

Orange Mound: Through the Anthropological Lens on Gentrification

Introduction

Orange Mound, located in Memphis, Tennessee, occupies a distinctive position in African American urban history. Established in the late nineteenth century on the subdivided grounds of the former Deaderick plantation, it became the first large-scale community in the United States where African Americans could purchase land and build homes. This monograph frames Orange Mound in anthropological terms as both a place and a process: a materially defined neighborhood and a historically situated project of Black collective self-design (the deliberate process of shaping identity, character, and self-perception).

Following Boas's (1920) principle of historical particularism, we examine Orange Mound's emergence through local contingencies—post-Reconstruction, racial capitalism, streetcar urbanism, and Black property procurements—while tracking how residents built institutions that reproduced cultural life and political personhood across generations. Drawing on political economy, urban anthropology, and ethnographies of Black social organization, we analyze community formation, demographic change (1970–2023), economic development, pioneering leadership, and contemporary gentrification and displacement. Its founding marked a critical moment of self-determination in the post-Reconstruction South, when land ownership symbolized not only economic stability but also freedom, dignity, and belonging (Williams, 2013). Over generations, Orange Mound residents created a vibrant community life centered on kinship networks, churches, schools, small businesses, and recreation.

Yet, like many historically Black neighborhoods across the United States, Orange Mound now confronts the challenges of gentrification. Subtle in approach and often cloaked in goodwill, this process carries real consequences: displacement, cultural erasure, and the redefinition of space by external actors who rarely inhabit the neighborhood themselves. Gentrification has always resembled a haunting—eerie, uncanny, and profoundly disquieting—emanating not from within the community but from without, imposed by the corridors of power—city hall, developers, real estate agents, and other forces that reshape the lives and histories of those who made the place what it is.

Accumulation by Dispossession

In this context, David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" is particularly relevant. This framework explains how gentrification functions as a mechanism for concentrating wealth and resources in the hands of a few while dispossessing marginalized communities. In Orange Mound, the displacement of long-term residents due to rising property values exemplifies this concept. As developers target the neighborhood for redevelopment, the economic marginalization that once suppressed property values becomes a tool for wealth extraction.

For instance, as property values rise, long-time residents are often unable to afford increasing rents and property taxes, leading to their displacement. This process not only severs kinship networks and community ties but also transforms the cultural landscape, often erasing the rich history and identity of the neighborhood. Moreover, the financialization of housing turns homes into mere commodities, exacerbating the cycle of dispossession as investors prioritize profit over community needs.

Land Acquisition and the Politics of Space

The origins of Orange Mound underscore the significance of land as both a material and symbolic resource. African American families who purchased lots in the 1890s transformed former plantation soil into a landscape of freedom. This history resonates with Harvey's (2008) concept of the "right to the city," where marginalized groups assert claims to urban space as a form of political agency. At the same time, Smith's (1996) "rent gap" theory elucidates present-day threats: decades of economic marginalization suppressed property values, creating opportunities for developers to revalorize land at the expense of long-term residents.

Community, Family, and Cultural Life

For decades, Orange Mound nurtured strong family structures and community institutions. Churches anchored spiritual and civic life, schools such as Melrose High became centers of pride, and recreational spaces like Orange Mound Park—housing the only African American swimming pool in Memphis—fostered intergenerational bonds, only to become the first community asset to succumb to gentrification in 1972.

Anthropologically, these institutions functioned as what Geertz (1973) termed "webs of meaning," where shared practices forged collective identity. Zukin's (1982) notion of "cultural capital" is also instructive here: the symbolic weight of Orange Mound's cultural life—its festivals, music (spirituals, gospel, blues), sports, and social networks—became assets of community resilience but are also vulnerable to commodification in gentrifying contexts.

Race, Class, and Dynamics of Change: Demographic Trajectories, 1970–2023

The experience of Orange Mound underscores the racialized dimensions of urban space. For much of the twentieth century, the neighborhood served as an enclave of Black property ownership in the segregated South. Schools, businesses, and civic organizations flourished despite exclusionary policies such as redlining. Wacquant's (2008) concept of "advanced marginality" helps explain how, in the postindustrial era, Orange Mound began to be stigmatized as a site of poverty and decline. Local media portrayals have contributed to the community's negative image, reinforcing racial and class dynamics in the gentrification process.

Census Tracts 67 and 68—statistical proxies for Orange Mound—register a long arc from a high-density, predominantly Black homeowner community in the late twentieth century to a twenty-first-century landscape marked by population loss, aging households, and rising poverty. Macro processes such as deindustrialization, suburbanization, racialized credit markets, and prison expansion have reorganized labor, housing finance, and family life in Black communities like Orange Mound.

Youth out-migration for education and work reflects life-course mobility and uneven opportunity structures, weakening the intergenerational relay of wealth through which neighborhood knowledge and home maintenance are transmitted. Vacancies and investor acquisitions shift occupancy from owner-occupied to absentee-owned rentals, undermining place-based governance and everyday surveillance that once stabilized neighborhoods. The demographic record thus serves as numeric material culture that reflects government policies that differentially load risk onto Black neighborhoods while extracting value from their land and labor.

Memory, Resistance, and Belonging

Orange Mound residents have long mobilized memory and history as forms of resistance. The community's identity as the first African American landowning neighborhood in the South serves as a foundation for claims to belonging and cultural survival. Low's (1996) work on contested public spaces reminds us that places are imbued with meaning, becoming battlegrounds over who has the right to occupy, use, and define them. In Orange Mound, churches, alumni associations, and neighborhood groups have anchored resistance, insisting that revitalization must honor the legacy of those who built the community from the ground up.

Specific Resistance Strategies

1. **Community Land Trust (ABODE CLT):** The ABODE Orange Mound Community Land Trust is a nonprofit initiative focused on creating affordable homeownership through a Community Land Trust model. The land is owned by the CLT, while homes are owned by residents, ensuring long-term control and stewardship in affiliation with the City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD). This initiative aims to make housing permanently affordable for residents, revitalizing the Orange Mound neighborhood by providing high-quality, affordable homes and promoting long-term community stewardship of land.
2. **Community Organizing and Advocacy Groups:** Local organizations, including the Orange Mound Community Development Corporation (OMCDC), work to empower residents through education and mobilization around housing stability, economic development, and cultural preservation.
3. **Legal Action:** Residents engage in legal battles against unjust evictions and discriminatory housing practices, often collaborating with local legal aid organizations to protect their rights.
4. **Cultural Events and Heritage Celebrations:** Cultural festivals, such as the Orange Mound Music Festival, celebrate the neighborhood's rich musical heritage and help reinforce community ties while asserting its cultural identity.
5. **Partnerships with Universities:** Collaborations with local universities for research on community history and demographics help residents present data-driven arguments for policy changes that protect their interests.

6. **Advocating for Policy Changes:** Activists lobby for policies that ensure affordable housing, such as inclusionary zoning laws and property tax relief for low-income residents.
7. **Creating Cooperative Businesses:** Initiatives to establish community-owned businesses help keep economic benefits within the neighborhood and foster resilience against displacement.
8. **Utilizing Social Media:** Residents leverage social media platforms to raise awareness about gentrification and mobilize support for local initiatives, engaging younger community members.

These resistance strategies illustrate how the residents of Orange Mound actively engage in protecting their community and assert their rights amid the pressures of gentrification, highlighting their resilience and determination to maintain their cultural identity and social cohesion.

From its founding through mid-century, Orange Mound's economy thrived on embedded exchanges—barbershops, groceries, cafés, garages, and dressmakers—where transactions were social ties as much as monetary exchanges. Public sector jobs, skilled trades, and Black entrepreneurship supported a modest working- and middle-class base despite the constraints of segregation.

The neighborhood's pioneers—land purchasers, educators, coaches, clergy, organizers, small business owners—operated as cultural brokers, translating between the demands of a white-dominated city and the aspirations of a Black community. Their work exemplifies agency within structure: methodical institution-building that converted limited resources into robust social infrastructures like the Orange Mound Civic Club, the Orange Mound Settlement House, and other community-based mutual-aid organizations.

Gentrification, Displacement, and the Politics of Heritage

Post-1970s restructuring exposed Orange Mound's local economy to volatile capital flows and risks. Suburban retail siphoned customers; redlining and subprime lending hollowed home equity; and municipal disinvestment frayed streetscapes. Yet, entrepreneurial relaunches—food ventures like the Orange Mound Grill, cultural festivals such as Melrose football games, and heritage branding—illustrate how residents deploy cultural capital and memory work to revitalize economic life, even as market participation becomes increasingly extractive.

In the 2010s and 2020s, Orange Mound faced speculative interest framed as “revitalization.” Anthropologically, gentrification is not merely new paint and coffee shops; it is a regime of value exchange that transforms historic Black spaces into exchangeable aesthetics while replacing long-time residents. Property tax burdens, code enforcement, and cash offers to elders combine with absentee acquisitions to produce what some term accumulation by dispossession. This pattern mirrors the gentrification experienced by another Black community in East Memphis, known as McKinney/Truse.

Displacement is both material and symbolic. It severs kin networks from homes that serve as archives of family life—homes that hold not only Jesus Christ and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

but also diplomas, photographs, championship jackets, and church bulletins. Displacement reassigns neighborhood meaning from lived heritage to marketable brand. Heritage projects can either protect or endanger: commemorations and historic designations may channel resources to community stewardship, or they can aestheticize history for outside consumption. The analytic task is to distinguish heritage as a community right from heritage as extractive spectacle and to craft reinvestment policies that align venture and speculation with resident sovereignty.

Global and Comparative Perspectives

Placing Orange Mound in dialogue with global anthropological studies of urbanism enhances our understanding of its struggles. Datta's (2012) research on housing and citizenship in Delhi highlights parallels in how marginalized populations assert rights to space amid redevelopment. Similarly, Simone's (2004) work in African cities demonstrates the creativity of residents in sustaining community under shifting political economies. Orange Mound's history of landownership, cultural production, and survival strategies reflects these broader themes, situating it within a transnational anthropology of urban resistance.

Conclusion

Through an anthropological lens, Orange Mound is more than a neighborhood; it is a site of cultural production, historical memory, and ongoing struggle over space. Its founding on land once associated with slavery, its flourishing as a center of Black family and community life, and its endurance through segregation and disinvestment reveal the layered meanings of place. Today, as gentrification advances, Orange Mound exemplifies the tensions between capital and culture, between "revitalization" and displacement, and between heritage and erasure.

Anthropology, by integrating political economy, cultural analysis, and ethnographic attention to lived experience, helps illuminate these dynamics. It emphasizes that gentrification is not simply a material process of redevelopment but also a symbolic struggle over identity, belonging, and history. Orange Mound's story thus challenges scholars and policymakers alike to recognize that true revitalization must be rooted in the memories, rights, and aspirations of the community itself.

References

- Boas, F. (1920). The methods of ethnology. *American Anthropologist*, 22(4), 311–321. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/660328>.
- Datta, A. (2012). *The illegal city: Space, law, and gender in a Delhi squatter settlement*. London: Routledge.
- Devin, J. (2011). Life stories: Orangella Harris kept neighbors united amid change. *The Commercial Appeal*. Retrieved from <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2011/mar/06/life-stories-harris-kept-neighbors-united-amid/>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harvey, D. (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review*, 53, 23–40.
- McCollough, P. (1985, June 6). Neglect of pocket area seems destined to linger. *The Commercial Appeal*, pp. B1 and B14.

- Memphis and Shelby County Office of Planning and Development. (1986). *Truss-McKinney redevelopment study*. Adopted by Memphis City Council, November 25, Memphis, TN, USA.
- Low, S. (1996). The anthropology of cities: Imagining and theorizing the city. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25, 383–409.
- Memphis and Shelby County Planning Commission. (1973). *Truss/McKinney study (rezoning study no. 119)*. Memphis, TN, USA.
- Simone, A. (2004). *For the city yet to come: Changing African life in four cities*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Smith, N. (1996). *The new urban frontier: Gentrification and the revanchist city*. New York: Routledge.
- Wacquant, L. (2008). *Urban outcasts: A comparative sociology of advanced marginality*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Williams, C. (2013). *African American life and culture in Orange Mound: Case study of a Black community in Memphis, Tennessee, 1890–1980*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Williams, C. (1982). Two Black communities in Memphis, Tennessee: A study in urban socio-political structure (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA.
- Zukin, S. (1982). *Loft living: Culture and capital in urban change*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.