Left Behind in ROSEDALE

Race Relations and the Collapse of Community Institutions

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Left Behind in Rosedale

To Juanita, Roy, and Jeannette,
with love and appreciation

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WHILE WRITING LEFT BEHIND IN ROSEDALE, I relied upon the goodwill and help of many individuals. Without the aid and support of these people, the job of telling the story of Rosedale would have been much more difficult. I am especially indebted to the elderly residents of Rosedale, both African American and white, for allowing me to spend so much time with them. I learned an immense amount from them. Their grace and wisdom, displayed under very difficult living conditions, made me grateful for the many blessings of my own life that I had taken for granted.

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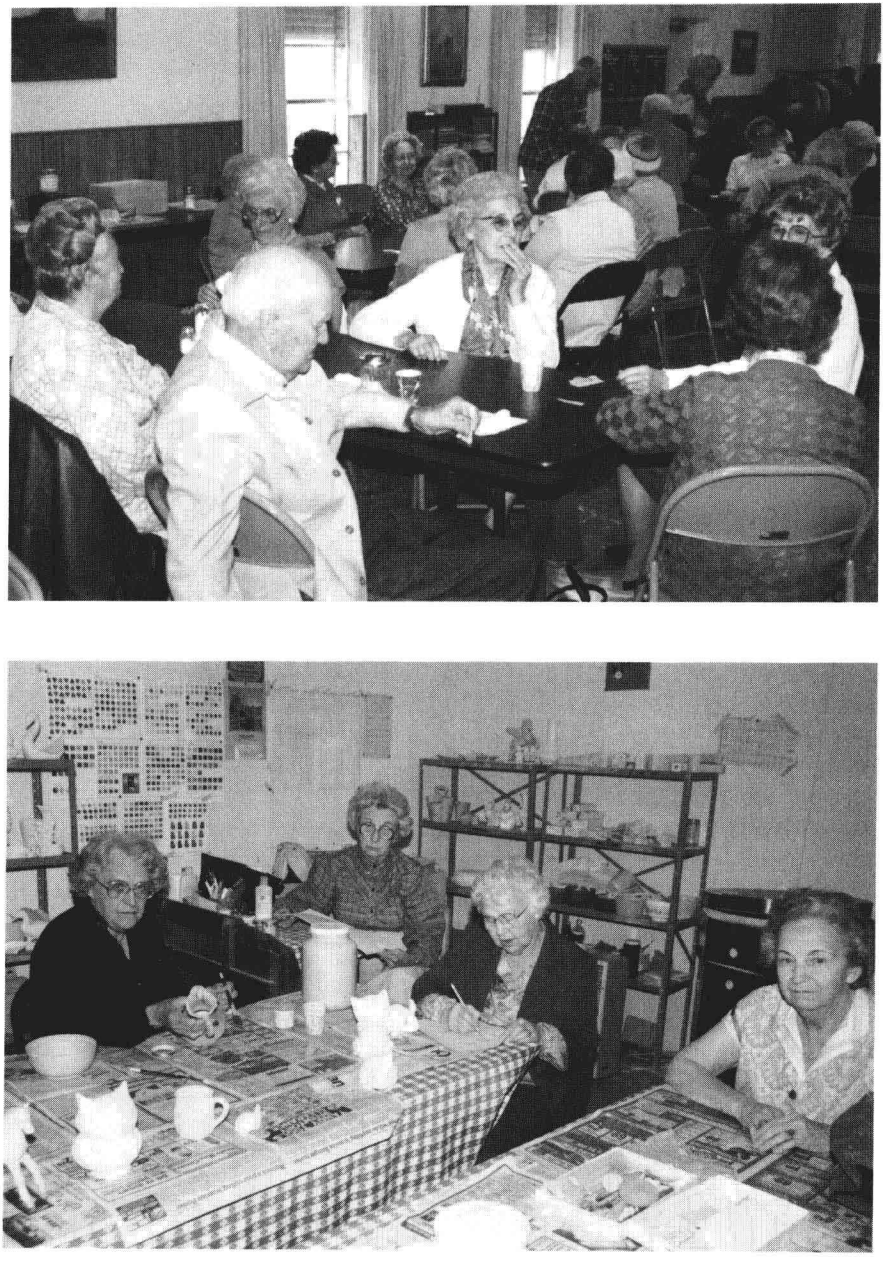
Scott Cummings
Key West, Florida



The Rosedale Senior Center shortly after the wilding incidents of 1982. Courtesy of Albert G. Mogor.

Abandoned housing and arson. Courtesy of Albert G. Mogor.

The houses of the elderly are easily identified. Courtesy of Albert G. Mogor.

The business district in Rosedale before the renovation efforts of 1986. Courtesy of Albert G. Mogor.

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Race Relations and Urban Neighborhoods

Few issues have generated more controversy in American cities than the racial integration of urban neighborhoods. Public officials, civic leaders, and civil rights activists have all struggled with the serious problems that accompany residential integration. Since the 1970s, "white flight," "block-busting," and "neighborhood racial transition and change" have all become familiar terms in both the academic and popular vocabulary. Racial transformation in urban neighborhoods is not a new topic for social scientists. The social science and planning literature abounds with the case studies and theoretical treatises describing the process of invasion and succession.[1] Drawing from our accumulated knowledge of the topic, we know that residential transition from one group to another is seldom smooth or devoid of serious conflict.[2]

Disputes among groups over control of urban space is not a recent problem or one limited to blacks and whites. American urban history was largely shaped by the dynamics of immigration and industrialization.[3] The urban neighborhoods of Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago are rich in ethnic diversity and tradition. Because ethnic residential segregation was so prevalent in most major industrialized cities, strong ties developed between immigrant minorities and their neighborhoods. Little Italy, Poletown, and South End are all names reflecting ethnic allegiance to urban space and denoting a strongly developed sense of community and neighborhood. Historians inform us that the psychological sense of community among immigrant minorities was intensely felt and aggressively defended,

especially under conditions when one group appeared ready to invade their turf and territory.[4] Nor did the sense of neighborhood fade in the face of urban renewal or gentrification.[5] Even today, most major cities reflect patterns of residential and neighborhood settlement rooted in immigration history, cultural diversity, ethnic competition, and conflict.[6]

Despite the persistence of ethnicity in American life, it is clear that neighborhood institutions and values do not remain stable when control of urban space changes from one group to another. New groups entering a community and eventually gaining control over it do not simply take over or acquire the institutions and lifeways of prior residents. Old institutions change and new ones are created. Over time, neighborhood businesses not only change hands but often alter the commodities and services provided to the new arrivals. Churches become occupied by different denominations, thus changing the religious culture of the neighborhood. Local schools typically experience gradual but steady modifications in the type of academic programs offered and in the socioeconomic composition of their student bodies. Street life and patterns of neighboring change, as do the content and form of family relations. The nature of everyday events changes in the wake of neighborhood transition. In most urban neighborhoods, racial and ethnic succession permanently and radically transforms community life and culture, especially under conditions where the religious, racial, and ethnic characteristics of residents are different.

This book examines the institutional, cultural, and psychological changes that accompanied racial transition in a single community over several years. Few popular or academic accounts of racial and ethnic change in urban neighborhoods describe the psychological and emotional circumstances that confront those individuals and families who are the direct participants in residential succession. Although demographic statistics profile important changes in our cities, they do not capture the human side of neighborhood succession. Seldom is the process of invasion and succession totally complete. Many of the previous residents do not move; they remain in the old neighborhood. This book examines the transformation of a once cohesive and stable community I will call Rosedale. The study spans two decades of institutional and cultural change. Particular attention is given to the ways in which community and cultural institutions change during the course of residential transition.

Special attention is also given to the influence of numerous social policies initiated during the 1960s and 1970s upon the process of institutional change within urban neighborhoods. During the era now referred to as the War on Poverty, a number of significant social programs were passed by the federal government and implemented as public policy.[7] Many of these programs were designed to provide equal opportunity for urban minorities in the areas of housing, education, social welfare, and job training. Additionally, important federal initiatives took place in the areas of urban renewal,

community development, and model cities, all with the intention of revitalizing the nation's cities.

These programs constituted an important political watershed in the history of American public policy. Not since the Great Depression and the legislation initiated by the Roosevelt administration have so many programs designed to provide equal opportunity dominated the public policy arena. This book is critical of many programs initiated during the 1960s and 1970s. In the book, I examine the relationship between federal urban policy and the collapse of one neighborhood's social and cultural institutions.

The book is also about crime, violence, and personal crisis among older people; it is about human suffering, fear, and entrapment. The book is about racial oppression and social inequality; it is about insensitivity and neglect. The book describes the failure of public officials, public policy, and community residents to manage the process of racial succession in an effective and humane manner. The book pays special attention to the problems of the elderly, both white and African American, and minority underclass families and their collective inability to forge any sense of solidarity and mutual support during the process of institutional and cultural change. Special attention is also given to African American youth, the social problems that confront them, and the increasingly serious challenges they pose to community residents, public officials, and civil rights leaders.

Background and Overview

I was originally drawn to Rosedale during the mid-1970s. At that time I was involved in community organizing. Attempting to provide technical assistance and university services to tenants' rights activists, minority organizations, and those involved in the fair-housing movement, I established professional and political affiliations with neighborhood and grassroots political organizers in the community. In 1978, the executive director of a community center located in the heart of a predominantly African American neighborhood asked me to assist in designing and seeking funds for a community development corporation. The corporation would eventually address housing needs in the area by rehabilitating existing and vacant structures, arranging home improvement loans with local financial institutions, and renovating multiple- and single-family dwellings. After several months of planning, a proposal was developed and ultimately funded with local and federal dollars.

University professors who have been active in community and neighborhood politics know that attempts to create any type of progressive social program require constant lobbying of city officials, potential funding agencies, and neighborhood leaders. Neighborhood political organizing, to

quote George Bernard Shaw's description of socialism, "is an endless meeting." It was during meetings that occurred five times each week, sometimes five times each day—evenings, afternoons, mornings, on weekends—that I became involved in the events described in this book.

Rosedale is situated in the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area, one of the largest urban regions in the nation. The neighborhood is adjacent to that part of Fort Worth in which the community development corporation was eventually established. The Rosedale Community Center was part of a social service program funded by a consortium of urban churches. Like the community in which I had been working for two years, the neighborhood was composed predominately of a few low- to moderate-income whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. The community, according to social science terminology, was "in transition," that is, rapidly changing from white to African American. In fact, the transition was nearly complete. By 1980, Rosedale was considered "black" by city officials and by most residents of that area.

The community center in Rosedale was located next to a church and used primarily to house a youth program. Being unfamiliar with all programs offered through the church consortium, I initially overlooked the fact that all the meetings I attended were held on the second floor of the community center. All of the personnel there were of African American descent, as were all the children participating in the youth program. It was a noisy place to meet; our discussions were constantly interrupted by the boisterous "rapping" and unruly behavior of youngsters. Arriving early for an afternoon meeting one hot summer day, I inadvertently interrupted a conversation between the executive director and several members of his staff. They were trying to devise a way to deal with the numerous complaints from the "old people" downstairs. The old people had apparently complained about the kids being too rowdy and disrespectful. It was also apparent that several of the kids had been accused of breaking into the downstairs facility. Not wanting to intrude, I simply made a mental note to meet the "seniors" downstairs sometime in the future.

It was several weeks later that I finally had an opportunity to visit what I assumed was a program for minority elders, housed on the first floor of the community center. The executive director of the youth program introduced me to Mrs. Rollins, the director of the Rosedale Senior Citizen's Center. She was a pleasant white woman, about sixty-five years old, neat, very tidy, and energetic. I soon realized that nearly all of the other senior citizens in the program were also white. The men were playing dominoes or checkers or shooting pool. Many of the women were just talking and sipping a soft drink or iced tea.

As I stood between the two directors, I noted a submerged but obvious tension between Mrs. Rollins and Mr. Ellins, the director of the youth facil-

ity. Their relationship appeared guarded but cordial, respectful but lacking in trust. Ellins appeared polite yet cavalier. Rollins seemed superordinate but also defeated, intimidated but resolved not to show signs of fear. I explained to Mrs. Rollins that I was from the university and had been working with numerous community leaders in the adjacent neighborhood, Southside. We talked briefly about the kinds of programs the senior center offered. When I expressed interest in knowing more about the program, she insisted that I return at a later date so that we could talk more extensively. As she walked me to the door, she stated, being sure that Ellins heard: "We need help. Please come back and talk with us." I was not able to return to the senior center for another several weeks. By this time, the obligations associated with the community development corporation had been largely satisfied. More significant, I kept recalling the desperation in the voice of Mrs. Rollins when she said she wanted help. I called her and arranged to have lunch the next afternoon with the seniors at the Rosedale Center.

Before eating lunch, I talked with Mrs. Rollins about the center's programs. We quickly established a first-name relationship. Ruth was a pleasant woman, dressed stylishly, and seemed intensely committed to the center. She took phone calls about every ten minutes during our conversation, answered a steady stream of questions from the staff, and managed to say hello to numerous seniors getting ready to have lunch. Even though she was fast approaching senior status herself, she displayed a strongly nurturing and maternal orientation toward her clients. She explained proudly that the most popular program at the center was lunch. People in the neighborhood "can get a hot meal and just come and talk to each other," she said. Explaining in more detail, she said, "Our people like to come and play dominoes. . . . We have tournaments every month." Crafts, cards, dancing, and singing were also popular activities. The center often invited outside people to make speeches or "present a talk" to the seniors. "They just love to do crafts too," she said. "We have two brand-new kilns, and we use them all the time."

Despite Mrs. Rollins's commitment to her program and enthusiastic promotion of it, I could not help but notice that the downstairs facility was stark and devoid of color. The gray walls needed paint. The tile floors were stained and reflected years of sustained service. A small kitchen was packed into a tiny room at one end of the large, open hall. The appliances in the kitchen were old but apparently adequate. At the other end of the hall was a small stage. A pulpit, a large crucifix attached to its front, stood boldly in the center of the stage. A microphone and a Bible were placed neatly on top of the portable pulpit. Numerous tables were carefully organized in the middle of the hall. Off to one side were two pool tables and several smaller table-and-chair arrangements for dominoes, cards, and checkers. A small room housed the ceramics equipment and various craft activities about