The Resilience of Ruinous Futures: Color, Urbanism, and Ecology in the Post-Jim Crow South

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Abstract
This paper explores the roles topography and segregation played in the development of an urban African American community in Raleigh, North Carolina. Southeast Raleigh is a historically African American neighborhood on the edge of downtown. It suffers from being in a low-lying area, poor city planning, and the legacy of residential segregation. Hurricane Fran caused flooding and damage near a forested wetland. A grassroots development proposal includes remaining in the area and creating a wetland education park for economic revitalization. This proposal emerged from non-designers and was born of the everyday casual use of the wetland as a de facto community park. The paper argues that translating a perceived community liability into a perceived strength is an example of a counter-narrative. This counter-narrative challenges Raleigh's imposed power systems that have marginalized Southeast Raleigh.

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Introduction

Neutral
A hypothetical state of the landscape before the influence of socio-cultural processes. All points on the surface of the paper (the plane) are on the same level.

Founding
Human uses and systems adapt to ecological processes. Socio-cultural factors like race, class, and power distribute people and resources inequitably.

Segregation
Policies of residential apartheid link race and topography; geographic inequities are imposed. Blacks in low lying areas suffer increased flood risk.

Resistance
Communities organize to resist policies and pursue community empowerment; geographic inequities are challenged and redefined, self-defined.

New Neutral
The dialogue between imposition and self-definition continues, this time on a landscape with the marks of inequitable urbanism.

Figure. A metaphor for the coincidence of race and topography

The urban landscape is a medium for communicating identity and societal roles. This context offers a palimpsest of layered consequences; decision-making revealing clear and hazy notions of race, class, power, and identity. Urban areas in America emerged from incremental decisions that eventually coalesced into buildings, streets, utilities, and open spaces. The overall trend of American urbanization involved unbuilt landscapes being transformed by the perceived and real needs of people, commerce, and public memory. The environment contains traces of the imposition of identities, as well as articulations of self-definition.

[2] In the American South, the history of urban landscape transformation includes references to different collective identities. Examples are the

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physical manifestations of racial conflict, resulting in inequitable urbanism, and disparities between Whites and African Americans.

[3] African Americans began their American experience enslaved. Later, segregation policies, here called “Jim Crow” laws, continued to impact qualities of African American communities well into the twentieth century. The aftermath of the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the disastrous pursuit of “separate but equal” facilities for Whites and African Americans led to separate and unequal opportunities favoring White Americans at every turn. The negative impacts of this inequity led to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the seminal Supreme Court decision that overturned segregation laws across the country.

[4] In addition to disparities in access to facilities, race impacted inequities in urbanism between White and African American residents in southern cities. However, identifying mechanisms that perpetuate inequities between the urban experiences of White and African Americans in southern cities is an emerging field. The Environmental Justice Movement, a grassroots, activist-based effort led by people of color, offers a compelling argument that African Americans and people of color bear a disproportionate burden of human and environmental health impacts (Liu). People of color, irrespective of class, are more likely to live near toxic and noxious facilities than White

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people. People of color are less likely to live near environmental benefits like parks and open space than White Americans. People of color suffer more health risks associated with proximity to toxics as well as lack of access to open space than White Americans. Environmental justice scholars identify unequal environmental protection under the law, a remnant of institutionalized racial inequities, as one of many causes of this phenomenon (Bullard).

[5] How did communities of color so consistently become home to a disproportionate number of toxics and environmental hazards? Why aren't they places that are well served by environmental "goods" like parks and open space? In the face of concurrent advances in equity in other areas (employment, mobility, education), why is the physical fabric of the community itself so resistant to patterns of equitable urbanism? And how have communities of color responded to these trends?

[6] This paper explores these questions by describing the overlay of *two patterns* in southern American urbanism. One pattern is physical development *responses to topography* (elevation and landform). The other pattern is long-term *racial segregation*. The paper reviews literature on trends across the southeastern region of the United States and connects these broader trends to examples of urban impacts in a specific African

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American community in Raleigh, North Carolina. Finally, the paper describes the efforts of Partners for Environmental Justice (PEJ) in Raleigh. PEJ emerged in the aftermath of widespread flooding after Hurricane Fran. This flooding occurred adjacent to a forested wetland in predominately African American Southeast Raleigh. PEJ is cited as an example of how everyday experiences with a wetland by African American residents fueled a successful proposal for a wetland education park. This proposal represents a counter - narrative to those identities historically imposed by Raleigh's power systems.

Urbanism and Topography in Southern Towns

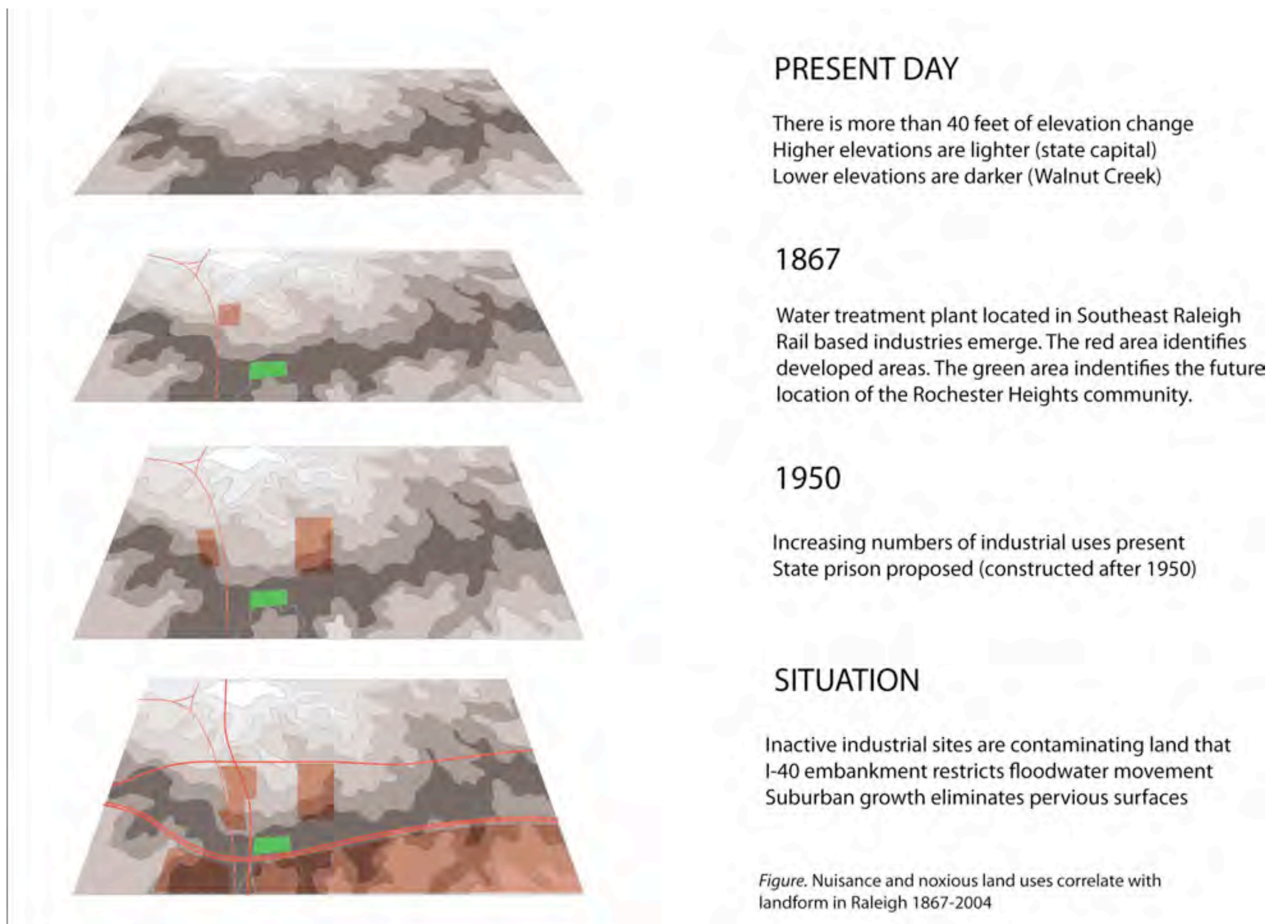

Figure. Nuisance and noxious land uses correlate with landform in Raleigh 1867-2004

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The Piedmont region is a hilly zone that is also the most densely populated area on the American east coast. This region is home to Raleigh, North Carolina and the community in focus. Inland southern towns, like Raleigh, reflect how perceptions of landform and elevation become urban form. Locating towns in the rolling topography of the Piedmont immediately placed an economic premium on higher and well-drained land for plantations and agricultural land. Low-lying and poorly drained areas were less desirable due to their lack of agricultural utility, as well as the perception of wetlands being dangerous and unhealthy places. An even higher premium was placed on high ground that was easily connected to trade routes, and these routes established the locations of major roads, business districts, and public markets. As southern economies transitioned from agriculture to manufacturing, the most arable lands closest to town and city centers came to have denser and more diverse uses. Low-lying areas that were "downwind" or "downstream" were generally reserved for noxious land uses. Town dumps, outflows from sewers, and eventually wastewater treatment facilities and prisons, gravitated to "the bottoms."

[8] Raleigh is a useful illustration of these regional dynamics. The city was founded in 1792 as a state capital on land purchased from wealthy plantation owners. The state capital buildings, located in the center of the city, occupy the highest point on a ridge between two creeks. Crabtree

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Creek and Walnut Creek border the northern and southern edges of the site respectively (City of Raleigh). The major east/west streets, Hillsborough and New Bern, were named and aligned as literal connections to the towns of Hillsborough and New Born. Raleigh's roads follow ridges and still serve as important urban corridors. Noxious uses (in their day) including the town dump and original city waterworks were located downstream.

[9] Accretion of like uses occurred in the low-lying areas of Walnut Creek throughout the twentieth century, areas which were located outside the southern boundary of Raleigh until the mid-twentieth century. What began as the location of the city dump and some rail-oriented uses, turned into a site for large industrial corridors, broader utility rights of way, and a prison. In the same way that high ground enabled the development of high-value uses, the low-lying areas attracted a critical mass of low-value uses.

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Residential Segregation in Southern Towns

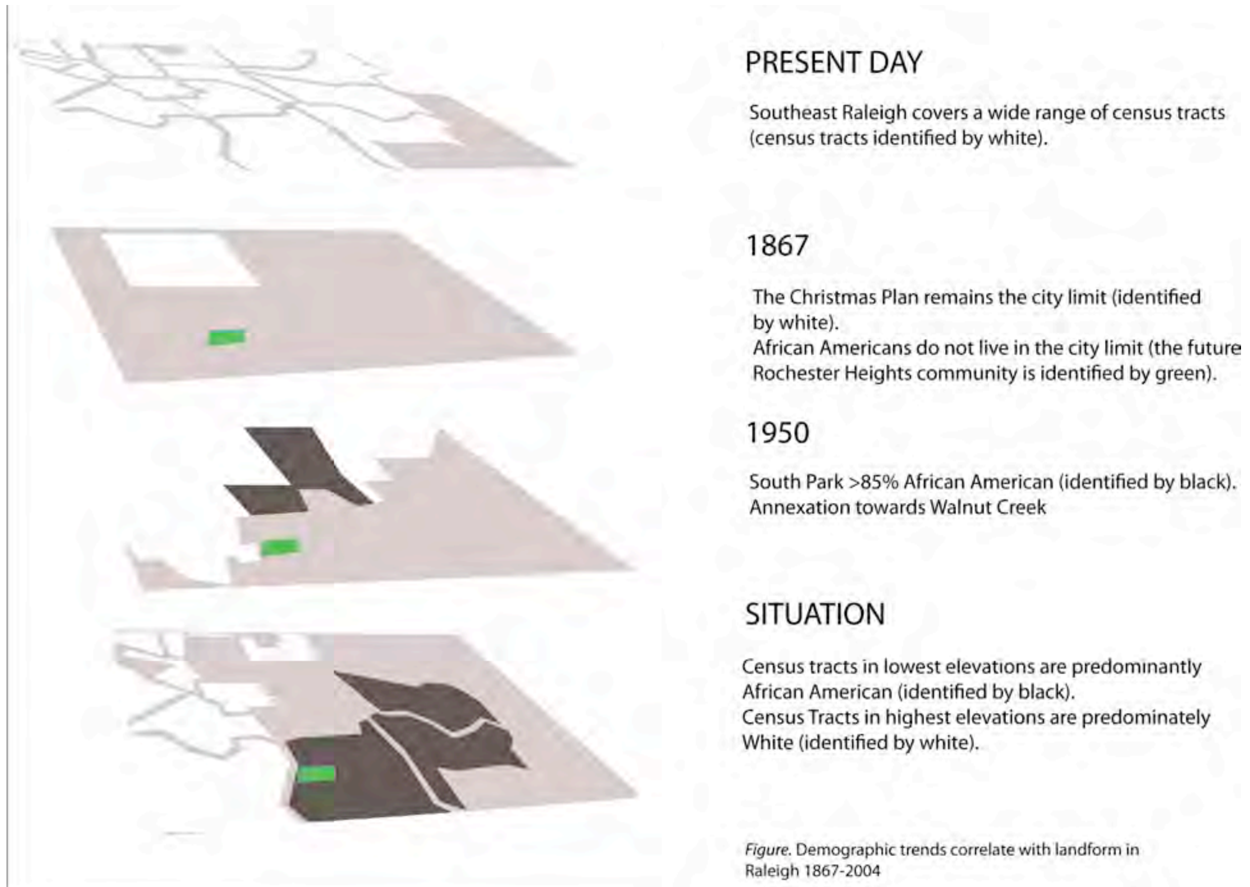

Figure. Demographic trends correlate with landform in Raleigh 1867-2004

Southern American colonies were dependent on slave-based economies. In many cases, enslaved Africans were integrally connected to the life of colonial-era towns. African Americans were never more interspersed geographically with White Americans in the South than during slavery. However, slave villages were clearly inferior to plantation homes and the settlements of wealthy White landowners. Federal, state, and local laws applied oppressive control over the movement, dwelling, and non-

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plantation work of slaves. Informal social mores were often enforced with violence.

[11] After the end of the Civil War, Reconstruction allowed recently free African Americans to participate in most aspects of American life. African Americans were able to buy land, build institutions, and develop new settlements. However, this period came to an end with The Compromise of 1877*.* The ensuing era, Restoration, was a reversion to complete economic, political, and social subjugation of African Americans.

[12] Urban African Americans were caught geographically between the need for proximity to city-based economic opportunity and a complete reneging of opportunities to buy land and pursue development outside of strict boundaries. This meant that African American communities were forced to develop at the margins of existing urban areas, often occupying the landscapes least desired by wealthy White Americans. This included low-lying and environmentally challenged areas.

[13] In the civil rights era, particularly in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* (sometimes referred to as "The Second Reconstruction") African Americans in the South enjoyed unprecedented economic and political opportunities. However, in urban areas, this increase in opportunity occurred

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at the same time that American urban policy favored "urban renewal," popularly termed "Negro Removal" (Fullilove). Slum clearance, freeway construction, affordable housing construction, and anti-urban patterns eroded the fragile community fabric of communities as a result of, and followed the path of least little political resistance. African American communities, with comparatively low political and economic power, were often the disproportionate victims of urban renewal policies.

[14] Racist lending policies discouraged African American residential mobility. These practices simultaneously enflamed prejudice in White communities and frustration in African American ones. The results included lower mobility of African Americans, as well as more isolation of the African American underclass.

[15] As Raleigh expanded to cover part of what is currently Southeast Raleigh, streetcar suburbs emerged in various parts of the city, South Park being the "separate but equal" African American development. This neighborhood, complimented by Chavis Park and Chavis Heights public housing, formed the backbone of what was then known as "culture town." The area received this moniker in part due to segregation; African American graduates of Shaw and Saint Augustine's, as well as faculty, staff, and students, lived within walking distance of these two black colleges and

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exhibited a more refined set of social norms and activities than those thought by White Americans to be associated with African Americans (Crow, Escott, and Hatley).

Inherited Ecological Debt and Residential Apartheid

Thomas Shapiro has identified a key pattern describing the "wealth gap" between White Americans and African Americans. White Americans receive more inherited wealth than African Americans. This enables more White Americans to purchase their own homes, pay for college, or invest at much higher rates than African Americans. Shapiro argues that the wealth gap is correlated to the lack of African-American equity-based wealth. Taken conversely, African Americans suffer from the burden of an inherited lack of equity, and couched in the terms of lost opportunity costs, this translates into inherited debt.

[17] Landscapes in the hearts of southern towns that are relatively clear of environmental constraints have historically enjoyed a similar benefit. Over time, these properties are generally more developable, re-developable, and inherit benefits associated with their proximity to desirable entities. These areas have higher property values and are overwhelming owned and lived in by White Americans.

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[18] By contrast, marginal landscapes at the edge of southern towns with environmental constraints have few economic benefits. Over time, particularly in low-lying areas, these landscapes suffer from less contiguous developable areas, the accretion of noxious land uses, lack of transportation infrastructure, and few utility corridors. These areas suffer from lower property values and are overwhelmingly African American neighborhoods.

[19] The challenge of developing in low-lying areas dominated by a concentration of undesirable infrastructure and land uses constitutes an inherited ecological debt. As declining sites of industrial use become polluting brownfields, and global warming elevates the environmental risks associated with living in low-lying areas, inherited ecological debt articulates a need for a comprehensive look at the range of constraints preventing sustainable urban patterns in challenged areas.

[20] Robert Bullard highlights the pattern of residential segregation in environmentally degraded areas as a key contributor to environmental justice issues faced by people of color in cities. Bullard refers to this pattern as "Residential Apartheid" (Jaret, Ruddiman, and Phillips), recalling policies specifically designed to disenfranchise people of color. He is also eliciting a visceral response to the connotation of the term, calling attention to an

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under-reported trend that is locking people into environmentally harmful situations.

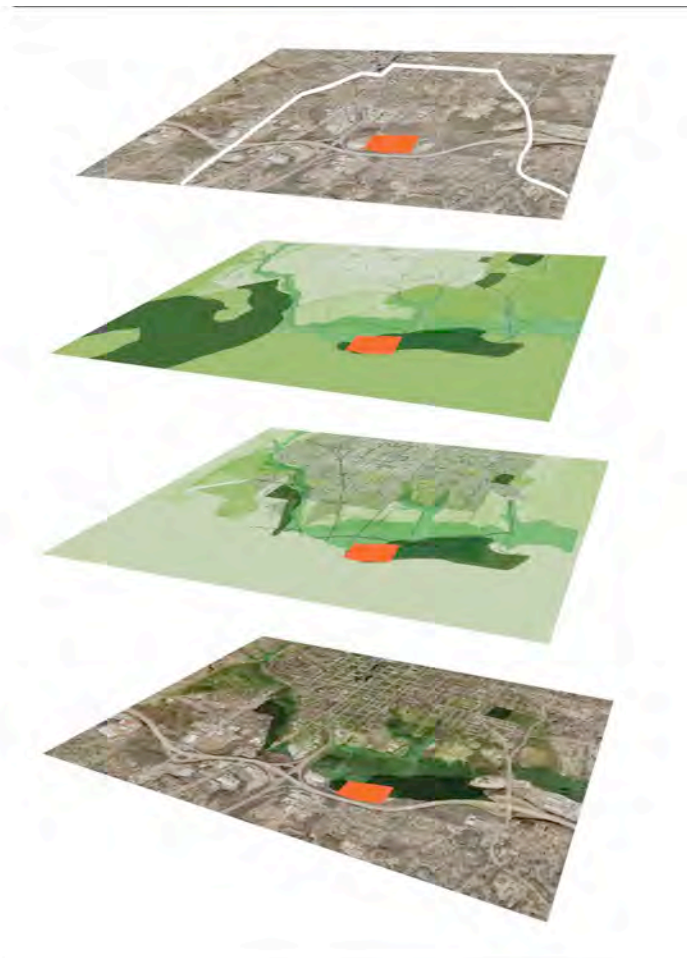

Figure. Situating Rochester Heights and Southeast Raleigh,1867-2004

[21] Combined, inherited ecological debt and residential apartheid disproportionately impact African Americans living in southern towns. On one hand, the accretion of environmental hazards in low-lying areas negatively impacts environmental and human health (Schrader-Frechette). On the other hand, residential apartheid immobilizes working-class and poor African Americans, severely limiting their residential choices. The persistence of

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these two factors, cast in patterns of topography and demography, represents a critical urban issue challenging the sustainability of twenty-first century southern towns. The lack of a coordinated strategy to overcome both issues constitutes a resilient and dysfunctional future for inequitable urbanism.

A Dialogue Between Imposed Identity and Self-defined Identity

There is a litany of external forces imposing debilitating patterns of development on urban communities of color in southern towns. But as people of color struggle with spaces of imposed identities and potentials, there is a parallel process of self-definition taking place. Broadly speaking, the legacy of race in the landscape resulted in the imposition of collective identities and contributed to inequitable urbanism between African Americans and White Americans. This is the existing narrative informing land use decision-making in areas like Southeast Raleigh.

[23] However, communities of color have struggled to develop counter-narratives that reflect their own sense of agency. Far from utopian, some visions of change in these communities directly address, even embrace, the very same liabilities heightened by narrow racial politics.

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[24] An example of this process lies in the historical role played by of the African American church. In addition to worship, the African American church has served and continues to serve as a broader repository of cultural traditions. Christian worship was imposed on African Americans, but within that construct, they were able to self-define, innovate, and pursue resistance movements and liberation strategies. The duality of both accepting an imposed identity, and subverting it to serve self-defined and empowering ends, is an important compliment to the narrative of the broader urban challenges faced by communities of color in the South. Validating this dual process acknowledges a more nuanced and dialogic relationship between African Americans, White Americans, and others involved in the future of southern urbanism. A narrative that celebrates the self-defined identities of communities in addition to their struggles with external impositions suggests a wider range of potential strategies and solutions.

[25] The implications of this shift in urbanism can be found in the story of Partners for Environmental Justice (PEJ). The Raleigh-based organization was formed in 1996 in response to Hurricane Fran, which induced flooding of the Rochester Heights neighborhood. It is appropriately ironic that Rochester Heights, the first post- war African American housing development, was built on some of the lowest elevations near downtown. It is located along Walnut Creek wetland, the largest forested wetland near downtown. In the 1950's,

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farms and low-density residential development surrounded Rochester Heights. PEJ argues that the surrounding land pattern (at the time of the neighborhood's founding) allowed for better management of flood events: larger pervious areas to allow for storm water infiltration and few barriers to storm water flow into Walnut Creek.

[26] Over time, the I-40 (North Carolina's interstate highway) was constructed on an embankment, creating a dam forcing stormwater to remain in the neighborhood (between the creek and the freeway) for longer periods of time. Rapid urbanization at the neighborhood's boundaries eliminated surrounding pervious surfaces, increased roads, rooftops, and sewers, and greatly increased the rate and amount of stormwater runoff heading into Walnut Creek.

[27] The intensity of Hurricane Fran overwhelmed an upstream dam at Lake Raleigh and the water rushed into Rochester Heights. The constraint of the freeway embankment, as well as the flow from surrounding communities, extended the period when Rochester Heights was underwater. During the same period, a predominately White community flooded as well. Tom Fetzer, the mayor of Raleigh, agreed to fund sewer improvements in the White community immediately. However, the City of Raleigh asked residents of

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Rochester Heights to pay higher water and sewer fees to correct a flood issue that was not their fault (Exploris Middle School).

[28] These issues sparked the formation of PEJ, Partners for Environmental Justice, a multi-racial organization. Dr. Norman Camp, the director, is an educator, organizer, and environmentalist. He and PEJ were able to leverage a range of connections and to enlist participants and advocates with unique skills to the cause. From university settings, they were able to recruit technical experts to offset city expertise on stormwater and development issues. From faith-based participants, PEJ was able to tap into a network of churches and influential pastors to build community awareness and apply broad-based political pressure. Through interaction with local schools, they were able to engage students from across the city in site visits of Walnut Creek and studies of the environmental issues associated with it. A cultural imperative emerged through this organizing: despite the legacy of the racial politics associated with the neighborhood, the health of the neighborhood was understood to be important to the health of the city. PEJ successfully convinced the City of Raleigh to drop the assessment and improve the overwhelmed stormwater infrastructure. But PEJ went further.

[29] Building on his memories of using Walnut Creek for recreational activities as a child, Dr. Camp initiated another proposal. The forested

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wetlands were commonly viewed as an undesirable environmental constraint. They were undervalued due to their location in an African American neighborhood and a broader lack of environmental awareness. But from another perspective, the wetlands had high ecological value, supporting wildlife habitat, improving water quality, and providing needed respite from the urban environment. Places like Walnut Creek wetlands were becoming increasingly rare in a rapidly urbanizing region. What was previously seen as an environment with little “value” was redefined for community benefit (Camp).

[30] PEJ pursued the designation of Walnut Creek wetland as a city park. They also pursued funds to establish a Wetland Education Center on site. In Dr. Camp and PEJ’s view, the city could potentially overcome its detachment and ignorance of Southeast Raleigh community issues by joining in the preservation, stewardship, and design of a redefined community asset (Partners for Environmental Justice). Walnut Creek was repositioned as the community’s greatest historical liability to its greatest strength. PEJ envisioned the wetland as an ecology-centered economic engine for community development. The demand to visit and use the park could leverage public infrastructure improvements connecting the park to the rest of the city. Walkable streets, greenway development, and other tools could give a level of activity and stability to key corridors throughout the

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neighborhood and attract private development. And finally, studies of the wetland by school groups could enhance student performance and natural sciences curriculum. With these arguments, PEJ successfully lobbied for a bond issue that is currently funding the development of the Wetland Park and Wetland Education Center.

[31] PEJ represents a contemporary model for overcoming the resilience of ruinous futures in urban African American southern neighborhoods. Although born of racist disparities in urban form, topography, and demography, current efforts are extending beyond simple stereotypes. They are simultaneously exploiting the political opportunity to attack a legacy of racial segregation and going beyond it. PEJ is on the cusp of delivering spaces, once indicative of second-class urban patterns, and now transformed into cutting- edge environmental, educational, and community development opportunities. African Americans, and other groups historically excluded from environmental action, are finding cultural relevance in interpreting their experiences through natural features for community benefit. Multi-racial coalitions are forming, not to reinforce the previous boundaries of segregated neighborhoods, but to support new boundaries that transcend neighborhoods. Collectively, these actions are countering the imposed negative connotations of low-lying areas with a positive affirmation of ecological stewardship, and cultivating relationships in service to a redefined

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and self-defined community represents the potential of a visionary southern urban future.

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