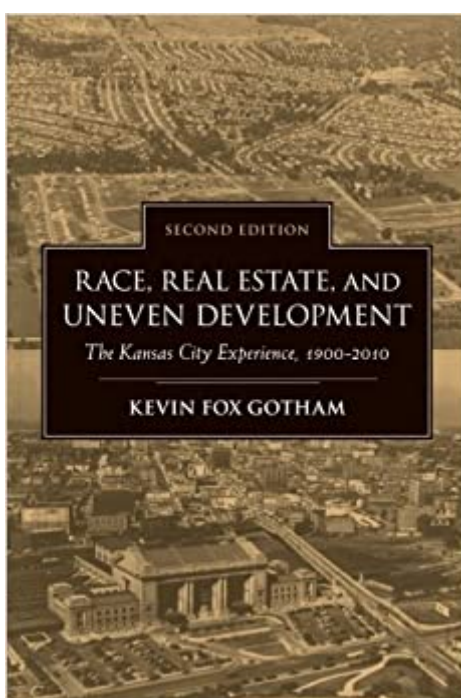


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Race, Real Estate, And Uneven Development, Second Edition: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2010



Synopsis

Updated second edition examining how the real estate industry and federal housing policy have facilitated the development of racial residential segregation. Traditional explanations of metropolitan development and urban racial segregation have emphasized the role of consumer demand and market dynamics. In the first edition of *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development* Kevin Fox Gotham reexamined the assumptions behind these explanations and offered a provocative new thesis. Using the Kansas City metropolitan area as a case study, Gotham provided both quantitative and qualitative documentation of the role of the real estate industry and the Federal Housing Administration, demonstrating how these institutions have promulgated racial residential segregation and uneven development. Gotham challenged contemporary explanations while providing fresh insights into the racialization of metropolitan space, the interlocking dimensions of class and race in metropolitan development, and the importance of analyzing housing as a system of social stratification. In this second edition, he includes new material that explains the racially unequal impact of the subprime real estate crisis that began in late 2007, and explains why racial disparities in housing and lending remain despite the passage of fair housing laws and antidiscrimination statutes.

Praise for the First Edition – “This work challenges the notion that demographic change and residential patterns are ‘natural’ or products of free market choices. [it] contributes greatly to our understanding of how real estate interests shaped the hyper-segregation of American cities, and how government agencies[,] including school districts, worked in tandem to further demark the separate and unequal worlds in metropolitan life.” – H-Net Reviews (H-Education)

– “A hallmark of this book is its fine-grained analysis of just how specific activities of realtors, the FHA program, and members of the local school board contributed to the residential segregation of blacks in twentieth century urban America. A process Gotham labels the ‘racialization of urban space’ – the social construction of urban neighborhoods that links race, place, behavior, culture, and economic factors – has led white residents, realtors, businessmen, bankers, land developers, and school board members to act in ways that restricted housing for blacks to specific neighborhoods in Kansas City, as well as in other cities.” – Philip Olson, University of Missouri

– “Kansas City” – “This is a book which is greatly needed in the field. Gotham integrates, using historical data, the involvement of the real estate industry and the collusion of the federal government in the manufacturing of racially biased housing practices. His work advances the struggle for civil rights by showing that solving the problem of racism is not as simple as banning legal discrimination, but rather needs to address the institutional practices at all levels of the real

estate industry. • Talmadge Wright, author of Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes

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Most works that focus on racial residential segregation explain its roots with the "preference perspective," or that races become spatially segregated based on market supply and demand and consumer desire (6). In *Race, Real Estate and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2010*, sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham deviates from the norm and aims to describe the role of "private interests and government policy in the development of racial residential segregation while at the same time highlighting connections between race, uneven development and the real estate industry" (3). Gotham's central thesis is that space was intentionally "racialized" in Kansas City, but not by its residents (13). He argues that the real estate industry and federal housing policies created the racialization of space and segregated the races. Real estate agents and firms, in particular convinced white buyers that homogeneity was the ideal and, along with home owner associations, created a housing environment that purposely excluded blacks from white neighborhoods and fostered a "exclusionary real estate ideology" (35). Using newspapers, retrospective interviews, census bureau data, oral histories, federal legislation, housing studies, maps, and restrictive covenants, Gotham investigates the role of the real estate industry in the "concentrating poor minorities in the inner city and encouraging white flight to the suburbs" (2). Gotham argues that the real estate industry had a profound, negative impact on federal policy, public housing, school boundary-drawing, land clearance, urban renewal, suburbanization, blockbusting, panic-selling, and lending. According to Gotham, there was no housing or land issue untouched by the "segregative practices of the real estate industry" (130). With this case study, Gotham skillfully paints a racial geographical picture of Kansas City. Readers gain a greater understanding of the barriers – some visible, like the Troost Wall, some invisible- that hemmed in racial enclaves. Most enlightening

is Gotham's discussion of the restrictive covenants in white, Kansas City neighborhoods which sheds light on the racial atmosphere of the time and convincingly proves that these covenants worked to "control the movement of the racial groups and created racially homogenous neighborhoods" (39). Real estate agents and restrictive covenants disseminated the "stereotype that racially mixed neighborhoods are undesirable and lead to declining property values" (47). Also effective is Gotham's treatment of the relationship between the real estate industry and various federal agencies, including the FHA. He provides an unflinching assessment of the institutionalization of racial discrimination into the "operations of the agency" that simply handed over the implementation of the projects to the private sector (68). The greatest strength of Gotham's is his ability to describe the effect of various programs, legislation, and practices like slum-clearance, urban renewal, blockbusting, and public housing on Kansas City's population. In each instance, black residents were displaced and then concentrated in less desirable and stigmatized areas of the city, away from affluent white neighborhoods (94). Gotham leaves some issues unresolved, however. Although he provides a plethora of evidence to support the claim that the real estate industry, community builders and federal policies contributed to the segregation and uneven development of the metropolitan areas of Kansas City, his argument that they created this environment, and were solely responsible for all its failings, is not convincing. He claims that the actions of these various actors did not reflect, but shaped and created attitudes about race. Gotham goes so far as to say that stereotypes about racially mixed neighborhoods being undesirable did not exist until real estate firms and community builders put it into the heads of residents and prospective consumers. He also posits that "the racial attitudes of whites did not generate the desire for suburbanization" (98). In this regard, Gotham grants too much power to the real estate industry, community builders and federal policies to shape opinions, behaviors and practices. He does not persuasively prove that these actors were not simply responding to established behaviors and demand from consumers. In a couple instances, Gotham concedes that "white prejudice and aversion to living near blacks may have been a major factor driving whites out of the city" and there may have been a "push and pull" of white residents out of neighborhoods (111, 125). This line of thinking is far more persuasive than his argument that lays all power and responsibility at the feet of the real estate industry. Overall, it is a fascinating study of the racial residential segregation of a city that, to this day, remains significantly racially segregated. Gotham's data is particularly

fascinating but his conclusions are not as effectual.

This book attempts to explain the rise and continuation of racial segregation in Kansas City, Mo. This book includes a fairly impressive collection of statistics, although I am not sure I always agree with Gorham's interpretations. Gorham begins in the 19th century; in 1880, the black population was small and much more evenly distributed among the city's wards than it is today. What changed? Gorham blames racist real estate agents who kept blacks out of newer areas by putting racially restrictive covenants (that is, contract provisions prohibiting the sale of property to blacks) in their deeds. Between 1900 and 1947, 62 percent of subdivisions in Jackson County (which includes most of Kansas City) had such restrictive covenants. But I wonder whether Gorham is confusing correlation with causation; his book doesn't fully explain whether the covenants had a significant independent impact or merely mimicked what whites would have done without them. Were areas without covenants any less segregated? Gorham doesn't really say. Gorham himself notes that "In 1910, a number of home owners received written threats that black residents living in an area were to leave in 30 days or face death" and cites a number of similar examples of racist intimidation. If such threats of violence were common, maybe covenants merely reflected white preferences rather than causing them. Another chapter focuses on the city's "urban renewal" programs of the 1950s and 1960s. In the name of eliminating blight, government eliminated many urban working-class neighborhoods. However, Gorham's own statistics show that urban renewal was not directed primarily at black neighborhoods; in fact, more whites than blacks were displaced (though the black percentage of renewal victims was almost half, and thus far ahead of their share of the general population). Highway construction was even more race-neutral; between 1950 and 1975, 71 percent of Kansas Citians displaced by highway construction were white. A third chapter deals with the city school board's attempts to segregate the schools. Gorham points out that in the 1960s, the city gerrymandered school attendance zones in order to keep blacks east of Troost. City schools east of Troost (the city's racial dividing line) became all-black quickly, while schools west of Troost remained majority white. However, one fact seems to contradict Gorham's argument: one west-of-Troost school (Westport) started off as all-white in the mid-1950s and was 47 percent black by 1974. He tries to explain away this school by claiming that the school board bused blacks to white schools and then "segregated [them] in demarcated classrooms and did not allow them to mix with the white students." But the federal court decision cited by Gorham to support this claim states: "In the face of civil rights protests, in 1965, the bused students were integrated into the regular enrollment." *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 593 F. Supp. 1485, 1494). Gorham concludes (correctly, in my

view) that "To many white residents, in Kansas City and elsewhere, good neighborhoods mean good schools, and they believe the degree of racial homogeneity determines the quality of both," But if this is the case, what difference would a more progressive school board have made? It seems to me, based on Gorham's own conclusion, that if the school board had sought racially balanced schools in the 1950s, "white flight" to suburbia would have occurred even more rapidly than it did. Another chapter discusses the city's fair housing policies in the 1970s. Gorham criticizes the section 235 program, which subsidized the purchase of homes by low-income families. Because these homes were often in substandard condition, the families could not afford to maintain them, causing the homes to become foreclosed and abandoned, causing "white flight" and neighborhood deterioration. But then Gorham points out that "Terminating the housing subsidy program helped accelerate the deterioration of the inner city" as lenders disinvested in black areas. I found this discussion to be a bit confusing, since it implies that investment and disinvestment are equally bad. Gorham tries to reconcile these ideas in his conclusion, writing that support for homeownership for the poor cannot work without "a careful articulation of objectives from the start, a system of program evaluation for monitoring progress toward these objectives, strong oversight to guard against fraud and exploitative lending, and a sustained effort toward enforcing fair housing statutes"- all of which sounds to me like an admission that this sort of program has no margin for error and thus perhaps should not be tried until the federal bureaucracy replaces ordinary human civil servants with superheroes. More broadly, Gorham concludes that "the housing problems of low-income people can only be addressed through a comprehensive program that includes the creation of jobs that pay a living wage, adequate benefits for those who cannot work, access to affordable health care, increased supply of affordable housing, and improving public infrastructure including schools and neighborhood conditions." But if limiting discrimination is useless without a "comprehensive program" addressing a wide variety of other issues, why bother to write a book about discrimination in the first place?

A little full of statistics to start but found that bearing with it a bit proved much more interesting. Any human story can be reduced to nuts and bolts and no story, but there are two very definite sides to every tale of any community.

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