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Elisa Lanari  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0836-7611>

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Envisioning a New City Center: Time, Displacement, and Atlanta's Suburban Futures

Elisa Lanari, Northwestern University (Evanston, IL, USA)

Abstract

In the fast-growing, gentrifying metro Atlanta region, poor people and immigrants are simultaneously being priced out of inner city neighborhoods and displaced by suburban revitalization initiatives. Affordable housing activists struggle to adapt their strategies to the place and pace of redevelopment. In this context, focusing on time becomes increasingly crucial to understanding people's varying experiences and responses to these phenomena. I develop this insight by attending to an often-overlooked site of gentrification: a majority-white, conservative, but rapidly diversifying suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. In 2012, this suburban municipality launched an ambitious plan to transform its sprawling, car-centric landscape into a brand-new "city center." The project, inspired by the principles of new urbanism, was only the first step toward a broader redevelopment vision targeting the city's most diverse neighborhoods. By analyzing planning documents alongside ethnographic data, I examine how affluent homeowners, renters, activists, and institutional actors differentially engaged with and endured the temporalities of redevelopment. I focus in particular on working poor Latinx families, who were first to be affected by these plans. Unlike nonresident activists, these people did not engage in overt forms of contestation, nor did they try to influence local planning decisions. Instead, they deployed various time-tricking (Bear 2016) and place-making tactics in an effort to build a life in the leftover spaces and "meantime" of redevelopment. Through creative uses of time and the re-purposing of disinvested landscapes, Latinx residents endured the regime of temporal uncertainty and residential mobility (re)produced by redevelopment.

Keywords: [Gentrification; Suburbs; Race; Temporality; Urban Planning; Latinx].

In May 2018, over two hundred people gathered on a public lawn in Sandy Springs, Georgia, to attend the inauguration of a new city hall and performing arts complex, called City Springs. This five-story, glassed-walled building was to serve as the core of a new “downtown district,” the first in Sandy Springs’ relatively short history as a city. Only as recently as 2005, this majority-white and affluent suburb had obtained the status of an autonomous municipality,¹ winning a thirty-year battle to sever its political ties with the city of Atlanta and the majority-minority Fulton County.² Following that watershed moment, Sandy Springs embarked on a series of efforts to transform its built environment so as to display this newly acquired municipal identity, creating “a unique sense of place” in the midst of a sprawling, nondescript suburban landscape (Carter USA n.d.). City Springs was the most ambitious among these projects. Launched in 2012, it aimed to transform a vacant commercial property situated along Brightford Road (Sandy Springs’ major thoroughfare) into a walkable, mixed-use civic, commercial, and residential district—in other words, a “true town center” (Carter USA n.d.).

During the six-year period (2012–2018) between the project’s conception and final realization, the administration significantly modified, expanded, and delayed its plans for this site. Residents were given several opportunities to participate in reimagining its future. Most recently, in 2016, a public planning campaign sought to channel the growth generated by the project into the redevelopment of nearby Brightford Road, an area occupied by low-end stores and affordable apartment complexes. “Like most dreams we’ve had in Sandy Springs, this [one] has been a long time coming,” said mayor Rusty Paul as he finally cut the ribbon of the new city center complex in May of 2018 (Ruch 2018d). “A lot of our aspirations are hung on that facility,” he further explained, referring to the dense web of profoundly temporal meanings, past legacies, and future hopes tangled up in the project (Kass 2018).

These temporalities included feelings of excitement and anticipation that homeowners had developed over the years as they took part in dozens of community meetings and spotted cranes and construction crews littering Brightford Road; the expectations of growth and profit generated by the city’s \$229 million-dollar investment in the project; and the “dreams and visions” that “city founders” had harbored for the future downtown (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 8). All of these different temporal orientations coalesced on the evening of the inauguration ceremony, when hundreds of people applauded City Springs’ shining new facilities and mingled on its lawn, finally bringing this “large-scale experiment in ‘place-making’” to life (Andrews 2018; Figure 1).

Yet other, less-visible temporalities were implicated in this project, not acknowledged during official events or included in their dream-come-true narratives. Some emerged during my ethnographic fieldwork in Sandy Springs, namely the sudden “eviction times” (Harms 2013) that working class Latinx families experienced as their apartments were gradually demolished to make room for new upscale developments; the protracted uncertainty that insinuated itself into their lives as redevelopment unfolded; but also the rhythms of their quotidian acts of walking, laboring, and gathering in the disinvested landscape of Brightford Road.

In this piece, I examine how homeowners, renters, activists, and institutional actors in Sandy Springs differentially engaged with and endured the temporalities of redevelopment.

I do so by analyzing planning documents alongside data drawn from eighteen months of fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2017, but more intensively in 2015 and 2016, during which I engaged in participant observation of the campaign leading to the drafting of a new compre-

hensive land use plan; attended hundreds of community meetings and public events; volunteered extensively with nonprofit organizations working with poor and immigrant residents; and interviewed public officials, developers, activists, and residents of various class, gender, racial, ethnic, and generational backgrounds. I complement this ethnographic data with content analysis of media and institutional documents, including various drafts of planning documents; comments and suggestions formulated by citizens via email or through public comment boards; and reports and debates on these issues appearing in local news outlets, on social media, and online forums. The temporalities that emerge from the analysis of this material, I argue, alert us to the multiple forms of inequality implicated in the remaking of twenty-first century US suburban landscapes, particularly when these projects occur in the rapidly diversifying communities of the metropolitan US South.

Sandy Springs, in fact, is not alone in its enthusiastic embrace of redevelopment and place-making as cures to the social and economic ills of post-recession Atlanta. As the city and its suburban municipalities compete with one another for jobs and investment, many of them seek to expand their tax base by building more compact, urban-like environments for middle class professionals and creatives (Stokes 2016). Atlanta itself is in the midst of an urban renaissance, driven by large-scale projects of sustainable urban development, a fast-growing regional economy, and a booming and diversifying population (Atlanta Regional Commission 2016). These trends, combined with the city's historically high rates of income inequality and a lack of anti-gentrification policies (Berube 2018; Solomon 2017), have recently culminated in a regional affordable housing crisis (Labovitz 2017), whereby working class residents—most of them of color—are not only being priced out of inner city neighborhoods but also are displaced by suburban revitalization initiatives.

Scholarly analyses of urban redevelopment and gentrification have traditionally focused on space and place-making. However, in a context where poor people and immigrants are being pushed farther and farther out to the suburbs, and affordable housing activists struggle to adapt their strategies to the place and pace of redevelopment, focusing on time becomes increasingly crucial to understanding people's varying experiences and apprehensions toward these phenomena. Here, I attend to the different "regimes of time that planning both promotes and encounters" (Abram 2014, 129): the linear, progress-oriented temporality of planners; the short-term, profit-seeking horizon of the private market; and the myriad of lived, social times through which people inhabit and imagine the surrounding landscape.

Sandy Springs' newly approved redevelopment plans sought to absorb all of these different temporalities within a single, future-oriented vision of socio-spatial transformation. This vision drew on the registers and aesthetics of new urbanism³ to re-imagine the disinvested area of Brightford Road as a vibrant, walkable site of community gathering. By representing this area as an outdated landscape dragging the city back in time, planning documents supported the ongoing demolition of working class neighborhoods, effectively contributing to the physical and discursive erasure of the people who had lived and labored in the area for years. Latinx residents were the first to be affected by these demolitions. Faced with a regime of growing temporal uncertainty, these people deployed various time-tricking (Bear 2016) and place-making tactics to build a life in the leftover spaces and "stalled time[s]" of redevelopment (Harms 2013, 345).

I begin by providing background on the history of Sandy Springs' battle for municipal incorporation as it relates to broader suburban geographies of class and racial exclusion, and to current redevelopment dynamics. Next, I reconstruct how Sandy Springs' planning visions

emerged and evolved over the course of the six-year period (2012–2018), also characterized by major transformations in the surrounding landscape. I discuss how white and Latinx nonresident activists took advantage of the procedural delays and opportunities for public feedback that characterized this “meantime” of planning to denounce ongoing apartment demolitions, holding public officials accountable to their promises of diversity and affordability. I then compare their responses with those of Latinx apartment residents, who were instead excluded from the utopian dreams and feelings of anticipation that filled the planning horizon. My ethnographic examples focus on a majority-Latinx neighborhood slated for overhaul. Despite redevelopment pressures and official discourses representing the residents of this neighborhood as “transient,” they continued to remain rooted in its community, engaging in the “unrelenting resignification” of its spaces (Allen 2012, 472).

Through this focus on the unequal temporalities of redevelopment, I shed light on the nature and effects of gentrification in majority-white yet rapidly diversifying suburban communities, where these phenomena (along with the people of color they affect) remain largely invisible. Mainstream media narratives of gentrification, in fact, tend to focus on “hip” urban neighborhoods in places like Brooklyn, San Francisco, or Chicago, and rarely use the term to describe systematic attempts carried out by white suburban municipalities to demolish affordable apartments and displace low-income minorities (Cortight 2015; Jaffe 2015). Within the burgeoning scholarship on the diversification of US suburbia, scholars have turned to multi-ethnic suburbs, such as those of Southern California, as the new frontiers for immigrant place-making and social justice struggles (Carpio, Irazábal, and Pulido 2011; Cheng 2013; Niedt 2013). Here, I uncover how these struggles unfold at the heart of conservative white suburbia, in a community that has historically excluded low-income minorities through spatial, legal, and political means.

Places like Sandy Springs might at first appear “lacking” any forms of grassroots mobilization among those who are negatively affected by gentrification. Instead, following Erik Harms (2013), I argue that by focusing on temporality we can understand how people who may otherwise appear apolitical or submissive exert their agency in a context of “slow violence” and looming displacement (Ahmann 2018; Nixon 2011). I thereby shift the focus of my analysis from overt forms of contestation and reclamation of public space to the everyday tactics of subversion and adaptation that dispossessed suburban dwellers develop as they “get by” (Allen 2012) and stay put in the midst of growing uncertainty.

Making the City of Sandy Springs

With a current population of approximately 100,000 people, Sandy Springs is one of the largest municipalities in the Atlanta metro area and a major regional employment center. Formerly a bedroom community administered by Fulton County, Sandy Springs grew exponentially between the 1970s and 1990s, fueled by suburbanization, a booming regional economy, and the mass exodus of white families from Atlanta’s desegregating urban neighborhoods. During these decades of rampant urban sprawl, these homeowners grew increasingly frustrated with the county’s majority-African American, Atlanta-based administration, demanding more control over matters of zoning and real estate development.

These discontents fed into the nascent movement for municipal autonomy. Led by a small group of neighborhood leaders with the backing of Republican State senators, this movement first originated in the 1970s in response to a series of annexation attempts carried out by a rapidly desegregating and increasingly black Atlanta (Kruse 2005, 258). Over the years, Sandy

Springs' activists gradually abandoned the overtly racist rhetoric they had initially used to justify their quest for political autonomy. Instead, they drew on a "colorblind" vocabulary of local autonomy, free market, and property rights more attuned to the emerging conservative discourse of the post-Civil Rights era (Connor 2015, 439; Kruse 2005).⁴

Despite being framed through claims of "collective racial innocence" (Connor 2015), Sandy Springs' incorporation battle was fundamentally about maintaining white privilege as embedded in a particular spatial and political configuration of the surrounding landscape. By the time residents finally won this battle in 2005, however, this underlying agenda had been complicated by changing demographics. Starting from the early 2000s, in fact, the apartment complexes that were built during the years of the Fulton County administration became increasingly affordable, attracting poor and working class populations priced out of Atlanta's gentrifying neighborhoods, along with increasing numbers of foreign-born immigrant families.

As a result of these trends of suburbanization of poverty and immigration (common to the broader Atlanta area—see Berube 2013; Odem 2008; Singer 2008), in the last two decades Sandy Springs has seen a gradual increase in African American, Latinx, and other immigrant residents, together constituting approximately 41 percent of the total population (US Census 2010).⁵ The city has also become increasingly polarized with regards to income and homeownership rates. Most of these newcomers are working poor, employed in low-wage construction and service sector jobs, and concentrated in a small number of apartments located along Brightford Road.⁶ It is precisely this area that, after suffering from decades of neglect and disinvestment, recently became the focus of redevelopment plans.

Planning Promises in the New Urbanist Era

In 2008, Sandy Springs' former mayor Eva Galambos and council members acquired a fifteen-acre vacant commercial property situated along Brightford Road, upon a ridge that "offered superb vistas of both the North Georgia mountains and the City of Atlanta's skyline," envisioning it as "the ideal platform for a new city center" (City Springs n.d.; Figure 2). Shortly thereafter, however, the Great Recession hit and the project was put on hold for a few years, until the city finally hired a consulting firm to help with site planning and design. In December 2012, at the end of a year-long series of meetings and public workshops, the administration approved a Master Plan to build a "unique, vibrant, walkable city center rich in amenities desired by the community" (Goody Clancy 2012, V). Among these amenities are a new City Hall, a central park and gathering space, high-end retail stores and restaurants, three hundred units of luxury apartments, and an eleven hundred-seat performing arts center (Figure 3a, 3b). In 2015, the project was officially named "City Springs." Construction began shortly afterwards and lasted until mid-2018, when mayor Paul officially welcomed the community to "everybody's neighborhood." He thus celebrated City Springs' role in providing residents from different backgrounds with a central gathering space, a "place to be a community" and "care about each other"(Figure 4).⁷

This ambitious project, with its place-making and civic branding components, was only the first among a series of entrepreneurialist strategies (Harvey 1989) that Sandy Springs has adopted to capture some of Atlanta's regional growth, making itself more marketable to middle class professionals. Official plans in fact touted the \$229 million investment in bonds and tax revenues to realize City Springs as a necessary catalyst to attract "significant market-driven private investment in walkable, mixed-use redevelopment" for nearby Brightford Road (Goody

Clancy 2012, V). To lay out the policy framework and guidelines necessary to support this growth in the decade to come, in 2017 the city approved a new comprehensive land use plan, which resulted from a sixteen-month-long public planning campaign called the “Next Ten.” This name was meant to frame the plan as “an official statement of the city’s vision for its future” (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 9)—a performative promise made by the administration to selected publics of residents and stakeholders (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013; Austin 1975; Searle 1970). In detailing the actions taken by the city to fulfil this vision, I highlight the gaps, silences, and procedural delays that intervened between planning promises and their realization.

Building “everybody’s neighborhood”

As a governmental technology, planning seeks to maximize market profit through the legal redefinition of property and land use. But planning is also a powerful representational practice that takes the future as its object (Abram 2014, 139). Over the course of the City Springs and Next Ten campaigns, residents were bombarded by hundreds of document drafts, display boards, PowerPoint presentations, newspaper ads, surveys, and resources for online consultation. These materials, with their captivating graphics and recurring buzzwords, contributed to the creation and “dissemination of a compelling vision of the future”—a distinctive urban aesthetic to which citizens could aspire (Ghertner 2015, 1).

Nowhere was this powerful, imaginative aspect of planning more evident than in the visions to improve Brightford Road, a congested, four-lane thoroughfare that runs through Sandy Springs for ten miles from north to south, connecting the area to nearby suburbs and highways (Figure 5). In official speeches and everyday conversations, this road was often portrayed as a “horrible” and outdated landscape that, having grown haphazardly from Atlanta’s uncontrolled sprawl, was punctuated not only by decrepit strip malls, gas stations, pawn shops, and adult stores but also by “blighted” and “dangerous” apartment complexes whose construction homeowners had tried to oppose since the 1980s (Galambos 2011, 86). Brightford Road was also home to some of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods in the city. Specifically, the majority of Sandy Springs’ Latinx (especially Mexican) population resided in apartments situated along the road’s southernmost section. North Brightford Road was in turn predominantly inhabited by African American families, alongside white, Brazilian, and other immigrant residents (City of Sandy Springs 2017b).

Strikingly, in only a few cases did planners and public officials explicitly mention race, ethnicity, or poverty when describing the present and future of these areas, or envisioning the type of community interaction that will occur at City Springs.⁸ In all other instances, they adopted a “colorblind notion of diversity,” defining the latter in terms of desirable redevelopment goals (Berrey 2015, 173). Drawing on the registers of new urbanism, planning documents and discourses envisioned the transformation of Brightford Road into a pedestrian-friendly “boulevard” anchored by a series of mixed-use commercial and residential districts, the most important being the City Springs site. The plans also advised the creation of more housing options for middle-income populations, particularly millennials and empty nesters, so as to “provide opportunities for a broader array of residents... to join the *diverse* downtown community” (Goody Clancy 2012, 21; emphasis added). Their presence was needed to counterbalance Brightford Road’s “monoculture” of low-income rental housing, as well as to strengthen the city’s social fabric and tax base (Ruch 2018c).

Without doubt, creating more housing opportunities for middle-income households (those in the \$65,000 to \$100,000 income category) is critical in a city where the median home value is over \$545,000 (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 53). What planners and politicians failed to mention, however, was that they intended to do so by redeveloping some of the existing affordable apartment units. Indeed, between 2014 and 2015, the administration engaged in a series of backdoor negotiations to favor developers' acquisition and demolition of three large apartment complexes located about 1.5 miles away from City Springs, along Brightford Road's more profitable southern section. Once rezoned for higher density, the complexes—predominantly occupied by Latinx families—were replaced with mixed-use developments featuring upscale retail and luxury rental housing.

In the summer of 2015, as construction for City Springs began, the district immediately surrounding it also started to experience the long-awaited ripple effects of growth and investment, resulting in the redevelopment of three old shopping centers into mid-rise apartment buildings. Boasting rents and amenities comparable to those of Atlanta's in-town neighborhoods (\$2–3,000 for a two-bedroom apartment), none of these new units were affordable for the families displaced by demolitions (Kahn 2017; Ruch 2018b).

With the onset of the Next Ten campaign, these projects began appearing less as isolated occurrences and more like part of a broader future-oriented vision sanctioned by a community planning process. Yet despite this framework and growing market pressure, no additional apartment demolitions have occurred since 2015. This temporary slowdown in the march of redevelopment provided an opening that nonprofit activists used to voice concerns that official plans to “diversify” Brightford Road could be ill-disguised attempts to de-concentrate poverty by destroying existing low-income communities.

Betrayal, Displacement, and “Exile in the Next Ten”⁹

Right from the start, the Next Ten campaign was portrayed as an effort to “engage a wider variety of city residents, including the Spanish-speaking community,” in the planning process (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 12).¹⁰ With the exception of one meeting on fair housing policies attended by a handful of African American residents, however, the low-income renter population was largely absent from meeting and workshop venues.¹¹ Ranging from a few dozens to over a hundred people, the crowds at these events were largely composed of middle class, mostly white homeowners, alongside representatives of nonprofit organizations serving Sandy Springs' disadvantaged populations.¹² This last group was composed of middle class, first and second generation Latinx men and (especially) women from Mexico, Venezuela, or the Caribbean who did not reside in Sandy Springs but had been involved in the community for decades through their nonprofit work.

These nonresident activists were among the first to denounce the negative effects of redevelopment on low-income families. Gabriela Mendoza,¹³ the executive director of a large social service organization, told me that “the low-income housing is disappearing, dramatically.” In a conversation that took place shortly after the first two demolitions were approved, Miguel Diaz, who ran a faith-based nonprofit helping Latinx youth, recounted his shock upon learning that several of the families attending the organization's programs had received one- or two-month notices to vacate their apartments. After struggling to find other affordable housing in the area, some of them were forced to relocate to a different part of the city, or to leave it altogether, facing issues such as school overcrowding, longer commutes to their workplaces via limited

public transit, and loss of formal and informal networks of support—anything ranging from sharing rides and childcare duties with neighbors to the ability to participate in the organization’s programs.¹⁴

In the following years, activists took advantage of the Next Ten campaign to raise awareness on the issue of low-income housing: some wrote on anonymous comment boards, others spoke up during public meetings, others still used local media to put pressure on the administration. However, when the first draft of the new comprehensive land use plan was released in summer 2016, it became clear that the city was targeting the remaining low-income sections of south Brightford Road, along with the low-income neighborhoods on the road’s northern end, for similar processes of rezoning and revitalization. Unlike previous campaigns, this time civic leaders recognized the need of implementing policies to ensure the availability of “workforce housing,” but defined the latter to include teachers, police officers, firefighters, and nurses who could not bear the cost of living in the area (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 54).

Nonprofit activists did not fail to point out that these definitions excluded Sandy Springs’ most vulnerable populations. During an interview with a local reporter, Gabriela cited a survey conducted by her organization showing that rents in the remaining apartments had increased significantly since the onset of redevelopment. She challenged the administration’s claim that they were powerless in the face of gentrification. Instead, she urged them to adopt incentives and zoning regulations similar to those used to benefit middle-income residents in order to “create housing with a mix of units affordable to *all* income ranges.” Otherwise, Sandy Springs “will face an ‘exodus’ of thousands of lower-income, blue-collar residents—an awful lot of families who would have no place to go” (Ruch 2017b; emphasis added).

For a short period in 2017, the administration appeared willing to give in to these pressures by adopting an inclusionary zoning measure, which would have required developers to set aside a certain percentage of “affordable” units in any new multifamily housing project (Ruch 2017a, 2017c).¹⁵ During the brief window of time in which the proposed measure was available for public comment, regional housing experts deemed its definitions of affordability “altogether insufficient” to address low-income housing needs (Ruch 2017e).¹⁶ Public officials, instead, expressed fears that those restrictions might altogether prevent the redevelopment of north Brightford Road, which had seen little investment up until that point. Citing the need for a more thorough evaluation of its implications, public officials decided to drop the measure on the eve of the plan’s final approval (Ruch 2017e). Some nonprofit activists reported feeling betrayed as they realized that the final draft had been purged of any reference to affordable housing in favor of less controversial middle-income solutions (Ruch 2018a).

But these decisions appear less surprising when we consider that, ever since the years of the incorporation battle and the very first iterations of redevelopment plans, institutional discourses had routinely characterized Brightford Road through racially coded metaphors of blight, crime, social pathology, and aesthetic degradation (Galambos 2011, 86). These discourses in turn built upon the “suburban revanchism” that was prevalent among white upper-middle-class homeowners (Markley and Sharma 2016; Niedt 2006; Smith 1996), who had long seen these apartments as a threat to property values and “quality of life” in the surrounding neighborhoods, insistently demanding their revitalization (Committee for Sandy Springs n.d.). While tapping into these longstanding desires to reclaim and remake black and brown neighborhoods, contemporary redevelopment plans reframed them through the socially acceptable and highly marketable registers of new urbanism. As other scholars have noted

(Markley and Sharma 2016, 66; Smith 1995), these registers allow white homeowners and political leaders to deflect accusations of racism by stressing the positive aspects of gentrification: improved walkability, community interaction, and a healthy “mix” of residents with different income levels.¹⁷ Nevertheless, race continues to be an “unstated but deeply important social relation,” shaping Sandy Springs’ plans and priorities (Hankins, Cochran, and Derickson 2012, 380), as demonstrated by the fact that the neighborhoods targeted for this sustainable, diversity-oriented remaking are precisely those with the highest concentrations of low-income Latinx and African American residents.¹⁸

Emptied Spaces and Protected Neighborhoods

Even before being physically displaced, these working-class people and their practices were rendered invisible through the gaze of planners and policy-makers, which represented the area of Brightford Road as a “no man’s land” supposedly avoided by everyone.¹⁹ Redevelopment thus worked as a form of “chronopolitics,” which “erase[d] and rew[r]ote history on the landscape” of Brightford Road (Conquergood 1992, 140) in order to make the latter into a “clean slate” safe for capitalist intervention (Baka 2013; Kanna 2011, 90).

This whitewashing of spaces and histories was particularly evident in the case of the city’s largest and oldest Latinx neighborhood, commonly seen by outsiders as both an economically and geographically depressed area, situated at lower ground than the rest of the city, bounded by the highway on one side and parking lots and gas stations on the other. Given its close proximity to City Springs and Brightford Road’s more profitable southern section, early on in the planning process this neighborhood attracted the attention of developers and affluent homeowners living nearby. In an online survey conducted in the fall of 2015, several respondents asked that this “blighted” area be “rezoned for maximum density, bulldozed, redeveloped,” and “gentrified,” so that it could “grow with the rest of the city” (City of Sandy Springs 2015). Incorporating these requests, the new comprehensive land use plan identified the area as a future redevelopment “node.” A closer look at project drawings reveals a neat visual and linguistic distinction between the nearby “established” single-family neighborhoods—labeled as “protected,” “strong and affluent”—and the area’s apartment complexes and ethnic businesses, marked in need of revitalization (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 64–70). Following the overall goal of attracting middle-income populations, the plan envisioned the replacement of these properties with condominiums and townhomes to “cater to the housing needs of a large employment base” (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 64).

Regardless of whether they actually resided there or not, all of the Latinx families I met were extremely familiar with this neighborhood, and considered it the center of Sandy Springs’ Latinx community (*el centro de la comunidad hispana*), generally referring to it as Ridgewell (the name of its main road) or, alternatively, “el Rincón”—a popular grocery store selling Mexican products. Centrally located next to a Hispanic Catholic church and across from a large parking lot with a small playground, the store and its surroundings were sites of informal neighborhood gatherings, performances of mariachi music, street vending activities, and religious ceremonies—such as the *Virgen de Guadalupe* celebrations in December (Figure 6).

As if to obliterate the lived and narrated experiences of these spaces, the Plan renamed the entire neighborhood “the crossroads” and did not include any of these sites among its existing “landmarks” or “assets” (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 64). Instead, it highlighted the presence of two shopping centers and a new mixed-use development located about half a mile south. Especially

when combined with stigmatized representations of these areas, attempts to rename and remap neighborhoods like Ridgewell are instrumental to maximizing these properties' market value by *de-valuing* the people and practices they host.²⁰ At the same time, by adopting this de-historicizing "gaze from above" (Scott 1999)—which, in this context, presumed the unmarked subject position of a white middle-class homeowner, the plan sought to absorb all of the different social times and rhythms of everyday life that populated this neighborhood within a single, future-oriented narrative of progress (Holston 1999).

Yet these "insurgent forms of the social" (Holston 1999, 167) continued to exist and persist in the meantime during planning: sometimes, even planning materials registered their reverberations. In an anonymous comment posted on the Next Ten meeting boards, for instance, one person wrote: "I routinely see workers walking to and from their job at Waffle House and Kroger. These people are our neighbors, this is their plan. What kind of plan is it if we are saying we are planning for you not be able to afford to live here in ten years? That is morally irresponsible in my opinion" (City of Sandy Springs 2016). As this comment suggests, throughout the planning process, the walking and laboring publics of Brightford Road were not only deprived of their history in this location but also denied the possibility of participating in its future re-imagining.

Care, Endurance, and the "Meantime" of Planning

Nonprofit activists, homeowners, and low-income residents reacted to the gradual unfolding of redevelopment through a variegated "set of visceral engagements with time" (Harms 2013, 346) that reflected their differential inclusion in (or exclusion from) the planning process. Pro-growth residents and business leaders were frustrated with the procedural delays and piecemeal implementation of the plans. After years of unfulfilled hopes, they saw the transformation of Brightford Road as never happening soon enough. Working poor Latinx families, on the other hand, began experiencing the consequences of redevelopment too fast and too soon: too fast to be able to find another apartment, and too soon in relation to their families' life trajectories.

Redevelopment also insinuated itself into the regular activities of local nonprofits, whose directors had to reallocate time and resources away from the organization's programs and toward issues such as housing, which would normally fall outside their purview. In the months following apartment demolitions, activists appeared overwhelmed by the realization that their decade-long trajectory of involvement in the community could suddenly be interrupted if low-income populations were to be displaced from the city. Finding the "near future" and "near past" suddenly evacuated as horizons of activism (Guyer 2007), some focused on the "here and now" of helping families struggling with housing insecurity. Others sought to influence *long-term* redevelopment plans. Camila Rubio, a Mexican woman who had worked for nearly a decade as a bilingual parent liaison at a local elementary school and who owned a condo in Sandy Springs, was angry at the prospect of seeing the area of Ridgewell entirely redeveloped: "We've been doing all this work with Latino parents, the PTA²¹ is just starting to grow... and in two years it may be gone." Hence she had made it her priority to attend all of the planning meetings, to voice her opposition.

While expressing similar feelings of urgency, activists with more political clout bypassed public meetings altogether, instead using private channels to influence municipal plans. Isabel la Grange, a white philanthropist and longtime supporter of local nonprofits, explained that "redevelopment is happening so fast that there is no time to get the population together. But I think there is something that the nonprofits can do about affordable housing." A few months

later, in 2017, Isabel and Gabriela Mendoza met privately with developers and public officials to propose a redevelopment concept that would ensure the long-term affordability of Brightford Road, even after its revitalization (Ruch 2018a). At present, this proposed measure is being evaluated by a special task force composed of local politicians, financiers, and other community “stakeholders,” including Isabel and Gabriela, but none of the apartment residents (Ruch 2018c).

This use of “elite networking” channels (Holland et al. 2007) shows that, even though activists experienced a momentary rupture in their horizon of political action, they nevertheless remained invested in the long-term trajectory of planning and city building. In fact, they hoped to influence future visions by taking part in public and private consultations with the local administration. Unlike these activists, working poor Latinx and African American residents had never had the privilege of dwelling in the “historical time” of Sandy Springs’ city-building project (Lazar 2014), nor in the horizon of futurity disclosed by its planning visions. Many of these families had been priced out from gentrifying neighborhoods before, and forced into a chronic condition of residential mobility by demolitions, absentee landlords, and long waitlists for subsidized housing vouchers. Hence they led a quotidian existence where crisis and precarity—and, for Latinx residents, even “illegality” and deportability (De Genova 2002)—were ordinary rather than exceptional (Berlant 2011). In Sandy Springs, their presence was rendered even more precarious by redevelopment plans, and by widely circulating narratives that represented them as “transient” renters not invested in the local community.²²

Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising that these people never portrayed themselves as the beneficiaries of planning promises, but rather as their abject publics. Early on in the Next Ten campaign, working class Latinx participants framed apartment demolitions as the *intended* outcome of the “mayor’s ten-year plan,” describing it as an attempt to “clean up” (*limpiar*) neighborhoods by “kicking out” or “removing” (*sacar*) Latinxs. Most of them did not attend planning meetings or review their documents. But they noticed other signs of impending change: friends and relatives receiving last-minute eviction notices, rising rents, upscale stores replacing old businesses, and landlords who refused to sign long-term leases. In this situation, many Latinx participants resigned themselves to the idea that they would eventually be priced out of Sandy Springs: they became rather concerned with the “when” and “how long” questions of displacement (Harms 2013, 346).

But official timelines of redevelopment were wrapped in a layer of secrecy that only well-connected activists seemed able to penetrate, dependent as they were on backdoor negotiations between the city, developers, and landlords. The only horizon of action available to low-income renters then was the “meantime” of planning—that indeterminate and rather uneventful period intervening between the plan’s approval and the moment when its effects would start to materialize in the neighborhood. As Chloe Ahmann suggests in her analysis of environmental activism in Baltimore, the meantime is simultaneously a space of uncertainty and one of possibility (Ahmann 2018, 154). In this meantime, Latinx participants continued to care for their families and neighborhoods, deploying tactics of “active waiting and patience” that were often “more laterally oriented than forward moving” (Han 2012, 8).

Many of the residents living in apartments scheduled for redevelopment, for instance, had already begun to look for alternative housing options in nearby suburbs. But given Atlanta’s insufficient network of public transportation, which makes commuting nearly impossible,²³ they did not want

to risk losing their jobs in the area. Among them were people like Alma Lopez, an energetic Mexican American woman, tireless worker in a local dry cleaner, and longtime volunteer with local nonprofits. Alma was especially worried about unsettling the school trajectories of her children, who had struggled to adapt to a suburban school system not equipped to deal with ethnic and linguistic diversity, but had finally found some support thanks to nonprofit-sponsored youth programs and all-Latinx PTAs. Despite having already been displaced twice by apartment demolitions, she and her husband Pedro were committed to waiting for the next eviction “in their own terms” (Harms 2013, 357). They wanted to remain in the area until their three children had graduated, even if this meant working multiple jobs, or listing a fake address to keep their children enrolled in the same school district: only then, maybe, they would relocate outside of Sandy Springs.

Similarly, trying to hold on to the indeterminacy of the present so as to “make time” for herself and her kin, and to ward off the unavoidable future of displacement (Han 2012), PTA member and mother of three Sofia Varela told me that her family had found cheaper housing in a different county. But “I don’t want to move so far away,” Sofia confessed. “I don’t want to uproot my children... it’d be a trauma for them. That’s precisely the reason why I haven’t moved. I have tried to hold on and endure this situation” (*he tratado de aguantarme aqui*). Through these narratives, Sofia, Alma, and other Latina women insisted in showing that they were rooted in place *despite* the multiple forces that made them “transient,” and that they would “lose everything they had” if their neighborhood were to be razed: their social networks of support; the sense of safety and quiet (*tranquilidad*) that came with living in a “nice,” affluent suburb; “good schools”; and a future of upward mobility for their children.

The figure of Juanita Costa (or simply “Señora Juanita,” as she was called in the neighborhood) is emblematic of how these practical, relational, and affective “place attachments” (Altman and Low 1992) had developed and persisted through time. A strong-minded woman with an entrepreneurial spirit, Juanita migrated to the United States from Mexico three decades earlier to escape poverty and an abusive husband. After working for many years as a nanny and housekeeper in Southern California, she decided to take up in the US what had been her first occupation in Veracruz: making and selling tortillas to local tourists and residents. Joining her son in Sandy Springs in the early 2000s, Juanita found the suburban streets and courtyards of Ridgewell—with their almost nonexistent competition and scant police presence—to be a good location in which to earn a living as a street vendor. Equipped with a grocery cart and good social skills, she quickly became popular in the neighborhood for selling candies and chicharrones to children, and cooking and bringing meals to day laborers standing at the nearby gas station.

After Sandy Springs became a municipality, however, Juanita was forced to deal with stricter law enforcement and building regulations, along with growing fears of being deported during one of Atlanta’s many immigration raids.²⁴ Back in 2005, in fact, the new Sandy Springs Police force had begun to more tightly regulate homeless presence and street “loitering,” something that Araceli described as “cleaning up the area to make it look nicer *from the outside*,” implying that the administration was instead ineffective in curbing landlords’ poor building upkeep and exploitative rental practices. Because of these changes, Juanita decided to move her “business” from the streets to the patio and living room of her apartment, where every day dozens of men (mostly construction workers) came to eat tamales and tacos, or to pick up meals for the following day.

Through her homemade food and her wanderings around Ridgewell, Juanita saw the neighborhood and its close-knit community change, all the while negative perceptions of it persisted: “Back in the day,” she recounted, “this used to be known as a dangerous area, they used to find bodies back there... this was years ago, when everything was bad and there were lots of homeless people outside.” Switching to English, her daughter Araceli then added: “Back then, my mom used to give them [the homeless] extra food... that’s how she met a lot of people, ‘cause she is always giving.” Both women agreed that the neighborhood had since become “safer,” but they attributed this change to informal systems of neighborhood surveillance. “The locals always spot a new face,” Juanita explained. “We do not call the police, but we are always talking to each other, I call one of my neighbors. We all get along well [*todos convivimos*].”

Through Juanita’s personal story, we get a glimpse of the rhythms and gestures of labor, care, movement, and sociality through which Latinx residents (particularly women) re-appropriated and re-signified spaces that both the county and municipal administration had neglected for years, thereby contributing to negative perceptions of these areas (i.e., crime). By seizing on the opportunities offered by this social and physical landscape, Latinx families restored that “capacity to aspire” to a near future in a community that had been disrupted by redevelopment (Appadurai 2013).

Conclusion

In this piece, I have examined institutional plans and on-the-ground experiences of redevelopment in the racially and socioeconomically polarized suburb of Sandy Springs, Georgia, and have demonstrated that planning promises were exclusionary. Rather than locating these exclusions solely in the outcomes of redevelopment, or in its most violent moments (e.g., evictions), I have focused on the conditions of temporal uncertainty, enforced waiting, and foreclosed futurity that low-income residents had to endure in the “meantime” of planning. By analyzing their responses alongside institutional actors, homeowners, and nonresident activists, I have stressed the importance of time as a lens through which to understand how inequality is (re)produced and experienced in the context of suburban gentrification.

The meantime of planning was marked both by actual transformations in the surrounding landscape, such as apartment demolitions and the construction of a new city center; and by signs and promises of future change, emerging from market pressures and planning campaigns. Only upper-middle-class (white) homeowners, however, were given the possibility of inhabiting the horizon of futurity evoked by these promises. For working-class renters, the unfolding of redevelopment coincided with a gradual shrinking of future possibilities to remain in the city, particularly in the area of Brightford Road, where they had lived, labored, and gathered for years. Nonprofit activists were shocked upon learning that these families might soon be displaced, hence they lobbied the administration to adopt measures to preserve affordable housing.

Unlike these activists, who operated within the long-term horizon of planning and city-building, Latinx apartment residents displayed a deep, embodied awareness of having always been excluded from local visions of suburban improvement. Living in the rubble of a landscape slated for overhaul, these families strove to build a future in the stalled times of redevelopment. They sought to delay the moment when they would be forced to leave the city and, in the meantime, continued to repurpose its most disinvested spaces (parking lots, gas stations, etc.) through the rhythms of their neighborly care, social encounters, and informal business transactions

(Lefebvre 2004, 96). Ironically, these spontaneous reuses generated precisely that kind of vibrancy and walkability that the administration was hoping to infuse in upscale pedestrian districts like City Springs.²⁵

As I write this piece, Atlanta is in the process of devising regional policies to tackle its affordable housing crisis and address historical trends of uneven, car-centric metropolitan development. Yet for any such policy to work, suburban municipalities must find ways to include their most vulnerable communities in local planning decisions, regardless of these people's legal status or forced residential mobility. In this context, focusing on the *right to plan* a life in the suburbs, and to shape future visions of suburban diversity and sustainability, can offer new grounds for claim-making and activist mobilization.

¹ In the State of Georgia, municipal incorporation is the process through which the majority of residents of a formerly "unincorporated" area ask the General Assembly to legally recognize the area as an autonomous municipality, provided with its own charter and local government. Sandy Springs was the first city created in Georgia in over fifty years and one of the largest in the country to go through the process of municipal incorporation. Sandy Springs' successful push for incorporation inspired a larger "cityhood movement" across metropolitan Atlanta, led by other largely white, affluent, and conservative suburbs. For more details on Sandy Springs' battle for cityhood and its privatized model of municipal government, see: Galambos 2011; Porter 2006; Segal 2012. For the broader political and racial implications of this "metropolitan secession" movement, see: Connor 2015; Rosen 2017.

² In the United States, voting districts, states, or jurisdictions are designated as "majority-minority" when their total population includes less than 50 percent non-Hispanic whites.

³ See Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000. For critical perspectives on new urbanism, see: Busch 2015; Smith 1995; Markley 2018.

⁴ See Bonilla-Silva 2009.

⁵ Out of a total population of 94,000 people, today 20 percent of Sandy Springs' residents identify as African American, 14.2 percent as Latino, 5 percent as Asian, and 2.7 percent with two or more races (US Census 2010). Latinx immigrants are predominantly from Mexico but also El Salvador, Colombia, and Brazil.

⁶ Sandy Springs' median household income is significantly higher than in the broader Atlanta region (\$65,813), yet 14 percent of its households live below the poverty level. Based on recent demographic data (City of Sandy Springs 2017b), half of the white-headed households in Sandy Springs earn more than \$100,000 a year, while 60 percent of black-headed households and 70 percent of Latinx-headed ones make less than \$50,000—or, more frequently, less than \$25,000. Homeownership rates among non-white residents are extremely low, with over 90 percent of black-headed households, and over 80 percent of Latinx-headed ones living in rental housing.

⁷ Rusty Paul, Interview, September 2014.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the use of "diversity" in official campaigns for City Springs, see Lanari 2017.

⁹ I borrow the expression “exile in the Next Ten” from an anonymous comment to a local newspaper article expressing concern about the gradual displacement of low-income residents from Sandy Springs (Ruch 2017b).

¹⁰ Next Ten planners tried to foster wider community participation by increasing social media outreach, using interactive online tools, translating meeting flyers into Spanish, and hosting “mobile workshops” in different parts of the city. With the exception of these initial workshops, however, the other meetings venues were located miles away from the apartments targeted for redevelopment.

¹¹ Based on media reports (Ruch 2017b), the African American women who attended this meeting protested rent increases and demanded affordable housing as members of the local workforce. In this piece, I focus on Latinx residents as they were initially the most affected by redevelopment.

¹² About 320 people in total participated in the Next Ten meetings and 560 visitors posted comments to online surveys (City of Sandy Springs 2017a, 15–16). Among the main factors limiting their engagement in planning campaigns, low-income participants mentioned language barriers, meeting time and location, and various other issues including fears of police presence, and lack of expertise about the planning process.

¹³ Throughout the article, pseudonyms are used to refer to people and places in order to protect participants’ confidentiality.

¹⁵ Between the 1980s and the 2000s, the United States terminated every federally subsidized public housing program in the country, shifting to a voucher system. Today, the only way for local governments to build affordable housing is by partnering with and/or intervening in the private housing market.

¹⁶ Of all the proposed definitions of affordability, only one targeted households making less than 50 percent of the area’s median income, which, by federal guidelines, is considered low-income. As explained by housing policy experts, the other definitions were rather focused on ensuring affordability for families with a middle-class budget. See Ruch 2017e.

¹⁷ This discourse echoes national public housing imperatives that, in the last decades, have focused on the goal of de-concentrating poverty by building mixed-income developments, often by adopting new urbanist planning principles. See: Bennett and Reed 1999; Fennell 2015.

¹⁸ By comparing census data at the tract level with planning documents, I found that Brightford Road’s future redevelopment “nodes” have over 80 percent of minority residents, and 60–80 percent of its population living below poverty level.

¹⁹ This expression was used by mayor Rusty Paul during the ceremony I described in the opening vignette.

²⁰ For an analysis of the role that street names, neighborhood boundaries, and storefront signs play in gentrification processes, see: Pérez 2004; Trinch and Snajdr 2017.

²¹ In the United States, most elementary schools have a Parent Teacher Organization (affiliated with state and national Parent Teacher Associations, or PTAs), whose goal is to foster family engagement and partnerships between the school and the local community.

²² See Murchinson 2013 for an example of how these discourses were used by Sandy Springs' public officials.

²³ In Atlanta, mobility and access to transportation are crucially related to social and racial justice. The history of its underdeveloped network of public transportation, in fact, is inextricably bound with white suburbanites' politics of "secession" from the inner city (Henderson 2006). Odem (2009), and Stuesse and Coleman (2014) have documented how Atlanta's car-centric landscape, combined with harsh anti-immigrant legislation, have deeply affected undocumented immigrants' mobility and capacity for labor and social reproduction.

²⁴ In 2011, the State of Georgia responded to the Department of Homeland Security's 287(g) Secure Communities Program by passing state laws (most notably H.B.87) that invested local police with the power to demand immigration "papers" during routine policing and report individuals to the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Atlanta's suburban counties were among the first to embrace and implement H.B.87, resulting in a series of immigration raids, detentions, and deportations in the following years, which many participants had experienced first-hand. Fulton County, however, stood out among a few other "urban" counties in refusing to comply fully with ICE guidelines (Redmon 2014). Participants often described Sandy Springs' police as being relatively less harsh in their enforcement of H.B.87 when compared to nearby Gwinnett and Cobb counties, where Latinx families could have found affordable housing. These aspects contributed to their perceptions of the city as being "safer," and thus to their desire to continue living there.

²⁵ See Diaz (2005), and Rojas and Kamp (2016) for a discussion of how Latinx populations have created sustainable urban and suburban environments with many of the features desired by new urbanist planners.

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Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3a.



Figure 3b.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

