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Redlining in Philadelphia Never Ended

The UC Townhomes is one of the last affordable housing complexes in what is now considered the University City district of West Philadelphia, and is at serious risk of being lost. Founded in 1983 as public housing serving 68 families, the UC Townhomes were created to be a relief for West Philadelphia residents. Once a predominantly Black neighborhood known as the Black Bottom, University City has seen rapid redevelopment and displacement fueled almost entirely by nearby institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University. Residents like Rasheda Alexander, who has lived there since 2008, now face the reality of losing not just their homes, but the community they helped build. With the Townhomes' affordable housing contract expired, the complex is likely living on borrowed time, with University City developers eying it at all times. Through the process of reverse-redlining— the practice of going into historically disenfranchised communities and buying up property, displacing residents, and culturally cleansing a rich community —the Black Bottom neighborhood is not much more than a memory. Now with the UC Townhomes at risk of meeting the same fate, groups like the Save the UC Townhomes Coalition are fighting back, led and working alongside residents like Rasheda Alexander to preserve the Townhomes because, ultimately, the struggle over UC Townhomes has become symbolic of the broader fight against gentrification, displacement, and anti-Blackness in Philadelphia.

Redlining is the discriminatory and racist practice of systematically denying services to minority neighborhoods. This practice was institutionalized in the 1930s through the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) maps, which identified minority neighborhoods as

hazardous and denied them loans, mortgages, and investments. In Philadelphia, these maps categorized African American and immigrant neighborhoods as high-risk, cutting off their residents from the opportunity to build wealth through homeownership. As Richard Rothstein argues in *The Color of Law*, this segregation was not simply a private market failure but a deliberate and coordinated effort by the government. He writes, “preventing African Americans from acquiring homes in white suburbs, while government-backed loans were accessible to whites, entrenched segregation and compounded racial economic inequality” (Rothstein 89). Despite redlining being outlawed in 1968 under the Fair Housing Act, the practice was never truly excised in Philadelphia, but rather evolved into something new.

These discriminatory practices were nothing new, though. Even before the establishment of formal redlining maps, Black and Brown Philadelphians were subjected to discriminatory housing practices and received no government support to combat them. In fact, a 1920s Philadelphia survey revealed that African American tenants faced rent increases nearly twice as high as their white counterparts (Rothstein 45). The survey highlighted that, as more African Americans moved north during the Great Migration, landlords disproportionately raised rents for Black tenants, further entrenching wealth disparities that would persist into the following decades. These early examples of discriminatory practices in Philadelphia set the stage for the more formalized redlining practices that would follow.

Census data from Philadelphia County underscores these disparities. In predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, homeownership rates are significantly lower than in white neighborhoods, and household wealth is drastically reduced. A recent study by Massey and Denton in *American Apartheid* further supports this analysis, showing how urban policy systematically segregated minorities from wealthier, predominantly white suburbs. In

Philadelphia, the average wealth of Black families is roughly one-tenth that of white families, a direct consequence of exclusionary housing policies and decades of discrimination (Massey & Denton 76).

While redlining as an official practice has ended, it has been replaced by reverse-redlining, where lenders and financial institutions target historically redlined neighborhoods with predatory loans and high-interest rates. This practice, prevalent in Philadelphia, disproportionately affects minority communities, keeping them in cycles of debt and economic instability. In their study, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, sociologists George Lipsitz and David Harvey argue that the discriminatory lending practices of reverse-redlining mirror the outcomes of traditional redlining— keeping minority populations economically vulnerable and excluded from wealth-building opportunities (Lipsitz & Harvey 143). Simultaneously, Philadelphia’s minority residents face an increasing rent burden. According to U.S. Census data, nearly half of the city’s renters are classified as “rent-burdened,” meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing. In historically redlined neighborhoods like North and West Philadelphia, the rent burden disproportionately affects low-income and minority households. Gentrification has exacerbated this issue, as wealthier, often white, residents move into these areas, driving up housing costs and displacing long-term residents.

Urban renewal projects, presented as a solution to blighted neighborhoods, have in reality become a modern form of redlining. Gentrification is often framed as revitalization, but it disproportionately displaces minority residents, pushing them out of neighborhoods they have lived in for generations. This displacement is a direct result of the rising property values and rents that accompany gentrification. In areas like Northern Liberties and Fishtown, gentrification

has led to the transformation of historically Black neighborhoods into predominantly white, upper-middle-class enclaves. A study by Hyra (2017) on the effects of gentrification in Philadelphia illustrates how urban renewal efforts displace low-income Black and Latino residents while benefiting wealthier newcomers. As Hyra notes in *Race, Class, and Politics in the Cappuccino City*, the socio-economic gains from urban renewal rarely benefit the long-term residents of these neighborhoods (Hyra 98). This process not only deepens racial and economic divides but also reinforces the legacy of redlining by keeping minority populations in precarious economic positions.

Addressing the legacy of redlining and its modern manifestations in Philadelphia requires bold policy interventions. One promising solution is inclusionary zoning, which mandates that a percentage of new housing developments be set aside for affordable housing. Philadelphia has already adopted inclusionary zoning policies, but stronger enforcement and expanded requirements are needed to ensure that affordable housing options are available to low- and middle-income residents. Public investment in affordable housing is another essential step toward addressing the housing crisis. This requires federal, state, and local governments to increase funding for affordable housing projects and expand programs like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), which helps finance affordable housing development. Philadelphia must also prioritize the preservation of existing affordable housing stock to prevent further displacement of long-term residents.

Finally, anti-displacement measures, such as rent control and tenant protections, should be considered to alleviate the rent burden on Philadelphia's most vulnerable residents. Stronger protections against eviction, rental assistance programs, and legal support for tenants can help stabilize communities that are at risk of displacement due to rising housing costs. Redlining may

have been officially banned, but its legacy is far from over. In Philadelphia, reverse-redlining, urban renewal, and increasing rent burdens perpetuate the same racial and economic inequalities that redlining created decades ago. While these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. By implementing policies that promote affordable housing, inclusionary zoning, and anti-displacement measures, Philadelphia can begin to dismantle the structures of inequality that have persisted for so long. It is only through concerted public effort and investment that the city can build a future in which all residents, regardless of race or income, have access to safe, affordable housing and the opportunity to build wealth.

Works Cited

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