

# URBAN JOURNAL

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**FROM THE EDITORS**

This year's edition of the *Urban Journal* explores the many ways urban life is lived, perceived, and reimagined. Across essays, poetry, photography, and visual art, our contributors return to a shared question: how do we make sense of the spaces we move through every day? Writing as observers, residents, students, and critics, they approach the city not as a fixed object, but as a dynamic phenomenon—shaped by memory, inequality, creativity, and care.

Several pieces turn inward to Providence, treating the city not simply as a backdrop but as a site of close attention. These works trace the textures of local life, examining how familiar streets, institutions, and infrastructures both reflect and obscure broader urban dynamics. Reflections on aging, housing insecurity, and the realities of low-income life widen the lens to consider questions of mobility and access, particularly for those whose experiences are often overlooked.

Threaded throughout the journal is a strong current of creative expression. Poetry and visual work such as photography and paintings offer alternative ways of engaging the city, capturing what resists straightforward analysis. These pieces attend to atmosphere, emotion, and fleeting moments, reminding us that urban life is as much felt as it is studied.

Urban Studies at Brown has long encouraged students to look outward: to ask how cities are structured, whom they serve, and what futures they make possible. But it also asks us to look inward, to consider how urban environments shape our own experiences and perspectives. The work collected here reflects that dual impulse. Whether grounded in research, observation, or artistic practice, each contribution seeks to better understand the complexities of urban life.

We hope these pages invite you to see urban spaces, whether in Providence or beyond, with greater attention, curiosity, and care.

—Bentzi Gitig and Sarkis Antonyan

Providence, Rhode Island

Front Cover: *This Nexus* by Sarkis Antonyan

Edited by Bentzi Gitig

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## Benefit Street

Anay Agarwal

I've been lucky enough to call Benefit Street home since this past fall. I live in a bright blue townhome apartment with 3 of my best friends on the corner of South Court and Benefit. The home itself was restored as a part of the Providence Preservation Society's efforts for Benefit Street's historic revitalization, brought back to its "original" beauty and luster. The street and the houses on it are beautiful, in fact—the types of homes I picture when I think of College Hill

This painting is a scene from this summer, my view as I walk down Benefit Street towards my house. As you turn onto Benefit from its main intersections with Angell and Waterman, the street becomes quieter and more secluded. You walk along brick sidewalks—every brick being slightly higher or lower than the one adjacent. If you're lucky, a tree in the middle of the path will have uprooted it entirely. The tree in the foreground of the painting does exactly that, in addition to curving out into the road and obstructing the path of many cars. Just last week, my friend Sophia tried to park in front of our house and ran her side mirror into that tree trunk and completely shattered it. In my defense, I tried to warn her, as I've warned many guests in the past.

Parking is always a problem on Benefit, especially now with all of the snow and ice. The No Parking sign in the painting also gets some of my friends from time to time. They're always less than happy to see the ticket in their windshield after they thought they could get away with parking there for a brief 30-40 minutes. One of my housemates

refuses to park the car, as she cannot parallel park: a requirement for Benefit Street and most of College Hill unfortunately. The road itself can technically accommodate one lane of traffic going each way, in addition to the parked cars on one side, but it definitely gets tight. Add the occasional biker to the mix as well as a car trying to park with vehicles popping out of various offshoots and things get complicated, to say the least.

For all of its quirks and frustrations with parking, Benefit makes up for it by being so gosh darn picturesque. The lampposts along the street, one featured in the painting, cast a beautiful warm glow along the asphalt and ornate homes along it. In December, I walked out to see each lamppost adorned with a red-ribboned wreath—I genuinely felt like the leading man in a Hallmark movie. All the details in the houses reflect College Hill's charm and character. Carved pillars, ornate trim, and big wooden doors only provide an appetizer for the spiral staircases, crown molding, and skylights that reside inside. I tried to capture a bit of that in this painting.

And the light. The evening glow that sparks light into the street, dances through leaves, and seeps into each brick on the sidewalk...that light is so warm and irresistible. It blinds you to the memory of every fender bender, every car that holds up traffic, every time I've tripped over a loose brick, and every parking ticket.

The sun is kind to Benefit Street.



Anay Agarwal '28 is a student in the Brown|RISD Dual Degree program from Baltimore, MD studying Urban Studies alongside Furniture Design at RISD. His work revolves around the built environment, fully understanding it and designing for it. Through his furniture, he hopes to explore the intimate, personal connection between humans and space as well as materiality and scale. Analyzing urban environments and working in architecture allows him to understand these same relationships at a macro level, contributing deeply to his design process and research.

## washing machine

Heidi Lin

the Atlantic separates me from dew on top of this hill in Liexlip  
 or your body's indentation on your first apartment down Benefit Street  
 a woman passes at Kennedy Plaza, children rope  
 on your porch, a birthmark of cherry ash from Dublin

or your body's indentation on your first apartment  
 full against a million dollar vestibule, forgo the rail  
 on your porch, a forty mile steel casket  
 i kick off the platform, shutter twice

forgo the rail, full mass pushing glass  
 on the Charles Esplanade, weeds starve  
 i kick on the washer, shutter twice  
 the aluminum holds me hostage

on the Esplanade, a Grecian mathematician  
 in my row, a baby is smothered into submission  
 the aluminum becomes my mothership  
 washing your pillowcases

a couple smothers a baby into submission  
 your laundry finishes, the Yamanote line jingles

you press my face into pillowcases we washed together

the Atlantic will forever separate me.

Heidi Lin '27 studies Interior Architecture. Most recently she has been published in *The College Hill Independent*, *VISIONS*, and *volume-1*. In her free time she comes up with different ways of climbing into bed.

## Learning from the Mollusks

### A More-Than-Human Ethnography of the Providence River

Rafael Ash

Standing on the cement blocks on the edge of the Providence River, it is easy to miss the mussels in the cracks in the steps behind you. Searching for marine life, we tend to look in the water, overlooking the water's temporal transience. The tidelines that stain the wood and concrete and the life that grows in the intertidal zone show us where the water goes—beyond where it is.

Drawing from anthropologist Kristina Lyons, the mussels reminds us of the river's memory, its cyclic or channeled patterns of movement. The mussels must also have a form of memory as they wait for the water to return. Depending on the species, mussel lifespans can vary from two years to hundreds of years—often dated by growth years on their shell—and they contain histories across time scales. Through the analysis of mussel memory and through treating mussels and other bivalves as water “processors,” we can read multispecies histories across many timescales through marine life in the present landscape.

As I stood on the concrete with a class I was taking, the water's movement only became self-evident as it rose above the step we were standing on. We scrambled to higher ground to avoid wet shoes. The right angles of the built environment made the rise more dramatic; as the tide level went from below the step to above them, the continuous change was processed as a discrete binary. On more gently sloped concrete or a natural coast, the water's creep might have gone unnoticed.

The tides are an important site of observation in the Providence River, because they demonstrate the extent to which the water has been constructed and channeled as a river. Samia Cohen argues for reinterpreting the Providence River as an *industrial aftermath* of what was once the Great Salt Cove; a bay and wetlands that spanned most of present-day downtown Providence as a more or less continuous extension of Narragansett Bay.

In more mercantile and industrial eras of downtown Providence the river was more clearly maritime, integrated into networks of trans-oceanic trade and migration. Fading photos and sketches posted on information stands along the riverfront show where gangways and docks would stretch out from warehouses to receive ships arriving from around the world. Today, the Wild Colonial Tavern is housed in an 18th century warehouse and is (perhaps too) aptly named to reflect the entanglements of Providence's commercial rise with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial imports to the Americas from British territories around the world.

Today, the Providence River is closed off from human traffic from the bay; the Point Street Bridge has not swung open for a boat since 1959, and the pedestrian bridge further north is low and immobile. The only boats on the downtown Waterfront are the gondolas, kayaks and site-seeing barges. They perform an aquatic aesthetic for tourists, but are isolated in the waterway.

The water, fish, birds, and mollusks, however, pass freely around, onto, and through the bridges and other human infrastructure that attempt to separate the city from the bay. The water ranges from brackish to salty. Oysters that can only survive in high salinity conditions are latched onto the grooves on the concrete embankments. Birds and fish follow migratory patterns along the coast. I sit on the algae covered step and wonder how the ecological assemblage has changed and how it has stayed the same since the Great Salt Cove was first emptied of abundant salmon and covered by cement and steel.

Returning to the mollusks, we begin to understand the metabolism of the environment. The mussels along the edge of the Providence River are embedded onto concrete and caked in mud and algae. As filter feeders, mussels and oysters process their watery environments; they consume plant particulate, excess nitrogen, and other chemical presences in the water. In the process, the oysters transform, absorb and morph to their environments. On our class walk, we encountered a stark example: an oyster that had grown on a Coca-Cola can was imprinted with bright red dyes and nearly legible smudges of text on its upper shell. It is a compelling metaphor for anthropogenic transformations of marine life, and specifically shows the sensitivity of bivalves to their environment.

Oyster connoisseurs describe the merroir of an oyster, place-based flavor inflections in brine that distinguish between oysters grown

in different sites. The term is a reference to terroir which refers to soil, ground, and place-based subtleties in wine tasting. Almost all oysters cultivated on the eastern coast of the United States from Prince Edward Island to the Gulf of Mexico are the exact same species; flavor differentiation is defined solely by different water conditions. I considered what it would mean to taste an oyster as an act of landscape observation. Watching the litter floating by and the iconic three smokestacks of the Manchester Street power plant just across the water, I have my doubts about the Providence merroir—it sounds like an upscale term for bioaccumulation.

The oyster is not purely reactive. Their filtration actively cleans the water and participates in interspecies ecological relationships of industrial waste, nitrogen blooms, and microbial life; some clever environmental engineers have speculated about building large oyster reefs in polluted waterways. Barnacles and bivalves also reshape concrete walls, ship hulls, and river beds. Like the oyster that had been latched to it, the coke can was reciprocally imprinted. The can's rust and erosion ended at the edge of where the oyster had been, and the oyster's growth had left a clean, shell-shaped shine.

When we think about the Providence River through its bivalve inhabitants, we are centering non-human marine life that predates urban Providence. The mussels exist within a human-shaped context but outside the complete control of human actions. The mussels and oysters have persevered

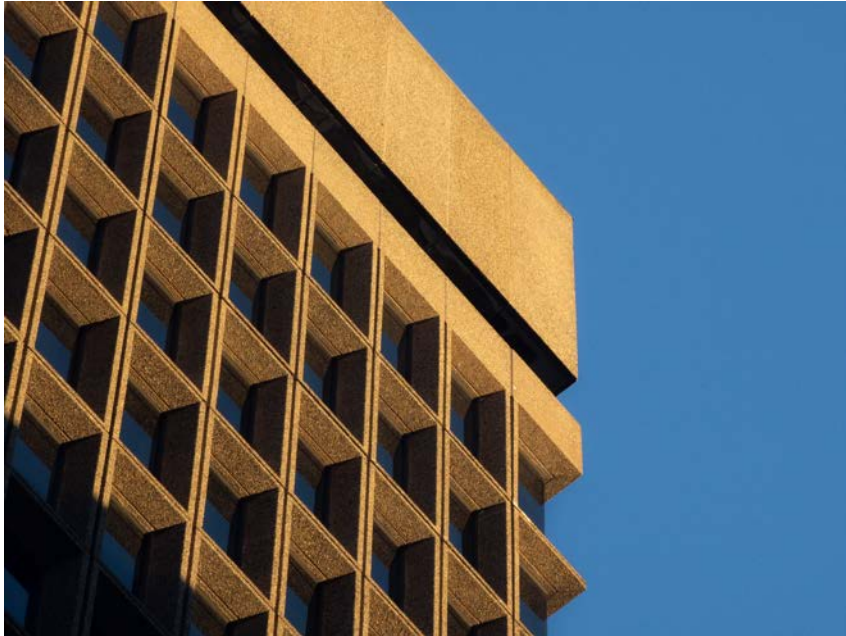
where other species have not, caught in the middle of representing old and new river ecosystems. Nonetheless, the mollusks are a continuation of an ecology that is often considered lost and covered over by centuries of colonization and urbanization. Human impacts have fundamentally transformed their topographies, hunted certain species to extinction, and covered and uncovered the water in concrete. The mollusks' longevity, however, demonstrates the perpetual incompleteness of the environmental transformation. The mussels live within the cyclic temporalities of the water's rise and fall, the continuation of life in the intertidal zone.

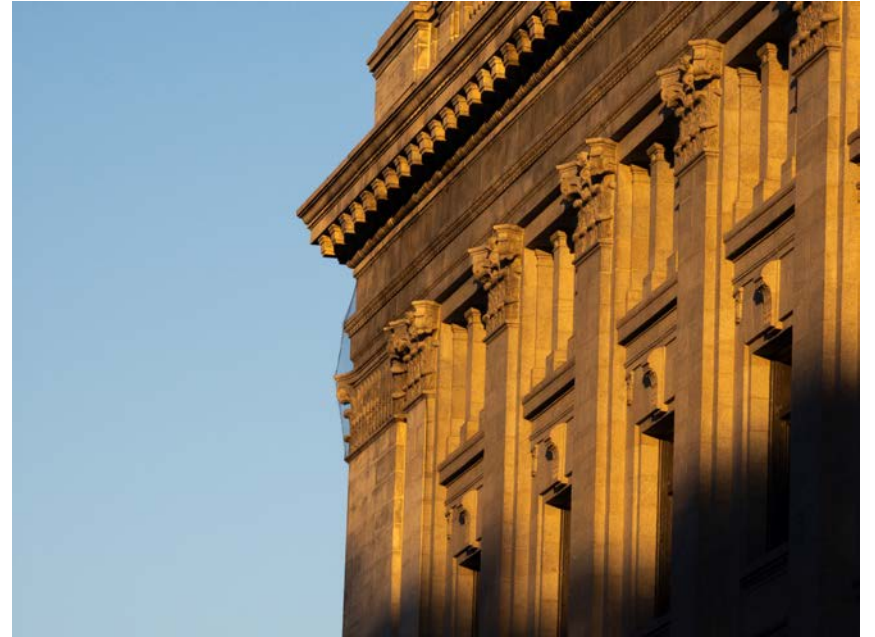
Rafael Ash '26 is an Urban Studies and Mathematics concentrator from Amherst, MA. For his senior thesis in Urban Studies, he is researching democratic urban planning movements in communities managing sea level rise through participatory action ethnography. He is fascinated by shellfish.

## 5 Photos from URBN and ARCH DUG Architecture Walking Tour

November 8, 2025

Zachary Miller





## An Exploration of Cemeteries' Land Use Potential as Green Space

Bentzi Gitig



From above, Swan Point Cemetery looks like a park. On the ground, it feels like a quiet suburb for the dead. I spent time walking through Swan Point cemetery, one of the two most major cemeteries in Providence and host to numerous well known Rhode Island citizens. From the outset, the orientation on Google Maps intrigued me. From satellite view, it looks like any other park, but the intersecting paths and segmented plots of land are an urban planning exercise in miniature, and the spatial dimensions of the cemetery are astounding.

I wanted to examine the land use of alternative types of green spaces: my exploration concerns issues of green urban land use and questions the cultural foundation of urban cemeteries. In Samia Cohen's course "Urban Ecologies: Forms, Flows, and Futures," we examined the split between city and nature, and learned about the historic ponds and dumping grounds of Rhode Island. I thought about the ways in which Swan Point is considered part of Providence, and learned more about its environmental evolution. An overlay of two maps displays that the cemetery is approximately the same area as the College Hill area, which hosts all of Brown University's residential, academic, administrative, and dining facilities. The cemetery is a unique convergence of the two, with an added cultural dimension.

While other green spaces of comparable size are frequented by walkers, picnickers, fishers, or families engaging in recreational activities, for the most part, cemeteries are infrequently frequented by relatives, or, in the historic

case, by small tour guides or interested persons. Regardless of peak timing, this is undoubtedly a small population size, made even smaller when compared to the size of Swan Point. Burial is continued mostly for cultural and religious reasons, as is the practice of burying bodies horizontally to better maintain bone structure post decomposition (which is practically easier but results in much higher land use than vertical burials). Neither of these land intensive practices seem particularly modern to me, and I am surprised that there hasn't been more widespread pushback by urban planners or advocacy groups. We have established that the vast green space that is a cemetery, is not, in fact, used as a green space and should of course not be treated as such.

The site also strongly resembles a microcosmic urban landscape. I walked the length and width of the cemetery, and all of the paths were accessible to cars which admittedly travelled at low speeds, but transformed a natural looking expanse of grass, trees, and stone into a car-centric environment. It felt much more like walking through tree-lined and winding suburban streets than anything else, with mausoleums standing in for small homes. The frequency and magnitude of Providence citizens' names (recognizable street names, park names, and other monuments) made this site feel less intimate or park-like, and even more like walking around Providence.

Through my wandering and contemplation, I considered the existence of non-urban, non-ecological places, which nevertheless contain

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elements of both. How are these places used, and is it time to reconsider the significance of said usage? What are the values to consider in land: is it their historical continuity and importance, or is the efficiency/productivity of the land? Swan Point, and cemeteries in general, fulfill a unique land use case, perhaps falling somewhere between a museum and a religious institution. I think that these questions, derived from a third type of space, lay out a rubric fundamental to analyzing both urban and ecological environments.

To understand how cemeteries function as urban land, it helps to look beyond Providence. A critical comparison between North Burial Ground and Copenhagen's Assistens Kirkegård reveals how different cultural and economic frameworks shape these spaces, and questions the efficacy of land and resource use. Where one reflects privatization, limited access, and car-oriented design, the other operates as an integrated public landscape, revealing a latent possibility. Taken together, these sites point to broader patterns in how cemeteries are valued, used, and maintained, and suggest how they might be reimagined within the urban fabric.

Cemeteries are a huge opportunity for public space design. Because of their nature they necessarily take up large areas of land and because of their history they are often in the midst of the urban landscape. As climate change worsens cities will get increasingly hot and biodiversity will increasingly suffer. Using the resources that we have in the most optimal way is already critical, but will

only become more so as the urban landscape begins to feel these effects. From an equity point of view, cemeteries can serve as a counterpoint to many urban parks. Urban greening projects such as park development usually contribute to raised property values in the immediate area which inevitably leads to the displacement of lower-income residents. This phenomenon is referred to as green gentrification. Already, green gentrification is more prevalent in the United States than in Europe. Focusing on cemeteries as green public spaces as opposed to their role as solely cultural and historical sites can vastly boost green space access for lower income residents while mitigating the more extreme effects of green gentrification.

North Burial Ground is located in Providence's Mount Hope neighborhood, a neighborhood in which nearly a quarter of families live below the poverty line. At 110 acres, the North Burial Ground takes up approximately a third of the neighborhood and is the main green space in the area. As the first public cemetery in Providence, an old colonial city, North Burial Ground is home to many notable and historic Rhode Island residents which lends a historical quality to the cemetery rather than a purely familial or religious one. At a glance, many cemeteries—North Burial Ground included—seem to fulfill the role of a green space when viewed on satellite maps. However, the mere presence of greenery does not qualify. To truly understand North Burial Ground's status as a pseudo-green/public space we must first understand the historical

context. As a response to the overcrowding and health concerns of high-density urban cemeteries in the mid-19th century the Rural Cemetery Movement came about. The purpose of this movement was to reframe cemeteries as exactly the ideal I am pushing for: places for the general populace to enjoy outdoor recreation, often in the presence of art and sculpture. This movement led to more intense landscaping and the addition of more nature, with the general strategy being to attract the living to spend time there. However, as the century drew to a close a number of factors contributed to the downfall of this aesthetic. In general, a higher cost of landscape maintenance, the emergence of dedicated public parks, and the overall confusion and disorganization of cemeteries' independently owned family burial plots and graves caused this mode of thinking about cemetery use to recede.

This downfall is indicative of the reasons why cemeteries cannot flourish as public spaces in the present. Many cemeteries in the United States are privately owned; while North Burial Ground is a municipal cemetery, it faces many of the same problems. Municipal cemeteries are also usually underfunded. The process of burial and end of life services follows the extreme economic tenets of neoliberalism by which all steps are commodified and privatized. Funerals and burials are extremely expensive. Sales of privatized burial plots are treated like real estate, and are bought permanently which leads to a scarcity of land and increasing prices. The layout of cemeteries—extensive car

roads, stop signs, limited walking paths—also reflects the United States' suburban postwar spatial logic; the road-dense design heavily reinforces car-centric infrastructure. When I biked through North Burial Ground on a nice, sunny, not-too-hot weekend day—the perfect weather and time for people to enjoy the outdoors—my suspicions were confirmed, and it was nearly empty. There are no bicycle locks to encourage alternative modes of transportation either. I spotted five cars, but only three people. It was easy to bike around; the paths are made for cars, complete with stop signs. Catering to private automobiles, like most infrastructure in the United States does, deprioritizes the pedestrian, forcing them to engage with their environment in a detached and secondary way. In the North Burial Ground's case, it doesn't help that it is bounded on east and west by the busy North Main Street and Interstate 95 respectively. The entire 110 acre span is permeated with the noise of interstate traffic and the speed of cars rushing past.

While the cemetery retains much of its landscaping from the bygone era of the Rural Cemetery Movement, it feels less like a park and more like a lawn. Flat, wide open, largely covered with grass, North Burial Ground has only sporadic tree coverage on the majority of the plot. With the amount of land the cemetery sits on much more could be done even considering the necessity to take care of the historically valuable graves. Dense tree coverage makes up approximately a twelfth of the total area.

There is a small pond which hosts birds and turtles, and other wildlife like coyotes are known to frequent the cemetery as well. Providing ecological urban habitats is so important to maintaining local biodiversity. If the space cannot fulfill its role as a public recreational space the way it was once intended to be, there are alternative paths to having an impact. A near monoculture lawn with a small pond and patch of trees does not meet the standards to having said impact. The cemetery's northwestern edge also lies along the buried path of the Moshassuck River which continues for a length under the I-95. This untapped ecological habitat is another example of how urban environments, and the North Burial Ground more specifically, vastly underutilize their environs.

By comparison, the cemeteries of Denmark are shaped by different economic and cultural factors and thus succeed in interfacing with the general populace much better. Whereas death and all of the procedures that it entails are treated as personal responsibility and economic opportunity in the United States, elsewhere they are treated as a shared civic matter and are governed by logic and regulation. Instead of a privately owned enterprise following the laws of supply and demand, cemeteries in many Western European countries like Denmark are publicly managed. This manifests itself in the way that burial plots are priced and managed. Rather than treat plots as wholly privatized pieces of real estate, Denmark employs a more flexible strategy. Graves are not owned, but leased which allows for eventual reuse.

This concept, which may be challenging to American cultural norms, allows for land use to be efficient, renewable, and much more flexible. This prevents the buildup of unused space and prevents the patchwork of disrepair all too common in American cemeteries. As far as general maintenance goes, a public taxation strategy combined with public funds raises money; by foregoing private donations these cemeteries present the process of burial as a public good rather than a private service.

The Assistens Kirkegård thus marks the antithesis of the privatized, inefficient, car-centric American cemetery. For the aforementioned reasons, cemeteries in Denmark generally serve as valuable urban spaces and act like green parks as well. There is no infrastructure for cars despite the cemetery's location in the middle of a busy capital city. Because of this prioritization, the cemetery is filled with activity in every photograph I have come across. People walk, jog, cycle, and push their children in strollers through Assistens Kirkegård. Picnicking or simply basking in the sun are not uncommon occurrences. The footpaths also allow for much denser vegetation than wider roads. Nearly the entire surface area of the Assistens is covered by trees: above 90% compared to North Burial Ground's measly 8%.

With a suitable framework as precedent, North Burial Ground, and indeed cemeteries across the United States, can begin to make changes that will alter their public perception and the way that they serve their communities and ecological inhabitants.

While it is true that Danish cemeteries benefit greatly from the economic context they exist in, not all of their success can be attributed to this. Additionally, it is fair to say that the American perception of death and the spaces associated with it need a massive modernization and upheaval. Despite these hindering forces, there are still improvements that can be made. The North Burial Ground should hire environmental consultants to inform their landscaping decisions. There should be much more tree density than there is, and the integration of native wild plants. In some way, the municipality should revitalize the Moshassuck River in the way that some of Providence's other rivers have in the past. Connecting the river to the cemetery's small rainfall pond could also give animals an ecological corridor to more safely travel in the urban environment. Lastly, a great portion of the paths should be closed off to cars. It is safe to assume that many visitors to cemeteries are of advanced age which raises accessibility concerns, so the presence of car accessible paths is still valuable. However, one circumference path around the park with only a few lengthwise and widthwise paths should be sufficient, and would limit the area accessible to automobiles by nearly 60% while increasing human comfort on those same paths.

Bentzi Gitig '26 is from New York and is concentrating in Urban Studies and Computer Science. He loves architecture, sustainable design, and urban transportation. He can be found playing chess in the park or looking for cats, also in the park.

# The Impact of the Built Environment on the Mobility and Quality of Life of Elderly Women in the United States

Brianna Lucas

## INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of a neighborhood have a strong influence on health outcomes and behaviors, and its role has directed more attention towards the overlap between urban studies and public health. Walkability in particular refers to how conducive the built environment is to pedestrian activity.<sup>3</sup> Walkability encompasses characteristics such as the density of inhabitants, residences, and amenities, access to public transport, sidewalk characteristics, traffic safety, street network connectivity, crime security, and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Walking is a beneficial and versatile form of exercise for people of all ages, and it has been shown to decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and all-cause mortality, as well as improve sleep and mental health.<sup>11</sup> Health guidelines recommend that adults do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week, which can be fulfilled by walking.<sup>9</sup> However, only 22.7% of adults in the United States met the recommended guidelines for aerobic activity.<sup>4</sup>

Older adults are the least physically active age group, and most spend a large part of the day sedentary.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, women are less likely than men to meet the recommended goal for aerobic activity.<sup>4</sup> Thus, elderly women are an especially vulnerable population to sedentarianism, and it is a public health priority to learn more about the facilitators and barriers in the built environment that impact their walking activity. Other neighborhood features, such as greenness, are also linked to health outcomes and may

decrease stress, noise pollution, and air pollution, as well as promote social contact.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this literature review is to compile data from observational studies and investigate whether differences in the built environment alone can directly predict changes in health outcomes related to mobility and quality of life in elderly women. Conclusions from this literature review can help better inform interventions designed to promote physical activity and understand the potential health impact of structural changes in the environment.

## METHODS

This review included peer-reviewed cohort and cross-sectional studies about the relationship between features of the built environment and health outcomes in older women published within the last 15 years. Studies that were conducted on patient populations outside of the United States or used physical activity alone as an outcome variable were excluded from this review. Acceptable health outcomes included quality of life measures, self-reported measures of physical or mental health, and measures related to mobility and function.

The search was conducted across three databases — PubMed, Web of Science, and SocIndex — on October 22, 2025. Search strings for PubMed and SocIndex were generated using search terms to capture the intervention and the patient population. Search strings for Web of Science also included terms for various outcome variables of interest.

The results were uploaded from PubMed, Web of Science, and SocIndex into Covidence for deduplication and screening. After the duplicates were identified, Brianna Lucas was the sole independent reviewer who conducted the first round of review, which consisted of evaluating the title and abstract, and the second round of review, which was a full-text evaluation (See Appendix A for PRISMA diagram).

## RESULTS

The data was extracted from six articles using the data extractor function in Covidence. The extracted information consisted of the publication year, sample size, and mean age of participants, study design, built environment feature(s), and outcome measure(s), along with a summary of the study's conclusions. Each study was evaluated to determine whether the data supported that differences in a feature of the built environment could predict differences in health outcomes among elderly women. This data was summarized into the Table featured in Appendix B.

Michael et al conducted a prospective cohort study that collected data between the years of 1990 and 2004 that followed elderly women in Portland, Oregon.<sup>2</sup> A composite walkability measure that was sensitive to street connectivity and street density was calculated and used as the exposure variable for each participant.<sup>2</sup> As the outcome variable, they measured the average change in BMI over time and the odds ratios of becoming obese.<sup>2</sup> The authors found that the relative risk of becoming obese among

the cohort was 1.03; 95% CI: (1.01, 1.05), meaning that the risk of becoming obese increased by 3% each year.<sup>2</sup> They found that walkability was not associated with BMI or risk of obesity.<sup>2</sup>

Another study conducted by Michael et al the following year, in 2014, was a retrospective cohort study that looked at the changes in BMI of participants comparing values from 2004 to 1986, during a time period when Portland, Oregon, the site of the research study, had undergone significant changes in public transportation development and walkability.<sup>5</sup> They quantified changes in walkability over the course of the study using a composite measure that was sensitive to land use mix (e.g., commercial vs. residential use), street connectivity, public transit availability, and access to parks and green spaces.<sup>5</sup> As the outcome measure, they collected participants' mean BMI throughout the study.<sup>5</sup> The authors found that the association between walkability and change in BMI, and the association between parks/green spaces and the change in BMI, were not significant.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the authors found that higher neighborhood SES was associated with a decrease in BMI.<sup>5</sup>

Tamura et al conducted a study investigating the presence of spatial clustering of health outcomes like obesity in relation to neighborhood walkability, using participant data from 2004 from the Nurses Health Study, and they included different regions of California, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup> The composite walkability

score used in this study was influenced by population density, street intersection density, facility diversity, and density within a 1200m radius.<sup>10</sup> The authors found only one obesity cluster in western Pennsylvania and found a higher likelihood of obesity within the cluster compared to outside regions (RR = 1.17,  $p = 0.029$ ).<sup>10</sup>

Sriram et al conducted a cross-sectional study, utilizing data from 2012-2013 from the Women's Health Initiative cohort, a national study of US women.<sup>8</sup> The authors collected information about the participants' residential neighborhood Walk Score, an open-source walkability scoring system, scaled from 0-100, that was adopted from the real estate industry, along with their BMI and waist circumference.<sup>8</sup> They found that Walk Score was not associated with BMI or overall obesity, but linked to lower odds of abdominal obesity in comparing waist circumference between those living in areas with the most walkable areas and the least walkable areas (RR=0.72, CI: (0.53, 0.99)).<sup>8</sup>

Banay et al analyzed data from the Nurses Health Study, a prospective cohort study enrolling female nurses across 11 states to study women's health.<sup>6</sup> As their outcome variable, Banay et al used data from 2000-2010 to calculate the incidence of depression among the women eligible in their study from reports of antidepressant use and/or a clinically confirmed diagnosis of depression.<sup>6</sup> They measured greenness as the exposure variable using satellite technology.<sup>6</sup> The researchers found a 13% reduction in

depression risk, RR= 0.87 (CI: 0.78, 0.98), and no effect modification of physical activity was found.<sup>6</sup>

Wende et al analyzed data from the Women's Health Initiative, a prospective cohort study of US women, from the years 1993 to 2012.<sup>7</sup> They quantified information about walkability and green space and collected reports from participants about hip fractures or any other fractures that they experienced.<sup>7</sup> The authors found that people with intermediate walkability scores had a 6% greater risk of any fracture (RR = 1.06, CI: (1.04, 1.07)), while high walkability was associated with a 3% lower risk of any fracture (RR = 0.97, CI: (0.95, 0.98)).<sup>7</sup> An intermediate green space level was associated with a 15% higher risk of any fracture (RR = 1.15, CI: (1.12, 1.18)), and a high green space level was associated with an 18% greater risk of any fracture (RR = 1.18, CI: (1.15, 1.21)).<sup>7</sup> There was no association found between walkability and hip fractures, specifically.<sup>7</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The conclusions from the studies included in this review yielded several results that were contrary to the hypothesized results. The first of which was the association between higher green space levels and an increased risk of fractures.<sup>7</sup> Green spaces with uneven and rocky terrain may be responsible for this trend since most walkability metrics do not include the influence of these types of microfeatures. Thus, parks with paved and adequately upkept walking paths should be prioritized for the safety of older adults as

they engage in physical activity outdoors.

Another surprising trend was the lack of an association between walkability and BMI.<sup>2,5,8</sup> BMI does not distinguish between muscle mass and fat, and since older adults naturally lose muscle mass as they age, there is no way to know whether muscle mass versus fat is being preserved, lost, or gained. Thus, waist circumference may be a better measurement to use in older populations to approximate health risk factors, and higher walkability was associated with a lower waist circumference in one study.<sup>8</sup>

One study found a potential link between greenness and depression, and physical activity was not found to be an effect modifier.<sup>6</sup> This may mean that this link could be mediated by lower stress, greater social cohesion, or the positive effects of an aesthetically pleasing environment.

Another study found that the obesity cluster they identified in western Pennsylvania had lower walkability scores compared to other areas outside the cluster. Obesity is a complex chronic condition that is influenced by many factors, and although walkability may be protective by encouraging physical

activity, other neighborhood features, such as proximity to healthy food options, strongly impact diet quality or neighborhood safety, which may cause people to choose not to walk even if the pedestrian infrastructure is intact. Thus, structural interventions to improve neighborhood health should aim to function at multiple dimensions by improving not just infrastructure, but also improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables and safety.

The conclusions of this review are limited by the fact that investigating the impact of walkability is largely limited to observational studies, which don't allow for inferring causality. Furthermore, scientific literature focusing on the impact of walkability on elderly women in particular is sparse, limiting the ability to strengthen measured associations with demonstrated reproducibility. Additionally, generalizability is also limited because most studies predominantly recruited white female participants, with few women of color. Further research efforts should aim to recruit a more diverse participant cohort and gather qualitative data about elderly women's experiences walking in their neighborhoods to better understand their behaviors and the types of interventions that would be the most impactful.

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## Street

Sarkis Antonyan

A grandmother velcroed against  
this urban background pokes with  
her cane her way. The dead bird  
puffs feathers—

its own Vesuvius. And now  
I am boarding the bus  
and folding my atoms

back into their plastic. Sun—  
point the way

without your grace-  
lessness. I want to be  
the sand under those waves petering  
toward their penultimate  
finality, sand

breaking sand  
moving

in Euclidean  
parachuting efforts.

Sarkis Antonyan '27 studies Interior Architecture, Urban Studies, and Literary Arts and Studies. From Los Angeles, California, he loves hyperpop, lychee, and gold rings.

## The Politics of Low-Income Housing and Public Finance in Atlanta

### How an Old Regime Prevents Progress

Garrett Brand

#### INTRODUCTION

Atlanta is in the midst of a low-income housing crisis. The city has employed a variety of strategies in attempting to mitigate said crisis, but has found limited success. There are a number of reasons why, but this paper will focus on two: the resilience of regime-style “Atlanta Way” politics, and the broken public finance system which those politics have created. I will then analyze how these foundational problems have hamstrung even the city’s most promising housing policy to date, the social housing inspired Atlanta Urban Development Corporation. Finally, I will argue that the success of recent insurgent electoral efforts by left-wing political actors in Atlanta may constitute the burgeoning of a political force capable of disrupting the city’s long-standing regime, and thus meaningfully addressing the housing crisis.

#### CONTEXT

It is no secret that Atlanta has been gentrifying rapidly for the last several decades. Between 1990 and 2019, the city’s median family income nearly doubled, increasing from approximately \$50,000 to about \$96,000 when adjusted for inflation. Over the same time period, Atlanta’s Black population *declined dramatically*: Black residents went from composing two-thirds of the city to less than half of it (Immergluck 2025, 6-7). As the city’s demographics have changed, so has its housing market. The city has added scores of expensive luxury units, but has lost ones affordable to low-income residents: “In 2019, more than 41,000 of the city’s rental units had gross rents of over \$1,500

per month. A comparable rent, adjusted for inflation, was about \$1,250 in 2010, but in 2010, there were only about 19,000 units priced at that level. The higher-cost rental stock had effectively doubled over the nine years, while the low-cost stock had declined by more than twenty percent” (Immergluck 2022, 104). The city is experiencing a severe low-income housing crisis which has harmed its poorest residents the most. This is doubly true considering Atlanta has the highest income inequality of any American city (Jackson 2022). It is thus no surprise that housing affordability has become one of the most salient political issues in Atlanta over the past decade (Immergluck 2025, 11).

This context is crucial to understanding how Atlanta’s particular housing crisis differs from those in other cities across the country. Atlanta is not a city that has failed to build new housing. In 2000, the city had 186,998 housing units; by 2020, it had 259,122, an increase of 72,124. Over the same time period, Atlanta’s population increased from 416,629 to 499,287, an addition of 82,658 new residents. That translates to approximately 0.87 new housing units per new resident added over two decades. That is a fantastic pace of housing construction, yet Atlanta’s housing prices have still skyrocketed. Between 2010 and 2020, the city’s median rent jumped from \$948 a month to \$1,617 a month, an increase of over 70%. Over roughly the same time period, a staggering 94% of new apartments were classified as luxury units (Goldstone 2025, xix). Atlanta’s housing crisis is not

about a failure to build housing—it is about what type of housing the city has built. (All figures in this paragraph were author-calculated using PolicyMap’s Census data.)

Atlanta’s housing crisis is not due to a lack of new housing construction, but a lack of new low-income housing. As discussed in the introduction and evidenced by the above statistics, the city has been very successful in adding luxury apartments to its housing stock, but has failed to expand, or even retain its existing low-income residential units. In 2023, the Atlanta metro-area actually had an excess of rental units affordable to households making 100% of the Area Median Income (AMI), with 107 such units available per 100 such households. In the same year, the region only had 41 units per 100 households making 50% of AMI and 27 units per 100 households making 30% or below AMI (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2024). Atlanta even falls below the pitiful national average of 34 units per 100 households at 30% AMI (Goldstone 2025, 359). The numbers are clear—Atlanta has abundant housing for those with moderate or high incomes, and virtually none for the poor.

Despite this, current Mayor Andre Dickens has touted his administration’s success in developing affordable housing and even enjoyed national celebration. The mayor’s claims warrant deeper scrutiny, particularly in terms of what metrics his administration has used to define what “affordable” means. As of September 2025, Dickens has

claimed credit for the construction of more than 11,700 units of affordable housing. However, less than 18% of those units are affordable at 50% of AMI, and less than 6% of those units are affordable at 30% AMI (Immergluck 2025, 14). The City’s strategy has primarily revolved around developing units which are affordable to households making 50-80% of AMI, with that range constituting just under 77% of Dickens’ total claimed affordable units (Atlanta Affordable Housing Tracker 2025). Adding any amount of affordable units is certainly preferable to adding purely market-rate ones, but the type of “affordability” is critically important. An apartment priced at 80% of AMI in Atlanta is not affordable to the city’s low-income residents. Thus, despite the City’s moderate efforts at expanding Atlanta’s low-income housing stock, its poorest residents are still being left behind.

To properly serve these Atlantans, the city needs significantly more units which are affordable to households at or below 50% of AMI. The existing gap is enormous: as of 2023, the Atlanta metro-area is missing 168,745 units of 50% AMI affordable housing (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2025). These deeply affordable units require large public subsidies to be financially viable. Thus, for the City of Atlanta to truly meet the housing needs of its low-income residents, it would need to massively increase its investments in the provision of affordable housing. A City government which was serious about reallocating resources in such a way would need to overcome two large

challenges: Atlanta’s dysfunctional public finance system, and the particular brand of regime politics which has created it.

### THE “ATLANTA WAY” AND PUBLIC FINANCE

In his 1989 classic, *Regime Politics*, Clarence Stone defined Atlanta’s governing regime as: “...the informal partnership between city hall and the downtown business elite. This informal partnership and the way it operates constitute the city’s regime; it is the means through which major policy decisions are made” (Stone 1989, 3). This regime structure has come to be known and institutionalized as the “Atlanta Way,” an openly acknowledged, informal alliance between the city’s Black political elites and white business elites. The Atlanta Way emerged in the mid 20th century as a compromise between the city’s two dominant racial groups. As Atlanta’s Black community built political power and some accrued economic wealth, it became necessary for the city’s White power structures to have a means of brokering with them, particularly once Black residents won control of City Hall in 1973 with the election of Maynard Jackson (Immergluck 2025 3-4). This need for partnership manifested as the Atlanta Way regime and has been the dominant political structure in the city ever since.

The Atlanta Way regime is a complex, unique political phenomenon which has been written about extensively in the works cited throughout this paper and beyond. However, the most relevant feature of the

Atlanta Way regime for the purposes of this paper is its treatment of Atlanta’s poor Black residents. Despite being partially composed of Black elites, the Atlanta Way has done almost nothing but harm to the majority of Black Atlantans: “...this regime did little for the fortunes of most working-class Black families, who remained in low-wage jobs and inadequate housing” (Immergluck 2025, 3). This is a key feature of the Atlanta Way regime: it has always left the poorest Atlantans behind in favor of pursuing the easiest path towards economic boons for the city’s elites. As Stone wrote, “It is not easy to have a regime that is both effective and equitable, but no regime is truly effective unless it is also equitable...The problem is that the path of least resistance lies in the direction of slighting equity” (Stone 1989, xii). Across history, the Atlanta Way regime has consistently chosen that path of least resistance, and thus sidelined the pursuit of equity for its lowest-income residents. As previously established and as will be explored further later, this is still true of the City’s current low-income housing policy.

The Atlanta Way has resulted in a city which is extraordinarily friendly to corporate business and real estate developers. Dan Immergluck has shown how these corporate-friendly policies stem from a shared vision for Atlanta’s future held by both the Black and White elites who compose the city’s regime: “Instead of focusing on responsible reinvestment and community development efforts inclusive of existing and future low-income Atlantans, the corporate-led urban

regime focused on a vision of a new, more affluent, and whiter Atlanta” (Immergluck 2022, 60). Particularly spurred by the city’s bid to host the 1996 Olympic Games, municipal leaders wanted Atlanta to be an “authentically global” city—or, a richer, whiter city (Gustafson 2013, 199). Crucially, this vision was not one imposed by White elites onto resistant Black ones; it was a mutually agreed upon goal enacted through the extensive informal networks connecting Atlanta’s Black-led City Hall to its White-dominated business sector. This is not a history of subordination of the public sector by the private; it is one of willing cooperation between the two. Immergluck sums it up nicely:

“Civic leadership, including the corporate-led regime, never relished the notion of being a majority-Black city. Even after Black elected officials gained power, they generally did not embrace the city’s lower-income Black population or focus policymaking on improving the conditions of their lives. The clearance of public housing, the reimagining of the city as a global one seemingly hell-bent on supporting investment capital, and the remaking of places to appeal to more affluent in-movers all set the stage for the city’s stronger gentrification in the twenty-first century.” (Immergluck 2022, 95-96)

To achieve this goal, the Atlanta Way regime has made Atlanta a city that caters extensively to the forces of capital. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than within the city’s

broken public finance system.

As argued relentlessly by Immergluck, Atlanta’s public finance system is broken for three primary reasons. Reason one is the presence of two competing, property-tax-break-loving development authorities in Invest Atlanta and the Fulton County Development Authority. Reason two is the undertaxation of large commercial properties across the city, and reason three is a regressive limitation on the city’s ability to raise property taxes on homeowners regardless of their wealth (Immergluck 2025, 10). The result of this dysfunction is a public finance system which primarily serves to enable the exploitation of rent gaps by private capital rather than the deliverance of quality public goods. Atlanta’s public sector has not held up its end of the gentrification bargain: an increase in property values should translate to an increase in public revenue, and thus public services—but not in Atlanta. Again, Immergluck sums it up: “The public sector captures too little of the wealth generated in this gentrifying city, dollars needed to provide housing support to the households and families who are most hurt by such gentrification – low-income renters” (Immergluck 2025, 16).

It is also important to give some attention to how hostile state-level preemptions constrain both Atlanta’s public finances and its ability to serve its residents. The City of Atlanta is heavily constrained by Georgia state law. The list of policy issues which Atlanta is legally barred from regulating includes, but

is not limited to: minimum wage, paid leave, project labor agreements, rent control, and fair scheduling laws (Blair et al. 2020). The City has very little room to operate. In an interview, Courtney English, Mayor Dickens’ current Chief of Staff, openly admitted that he believes Atlanta’s existing inclusionary zoning policy is likely illegal under Georgia state law. He cited the threat of developer lawsuits as the reason why the policy includes a highly flawed opt-out mechanism for developers to avoid its affordable housing mandate by paying an “in-lieu of” fee (Interview with Courtney English 2025). This is a clear example of a state preemption hurting Atlanta’s ability to serve its residents. The city’s inclusionary zoning policy, which may otherwise be a powerful mechanism for developing affordable housing in the growing city, is rendered ineffective by the hostile legal terrain created by the state.

Georgia’s hostile state government can also be seen as a driving force behind the Atlanta Way and its resulting policies. A city so limited by its pro-corporate state government will naturally feel forced to cede ground to corporations in the policy arena. Stone backs this up on the very first page of *Regime Politics*: “City Hall has to deal with a business sector and sharp limitations on its own authority. Thus, public officeholders have to come to terms with private interests, especially business interests” (Stone 1989, ix). Today, these concessions have been institutionalized as defining features of the Atlanta Way regime.

An important result of Atlanta’s public finance

dysfunction is how it further reinforces the power of the Atlanta Way regime. In the absence of a healthy public finance system to fund essential social services and a public policy agenda, Atlanta has repeatedly turned to the business community to fill the financial gap through private philanthropy, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Atlanta’s civic leaders have a long history of relying on private fundraising capacity to solve public problems. Stone describes how “The business elite’s capacity to raise money and deploy credit quickly served to link city hall closely to the business community” (Stone 1989, 96). This dynamic is key to understanding the relationship between the Atlanta Way regime and the city’s public finance problems. The regime not only hamstringing the City’s ability to adequately finance itself as described above, it then leverages its economic power to fill the resulting gap and thus further institutionalize its power over public policy.

This can be seen clearly in the City’s current approach to affordable housing development under Mayor Dickens. The mayor’s much-touted commitment of \$300 million towards affordable housing development consists of \$100 million of public sector money derived from the 2023 Housing Opportunity Bond and \$200 million of private philanthropic funds raised by the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta from typical donors like the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation (McAdams & Fike 2025b, 4). This is a funding structure directly in line with the Atlanta Way: instead of allowing total public

control over public policy through effective public financing mechanisms, the City relies on the private sector to supply funding. This allows the private sector to exercise control over the direction of policy, and crucially, has not resulted in significant gains in low-income housing.

In fact, the city has continued to lose units of low-income housing under Dickens' leadership. From 2019 to 2023, Atlanta lost 27% of its low-cost rentals (defined as beneath \$1,250 in 2023 dollars), a decline from about 38,400 to under 27,750 (Immergluck 2025, 13). This is despite a somewhat increased production of affordable housing under Dickens. While the so-called "housing mayor" has scaled up the city's development of subsidized units, he has not fundamentally broken with the Atlanta Way, and thus has not meaningfully addressed Atlanta's low-income housing crisis. Immergluck characterizes Dickens' mayoralty as "...an administration focusing more on affordable housing production, but without a marked improvement either in serving the lowest-income households who are most in need of such assistance or in capturing more of the city's wealth to use for these purposes, both of which are consistent with the Atlanta Way" (Immergluck 2025, 18). This description seems apt.

### THE AUDC

However, the Dickens Administration has offered some glimmers of hope in terms of low-income housing policy through its creation of the Atlanta Urban Development

Corporation (AUDC). AUDC is an example of an approach to low-income housing that, if supported with sufficient public financing, could meaningfully address the city's crisis. AUDC stands out from Atlanta's typical approaches to affordable housing because it embraces a model known as "social housing." Social housing is a multidimensional concept which encompasses a wide array of housing models, but all of its iterations share three core tenets: they are permanently affordable, democratically controlled, and serve a wide, mixed-income range of the population (Schindler 2025). Social housing has seen extreme success for over a century in European cities like Vienna and Copenhagen, and even been successfully adapted in parts of America like Montgomery County, Maryland and Seattle. According to Courtney English, who sits on AUDC's board, the entity is an explicit attempt to copy those models (Interview with Courtney English 2025).

Before elaborating on the potential benefits of AUDC's implementation of social housing some information on how the entity functions is needed. AUDC was formed as an "operationalization" of Mayor Dickens' Housing Strike Force, a task force composed of the heads of every Atlanta agency involved in the provision of affordable housing (Keenan 2023b). A key finding of the Strike Force was an immense underutilization of \$700 million worth of publicly-owned land in Atlanta (McAdams & Fike 2025a, 6). Correctly diagnosing this as an opportunity for city-led efforts to create new affordable housing, in 2023, the Strike Force formed

the AUDC to act as Atlanta's resident social housing developer (McAdams & Fike 2025a, 4). AUDC operates the Housing Production Fund (HPF), a revolving loan fund which was seeded with \$38 million from the \$100 million Housing Opportunity Bond issued in 2023. AUDC uses the HPF to issue low-cost mezzanine loans to housing developments around the city in exchange for ownership of their affordable components (McAdams & Fike 2025a, 6). This allows the city to effectively "buy into" affordability components in developments which otherwise would have been purely market-rate (Interview with Courtney English 2025). When these loans are paid off after 3-5 years, the money "revolves" back into the HPF to be distributed to new projects, allowing long term financial sustainability for affordable housing production.

Social housing is preferable to other housing models for a variety of reasons. However, the most important characteristic of social housing is its decommodification. Permanently removing housing from the speculative private market is absolutely critical to ensuring long-term stability and affordability for its residents. The consequences of failing to do so can be seen clearly through the affordability expiration of Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) financed projects across the nation (Goldstone 2025, chapter 23). AUDC achieves this goal by holding the property deeds for projects it subsidizes and leasing them back to developers/property managers for 99 years at a time, effectively removing

those units from the fluctuations of the private housing market and guaranteeing long-term, sustainable affordability for low-income tenants (Courtney English Interview 2025).

Another advantage to AUDC's social housing model is its separation from federal and state funding sources. Because of the revolving structure of the HPF, AUDC is able to continuously replenish its coffers over time, allowing for constant development of new subsidized housing. This is particularly crucial considering that currently 94% of Atlanta's public investment in affordable housing is flowing downstream from increasingly-limited state and/or federal sources (Immergluck 2025, 15). At a time when both the state of Georgia and the federal government are explicitly hostile towards Democrat-controlled cities with large minority populations, it is especially important for a city like Atlanta to have financial mechanisms with which to fund its own public agenda. Furthermore, AUDC's social housing approach falls outside of the United States' traditional, flawed "two-tiered system" of housing policy. The US has typically segregated its housing into two categories: highly income-restricted public housing, and entirely unrestricted market-rate housing (Schindler 2025). Social housing is an approach between those two tiers, which comes with two benefits. Firstly, it allows for higher-income tenants to effectively cross-subsidize the rents of lower-income tenants, enabling sustainable affordability (Aiken, Murphy, & Raitz

2024, 2). Secondly, it allows for the creation of thriving mixed-income communities, which bring a host of social benefits beyond financial affordability (Baiocchi & Carlson 2022, 18).

### THE PERSISTENT PROBLEM

For all of the above reasons, AUDC is a very promising development in Atlanta's low-income housing landscape and falls outside of the typical approach taken by the Atlanta Way regime. However, while the regime persists as the dominant force in Atlanta's politics, AUDC will be hamstrung from reaching its true potential. Despite the promise of AUDC as a vehicle for social housing development in Atlanta, the entity does not currently have nearly the funding needed to transform the city's approach to housing. To begin with, AUDC lacks a consistent revenue stream—by all indications, there is currently no intent to increase the entity's funding, nor is there a clear plan for where that increased funding could come from. The existing \$38 million revolving loan fund is insufficient to provide both the scale and depth of public subsidies needed to address Atlanta's low-income housing shortage. For a social housing developer like AUDC to build units affordable at 50% AMI and below, it needs access to huge amounts of public subsidy in addition to allowing projects to utilize unit cross-subsidization. As Immergluck writes, "One issue that often arises in such models is whether, unless there is access to deep subsidy, such entities are unlikely to provide the sorts of deeply affordable housing that is most needed, i.e. rental housing affordable

to families with incomes below 50 percent, and especially below 30 percent, of the metropolitan median income" (Immergluck 2025, 12). Recall once more that 77% of Dickens administration affordable units have fallen in the 50-80% AMI affordability range. Investing in mechanisms focused on affordability below 50% AMI is crucial to addressing the previously established low-income housing crisis. While AUDC's existing built-in affordability criteria require at least 20% of units in any given project to be priced at or below 50% AMI, for its projects to meaningfully fill the low-income housing gap, it will require more funding to enable deeper subsidies (McAdams & Fike 2025a, 6).

As discussed exhaustively throughout this paper, the primary obstacle to Atlanta addressing its low-income housing crisis is a lack of sufficient funding, which can be largely attributed to the city's dysfunctional public finance system. However, any discussion of Atlanta's allocation of its public resources must also discuss the politics of the city budget, particularly in terms of the overfunding of the Atlanta Police Department (APD). While the Atlanta Way regime persists, APD will continue to be bloated and overfunded with money that should be allocated towards entities like AUDC. As Atlanta has gentrified and the low-income housing crisis has deepened, APD's budget has exploded (a correlation which is not coincidental, but outside of the scope of this paper to explore). In 2000, APD had a budget of \$130 million. This year, it will

have a budget of \$307 million, an increase of over 130% (Herskind 2023; ATLbudget 2025). For a metro area that was home to more traffic deaths than homicides in 2024, it is difficult to accept the police eating up 31% of the city budget (Dixon 2025). This is especially true considering that the city budget has consistently shortchanged its Affordable Housing Trust Fund (a potential funding mechanism for AUDC), which has come under heavy criticism for both its lack of funding and mismanagement (Keenan 2023a).

As organizer-scholar Micah Herskind details, the Atlanta Way regime has a multitude of incentives to overallocate money towards policing while underfunding necessary social services, including the provision of affordable housing (Herskind 2023). A more just—and logical—allocation of resources will require a serious disruption to Atlanta's governing regime. Until the city's political foundation is altered, its financial priorities will continue to be misaligned with city needs, and progress on low-income housing will continue to be modest at best. As Dan Immergluck writes, "...the Atlanta Way appears to be alive and well in Atlanta, albeit perhaps with some moderate affordable housing characteristics" (Immergluck 2025, 18). For anything more significant than "moderate" progress on the city's most pressing policy crisis, the Atlanta Way will need to be ruptured in a meaningful way.

### ATLANTA'S POLITICAL FUTURE

Fortunately, there are signs that such a political rupture may be in Atlanta's near future. In recent years, groups such as the Georgia Working Families Party (WFP) and Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have begun building serious political power, and even waged successful electoral challenges to the Atlanta Way regime. Much of this burgeoning progressive coalition's base formed in the wake of Mayor Dickens' disastrous handling of the controversy surrounding Cop City, a major public-private investment in police infrastructure, and has since been organized into real power structures (Nolan 2025). Stone considered the potential for Atlanta's regime to be disrupted all the way back in *Regime Politics*: "Any event contains regime-altering potential—perhaps not in sudden realignment, but in opening a new path along which subsequent events can cumulatively bring about fundamental change" (Stone 1989, 10). Atlanta's emergent progressive ecosystem may constitute the foundations of a political force capable of opening such a new path, and thus enabling true housing justice policy in Atlanta.

The most notable of these political insurgents is Kelsea Bond, Atlanta's newly elected District 2 City Councilmember. Bond is a longtime labor organizer and Atlanta DSA member who ran an openly socialist campaign focused on expanding Atlanta's low-income housing stock and public transit network (Nolan 2025). Bond, who is now the first democratic socialist elected in Atlanta, beat a developer-backed

candidate by a stunning margin, winning 64% of the vote (Fulton County 2025). Their campaign was run entirely by Atlanta DSA, which is in the early stages of building a robust political infrastructure, similar to how NYC DSA scaled their operation in the years preceding mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani's landmark victory. Bond has already shown that they are willing to fight against Atlanta's establishment: before even being officially sworn into office, they have already tallied their first success against the Atlanta Way regime. Using their platform as a newly-elected official, Bond rallied community members to successfully delay Mayor Dickens' attempt to expedite the passage of legislation to extend the city's Tax Allocation Districts, which have been criticized as gentrification-accelerants and for-profit giveaways of tax dollars (Marazzi Sassoon 2025). This is an impressive show of force for Atlanta's brand new, most progressive municipal official.

In addition to Bond, four other WFP-endorsed candidates won re-election to the City Council. Jason Dozier, Liliana Bakhtiari, and Antonio Lewis all hold district-specific seats, while Eshé Collins won one of the Council's three city-wide positions. However, it is notable that these are all existing members of the Council who won re-election. They represent the cadre of existing progressives in City Hall who have already spent years working within the Atlanta Way regime, but are willing to align themselves with its challengers. They are the foundation to be built upon, and

can serve a number of key support roles for future outsider-challenger candidates. By existing as institutional examples of "electable" progressives and offering their endorsements, they can provide an important air of legitimacy to candidates who may otherwise struggle to gain it. Furthermore, they can provide material support for future candidates, whether through key networking, advice, or campaign infrastructure sharing. Finally, once progressive challengers are elected—like Kelsea Bond—these established officials can leverage their knowledge of and experience with Atlanta's bureaucratic systems to help effectively turn policy platforms into governing programs.

That foundation will be key if and when progressives are able to defeat regime candidates for key municipal positions, which may be soon if the near-success of Rohit Malhotra is any indicator. Rohit Malhotra, who is the founder of the nonprofit Center for Civic Innovation, ran an outsider campaign for Atlanta's City Council president seat in the city's most recent elections. His opponent was Marci Collier Overstreet, a current City Councilmember and close ally to Mayor Dickens and the Atlanta Way regime. It is difficult to overstate the significance of a political outsider like Malhotra being able to mount such a serious challenge to an insider like Overstreet. No candidate who has openly challenged the Atlanta Way regime has won a city-wide election in Atlanta since Maynard Jackson in 1973, and even he was eventually subsumed into the regime's agenda (Immergluck 2025, 4-5). Malhotra may have

lost to Overstreet in a 46-54% vote split, but the fact that he came so close to defeating an establishment darling is a sign that the regime may well be vulnerable to political challenges in city-wide elections, especially as Atlanta's progressive coalition continues to expand its power (Darnell 2025).

As this progressive ecosystem continues to build capacity over the next several years, the possibility of significant victories in 2029's mayoral and council elections looks real. Furthermore, the potential governing success of municipal progressives across the country like Zohran Mamdani in New York City and Katie Wilson in Seattle may further invigorate the Atlanta Way's challengers and enable bolder commitments to progressive public policy from city officials. For instance, if Mamdani is able to successfully increase New York's public revenue by raising taxes on the rich, the nation's Overton Window may potentially shift in terms of cities using progressive strategies to increase their public revenue. In other words, it could open political space for Atlanta to reform its public finance system under new progressive governance.

However, while all of these developments are promising and provide hope for the future, the Atlanta Way regime is undoubtedly still in control of the city's politics—for now. These challenges to the regime's power have not been enough to knock it down from its position of political dominance, but they have laid the groundwork for a movement that by all signs will continue to grow over the next

several years. In an interview following their victory, Kelsea Bond described the current state of Atlanta's progressive coalition in relation to the general electorate: "...here in Atlanta, DSA exists in the progressive left ecosystem, along with lots of other groups. We put out a voter guide every year that way more people use than you would think. I wouldn't say we're a household name yet. That's the goal. But voters are familiar with us" (Nolan 2025). If that familiarity can be effectively translated into a consistent, organized political force, it may very well represent the sea-change in urban politics which Atlanta sorely needs. Bond certainly thinks this is possible: "I think these wins will create the momentum for more political wins in the future, as long as we stick with the strategy" (Nolan 2025).

Such potential for the future invites questions of what would be possible in a post-regime Atlanta, particularly surrounding the politics of housing and development. If the Atlanta Way regime was disrupted, the policy interventions alluded to in this paper would suddenly go from fringe-ideas to political possibilities. The structural dysfunction handicapping Atlanta's public finances could be addressed, creating huge amounts of new funding for quality low-income housing solutions like AUDC. While such an approach is currently politically terrifying, "defunding the police" could become an entirely reasonable way to rebalance the city's budget to address the actual problems facing its residents. Solutions such as these are desperately needed. The lives of Atlanta's

## The Revolutionary Home

### A Bottom-Up Historiography of Housing in Urban Havana

Bennett Shin Lacerte

most vulnerable residents are at stake—the moral imperative to continue organizing against the Atlanta Way regime has never been stronger.

#### INTRODUCTION

Six years before the success of the Cuban Revolution, in a trial in which he was being prosecuted for his role in the attack on the Moncada Barracks of the Batista dictatorship, Fidel Castro declared housing as one of the six major problems facing the Cuban people—naming it a primary concern that “a revolutionary government would solve.”<sup>1</sup> The Cuba that his government would go on to inherit in 1959 was one that was characterized by immense wealth concentration in the hands of a landed, urban few, and an attendant widespread housing instability for working and middle class Cubans. Specifically within Havana, the state of housing and urban inequality in 1959 was shaped by the layered histories of the colonial and postcolonial periods. Once a thriving slave colony of the Spanish crown, Havana’s urban environment was defined by the preoccupations of the colonial state; urban planning was effectively a tool used by colonial authorities to control and exclude enslaved and Indigenous populations.<sup>2</sup> The gridded layout of the city as well as the remnants of *intramurolextramuro* walled divisions represented spatial hierarchies of class and race directly inherited from this colonial era. Moreover, increasing industrialization and urbanization within Havana drew heavy migration from rural communities, leading to the creation of shantytowns during the postcolonial period.<sup>3</sup>

With the triumph of the 1959 Revolution, Cuban architects, planners, and political leaders committed themselves to addressing

the housing question, guided by the central value that adequate housing was an irrevocable right. Through both legal reforms and architectural transformations, the revolutionary Cuban government embarked on the monumental task of revolutionizing housing—not just the dismantling of colonial territories and property regimes, but also the construction of decidedly new, Cuban ones. Policies like the Urban Reform Law—which ended evictions, transferred ownership of rented houses to tenants, and effectively eliminated landlordism—constituted a substantial redistribution of capital and property within Cuban society; architectural methods like prefabrication and thin-tile vaulting were integrated into construction projects throughout the housing sector, allowing for efficient production; and *microbrigadas* addressed labor shortages by providing ordinary Cubans with materials and guidance to collectively build their own housing.

And yet the revolutionary Cuban state could not overcome all of the challenges and contradictions it faced. External factors such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the United States’ increasingly-dire economic blockade, as well as internal factors like deprioritization of urban investment, have contributed to a continued shortage of adequate housing and a dramatic deterioration of Havana’s urban infrastructure. Moreover, the revolutionary government enacted centralized campaigns of slum clearance that, in many ways, represented a failure to live up to its original ideals of uplifting,

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empowering, and respecting lower-class Afro-Cuban communities. In the face of these shortcomings, bottom-up initiatives like self-directed neighborhood revitalization projects as well as shantytown resistance movements represent an active embodiment of revolutionary ideals at the individual level.

It is in these two existing truths that two understandings and historiographies of the Cuban built environment have emerged. On one hand, the Western left can often fall victim to romanticizing and historicizing the top-down transformation of Cuban space led by the revolutionary government. On the other hand, critics of the Cuban Revolution tend to dismiss and discount Cuba's transformation of the built environment as a total failure, pointing to dilapidated buildings and crumbling streets as evidence of a fated communist collapse. I suggest here that reducing the layered histories and shapings of the Cuban built environment to a mere political dispute does not adequately consider the agentic experiences of actual Cubans. Neither of these historiographies sufficiently consider the nuanced manifestations of abolitionist and revolutionary praxis as carried out by individual actors that exist outside of the state. As such, I will explore postrevolutionary housing as a territory for "collective" architecture that stages both spatial and temporal interventions in Havana's architectural history.

#### COLONIAL AFTERLIVES: PRIVATIZED HOUSING AND THE GRIDDED CITY IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY HAVANA

If you walk through the urban core of Havana today, locals can point out to you that certain buildings are called *edificios capitalistas* (capitalist buildings), legacies of the "postcolonial era."<sup>4</sup> Such relics are only one manifestation of a deeply-entrenched colonial urbanism. In her book *Beyond the Walled City: Colonial Exclusion in Havana*, Guadalupe García explores Havana's material and historical traces of colonial urban planning. Importantly, any analysis of colonial urbanism in the Americas must center the development of the gridded city, an idea which ingrained Iberian ideals of hierarchy, order, and exclusion into urban fabrics.<sup>5</sup> Not only does the grid constitute a method of colonial exclusion and disinvestment, but it also facilitates the commodification of land and property.<sup>6</sup> Within a discussion of Havana's housing stock, then, it is worth considering the role of the colonial grid in perpetuating a capitalist doctrine of exclusion—one that afforded land and space to some and withheld it from others.

Within Havana's urban context, starting in 1573, various plans for the gridded city emerged from Spanish colonial authority.<sup>7</sup> In 1603, Cristóbal de Roda introduced the first plan for a grid that included the physical walling of Havana.<sup>8</sup> Such a plan would lay the foundations for the material division of *intramuro* (inner-wall) and *extramuro* (outer-wall) neighborhoods—which were ultimately

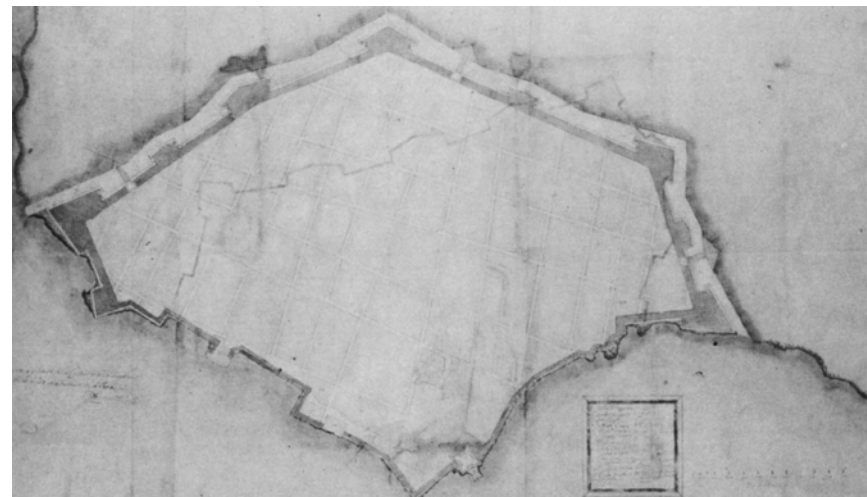


Figure 1 Cristóbal de Roda, *Descripción y planta de la ciudad de La Habana*, 1603. Mapoteca Santo Domingo, Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Seville.

a method for segregating colonists in the *intramuros* from their racialized subjects in the *extramuros*. As García argues, these physical manifestations of exclusion and confinement came to define urban planning and housing distribution.

Colonial Havana's plantation economy played an important role in establishing its position as an urban epicenter.<sup>9</sup> Being a principal port city that revolved around the industries of sugar, coffee, tobacco, and enslavement, colonial Havana boasted a high urban concentration—and consequent shortage of housing.<sup>10</sup> It was in this burgeoning colonial urbanism that the struggle for housing came to represent a critical rupture in Havana's social order; it was clear for impoverished Afro-Cuban and Indigenous communities that the colonial government

could not meet their needs. With time, urban housing insecurity would become characteristic for Havana, and it indeed came to represent a primary impetus in the struggle for independence at the turn of the twentieth century. The issue of housing became apparent at a pivotal point in Cuba's political history, just as it would in the 1959 Revolution.

Moving forward to the early twentieth century, economic depression further entrenched the urban inequalities of the colonial period. Havana's housing situation was determined by an "explosive growth of its urban population and the private capitalist nature of the housing supply."<sup>11</sup> With the population more than doubling, Havana's urban core could not sustain adequate housing for all of its new residents,

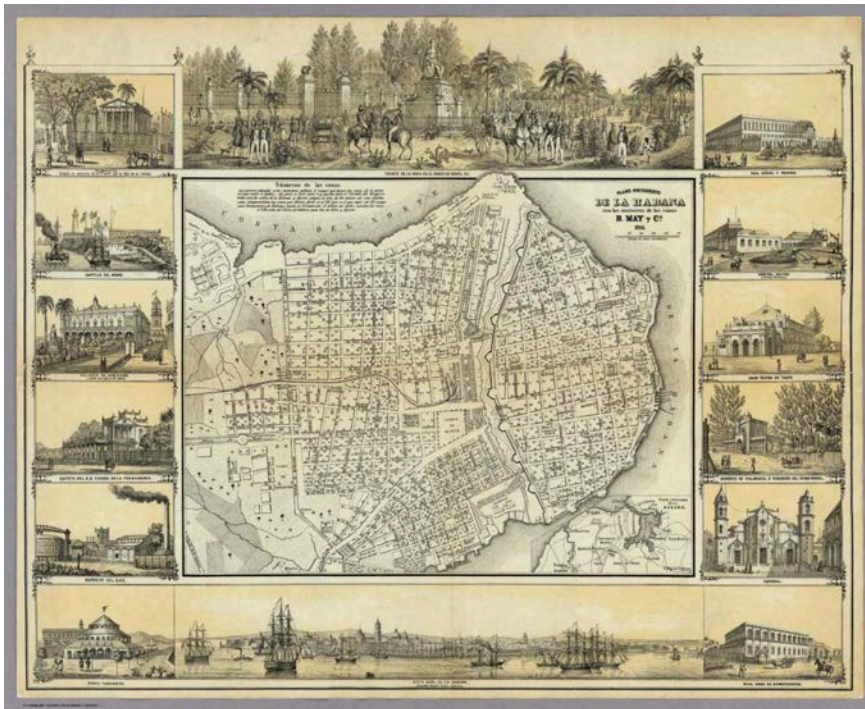


Figure 2 B. May y Ca., *Plano pintoresco de la Habana con los números de las casas*, 1853. Mapoteca M-521, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Havana.

leading to the creation of shantytowns that primarily housed marginalized Afro-Cuban communities.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, a new legacy of the *intramuro/extramuro* divide was reproduced within the city itself; while shantytown residents attempted to assert their right to the city, the standing Batista government deemed these populations as excess and unwelcome. High rates of eviction, dilapidated shantytown neighborhoods, and increasing unemployment meant that housing was ripe terrain for mobilizing revolutionaries. Come 1953, three-quarters of Cuban families were renters, and over two

million Cubans living in urban populations paid rent that took “from a fifth to a third of their income”—which, for the time, was a high rate.<sup>13</sup> And while revolutionaries like Castro did not necessarily connect the questions of housing and race, it is clear that inherited colonial hierarchies and inequalities were a defining feature in this question of who had the right to live in the city.

#### THE REVOLUTIONARY HOME AS CONTESTED TERRITORY

In 1959, the triumphant revolutionary government inherited a capital city in which

more than half of the population “lived in conditions of poverty and depended on self-built construction for shelter.”<sup>14</sup> According to the 1953 Census of Housing, within Cuba existed an estimated 200,000 to 700,000 dwellings.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, it was clear that although capitalist housing interests in the first half of the twentieth century met the market demand of affluent consumers, the social demand of the vast majority of the population had been left unmet. The question of whether the nascent revolutionary government was adequately prepared to respond to such an entrenched legacy of housing inequality—dating from the colonial period to the neocolonial Batista regime—is not easy to answer.

It is in this context that I propose an understanding of the home as a primary site of confrontation between state control and the lives and agency of ordinary Cubans, or in other words, the personal and the political. To this extent, the revolutionary Cuban government was certainly aware. Cuban revolutionary philosophy understood itself to be a project “staked explicitly and deliberately on the transformative potentials of *material* infrastructure” (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> Specifically, housing was a principal site for revolutionary “experimentation.”<sup>17</sup> Architects employed by the incipient Cuban state were thus implicated in the project of “realizing” Revolution, creating a national identity through urban redevelopment and architectural transformation. And considering the fact that “architecture’s practitioners are usually also its theorists,”

architects in revolutionary Cuba certainly influenced and were influenced by theoretical and ideological considerations of the state, often working in close proximity to state officials.<sup>18</sup> A well-known example of such a collaboration is the relationship and exchange of ideas maintained between architect Ricardo Porro and revolutionary Che Guevara in the planning and construction of the National Art Schools.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, however, in this tremendous transformation undertaken by Cuban planners and architects emerged a failure to implement a uniform architectural aesthetic and theory for the Revolution. Some believed that a revolutionary architecture meant the cultivation of (beautiful) Cuban forms, as exhibited by the imaginative projects of the National Art Schools.<sup>20</sup> Others were committed to a utilitarian, socialist aesthetic influenced by the Soviet Union, which stimulated the construction of large-scale, easily-replicable housing developments built with prefabricated elements.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, an intersection between these two sects can be found in the shared use of building practices like thin-tile vaulting—a method originally advanced by the National Art Schools and then used widely to construct low-cost public housing.<sup>22</sup> The aforementioned “split” amongst Cuban architects has been well-documented by historians and practitioners alike, though, and my intention with this paper is not to simply engage in an architectural discourse which has been so thoroughly expounded.

Rather, I point to the positioning of the architect as one of the paramount proxies of revolutionary ideals as something that can begin to explain why prevailing understandings of Cuban housing policy have often taken the shape of top-down historiographies. However, as I hope to highlight in this paper, this remaking of colonial and neocolonial housing ecosystems were not entirely government-led. My goal in this paper is not to evaluate whether the Cuban Revolution was a success or a failure, but rather to point toward historically underrepresented experiences of the built environment. In this sense, the theoretical grounding for this paper lies in a recognition of the fact that the topic of housing represents an opportunity to glean larger lessons on the methods, contradictions, and experiences of the Cuban Revolution.

#### URBAN REFORM AND REVOLUTIONARY HOUSING IN PRACTICE

Once in power, one of the first momentous actions taken by the revolutionary Cuban government was to halt all evictions and reduce rents by thirty to fifty percent.<sup>23</sup> In October of 1960, the Cuban state passed the Urban Reform Law, which laid the foundations for a comprehensive transformation of Cuba's urban environment. Operating under the stated goal of establishing housing as a right and resource available to all Cubans at no cost, the Urban Reform Law declared null and void all existing urban rental contracts, called for a substantial increase in the production of public housing, and prohibited the sale of private housing properties.<sup>24</sup> Such a law

ultimately represented a vision for housing as a resource that should be allocated by social criteria rather than economic capability. The Revolution understood housing and urban space to be an arena for struggle against the rooted legacy of racist and capitalist forms of oppression.

In the immediate years after its passing, certain contradictions emerged with respect to the implementation of the Urban Reform Law. Although the law had originally called for a significant redistribution of housing, in large part, families remained where they were—whether “small... in large mansions” or “large... in one-room slums.”<sup>26</sup> Still, with the emigration of a large part of the wealthy elite, workers and students were able to move into their vacant residences.<sup>27</sup> Such changes constituted a fundamental transformation in the existing socioeconomic spatial hierarchies—ones which, in connection back to my earlier discussion, were often determined by colonial traditions of racial exclusion.

Notably, the government also promised lifetime compensation for former landlords who had been forced to sell investment properties, but no such compensation was offered to the residents of inner-city slum housing.<sup>28</sup> Instead, the residents of “informal” settlements were mandated to pay toward the construction of new housing, and many were relocated to residences left vacant by wealthy exiles or homes in publicly-funded neighborhoods like Buena Ventura and the East Havana project.<sup>29</sup> And while

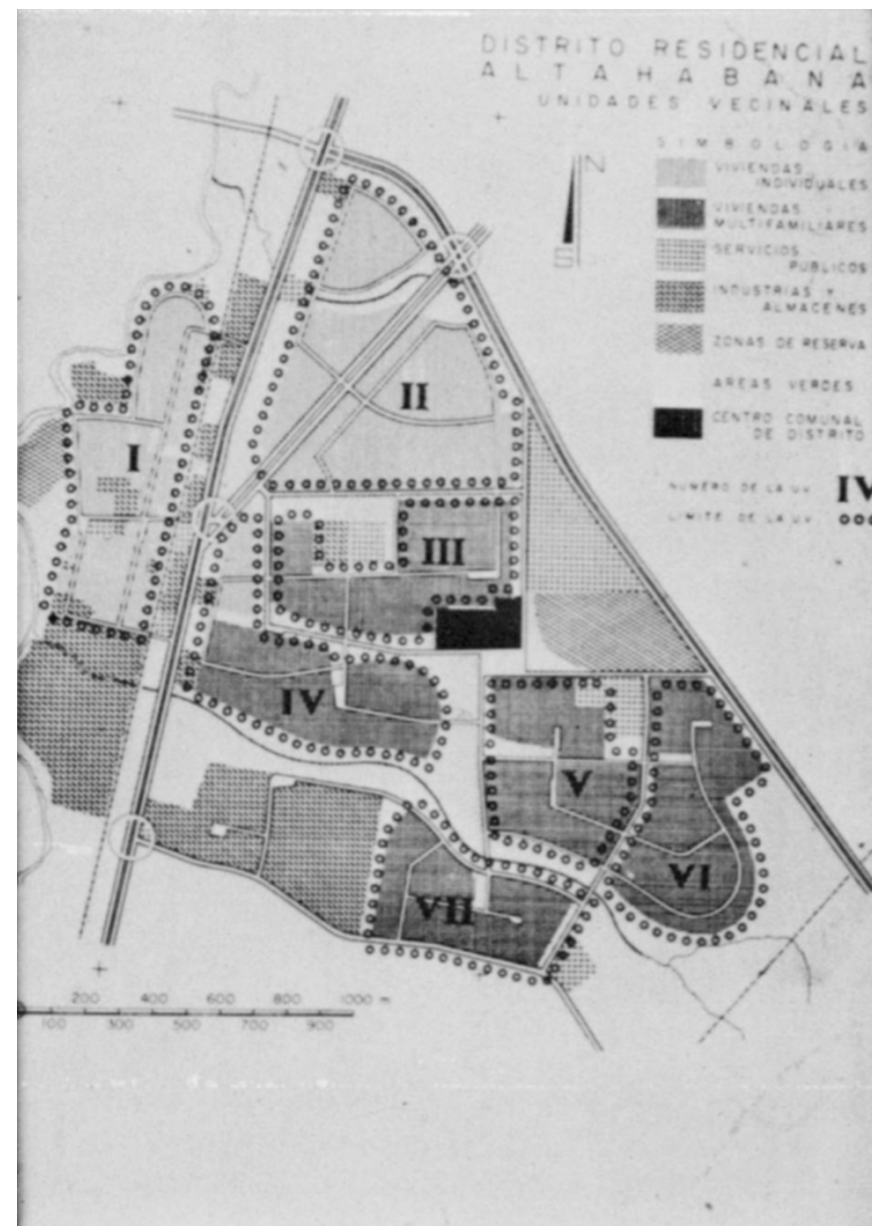


Figure 3 Plan of neighborhood units for “Residential District in Upper Habana.”<sup>25</sup> A defining feature of the revolutionary government’s urban reform was to prioritize high-density housing—where amenities, public services, and homes were concentrated within a small radius—as exhibited in this neighborhood plan.

it is true that these changes brought a level of economic security and overall wellbeing, many of the families in shantytowns like Las Yaguas were opposed to their relocation.<sup>30</sup> Such campaigns were a direct consequence of the Urban Reform Law of 1960. In many ways, the projects of slum clearance carried out under Castro's regime can be viewed as a continuation of a practice that was institutionalized by the former regime of Batista, though the justifications for such a campaign seemed to be ideologically opposed.

The revolutionary government constructed an image of shantytowns that defined residents as the “beneficiaries, not heroes, of the Revolution.”<sup>31</sup> The inhabitants of settlements like Las Yaguas—most often Black—were painted as a people in need of assistance, and consequently denied agency in the relocation processes prescribed by the state. Relocation campaigns carried out by the state sought to flatten these towns—in both the creation of a flat, politically impotent cultural image and the physical razing of infrastructure. Such efforts were undergirded by the notion that these settlements harbored hedonism and a “culture of poverty,” when in reality they often boasted vibrant community life. As described by The Commission on Cuban Affairs, “Paths become little streets with names, and the houses have their numbers. Tiny shacks appear as grocery stores.”<sup>32</sup> Importantly, the spatial transformation depicted in this quote demonstrates a certain rejection of the colonial grid that so defined Havana. And although local resistance from Las Yaguas emphasized their right

to the city, it was generally framed in a negative light by the state.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, these negotiations between state powers and the urban poor reveal ways in which Afro-Cuban place-making continued to be invisibilized by the revolutionary state.

As Acosta and Hardoy point to in their conclusion of their 1971 book *Urban Reform in Revolutionary Cuba*, the question of housing—in terms of both supply and quality—at the time of publishing had not been sufficiently answered by the Urban Reform Law. In fact, they even predicted that “revolutionary economic policy will continue to deemphasize urban needs in favor of investments that will raise the rural standard of living.”<sup>35</sup> To this extent, they would be correct, considering the fact that in the years between 1953 and 1981, housing conditions worsened in urban areas in Cuba—the percent designated “good condition” lowered from 53.8 to 44.2—and improved in rural areas—the percent designated “good condition” rose from 25.7 to 49.0, even higher than those reflected in urban populations.<sup>36</sup> In a similar light, William Kelly underscores the fact that housing would go on to represent what was one of the greatest state failures in the eyes of many ordinary Cubans.<sup>37</sup> Not only were the utopic promises of housing made by the early revolutionary government not upheld, but slum clearance campaigns did not effectively empower Afro-Cuban residents. In its momentous transformation of Cuba's housing infrastructure, the early revolutionary government relied heavily on a top-down methodology that, although

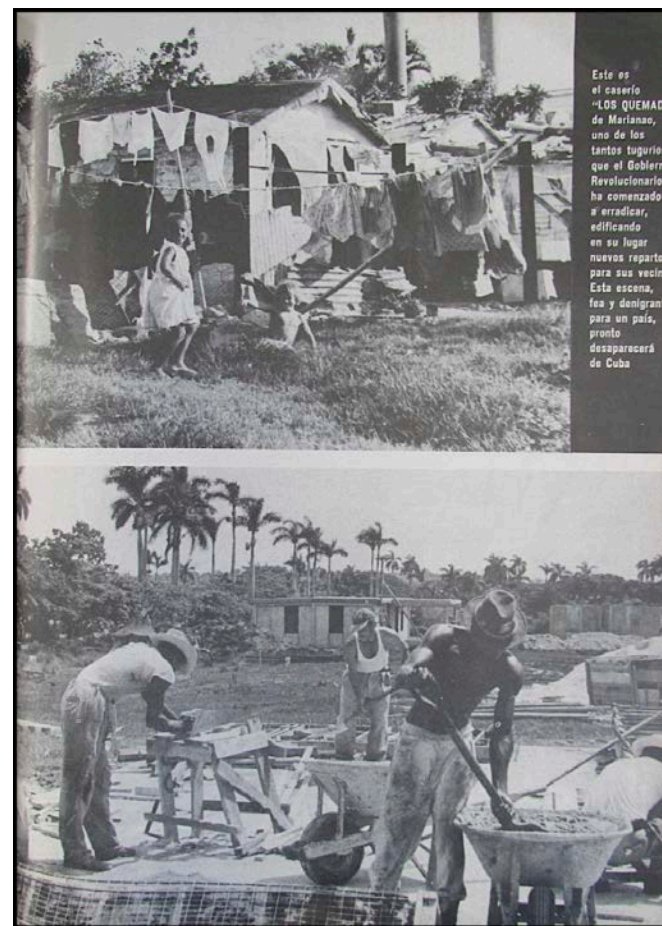


Figure 4 Above, a photo of the Los Quemados shantytown: “one of the places the Revolutionary Government has begun to eradicate... This scene, ugly and denigrating for a country, will soon disappear from Cuba.”<sup>34</sup>

effective in facilitating radical changes, failed to grant agency to the nation's most marginalized communities. Drawing from scholars Jesse Horst and William Kelly, I propose here a historiographic turn toward

the invisibilized experiences of ordinary Cubans who staked their own claims in the Revolution.

### CONSTRUCTING A NEW DIALECTIC: SELF-ORGANIZATION AND ORDINARY REVOLUTION IN THE HOME

It is worth noting that the revolutionary government departed from Batista's violent campaigns against the urban poor in an important manner: rather than just clearing neighborhoods and reproducing boundaries of colonial exclusion, it oversaw and facilitated the construction of new homes for shantytown residents.<sup>38</sup> With programs like "Self-Help and Mutual Aid," the government empowered residents to construct their own housing, though integration into planning processes was oftentimes minimal. Such programs were part of a larger move on the part of Cuba's new government to support similar projects of "self-help" construction that effectively subcontracted labor from its civilian population. Under mounting pressure to increase housing construction and respond to acute labor shortages, the decade-old revolutionary government implemented the microbrigade system. Working in teams composed of individual laborers from a given workplace, microbrigades were provided with land, resources, and supervision from the state to construct housing that some of them would go on to live in.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, units of "Popular Power" led by local government officials collaborated with and partially supported the self-construction of housing—housing that was not deemed "government-built" like that of the microbrigades.<sup>40</sup> While the microbrigade system was largely successful in creating new

housing, by 1983 almost "seven times more self-constructed units as state units were built."<sup>41</sup> These self-construction projects allowed residents to act on their desires to not be displaced from urban centers, often taking the form of additions, subdivisions, and modifications to existing housing structures. For example, the architectural phenomenon of the *barbacoa* took hold in urban Havana, in which residents subdivided older (often colonial) buildings by inserting platforms to create greater living space.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, the act of constructing "revolutionary" housing became increasingly decentralized. Given that these self-construction projects were in large part built with little government assistance and lacked skilled supervision, a large quantity of the units composing Havana's housing infrastructure retained substandard conditions. While I do not seek to glance past inadequate housing conditions, I want to highlight a specific point: whether in the experience of a middle-class family subdividing their home or that of a shantytown resident constructing their own housing, transformation and urban adaptation became a matter of individuals in their own homes. To articulate this further, I would like to propose an understanding of "ordinary" Revolution, or the ways in which non-state affiliated, everyday individuals embody revolutionary ideals on their own terms.

United States architect Lebbeus Woods posited that a critical understanding of Cuban architecture must decenter the role of the architect, and instead focus on the results



Figure 5 Example of a *barbacoa*, a two-story contemporary construction subdividing an older colonial structure, meant to increase living space.<sup>43</sup>

of "collective work" that have shaped the built environment.<sup>44</sup> I would add to this that we must begin to understand this type of collective architecture as a legitimate territory for resistance—resistance to an enduring colonial urban heritage and a government which has failed to effectively privilege marginalized individual actors. I move to view ordinary Cubans' continued modifications, subdivisions, and localized construction projects as evidence of resilient adaptation. With each small change, Havana residents write over colonial boundaries, walls, and

pathways—effectively "de-gridding" the city both materially and ideologically. Residents who assert their right to housing in Havana, both before and after the Revolution, subtly defy the order that the Spanish colonial grid once attempted to impose. Though the task of the 1959 Revolution in large part was to abolish colonial and neocolonial legacies of racist housing infrastructure, such a radical shift was ultimately realized not by the state apparatus, but by individuals.

So, how can we honor the various actors who actively interpret and fulfill their own commitments to abolitionist place-making and home-making? I offer that abolition—informed by architectural historical analysis of Cuban housing—must always be thought of as a project that is realized by its constituents from the bottom-up. And perhaps more importantly, even despite state efforts to establish a monolithic architectural theory and practice, an abolitionist architecture must be understood as an ongoing, changing, and incomplete project.

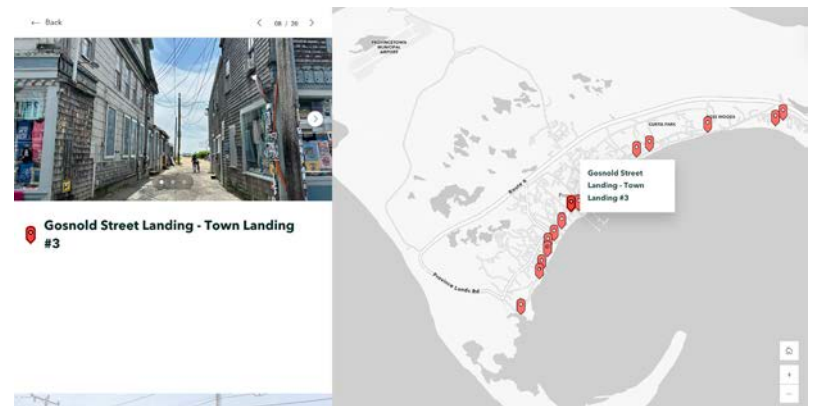
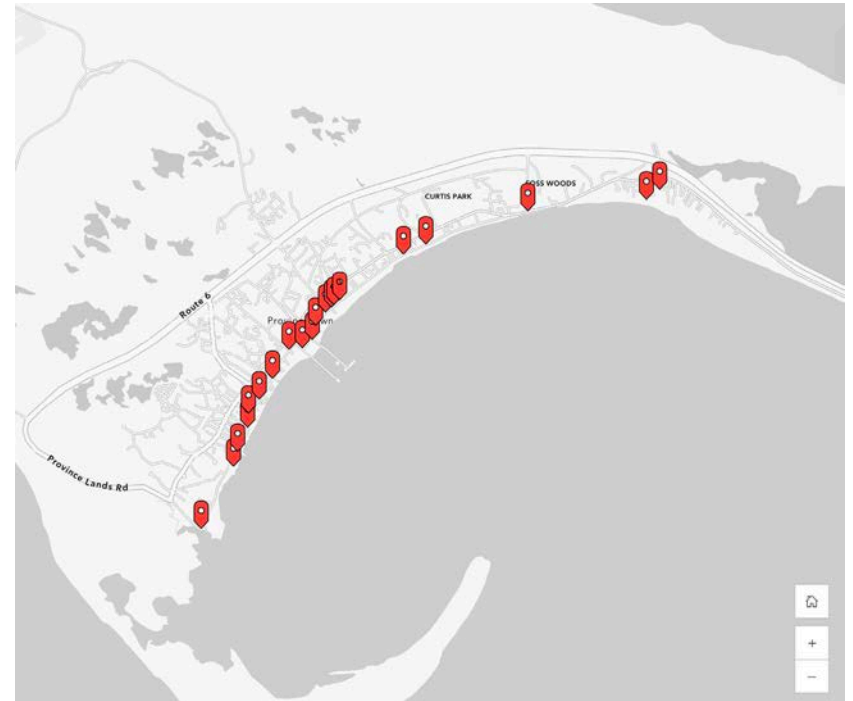


Figure 6 Wifredo Lam, *Untitled*, 1958.

Bennett Lacerte '27 is from the San Francisco Bay Area concentrating in Urban Studies and Community Health through the Engaged Scholarship Certificate. He is excited to explore his interests in housing justice and architectural history while studying abroad in Havana in the Spring of 2026.

## Provincetown Access from Street to Shore (PASS)

Kylee Hong & Theo Grossman



In Provincetown, we are fortunate to have twenty-one miles of coastline, boasting a variety of recreational and commercial uses of the water. Originally a major fishing hub, public access to the beach was declared a right

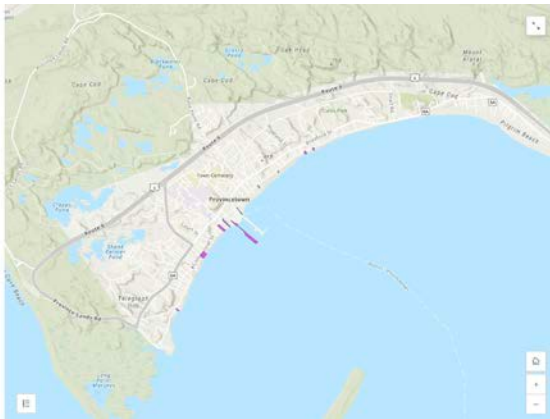
noted as far back as the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 17th century. The 2012 Harbor Plan describes “public access” as “free access from the street to the shoreline for pedestrians and for water-

dependent vehicles where appropriate.” Public access also refers to the visual access of what are called “historic view corridors,” the quaint alleyways between buildings on the seaward side of Commercial Street. The town landings and other sites along Commercial Street provide important visual and physical public access to and along the waterfront, and protecting and maintaining these areas is a priority for the Town.

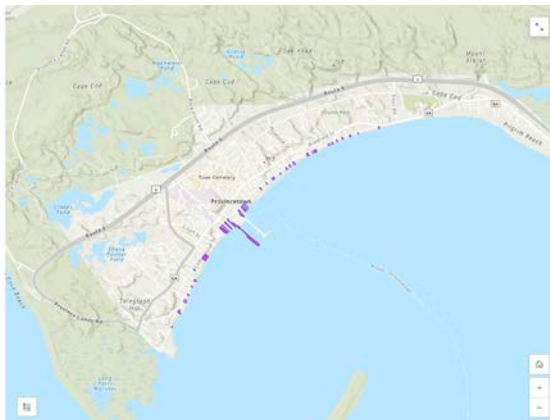
Visit the website to see a map of public beach access points and read more about Town Landings and Chapter 91.

Visit the website at <https://tinyurl.com/3kr2fxdz>

**Properties with Active Chapter 91 Licenses that provide Public Access to the Waterfront**  
During July and August of 2025, we visited these private parcels and confirmed that there was public beach access and signage.



**Properties with Active Chapter 91 Licenses that are required to provide public access to the Waterfront**  
*This is not a comprehensive list and may not be up to date.*



Kylee Hong '26 is a Dual Degree student studying Urban Studies and Interior Studies: Adaptive Reuse. She enjoys long walks on the publicly accessible beach.

Theo Grossman '27 is a student at Colby College double majoring in environmental policy and philosophy.

## ENDNOTES

### ASH

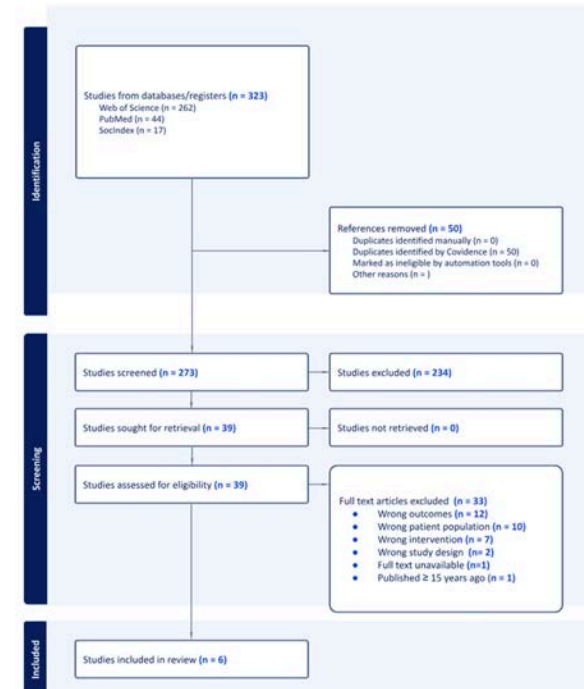
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### Appendix A: PRISMA Diagram



Appendix B: TABLE 1. Study Characteristics and Main Findings

Study ID	Population	Location	Study Design	Built Environment Measure	Outcome Measure	Summary of Findings
Michael et al. 2013	Sample size: 1008 Mean age: 71	Portland, Oregon	Prospective cohort study (1990 - 2004)	Composite walkability measure (street connectivity and density)	Average change in BMI over time and odds ratio of becoming obese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relative risk of becoming obese among the cohort was 1.03; 95% CI: (1.01, 1.05)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The risk of becoming obese increased by 3% each year</li> </ul> </li> <li>Walkability was not associated with BMI or risk of obesity</li> </ul>
Michael et al. 2014	Sample size: 2003 Mean age: 72.6 ± 5	Portland, Oregon	Retrospective cohort study (1986 - 2004)	Composite walkability measure (land use mix, street connectivity, public transit availability) and access to parks and green spaces	Mean BMI of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The association between walkability and change in BMI was not significant                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intercept b (SE) = -.012 (0.053)</li> </ul> </li> <li>The association between parks and green spaces and the change in BMI was not significant                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intercept b (SE) = -.011 (.049)</li> </ul> </li> <li>Higher neighborhood SES was associated with a decrease in BMI                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intercept b (SE) = -.112 (.022)</li> </ul> </li> <li>The increased physical activity due to the built environment may not be sufficient in time length and vigor to result in a decrease in BMI, except among those who are extremely active.</li> </ul>
Banay et al. 2019	Sample size: 38,947 Mean age: 70 ± 7	Nurses in 11 US states	Prospective cohort study (2000-2010)	Greenness measured via satellite	Incidence of depression (antidepressant use or report of physician diagnosis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researchers found a 13% reduction in depression risk; RR= 0.87 (CI: 0.78, 0.98)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No effect modification of physical activity</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Wende et al. 2025	Sample size: 157,583	National US study	Prospective cohort study (1993-2012)	Walkability and green space	Report of any fracture and hip fracture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intermediate walkability is associated with a 6% greater risk of any fracture (RR = 1.06, CI: (1.04, 1.07))</li> </ul>
	Age range: 50-79 years					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High walkability is associated with a 3% lower risk of any fracture (RR = 0.97, CI: (0.95, 0.98))</li> <li>An intermediate green space level is associated with a 15% higher risk of any fracture (RR = 1.15, CI: (1.12, 1.18))</li> <li>High green space is associated with an 18% greater risk of any fracture (RR = 1.18, CI: (1.15, 1.21))</li> <li>No association found between walkability and hip fractures</li> </ul>
Sriram et al. 2016	Sample size: 6526 Mean age: 78.7 ± 6.8	National US study	Cross-sectional study (2012-2013)	Walk Score (open source database)	BMI and waist circumference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walk score not associated with BMI or overall obesity, but linked to lower odds of abdominal obesity in comparing waist circumference between those living in areas with the most walkable areas and the least walkable areas (RR=0.72, CI: (0.53, 0.99))</li> </ul>
Tamura et al. 2014	Sample size: 22,599 Mean age: 69.9 ± 6.8	California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania	Cross-sectional study (2004)	Walkability measure (population and intersection density, facility diversity, and density within a 1200m radius)	Clustering of obesity in specific geographic locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obesity clusters found in Pennsylvania                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Western PA - Found a higher likelihood of obesity within the cluster compared to outside regions (RR = 1.17, p = 0.029)                                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This region had lower walk scores compared to other regions</li> </ul> </li> <li>Philadelphia area - Found a lower likelihood of obesity within the cluster compared to outside regions (RR=0.80, p=0.01)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

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