

## COMMUNITY AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF GENTRIFICATION IN CHARLOTTE'S LOCKWOOD

Department of Anthropology  
Quinton Frederick and Nicole Peterson, Ph.D.

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### *Abstract*

This project examined the interactions between community relationships and physical space in Charlotte's Lockwood neighborhood. Property values in Lockwood are growing at one of the fastest rates in the country and show no signs of stopping. This growth made Lockwood a fitting place to investigate gentrification, an increasingly important issue in Charlotte and beyond. Previous researchers recorded oral histories from Lockwood's residents during this period of property value increase. Qualitatively coding these oral histories revealed a significant theme: residents consistently mentioned a decline in the neighborhood's sense of community. Additional interviews and archival research indicated dramatic changes to Lockwood's built environment. Many of Lockwood's historic homes have been replaced by new, larger houses with far less emphasis on community building spaces like front porches and backyards. In response, local non-profit Community Dream Builders creatively



### Quinton Frederick

Quinton Frederick is a Levine Scholar majoring in architecture and history at UNC Charlotte. As a freshman in UNC Charlotte's School of Architecture, he discovered the fascinating intersection of history and physical space. With encouragement from the Levine Scholars Program, Quinton added a second major in history to explore this academic interest. This research project allowed him to investigate the two subjects through the lens



### FACULTY ADVISOR Nicole Peterson, Ph.D.

Dr. Nicole Peterson is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at UNC Charlotte, and has examined Charlotte area food systems, how people adapt to changing climates and agricultural systems, and community-oriented sustainability efforts. Nicole has also been collaborating with Community Dream Builders for several years to understand neighborhood change. You can get more information about publications and courses at [clas-pages.uncc.edu/nicole-peterson](https://clas-pages.uncc.edu/nicole-peterson).

used Lockwood's physical space to bring residents together and encourage sustainable growth. The residents' comments about community interactions were examined through the context of these documented physical changes. Research showed that Lockwood residents rely on informal community building spaces like front porches and backyards to form connections with one another. The loss or obstruction of these crucial spaces was at least an indicator and perhaps an accelerator of social change in the neighborhood. As property values continue to rise, the remaining community spaces in Lockwood should be preserved and expanded.

**Keywords:** Lockwood, gentrification, community, built environment, oral history

## *Introduction*

Gentrification has become something of a buzzword recently. Everyone seems to have an opinion on it and most people are not afraid to share theirs. But how many people really understand gentrification as a process and not just a word? Glass (1964) first coined the term “gentrification” as the process where “many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes,” (p. 22). Using this definition, researchers in the United States conducted a series of studies in what Freeman (2016) called the “first wave of gentrification research,” (p.163). Like Glass, these researchers generally defined gentrification as a process where middle-class, well-educated, white-collar workers moved into neighborhood’s close to the center city because of the lifestyle and opportunities it provided. The process usually displaced long term residents, rapidly changing the neighborhood’s physical and social fabric (Sumka, 1979). A “second wave of gentrification research” followed, where scholars found gentrification to be far more prevalent and much less distinct (Freeman, 2016) in that the causes and consequences of change became harder to identify. In this period of study, Kennedy and Leonard (2001) recognized that the term gentrification was “both imprecise and quite politically charged” for such a complicated phenomenon that looked different in each city, community and even person they investigated (p. 5). Agreeing with Kennedy and Leonard, Yonto and Thill (2020) claimed that “different dynamics” of gentrification in the New South provided a previously unexplored perspective (p.1). Given these challenges of defining “gentrification,” this study avoids employing a specific definition of the process. Instead, this paper will discuss the physical and social changes perceived by residents of Charlotte’s Lockwood neighborhood, a particularly unique and relevant case study.

Lockwood was first developed in the 1920s as a small neighborhood just outside of Uptown Charlotte. Then and now, the neighborhood is defined by three main avenues, Plymouth, Sylvania, Keswick, and their cross streets. Many of the early residents lived in modest bungalows



increased. The average home in Lockwood now costs close to three hundred thousand dollars. A recent study even identified Lockwood as one of the nation's most rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods (Realtor.com, 2019). As property values rose, some residents became concerned about the physical and social consequences of this growth. They worried that the neighborhood's social structure and built environment would dramatically change. A dedicated group of residents led by Mr. Chris Dennis began working to preserve the neighborhood as it grew. Community Dream Builders is a non-profit founded by Mr. Dennis with a mission to support sustainable community growth. This paper examines the physical and social changes taking place in Lockwood as well as the efforts by Community Dream Builders to preserve the neighborhood's identity. Studying these struggles and changes in Lockwood confirmed Kennedy and Leonard's ideas about gentrification; it is a complicated and extensive process best understood through the lens of those who experience it firsthand.

### *Methods*

This research project relied on data collected by previous researchers. Starting in 2017, students led by Dr. Nicole Peterson collected oral histories from Lockwood's residents through interviews approved by UNC Charlotte's Institutional Review Board. The interviews were semi-structured- meaning researchers prepared questions but allowed the discussion to respond to the unique experiences of each subject. Over twenty hours of video recording captured the stories of twenty-one community members. Of these twenty-one interview subjects, thirteen (a majority) were long term residents, living in Lockwood for over ten years. Five of these long-term residents grew up in the neighborhood, while the others moved in later in life. Interviewees ranged in age from early 20s to late 70s, and while the majority of interviewees identified as Black, a few newer residents and a long-term landlord identified as white. In this paper, pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of all interviewees except Dr. Tom Hanchett and Mr. Chris Dennis.

The resulting interviews provided rich insights into a wide variety of experiences, themes, and ideas about Lockwood. Previous researchers then edited and qualitatively coded these interviews using grounded theory (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Two of the themes they identified formed the basis for this stage of the project, since residents consistently discussed changes to the social community and built environment in their oral history interviews.

In the projects current stage, additional qualitative coding of the interviews revealed new subthemes within the categories of change in the community and change in the built environment. Quotes about specific neighborhood changes were coded by the speaker's opinion of those changes, e.g. positive, negative, or unclear. Additionally, comments about community interactions were coded by the spaces where they occurred, e.g. the front porch, street, or backyard. This coding exercise sourced quotes from previous codebooks, interview transcripts, and the video recordings themselves. Reviewing similar studies in other cities also helped further guide the analysis of the data.

Additional research methods supplemented this coding methodology. A second interview was recorded and coded with Charlotte neighborhood historian Dr. Tom Hanchett, a participant in the earlier phase of the project. Dr. Hanchett answered new questions related to the connections between social activity and physical space in Lockwood. Archival research also brought additional context to quotes about the neighborhood's changing physical environment and history. For example, photographic records were found to match comments about specific demolished structures.

### *Results*

#### **Spaces and Community Interactions: Porches, yards, and streets**

Throughout their interviews, residents consistently referenced the importance of informal community building spaces in Lockwood. One of the closest public spaces for neighborhood

residents, Greenville Park, is over a mile away across several major roads. Without easy access to traditional community building spaces, Lockwood residents found creative informal ways to interact with one another and build community. These activities occurred primarily in three distinct spaces: the front porch, backyard, and street. Together these spaces formed the backdrop for a strong informal care network that connected Lockwood's residents.

Lockwood residents fondly remembered gathering beneath large, covered porches, a trademark of the neighborhood's historic craftsman bungalows (Mayer, 2019). Donna, a long-term resident, recalled these front porch gatherings saying, "If it were cold, we had hot chocolate in the Styrofoam cups for the kids to drink before the bus came and I would read *Oh The Places You'll Go* every morning for any of the kids out there." Sixty-nine-year-old and long term resident Gloria said that they can't walk past one neighbor "without going up on her porch and giving her a hug and a kiss." Thirty-seven-year-old Marcus spent time in the neighborhood as a child and described front porch interactions as "the things you look for in a community, in a neighborhood, those are the things I will cherish for the rest of my life." At least seven other residents directly mentioned a positive community interaction taking place on the front porch. Community historian Dr. Tom Hanchett traced this tradition of front porch gatherings to the 1960s, when the neighborhood demographics transitioned from white to Black. Since then, Lockwood's members have used their front porches to form a close-knit community.

Although not mentioned as frequently as the front porch, many residents described gathering with their neighbors in backyards. After walking through the neighborhood, it's easy to understand why. Lockwood's backyards are surprisingly spacious, especially for a neighborhood so close to Uptown Charlotte. Donald, a long-term resident described a surprising backyard interaction saying, "you're in the house and all of a sudden you hear some noise, and you wonder what's going on and you've got a girl sitting in the back yard back there playing drums." Donald

continued, “But it’s your neighbor and it feels so good, you know?” Charles, a sixty-eight-year-old long-term resident, described backyard cookouts, saying “It was awesome and we would have some good times and she would invite everybody and anybody.” Donna even remembered that her neighbors attended a family wedding in her backyard, because community means “sharing experiences.” At least five of their neighbors referenced similar community interactions in the backyard.

Lockwood’s famous block parties perhaps united the neighborhood most of all. Every once and awhile, Lockwood residents met at one resident’s home for a neighborhood gathering that filled the wide streets. The entire community seemed to work together organizing these events. 22-year-old resident Mary described an elaborate process of attending meetings, passing out flyers, and cleaning the neighborhood (before and after). Others remembered preparing the food necessary to feed such a large crowd. Long-term resident Raymond said that the act of sharing food, “is why Lockwood is not just a neighborhood, but also a community.” At least eight residents described these block parties, but the events might have been best summarized by a sixty-three-year-old Henry who said, “The block parties were out of sight, we had a great time.” More than any other event, the Lockwood block parties demonstrated the strong social connections of Lockwood’s previous community.

### **Changing Community Interactions: distances and community events**

According to Lockwood’s members, the neighborhood interacts differently today. Many residents claimed that the once closely-knit Lockwood community has changed, with resident interactions becoming less and less frequent. This point of view certainly fits neatly within prevailing narratives on gentrification (Sumka, 1979). The story in Lockwood was much more complicated though. Plenty of community members identified positive changes brought to the neighborhood by newer residents like Mr. Chris Dennis. Regardless of their opinions on the subject,

interview participants generally agreed that the neighborhood's social fabric changed due to an influx of new residents.

Interviewed Lockwood residents commonly contrasted the front porch gathering and block parties of past years with the current community, where they no longer knew many neighbors by name. Gloria said, "I got neighbors walking past me all day long that don't speak." Donna claimed that community gatherings had ceased because, "there have been so many harsh words spoken here and dissention, and disagreement, that I'm not sure we could ever bridge that gap." Forty-two-year-old Arthur gave one example of this dissention saying, "when they see a group of us socializing it's a problem so that's when you get the police coming up wanting to harass you... it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out where the calls are coming from." Seventy-year-old resident Roger said, "Some of the people that's been here forty-fifty years they don't trust the people that are just movin' in." At least seven other residents expressed similar concerns about the social changes occurring in Lockwood. They thought that Lockwood's carefully constructed informal care networks suffered due to new neighborhood transplants.

Some residents, however, found that positive community interactions actually increased due to new residents. Martha who recently moved in but also grew up in Lockwood said, "I love that about here, that everything is changing, and people are trying to come together in the neighborhood." At least five of their neighbors agreed. Interview participants often mentioned community projects, like the street murals, a neighborhood 5k, and a community festival as examples of improving social interaction within the neighborhood. Janet, a newer resident, noted how the street mural project brought people together saying, "we had to go door to door and get 75% of the people on the street to agree... I think that's community- trying to do good things together and getting to know what people care about." Much of this effort can be traced back to Mr. Dennis and the Community Dream Builders' quest to strengthen community ties in Lockwood. Mr. Dennis,

a relatively recent resident, saw opportunities in Lockwood's current situation. He said, "you just have to bring back the hope and demand resources, even if you have to create them yourself. It's not hard for anyone to do... if you believe you can change something, anything is possible." Many believed that new residents like Mr. Dennis were helping to increase community interactions that had declined.

### **The New Lockwood Built Environment: demolitions and preservation**

Most of Lockwood's houses can be divided into two historical periods: craftsman bungalows built sometime around the 1920s and ranch style houses built between the end of World War Two and the 1960s (Mayer, 2019). For most of their lifetime, these houses remained largely untouched- a rare feat in Charlotte. Following recent gentrification though, several of these historic structures were demolished to make room for new (often dramatically different) houses. Renovations and additions further transformed the neighborhood's architectural character. Five residents specifically approved of these recent physical changes. The remaining sixteen interviewed residents either expressed concern or had mixed opinions.

Several interview subjects identified specific recently demolished structures. Terry who grew up in the neighborhood said, "I still don't know why. They just tore that one down right in front of their house. My uncle lived there for a long time." Another long-term resident James remembered a "rustic house with white columns" from the 1930s that was recently demolished. Perhaps they referred to a recently destroyed small Craftsman home with a wraparound porch where neighbors almost certainly gathered (Google Earth, 2015). A newer resident Dylan said, "The most recent homes like that have sold on my street are like over \$400,000 and they're tear-downs." At least five other residents mentioned the loss of specific structures with concern. But according to the interview participants, not all demolition was negative. Donald celebrated the destruction of a nearby former speakeasy. Generally, though, residents worried that the neighbor-

hood's history and identity was being erased through the loss of these buildings.

These demolished structures were almost always replaced with larger more modern homes, a trend that further concerned Lockwood residents. Janet said, "I mean it would be awesome if this could stay really wonderful close, mixed, income racially mixed [neighborhood]... you wonder these are really cool big houses, but they don't necessarily fit in." Meanwhile, Dylan asked, "are you one of the newbies is coming in, you know building the big nice houses, or are you gonna be one of the traditional people that's been here that's going to try to preserve?" They might have been thinking of two larger modern homes recently built on Sylvania Avenue, or an addition on Keswick (fig. 2). These new houses had far less emphasis on important community building spaces. At the two new houses on Sylvania, for example, the front porches did not include any furniture and the backyards were hidden with privacy fences. Six other residents made similar comments about new construction in Lockwood. They were concerned that these new houses, along with raising property values, further modified the already changing community by providing a physical indicator of the differences between new and old residents.

**Figure 2**

*Recent Lockwood Construction*



Not all of Lockwood’s new construction began with tearing down though. Many new residents chose to renovate their homes rather than replacing them. Henry described these changes, saying “I think it makes it a little better. I just got to be frank.” With the Lockwood Legends Arts facility, Mr. Dennis saved one of Lockwood’s historic homes from demolition (fig. 3). He remodeled the historic landmark to serve as a space for arts, culture and community interactions that will “get people to talk,” and “share commonalities.” Other initiatives like the Music Factory 5K Rock ‘N Run, colorful street murals, and neighborhood festival found similar success in bringing people together (Powell, 2018). Some residents, meanwhile, worried that beautification would raise property values and price other residents out of their neighborhood, citing neighborhoods like Charlotte’s NoDa. Dr. Hanchett remarked that some of these remodeled homes were in poor condition due to previous disinvestment and “absentee landlords.” New residents who invested in these homes helped preserve Lockwood’s historic built environment, but potentially raised property values at the same time (Leggett, 2014).

**Figure 3**

*Lockwood Legends Arts Facility*



*Note.* The Lockwood Legends House can be found in the Charlotte Landmarks Commission Historic Landmarks Register as the Butler House, named for its former owner.

## **Lockwood's Future is Just Beginning: further decline and displacement or creative neighborhood spaces**

With so much social and physical change occurring, residents wondered what might come next. Some interview participants who negatively perceived previous neighborhood change forecasted additional decline. A vast majority, however, saw Lockwood's future differently. Participants who appreciated previous physical and social change understandably looked forward to the future. Surprisingly though, many of the residents who expressed concern about previous change also saw a brighter future for Lockwood and its people. All the interviewed residents could agree on one thing though; they each thought Lockwood's change was just beginning.

Many negative views of Lockwood's future focused on additional changes to the built environment. These residents worried that the physical changes they had already seen would increase soon. Gloria asked, "How can you [keep the same environment] when everybody's living on top of each other in expensive condos or co-ops or whatever they wanna call it... So they gotta make it look like Uptown." Perhaps they referenced Lockwood's designation as a focus area in Charlotte's 2040 Comprehensive Plan (Chemtob, 2020). Terry predicted the result of this growth, saying "a lot of people's gonna move out, that's been living here for years." At least seven other residents made similar claims. They feared the loss of their homes and neighbors at the hands of continued economic growth.

Most interview participants remained optimistic about Lockwood's future. Charles simply said, "this is going be a nice area." A few others made similarly general statements. Most residents, though, demonstrated their optimism by discussing specific improvements they hoped to see. Martha who recently moved in predicted that Lockwood might, "become more open and that it grows and a lot of things happen, I like to actually like try to make a park or something, people can go and walk their dogs, kids play." Placing a public park in the neighborhood was a popu-

lar idea, with at least six other residents making the same suggestion. Residents also mentioned adding a farmer's market, community center, historical markers, safety measures, and more. Lockwood's people understand that ideas about change can connect community and spaces. Mr. Dennis says,

I want to point out that the definition [of gentrification] fits the coined phase, but the things that curve the negative aspects are often missed. The onset is cause by defunding communities and removing or alienating them from resources. To curve this you just have to bring back the hope and demand resources, even if you have to create them yourself...Lockwood is still in a bubble of sorts that will eventually burst (I hope not), but external forces continue to build (taxes, desire to relocated closer to downtown, property values, etc). This is where the strategy came into play, that's a longer conversation and a committed sacrifice.

He concludes his comments on a draft of this paper with the question, "will we ever get gentrification right? Why has it not happened so far? Is it possible for all parties involved to be considered winners (happy with the results)?"

### *Discussion*

The collected data showed that community interactions and physical space have a powerful connection in Lockwood. As property values grew and new residents moved in, many spaces for community interactions, like front porches and backyards, were obstructed or destroyed. These informal community building spaces are incredibly important to Lockwood's residents and their loss is significant. While it is hard to exactly determine if these social and physical structures suffered due to rising costs, it seems likely. Residents described many of these changes occurring around the same time property values began to rise (Legget, 2014). The loss of community

building space was at least an indicator and perhaps an accelerator of social change. Researching neighborhoods experiencing similar change could give additional information on the relationship between these factors.

Yet ideas about change also connect spaces and communities. Many of Lockwood's homeowners chose to preserve and expand the neighborhood's space for community interaction. Although there are several individual examples, most of this effort can be traced back to Mr. Chris Dennis and Community Dream Builders. The Lockwood Legend's house demonstrated that spaces for community interactions can be rebuilt in Lockwood. The spirit of Lockwood's previous community clearly lived on in these initiatives.

Kennedy and Leonard (2001) argued that residents and developers should spend "more time developing strategies to avert or address the adverse consequences of gentrification, and less time opposing or supporting the market-driven process itself" (p.3). Lockwood's people are clearly working to do just that. The more we can understand gentrification, the easier it will be to address. But gentrification is more than a buzzword; it's a complicated process with different consequences in each unique environment where it occurs, as Mr. Dennis suggests above. Lockwood residents demonstrated this by frequently contradicting conventional gentrification narratives. Some long-term residents appreciated and benefited from the changes associated with increasing property values. Meanwhile, several new residents worked to preserve and not destroy the identity of a community they just joined. They showed that this type of community change should be further studied, particularly in neighborhoods with unique circumstances like Lockwood. More importantly, Lockwood's members showed the value of firsthand accounts in this kind of research. If we want to properly address the consequences of gentrification, we have to understand the perspective of the people who experienced it.

Lockwood residents have already discovered effective strategies to address the negative

consequences of their growth. Community Dream Builders found opportunities to build community in the neighborhood through projects that echo Lockwood's collaborative past. I hope that work can continue. Many of Lockwood's residents also suggested a more formal solution: building a public park in the neighborhood. Lockwood residents deserve a park or similar community space to recover some of what was lost due to recent development. Community building space is an incredibly important part of Lockwood's past and future: it should be preserved and protected in all of its forms as the neighborhood grows.

Mr. Dennis claimed that communities that lacked resources were prime targets for gentrification. Surrounded by busy roads and industry, Lockwood has certainly struggled to access important resources in the past, but things are changing. He also identified another factor that creates opportunities within changing communities: hope. Through initiatives like the Lockwood Legend's art facility, residents are finding exciting ways to "bring back hope and demand resources." If Lockwood's people continue working together to build community, the neighborhood's future looks bright.

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The Office of Undergraduate Research  
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