Louisville and cities across the US today, these social characteristics were based largely on qualitative police observations and centered around the idea that the area was a negative externality for municipal budgets due to the high rates of crime and poor public health. This study was later used as a fundamental evidence for the wholesale destruction of the entire eastern portion of the Russell neighborhood. Thus, the determination of “blight” in slum clearance and urban renewal projects was based more on qualitative determinations about race and poverty than it was

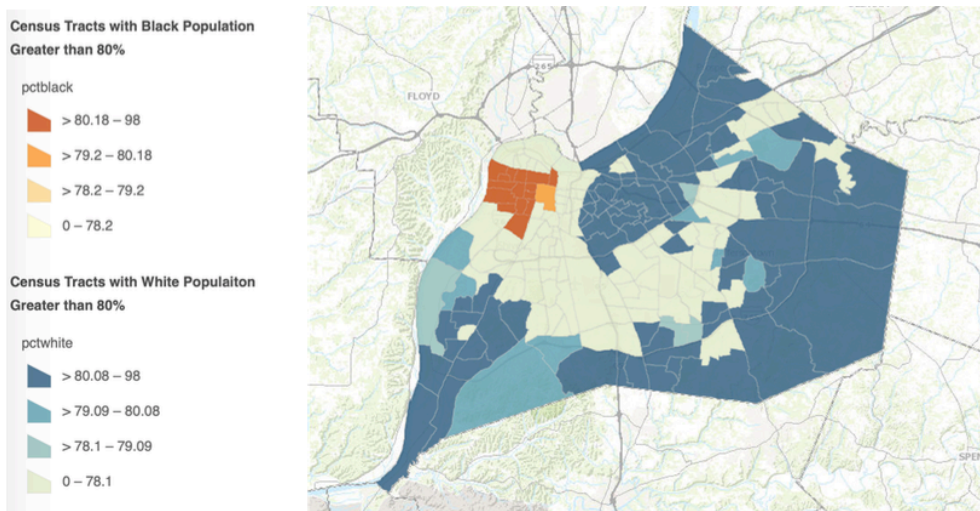
**Figure 2**

The Russell Neighborhood Location Map.  
 Source: Root Cause Research Center



**Figure 3**

Racial Segregation in Louisville, KY.  
 Source: Root Cause Research Center



about the physical condition of dwellings. Former Louisville Mayor Charles Farnsley later said in 1975 that these urban renewal projects were designed to “drive the Negro back from the central [business district],” demonstrating how urban policies of the 20th century were rooted in racial banishment and segregation (Shands, 1975).

Today, the overall median household income for the Russell neighborhood (Figure 2) is below \$20,000/year, and the median income of one particular census tract within Russell, which sits just west of downtown, is below \$10,000/year (Louisville Metro Housing Authority, 2017). Over half the Black population in Louisville now lives on less than five percent of the land, with Figure 3 detailing this level of segregation. The blue areas in Figure 3 are census tracts with a white population of over 80% and the red areas are tracts with a Black population over 80% (ACS 2018 3- Year Estimates, 2018).

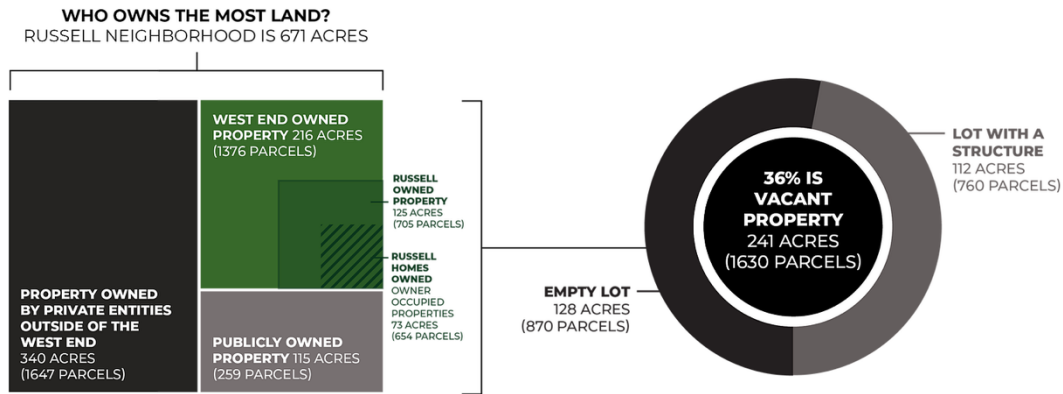
The population of the Russell neighborhood is over 90% Black. Only 18% of the land in Russell is owned by Russell residents, with only 11% owned of total land owned by those living in owner-occupied housing. Meanwhile, as detailed in Figures 4, 5 and 6, over half of the land in Russell is owned by entities outside of Louisville’s predominantly Black West End, and 13% of the land is owned by entities outside the state (Bellamy et al, 2020). Most of this land is controlled by private absentee landlords, with a large percentage owned by a few nonprofit housing developers, who benefit from public subsidies as well as philanthropic donations (Bellamy & Poe, 2020). The rents paid by Russell residents are thus in essence extracted as income for white absentee landlords.

### **Plantation Urbanism, Land and Unhousing**

A key dimension in understanding how the processes of plantation capitalism have led to plantation urbanism in the Russell neighborhood, and in Louisville more broadly, is by looking at land ownership and economic development from the context of what Ananya Roy calls “stolen lives and stolen land” (Roy, 2020). Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s description of Birmingham is also applicable to Louisville when she says that, “it was made out of land seized by settler colonial expansion mixed with imported remnants of the plantation system - including profits that had been turned into cash before slavery’s labor lords became landlords” (Wilson, 2020, p. ix).

Louisville’s Brown family owns the Brown Forman whiskey distillery and is listed as the 20th wealthiest family on the Forbes list of US wealthiest families, with a combined net worth of \$12.3 billion (Hopkins, 2016). In framing how mechanisms of legacy operate to reproduce inequality, it is important to note the Confederate origins of the Louisville power structure, the relationship between whiskey production and slavery as well as the connections of families like the Browns to legacies of settler-colonialism. This is aptly illustrated by the following quote from the US Department of the Interior’s National Register of Historic Places:

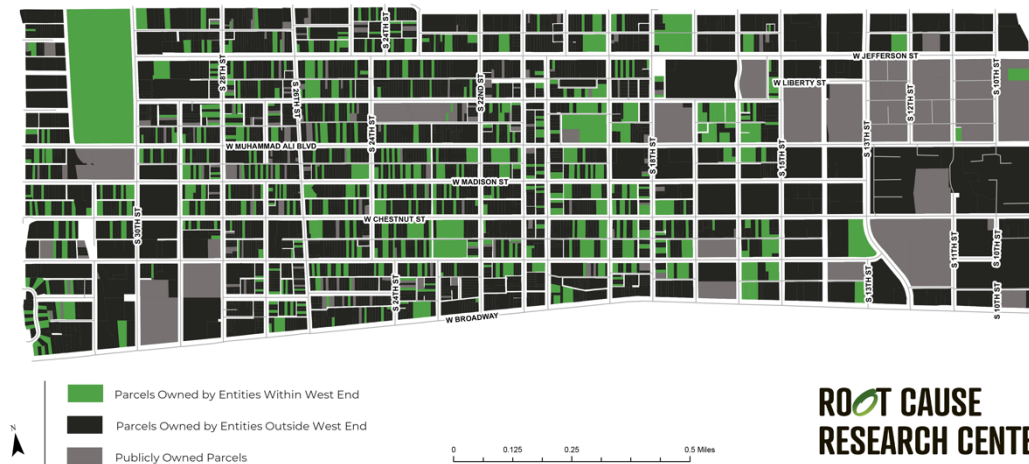
“J. T. S. Brown & Sons was one of Louisville’s oldest and strongest wholesale whiskey and distilling firms, with roots that were deeply planted in Kentucky’s history. J.T.S.



**Figure 4**  
Breakdown of Land Ownership in Russell Source: Root Cause Research Center

WEALTH BUILDING & WEALTH EXTRACTION

**WHO OWNS THE RUSSELL NEIGHBORHOOD?**

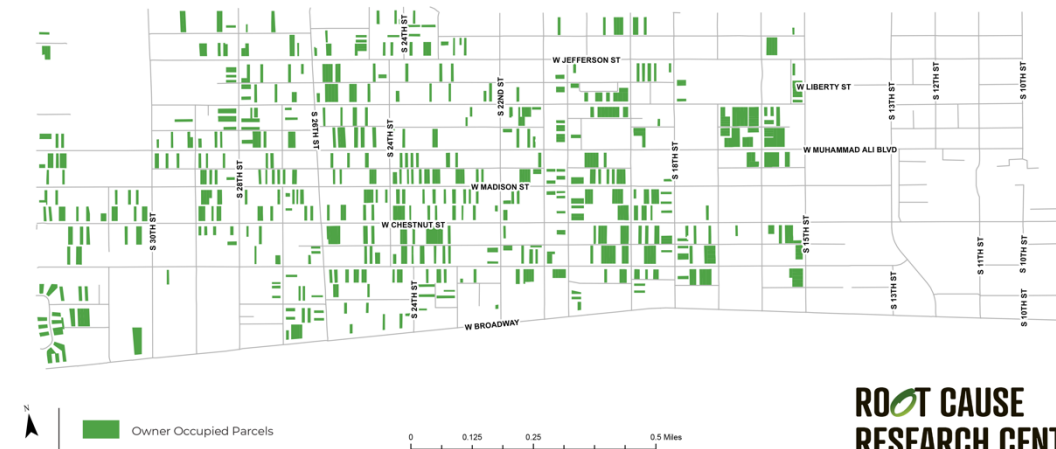


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**Figure 5**

Who Owns Russell? Source: Root Cause Research Center

**OWNER-OCCUPIED PROPERTIES IN RUSSELL**



**ROOT CAUSE  
RESEARCH CENTER**

**Figure 6**

Owner Occupied Housing in Russell. Source: Root Cause Research Center

Brown's father, William Brown, and William's brother Patrick left Hanover County, Virginia, in May 1782 and moved into Kentucky through the Cumberland Gap, joining their brother James at Harrodsburg. There they were involved with George Rogers Clark in early campaigns against the Indians.

William Brown subsequently returned to Virginia and married Hannah Street, also of Hanover County. They returned to Kentucky and settled near Elizabethtown, where they farmed a large tract and owned a large number of slaves. Their son, J. T. S. Brown, moved to Munfordville, where he engaged in business and served as postmaster for more than fifty years. When the Civil War broke out, he became a major in the Confederate army" (US Dept of the Interior, 1998).

Brown-Forman began selling whisky in 1870 with its first product, Old Forester Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whisky. The company survived Prohibition because one of the founders was a pharmacist and had a license to sell whiskey during that period; they have since become a global power in the whiskey market (Hopkins, 2016). The Brown Family has also been instrumental in shaping urban redevelopment in Louisville in the past decade, with Brown family heiress and philanthropist Christy Brown leading a number of projects. One of these was an urban greening project with the University of Louisville that was renamed the Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute (EI) after a \$5 million donation from Christina's Owsley Brown II Family Foundation. The EI is currently conducting an experiment on residents in a South Louisville neighborhood to measure the health impacts of tree plantings in their community in what they call an "urban laboratory." By using an experimental group of community members who will receive tree plantings, and a control group who will not, the EI extracts medical information such as blood and urine samples, and other health data from residents to measure the impacts of trees on health (UofL, 2019).

Christy Brown's son-in-law Gill Holland is a real estate developer and was dubbed the "Godfather of New Louisville" in a 2015 CityLab article for his role in developing the area directly east of downtown (Grabar, 2015).

"His first project was on the opposite side of downtown, in an area then known as Louisville's skid row. Beginning in 2006, he raised \$13 million to renovate and rebuild several blocks of East Market Street. The transformation has been, by all accounts, stunning. The neighborhood has acquired a trendy nickname, NuLu ("New Louisville"), and added dozens of businesses and hundreds of jobs" (Grabar, 2015).

However, the transformation of NuLu did not occur without the large-scale displacement of predominantly Black residents. HOPE VI was a federal housing program that began in the 1990s and demolished numerous public housing sites in the U.S. largely based on the principles of New Urbanism. A HOPE VI project led to the demolition of the Clarksdale public housing site, located just south of the East Market Street business district. Dr. Rick Axtell and Dr. Michele Tooley produced the definitive qualitative study of the Clarksdale demolition in 2011, where they drew a connection between the HOPE VI demolition and the economic development aims of the city and private capital.

“It is important to put the choice of Clarksdale into economic and geographic context. The land that Clarksdale occupied was ripe for developers. The Housing Authority believed that ‘Clarksdale stands on the precipice of transformation, literally surrounded by economic opportunity.’ Encircled by the University of Louisville Medical Center, Jewish Hospital, Louisville Slugger Field, Waterfront Park, and the East Market business corridor, Clarksdale’s continued existence would endanger further economic potential of the area. The city’s Downtown Development Plan envisioned the site as a ‘mixed income, diverse neighborhood.’ The application for HUD funding stated that the revitalization will result in ‘dramatic change for public housing residents’ and will ‘spur new economic development.’ However, these realities suggest that perhaps the rhetoric of deconcentration and development in Louisville was a fraud. Poor people were pawns in a policy that benefitted developers and investors” (Axtell & Tooley, 2015, p. 20).

In 2013, with the expansion goals of NuLu in motion, Holland turned his investment towards the Portland neighborhood, an area just west of downtown and just north of the Russell neighborhood, where he announced plans to raise \$23.5 million for his Portland Investment Initiative (Grabar, 2015). With the Portland Investment, Holland laid the groundwork for future investment in Louisville’s West End and was able to leverage philanthropic and public capital for the development of Russell through a \$30 million Choice Neighborhood grant from HUD, massive public investment from Louisville Metro Government and philanthropic donations.

In 2015, Louisville Metro Government launched a campaign to eliminate the historic “9th Street divide” that separated Louisville’s downtown from the majority Black West End. In order to attract capital across 9th Street, the Louisville Property Valuation Administration, which sets property values in the city, increased residential property values in the neighborhoods to the east and south of downtown (Jackson S. , 2015). Small homes in the traditionally affordable neighborhoods of Clifton, Germantown, Shelby Park, and Butchertown were suddenly out of reach for many middle-class white people, setting the stage for the development of market rate homes in Russell and Portland to attract white, affluent families to purchase in the West End.

Also in 2015, Louisville Metro Government gave \$778,000 in forgivable loans to the Lexington, KY developer Community Ventures Corporation to buy 29 residential parcels of public land in Russell (Shafer, 2015). While assurances were made at the time that these market rate homes would sell between \$80,000 and \$150,000, some of these homes in the Cedar Street area of Russell are already on the market for upward of \$170,000 (Zillow, 2019). Around the same time, the Louisville-based James Graham Brown Foundation granted Community Ventures \$250,000 for the development of Chef Space in Russell, “a 13,000 square foot kitchen incubator aimed at bringing area entrepreneurs and small business owners to West Louisville” in an area targeted for commercial redevelopment (James Graham Brown Foundation, 2018).

In explaining why local government was giving away land and money to out of town developers in 2015, then Louisville Metro Director of Redevelopment Strategies, Jeana Dunlap said that, “public investment creates synergies that incentivize others to invest in

neighborhoods” because, “private investors know that they are not alone” (Parsons, 2015). In 2019, Louisville Metro made another \$1 million available to developers for market rate housing in Russell through forgivable and revolving loans (Louisville Metro Government, 2019). A 2012 study found that a \$100 increase in median rent is associated with a 15% increase in homelessness in urban areas (Munley, et al., 2012). This public investment in market rate housing increases investor activity, which in turn increases rents, resulting in even more land being purchased by investment firms. In this way, unhousing through wealth extraction and gentrification become more rapid and harmful, particularly to those making below \$25,000/year. Roy, Graziani, & Stephens define unhousing as the “specific policies and actions through which the unhousing of people is produced and reproduced for financial profit and with political legitimacy” (Roy, et al., 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, there are currently 1,766 subsidized housing units in Russell, and the subsidy restrictions of 1,420 (80%) of those will expire by 2023, which means that when these subsidy restrictions expire, those units could be converted to market rate housing due to the current investment. This in turn could result in mass evictions and the loss of housing for hundreds of families (National Housing Preservation Database, 2020).

In a particularly stunning example of government funded “unhousing” for the private economic gain of outside developers, in 2015, the Louisville Metro Housing Authority (LMHA) was awarded a Choice Neighborhood grant for the demolition of the Beecher Terrace public housing development that is located just west of downtown in the Russell neighborhood. Choice Neighborhood is the follow up program to HOPE VI, but with an expanded scope to include neighborhoods beyond public housing sites. LMHA in turn awarded St. Louis developer McCormack, Baron and Salazar (MBS) a 30-year developer contract that includes a ground lease to control and redevelop the site. MBS has since accessed a \$30 million grant that demolished over 725 units of public housing and displaced over 1,400 people (Jones, 2019, MHC, 2019); the firm will now reap the benefits of redeveloping a site of mostly market rate units (Louisville Metro Housing Authority, 2019). In 2019, the project was already \$34 million over budget despite being in the early stages, so HUD again awarded the LMHA with a supplemental \$4 million dollar grant along with a two year extension for the replacement units (Jackson K. , 2019). LMHA has said that they are willing to make up the budget shortfall from their internal funding, meaning MBS has virtually unlimited access to public funds until the project is complete with little to no public accountability.

The impacts of neoliberal urban policy, where private actors manage public contracts, are felt most heavily by public housing residents and those receiving subsidized housing voucher assistance. LMHA has a “Right to Return” policy guaranteeing that “all original Beecher Terrace residents (who lived at Beecher Terrace on or after June 28, 2016), who are in good standing with LMHA are eligible for a lifetime preference to return to any on- and off-site Beecher Terrace replacement units” (LMHA, 2019). However, according to the LMHA press releases, over one quarter of former Beecher Terrace residents have already abandoned the Choice Neighborhood process or were forced out. “From the original 726 households, 199 Beecher Terrace households are no longer in the LMHA system. Of these,

there were 107 ‘involuntary terminations’ and 92 households who moved into the private housing market, died, left Louisville/Jefferson County, or left due to illness” (MHC, 2019).

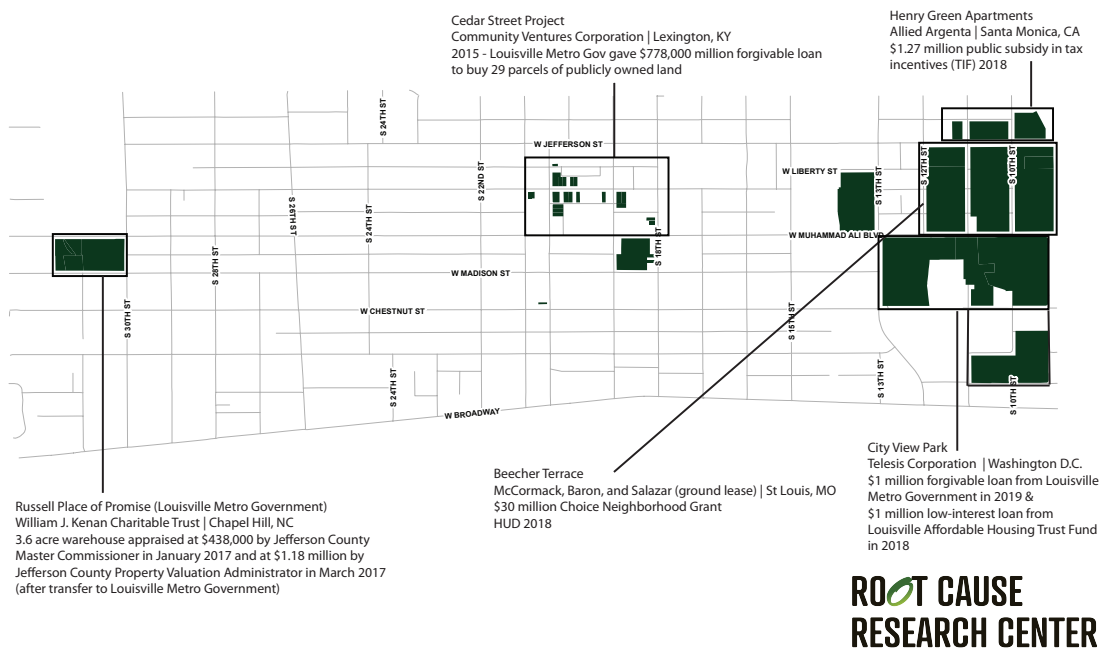
As part of the Root Cause Research Center, we analyzed records from the Louisville eviction court and found that 524 households were evicted in Beecher Terrace between June 2016 and the demolition in 2019, suggesting that the number of households displaced through this process is much higher than LMHA is reporting. These records also show that Beecher Terrace eviction judgements increased drastically from 2016 to 2017 (138 to 223) despite eviction filings decreasing (401 to 391), suggesting that LMHA pursued a more aggressive eviction policy of targeting lease violations once the relocation process began (Administrative Office of the Courts, 2020). As Roy, Graziani, & Stephens note, “subsidized and public housing continue to be key sites of racialized policing in spatial exclusion. What is at work are conjoined structures and interconnected geographies of racial banishment embedded in a national legal regime” (Roy, et al., 2020, p.10 ).

With the public sector gutted by neoliberal policy, the role of providing a safety net for low-income residents to manage surplus populations now falls on nonprofits and philanthropic organizations, which also benefits private capital in multiple ways. Being a private company, MBS was unable to access tax-exempt grant money, so at the suggestion of the Ford Foundation in the 1970s, they launched the nonprofit Urban Strategies to provide case management for public housing tenants (Shelterforce, 2015). This enabled MBS to access philanthropic money as well as public subsidies, along with returns on their private investment.

When MBS was awarded the Choice Neighborhood contract for Louisville, they hired Urban Strategies to provide case management for displaced public housing residents, even though MBS CEO Richard Baron is still the board chair of Urban Strategies (Louisville Metro Housing Authority, 2019; Urban Strategies, 2020). Urban Strategies doesn’t disclose this relationship to the community, however, so when public housing residents have a complaint about the landlord, they are instructed to file it with their case manager at Urban Strategies, totally unaware that Urban Strategies is the nonprofit branch of their private landlord. This relationship enables local public housing authorities and private developers to control resident dissent. The Brazilian housing scholar and activist Raquel Rolnik aptly calls these scenarios, “private regimes of territorial control” (Rolnik, 2019).

Most of the land in the census tract in the eastern section of Russell (where the annual median household income is below \$10,000) is now owned or controlled by three out-of-state development companies (shown in Figure 7 below): Henry Green Apartments by Allied Argenta (California), Beecher Terrace by MBS (Missouri), and City View Park by Telesis Corporation (Washington DC). All 3 have received large public subsidies in Louisville for either the demolition or renovation of low-income housing (Bellamy et al, 2020). In 2018, Allied Argenta received \$1.27 million in financing from the city government to renovate over 100 units (WDRB, 2017). Telesis Corporation has received over \$2 million in forgivable and

**PUBLIC / PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS**



**ROOT CAUSE RESEARCH CENTER**

**Figure 7**

Public / Private Partnerships in Russell Source: Root Cause Research Center

low-interest loans from Louisville Metro Government to renovate over 500 units (Johnson, 2019). Although these projects are promised to result in “zero displacement,” there are no community benefit agreements or binding elements in place that prohibit these landlords from raising rents to push current residents out and then recruit new tenants with higher incomes.

In May of 2018, Louisville Metro Government, with the Community Foundation of Louisville as fiscal sponsor, along with Cities United and the Louisville Urban League, submitted a proposal for \$5 million to the North Carolina-based Kenan Charitable Trust for the initial funding to create the Russell: A Place of Promise (RPOP) project. While this \$26 million initiative claims to be “building Black wealth without displacement” (Louisville Metro Government, 2019), the Kenan family is connected to the legacy of plantation era dynasties. Most recently, the family came under scrutiny for the patriarch’s role in the Wilmington Massacre in 1898, resulting in the Kenan name being removed from various buildings at the University of North Carolina in 2018 (McClellan, 2018).

There were three committed board members for RPOP at the time of the grant application, including “small scale developer,” and North Carolina native, Gill Holland. The grant requested funding to create 135 market rate homes and a mixed-use development of an historic warehouse (Louisville Metro Government, 2019).

Gill Holland’s Portland Stroll district was created along Portland Ave between 18th and 28th Streets. In the spring of 2019, Holland partnered with the nonprofit housing developer Housing Partnership Inc (HPI) on a 24-unit multi-building complex at 2506 Montgomery St., next to Holland’s historic Dolfinger Building. The \$2.9 million complex was partially

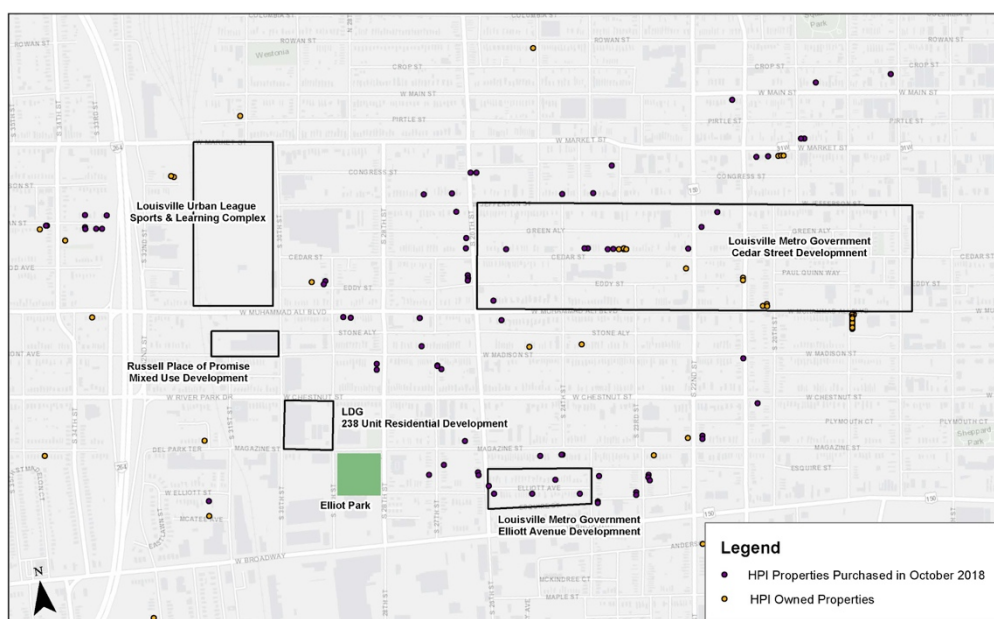
funded by Louisville Metro Government’s Affordable Housing Trust Fund (LAHTF) (Elahi, 2019). The developers received \$1 million for this project from the Trust Fund with an expected \$900,000 payback. Although this money is allotted for “affordable housing,” their contract for the project allows rent restrictions to be set at 80% area median income, meaning that a one bedroom apartment could rent for as high a \$1,100 per month, in a neighborhood where the annual median household income is less than \$25,000 per year (Louisville Metro Government, 2019). The Louisville Metro Government disclosed their intentions for the development in a 2019 Courier Journal editorial, where they stated that the market and socioeconomic change in neighborhood composition will dictate ‘affordable’ rent levels (McCrary and Harris, 2019).

As a nonprofit housing developer, HPI alongside LDG Development is one of the largest recipients of housing subsidies from Louisville Metro Government (Louisville Metro Government, 2019). In October of 2018, HPI purchased 95 properties in the West End for \$3.2 million in one acquisition, most of which are located between 22nd and 28th streets in the Portland and Russell neighborhoods (Jefferson County Clerk’s Office, 2020). These properties, seen in Figure 8, are also in proximity to other major West End development projects, such as Holland’s Portland Initiative, the Russell Place of Promise (RPOP) warehouse development at 30th and Madison St, the Louisville Urban League’s \$30 million Sports and Learning Complex, and Louisville Metro’s Cedar Street development. Twenty of the properties are on or near the Elliott Ave development project.

In April 2020, LDG Development announced plans “to construct a 283-unit apartment complex on nearly four acres at 2901, 2919 and 2929 Magazine Street and 2900 West Chestnut Street” (Finley, 2020). This location is also directly south of the Louisville Urban League’s Sports Complex and the RPOP mixed-use site and a few blocks to the west of the Elliot Avenue development project (see Figure 8). Along with being one of the nation’s largest developers of affordable housing, LDG has a long history and close relationship with Louisville Metro Government and the Metropolitan Housing Coalition. LDG also shares an

**Figure 8**

Russell Investment near Elliot Ave.  
 Source: Root Cause Research Center



office address with the Louisville Affordable Housing Trust Fund in a building owned by LDG, even though LDG is the largest recipient of LAHFT subsidies (Louisville Metro Government, 2019).

### **Property and Policing in Russell, and the case of Breonna Taylor**

According to Roy, Graziani, & Stephens, “the relationship between property, personhood and police” is central to a critical analysis of housing (Roy, et al., 2020, p. 3). Louisville’s public nuisance ordinance has been in place for decades, however, in 2018, new language was added to expand the list of reasons a property could be considered a public nuisance, including misdemeanor crimes, possession of drug paraphernalia, theft or domestic violence. Also in 2018, Louisville Metro Government’s ‘Vision Russell’ initiative was able to leverage funding from the Choice Neighborhood Grant to increase surveillance in the Russell neighborhood. This expanded police power in surveillance and nuisance abatement resulted in a sharp increase in public nuisance cases, with 84% of those in Louisville’s predominantly Black western half, which includes the Russell neighborhood (Ryan, 2019).

“Russell Neighborhood is on the rise,” exclaimed Ed Blayney, Louisville Metro Government’s Civic Technology Manager. In both June and November of 2019, Blayney published two Medium articles where he attempted to dress up increased policing as innovation, and labeled Russell residents who didn’t support increased police camera surveillance as “detractors” (Blayney, Smart Russell, 2019). In the article published in November, Blayney didn’t understand why a Russell resident would be uneasy about their local government plans to install 35 state-of-the-art surveillance cameras around their neighborhood. Blayney notes that these police cameras have been placed in “public areas such as roadways, sidewalks, parks, etc.” All camera footage from this surveillance system is also monitored 24/7 by government employees, both “proactively and reactively” (Blayney, 2019).

On March 13, 2020, 26-year-old ER technician and Black Louisville resident Breonna Taylor was murdered in her home by the LMPD. Initially, the story and circumstances surrounding her death received little local or national attention. However, beginning in May with the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd and subsequent uprising across the United States, Breonna’s case became well known and resulted in a Louisville youth uprising that lasted throughout the summer.

On July 5, 2020, the legal team in Breonna Taylor’s case filed court documents alleging that the search warrant that was issued for her house originated as part of a Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD) effort to aid in the gentrification of Louisville’s West End neighborhoods. According to Phillip Bailey and Tessa Duvall from the Louisville Courier Journal: “Lawyers for Taylor’s family allege in court documents filed in Jefferson Circuit Court Sunday that a police squad — named Place-Based Investigations — had “deliberately misled” narcotics detectives to target a home on Elliott Avenue, leading them to believe they were after some of the city’s largest violent crime and drug rings” (Bailey & Duvall, 2020). On July 7, 2020, Christy Brown of the famed Louisville Brown family published an op-ed in

the Louisville Courier Journal about the Breonna Taylor murder, saying that she was “greatly concerned about the new accusations in the July 6 Courier Journal about the LMPD and allegedly different set of circumstances leading up to the murder of Breonna Taylor” (Brown, 2020).

Since August 2017, Louisville Metro Government has purchased twenty-two properties on Elliott Ave between 24th and 26th Street, where Breonna Taylor’s friend (and alleged former boyfriend) Jamarcus Glover lived and where he was placed under surveillance and targeted for the no-knock search warrant that ultimately led to Breonna Taylor’s murder. Breonna Taylor’s lawyers assert that Glover’s home at 2424 Elliot Ave was one of the “primary roadblocks to the development project” (Bailey & Duvall, 2020).

Louisville Metro has used the Louisville & Jefferson County Landbank to acquire these properties through foreclosure and outright purchase, and using a combination of police terrorism and code enforcement to take properties in key areas of the West End. For instance, in March of 2019, Louisville Metro Government used a code violation ruling to purchase the lot at 2531 West Broadway. This lot is directly across from Dino’s Food Mart, where David McAtee was murdered by the LMPD and Kentucky National Guard on June 1st, 2020, during the Louisville protests against police brutality (Louisville Metro Government, 2020).

The Elliot Avenue development project began in 2016, as a component of the multiple investments occurring just to the north along 28th Street, with Louisville Metro Government (LMG) filing for foreclosures on multiple Elliot Avenue properties between 2017 and 2019. In November of 2019 LMG entered a grant agreement for project management of Elliot Ave and stated that “community developers for the Elliott Avenue project have not yet been identified. At the completion of the public design phase, The Office of Community Development (OCD) will seek proposals from community-based developers capable of activating Elliott Avenue in a way that will revitalize and empower the community.” This project overview also noted that “the OCD, in partnership with the LMPD will continue to explore crime reduction measures on Elliott Avenue with an emphasis on place-based crime prevention strategies.”

In December of 2019, the Place-Based Investigations (PBI) unit of the LMPD began working on the surveillance of Elliott Avenue and arrested multiple individuals on charges of firearm and drug possession and drug trafficking. Following a January 2020 meeting between LMPD and the OCD, the Louisville Metro Government Department of Codes and Regulations sent a letter of notice to 2424 Elliott Ave.’s owner. The notice stated that 2424 Elliot Avenue could be deemed a public nuisance by the city if additional criminal activity were to occur at the property. The owner of 2424 Elliot Avenue responded that he would abate the problem and asked if there was a donation process for the property to be handed over to the city.

Between January and March, both Jamarcus Glover’s residence on Elliot Avenue and Breonna Taylor’s home were under surveillance by PBI, resulting in the no-knock warrants and subsequent arrest of Glover and murder of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020. On

March 17, the second and final Notice of Public Nuisance Violation was sent to the property owner at 2424 Elliot Ave, following the arrests on March 13th, resulting in the property being donated to Louisville Metro Government on June 19, 2020 (Louisville Metro Government, 2020). This process of nuisance and property abatement highlights what Roy, Graziani, & Stephens call, “the territorial logic of interlocking regimes of racialized policing as a necessary condition for gentrification and displacement” (Roy, Graziani, & Stephens, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This study found that within the logic of what we have come to understand as plantation urbanism, local governments have two functions: 1) to attract as much redevelopment capital to the city as possible and 2) to make sure residents are obedient and subservient to that capital. The subservience and obedience are maintained by media and nonprofits through perception control, optics management, and corralling dissent. Plantation urbanists craft dominant narratives that co-opt progressive language so as to appear to be working --albeit in a paternalistic fashion-- on behalf of residents, much like plantation owners claimed benevolence in the care of their slave population.

The legacy of the bourbon industry in Louisville has created a “whisky oligarchy” where the media is tightly controlled by a few wealthy families, and there are little opportunities for communities to launch independent investigations to produce counter narratives that challenge systems of oppression (Louisville Public Media, 2019). In 2018, Gill Holland’s publishing company released a book about the history of Portland (Hidgon, 2018). Holland has already commissioned a similar book about Russell by a local journalist (Jackson, 2020). Holland also served on the board of Louisville Public Media for the past 9 years, retiring in July 2019. In 2019 the LMHA commissioned a documentary film about the history of Beecher Terrace by a local film-maker who celebrated the project as “uplifting the neighborhood” (Jones, 2020). RPOP and Kenan Charitable Trust commissioned national journalist Soledad O’Brien to do a lengthy feature on the project for her television show, *Matter of Fact*, titled *America’s Cities: Russell Rising as Citizens Build Their Own Path* (O’Brien, 2019). Finally, the city’s leading housing advocacy organization, the Metropolitan Housing Coalition (MHC), publishes a yearly report in collaboration with the University of Louisville that is funded by many of the developers and financial interests that are currently invested in the gentrification of Russell, further normalizing the colonization of local data and knowledge (MHC, 2019).

Through our investigation into the historical legacy of plantation urbanism, we found evidence that, through investments, public land giveaways, developer subsidies, the concentration of budding development initiatives, and philanthropic donations, Louisville’s ruling class exerts tight control over media narratives and public policy and has a clear and vested interest in the gentrification of the historically Black Russell neighborhood, which will create massive unhousing for Russell residents without an urgent policy of public protection. These patterns form a straight, empirical line from the antebellum South to the present in

racial capitalism where white, wealthy families weaponize monopolies of land ownership, state support and profit to violently dispossess Black bodies, with the police serving as a foundational apparatus in that process. Central to these patterns are narratives that service plantation urbanism's practitioners as the paternal benefactors of Black and poor communities, meanwhile corralling dissent, co-opting resistance through philanthropic donor relationships, gatekeeping and erasing counter-narratives of Black lead initiatives.

Through conjoined banishment tools such as surveillance and property abatements, the forces of plantation urbanism use state and police power to access cheap land and remove Black and poor residents to protect speculative investment and create territorial control of urban redevelopment. This territorial control and monopoly capitalism is made possible by the legacies of plantation regimes in denying Black communities land ownership and political autonomy. Our study finds that these historical forces converged on the Russell neighborhood in the Spring of 2020 to place the property at 2424 Elliot Avenue under surveillance to protect redevelopment dollars, and that the nuisance ordinance signed by the city in cooperation with the Louisville police served as a death warrant in the murder of Breonna Taylor.

Beginning on May 28th, Louisville experienced a massive uprising in response to the Breonna Taylor murder. On July 10th, 2020 protestors interrupted a press conference held at the ribbon cutting of Gill Holland's Montgomery Ave development project, where they shut down a speech by Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer with the chant of "Fire Fire Gentrifier" (WLKY Digital Team, 2020). Later, seventy-six demonstrators were arrested in NuLu on Friday, July 24, for occupying a block of East Market Street and targeting the business district for its role in gentrification and racial banishment (Loosemore, 2020).

We call for an end to the Louisville nuisance ordinances. We call for a moratorium on evictions in the Russell neighborhood. We call for a system of public land donations for Russell residents and the requirement of Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) in West Louisville development projects to ensure a participatory process between developers and residents that can produce social good for the community beyond the return on investment for private capital. We believe that only through this sort of strategic resistance, tenant organizing, and radical collective power can Black and poor communities in the South combat the massive control that racial capitalism and plantation legacies exert over their lives.

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