

## **PLANNED GENTRIFICATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD DYNAMICS IN HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In response to calls by Lees (2000) and others to address “new wrinkles” in the “geography of gentrification,” several recent studies have focused on the influence of urban policy on gentrification. Here we present a case study in Harrisburg, PA that investigates neighborhood dynamics and the influence of planned gentrification efforts in two neighborhoods, South Allison Hill and Capitol Heights, using a stable neighborhood, Midtown, as a baseline. This comparison is especially salient to research in the geography of gentrification because each neighborhood represents two different strategies of planned gentrification. In the case of Capitol Heights, the City of Harrisburg and its private partners have performed broad scale block-level teardowns and rebuilds. In contrast, urban renewal projects in South Allison Hill have focused on parcel scale rehabilitation projects, usually in partnership with individual homeowners or businesses, with the intention of creating small footholds of urban renewal throughout the neighborhood. Our comparison focuses on the progress of gentrification in these two neighborhoods as measured by parcel-level variables, including vacancy of parcels within neighborhoods, frequency of parcels that are changing, and spatial estimates of land and building values. Our findings related to the progress of gentrification in these neighborhoods were then validated in the field. In Capitol Heights, urban revitalization is predictably dramatic while the success of planned gentrification efforts in South Allison Hill is less certain. However, these results are the first in a longitudinal study of neighborhood dynamics in Harrisburg, PA and thus provide an important foundation for future studies.*

**Keywords:** *Gentrification, Urban renewal, Urban policy, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gentrification has persisted as a major topic in urban geography for over three decades. In its strictest sense, gentrification refers to the physical and social transformation of low-income neighborhoods, which are characterized by physical decay of the housing stock, into high-income neighborhoods characterized by stylishly refurbished buildings. It is this view of gentrification that dominated the literature through the 1980s and 1990s, but it is now recognized that gentrification refers to a broad range of urban renewal and neighborhood change processes (Slater, 2004). Recent research in gentrification acknowledges this complexity and many recent studies have addressed what Lees (2000) has identified as “new wrinkles” in the “geography of gentrification.” Specifically, Lees (2000) identifies a gap in the literature related to the relationship between urban policy and gentrification. Likewise, Redfern (2003, p.2354) notes that

“gentrification has gone from being a local anomaly to being a global urban strategy.”

In response to these observations, several recent studies have addressed the relationship between urban policy and gentrification (Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Larson, 2005; Lees, 2003; Slater, 2004; Smith and Graves, 2005). Furthermore, O'Sullivan (2002) notes that, methodologically, much gentrification research has shied away from approaches that incorporate modeling or spatial analysis. In our study, we contribute to these lines of research using a case study in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (Figure 1), a medium-sized city that nevertheless exhibits many of the same trends of urban decline and recent urban renewal as larger cities throughout the northeast.

Harrisburg is the capitol of Pennsylvania and is located in the center of the state, on the east bank of the Susquehanna River in Dauphin County. In 2000 Harrisburg had a population of 48,950, a 6.5% decrease from the 1990 population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). At its peak in 1950, Harrisburg supported a population of almost 90,000

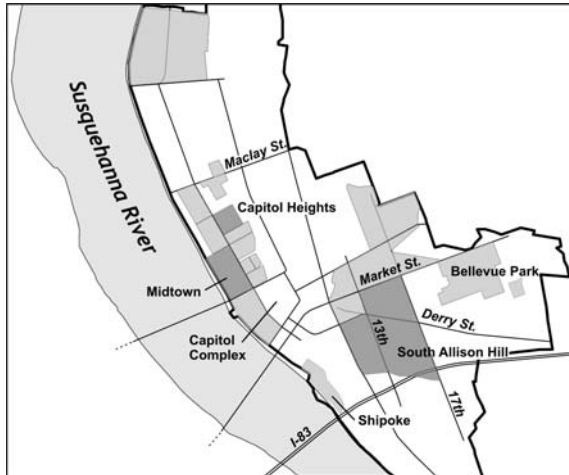


Figure 1. Neighborhood boundaries in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

and was a regional center of transportation and industry (Eggert, 1992). However, as with many northeastern cities, Harrisburg is experiencing a transition to a post-industrial economy. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by a rapid contraction of the city’s population and economy. Between 1970 and 1980, the rate of population decline exceeded 20%, while the suburbs in central Pennsylvania boomed. Although the population in Harrisburg continues to decline, the rate of decline has decreased markedly and there are indications that Harrisburg’s economy is stabilizing. Urban renewal, through both spontaneous and planned gentrification, is one such indicator. Because of its size and the availability of digital spatial data sets, Harrisburg is an ideal city to study neighborhood dynamics using a combination of spatial modeling and field techniques.

The goal of this paper is to present a preliminary comparison between Capitol Heights and South Allison Hill, two neighborhoods undergoing different types of municipally managed urban renewal (discussed in detail below). Our comparison will focus on the progress of gentrification in these two neighborhoods as measured by parcel-level variables: vacancy of parcels within neighborhoods, frequency of parcels that are changing, and spatial estimates of land and building values. We note here that the focus of this paper is on only two aspects of gentrification: physical changes or upgrades to properties and property values.

We assume that gentrifying neighborhoods will exhibit evidence of change at the parcel level, indicating that properties are being renovated. We expect gentrifying neighborhoods to show some evidence of economic distress (e.g. areas of low real estate values and moderate rates of parcel vacancy),

but to be clearly in a state of recovery. Our findings related to the progress of gentrification in these neighborhoods were then validated in the field. To facilitate the comparison between Capitol Heights and South Allison Hill, we also include a third neighborhood in this analysis, Midtown. In contrast to Capitol Heights and South Allison Hill, Midtown is a moderate-income, stable neighborhood and was used throughout this research as a baseline.

Our paper will conclude with a discussion of neighborhood dynamics in Capitol Heights and South Allison Hill in light of the different approaches to municipally managed gentrification. While it is difficult to make definitive conclusions relative to the success or failure of urban policy in this preliminary comparison, the results are nevertheless compelling. Furthermore, because these are the initial results of a longitudinal study, this paper provides an important basis for future studies that will be able to make a more comprehensive empirical assessment of urban policy and gentrification.

## STUDY AREA DESCRIPTION

As noted previously, Harrisburg has experienced significant population decline over the past several decades. The vision of the city leaders is to stabilize the city’s population at 50,000 and strengthen and revitalize the business community. Several specific planning goals to address this vision include: increase occupied housing units, stabilize neighborhoods by increasing homeownership, and stabilize property values by encouraging property maintenance (City of Harrisburg, 2006). Resources to support these goals are limited, and Harrisburg has been strategic about where resources are allocated within the city. The city has also taken advantage of opportunities offered by private investors. More recently, the city has identified a Capital Corridors Target Area, within which revitalization dollars will be focused on highly visible neighborhood blocks on Harrisburg’s major transportation corridors.

This study will focus on three neighborhoods in the City of Harrisburg: Capitol Heights, South Allison Hill and Midtown. Capitol Heights is a relatively small neighborhood, consisting of only four city blocks and 374 parcels, and illustrates the City of Harrisburg’s approach of strategic planning and opportunism to achieve urban renewal. In Capitol Heights—once referred to as “Lottsville” due to the number of abandoned buildings and vacant lots—the City of Harrisburg and private developers have performed broad scale block-

level teardowns and rebuilds (Martini et al., 2006; Spahr, 2005) (Figure 2). This approach to gentrification is similar to what Smith and Graves (2005) document for the Fourth Ward in Charlotte, NC. In both Capitol Heights and the Fourth Ward, a private corporation has invested a great deal of capital in an inner city, economically distressed neighborhood. Harrisburg has facilitated these changes by, for example, condemnation proceedings that have made parcels available for revitalization. Capitol Heights had also been identified as a targeted neighborhood for urban renewal, a designation that drew the interest of private investors.

South Allison Hill, the largest of the study neighborhoods, consists of dozens of city blocks and over 2,300 parcels. Row homes and small apartment buildings characterize the residential areas in South Allison Hill, many of which were built near the turn of the twentieth century (Figure 3). The housing stock in South Allison Hill is a mix of brick and frame, many with desirable architectural details, such as mansard roofs, turrets, and stained glass windows. South Allison Hill was once a diverse neighborhood with a solid working class base associated with the warehouses and factories that developed in the area because of the neighborhood's proximity to the rail lines (Eggert, 1992). Today, it is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Harrisburg. The city has a variety of programs to facilitate urban renewal, including the disbursement of grants and loans to encourage homeownership and home improvements, and partnerships with non-profit housing developers, such as Habitat for Humanity. Because four of the seven



Figure 2. The Capitol Heights neighborhood. These houses are part of the new development designed to blend in with the older row houses.



Figure 3. The South Allison Hill neighborhood. This is a typical group of row houses, where vacant or abandoned residences are interspersed with occupied residences.

Capital Corridors Target Area corridors (Market St., Derry St., 13<sup>th</sup> St. and 17<sup>th</sup> St.) intersect South Allison Hill, this neighborhood received more than 10% of the nearly \$2 million dollars of federal, state, and city funds allocated for property rehabilitation in 2005 (City of Harrisburg, 2006). South Allison Hill is thus a priority neighborhood for Harrisburg's revitalization efforts, but has not yet attracted the attention of large, private developers, as has been the case in Capitol Heights. In contrast to the block-level redevelopment taking place in Capitol Heights, rehabilitation projects in South Allison Hill are therefore typically *parcel-scale*, usually in partnership with individual homeowners or businesses (Martini et al., 2006).

The neighborhood of Midtown covers roughly 15 blocks and includes 800 parcels. With river frontage on its western boundary, its proximity to the Capitol Complex, and the fact that several major thoroughfares (e.g., Front Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street) cross through Midtown, this neighborhood's location has contributed to its stability. The housing stock in Midtown consists of a mix of frame and brick row homes, similar in age and style to those found in South Allison Hill (Figure 4). However, homes in Midtown are generally very well maintained. Unlike Capitol Heights and South Allison Hill, Midtown never experienced a decline, making this an appropriate neighborhood to use a baseline.



Figure 4. The Midtown neighborhood. The houses change from wood to brick as one gets closer to the Capitol Complex.

## METHODS

Our analysis used several spatial and non-spatial data sets. First, we utilized a digital parcel data set developed by the City of Harrisburg's Department of Building and Housing Development in 2004. This data set includes the boundaries of all parcels (> 20,000) within the city as they existed in November 2004, and each parcel polygon is attributed with a property identification number (PID). This PID allows parcels to be identified in the tax assessment records for the city, but these two data sets (the spatial parcel data set and the tax assessment records) are not dynamically linked. We therefore adopted a sampling approach, where we selected a subset of parcels for which tax assessment data would be collected. The sampling approach was designed to accommodate a longitudinal study.

We randomly selected 1,074 parcels from the parcel data set. In future studies, a random sample will again be drawn from the parcel data set, except for 62 parcels that have been identified as permanent samples to be tracked over time. We sampled across the entire city of Harrisburg, but within Capitol Heights, South Allison Hill and Midtown, the sampling frequency was higher to capture at least 10% of the parcels contained within each of these neighborhoods. Neighborhood boundaries were outlined by the Deputy Director for Planning in the City of Harrisburg, and digitized. For each parcel in the sample, tax assessment information (building value and land value) was collected in April

of 2006 from the Dauphin County Office of Tax Assessment's on-line property information system (<http://www.dauphinpropertyinfo.org/propertymax/>).

The tax assessment database is updated frequently and is therefore a powerful data set for investigating neighborhood dynamics. However, we acknowledge that there are limitations with these data. Specifically, tax assessments do not reflect the true market value of properties; rather, they reflect the property value as assessed for tax purposes and often report values that are lower than the true market price, particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods. Land and building values collected from the tax assessments nevertheless do provide a good basis for broad patterns of relative land economics within the city. Additionally, the tax assessment data set also has internal temporal inconsistencies. The Dauphin County Office of Tax Assessment performed a general assessment of all properties within Harrisburg in 2000, but some properties have since been reassessed due to major physical upgrades or demolition. For all parcels in this analysis, we used the 2006 assessment information, regardless of whether or not a parcel had been reassessed between 2000 and 2006. Finally, there are temporal inconsistencies between the tax assessment data and the parcel data set. These inconsistencies would occur when parcels were split or merged between November of 2004, when the parcel data set was completed, and April of 2006, when the tax assessment information was collected. However, these temporal differences between the two data sets can actually be used as an indicator of change within neighborhoods, as discussed below.

Using the above data sets, several spatial analyses were performed to characterize neighborhood dynamics, particularly in terms of stability and change. For the three neighborhoods of interest, we calculated the number of parcels in our sample that did not have a corresponding record in the tax assessment data set. Parcels without tax assessment records indicate that a single large parcel was divided, that two parcels were merged, or that the parcel boundaries were redrawn—or more simply the parcels were adjusted in some manner—and therefore provide a metric of neighborhood change. We also calculated the number of parcels identified as "Vacant" (e.g., no structures and in no active use) in the tax assessment database. We considered these two metrics as indicators of stability or change. To more broadly characterize patterns of land and building values, we used inverse distance weighting (IDW) to interpolate spatial patterns of land and building values between our sample parcels' centroids. For this latter analysis, we considered only residential parcels and excluded parcels with no data.

The modeled land value surface was thus based on a sample of 819 parcels. In the case of the modeled building value surface, the sample was slightly smaller,  $N = 789$ , because parcels without buildings were not included.

Our findings were then validated in the field. Fieldwork consisted of several visits to each neighborhood, conducted both by car and on foot and visible indications of neighborhood dynamics were noted. For example, indicators of change included buildings that were recently renovated or newly constructed, actively undergoing renovations or had building permits posted, or properties marked for sale or marked as having recently sold. Another indicator of change that we noted is a “C” symbol that is painted on the outside of buildings to indicate properties that have been condemned and that are awaiting demolition or restoration (Figure 5). This is a symbol recently adopted by the City of Harrisburg as a visual demonstration of urban renewal.

## RESULTS

Results for the frequency of parcels with no corresponding entry in the tax assessment database for the three neighborhoods are shown in Table 1. For Capitol Heights, South Allison Hill and



Figure 5. An example of the condemned “C” symbol on a building in South Allison Hill, indicating that the building has been condemned and awaiting or undergoing restoration.

Midtown, the respective frequencies are 13.75%, 2.22% and 0.83%. Table 2 shows the percentage of parcels in each of the three neighborhoods identified in the tax assessment database as being vacant. The vacancy rate is 11.59% in Capitol Heights, 6.10% in South Allison Hill, and 2.52% in Midtown.

The results of the IDW interpolation are shown for land values (Figure 6) and building values (Figure 7). Land values are highest near the river and Capitol Complex, and slightly higher east of the Capitol Complex along Market St. Building values show a similar pattern along the riverfront. The Bellevue Park and Shipoke neighborhoods stand out as two of the most expensive neighborhoods in terms of building value. Values in South Allison Hill and the blocks north of Maclay St. are among the lowest.

## DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results in Tables 1 and 2 point toward substantial differences among the three study neighborhoods in Harrisburg. The low frequency of adjusted parcels in Midtown (0.86%) confirms our characterization of this area as a stable neighborhood (Table 1). Capitol Heights has the highest rate (13.75%) of adjusted parcels. This number is very high relative to Midtown, and indicates the dramatic changes taking place in Capitol Heights as a result of a public-private partnership between the City of Harrisburg and a developer, Struever Rouse Homes. As part of this phased redevelopment project, whole blocks within the Capitol Heights neighborhood were condemned, razed, and are being rebuilt (Martini et al., 2006; Spahr, 2005). To date, roughly 75% of the 180 planned units have been completed (Martini et al., 2006), so a high rate of parcel change at this time is to be expected. While South Allison Hill exhibits a frequency of change (2.22%) that is significantly higher than the stable neighborhood of Midtown, it is clearly not experiencing the level of dramatic change that has been captured in Capitol Heights.

These initial conclusions are supported by the vacancy rates in each neighborhood (Table 2), where Capitol Heights exhibits the highest rates of vacancy (11.59%) and Midtown the lowest (2.52%). As noted above, the Capitol Heights redevelopment project is not yet completed and this contributes to the high vacancy rate relative to the more stable neighborhood of Midtown. South Allison Hill's vacancy rate of 6.10% is significantly higher than Midtown's and, unlike Capitol Heights, is indicative of the abandonment that this neighborhood has

Table 1. Frequency of Parcels with No Tax Assessment Records

Neighborhood	Total Number of Sample Parcels	Percent of Parcels With No Tax Record
Capitol Heights	80	13.75
South Allison Hill	406	2.22
Midtown	120	0.83

Table 2. Frequency of Parcels Identified as being Vacant

Neighborhood	Total Number of Sample Parcels	Percent of Vacant Parcels
Capitol Heights	69	11.59
South Allison Hill	344	6.10
Midtown	119	2.52

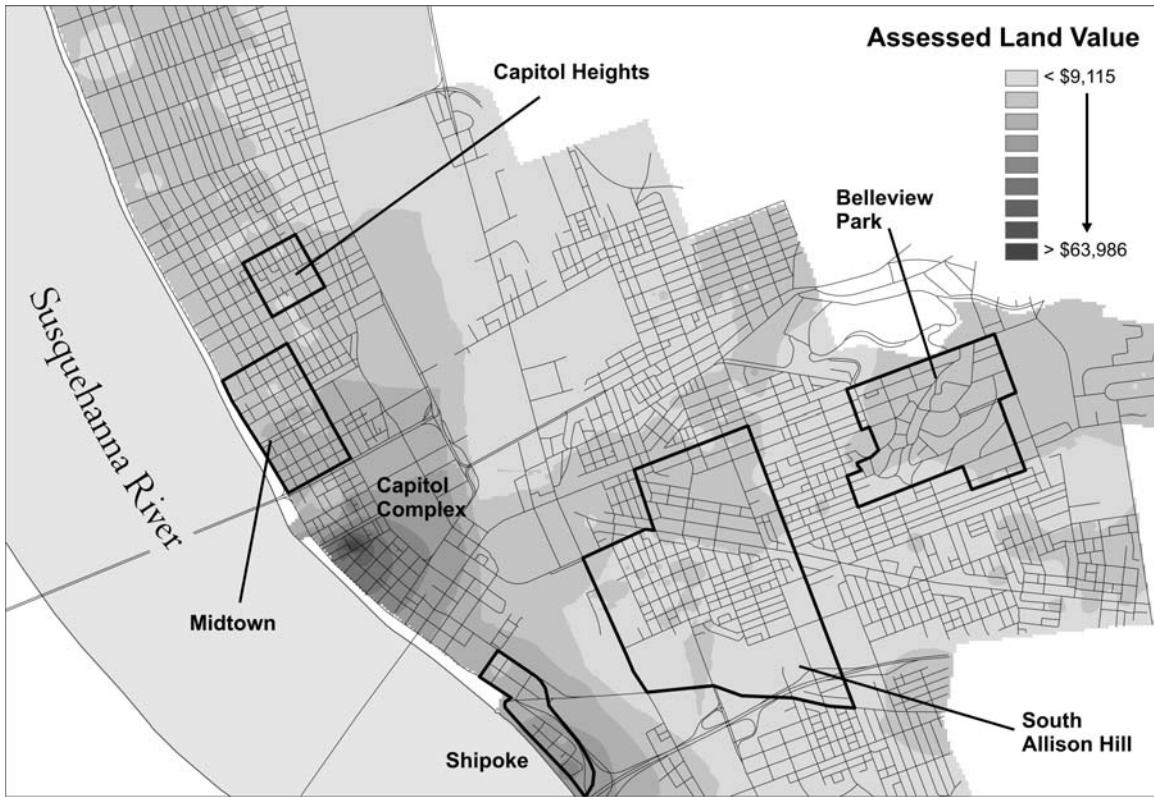


Figure 6. Interpolated surface of land values.

experienced since the 1950s. It is important to qualify the differences in the types and causes of building vacancy between the Capitol Heights and South Allison Hill neighborhoods. Vacancy in Capitol Heights is due overwhelmingly to those properties that are slated for reconstruction—as noted above this project is currently only 75% complete. Even those properties that have been condemned in Capitol Heights show signs that either renovation has started or will be started soon. The vacancy in South Allison Hill is due primarily to abandonment. Vacant properties here show little sign of stabilization, let

alone renovation. Those cases where owners have attempted to stabilize the abandoned buildings—often simply boarding up the windows—show signs of ongoing vandalism (Figure 8). However, South Allison Hill also has a higher frequency of parcels experiencing change relative to the baseline neighborhood of Midtown (Table 1), which may be an indication that the trend of decline is slowly reversing.

Field visits confirm these results. The landscape in Capitol Heights is clearly one of recent and dramatic change. Whole blocks of new or



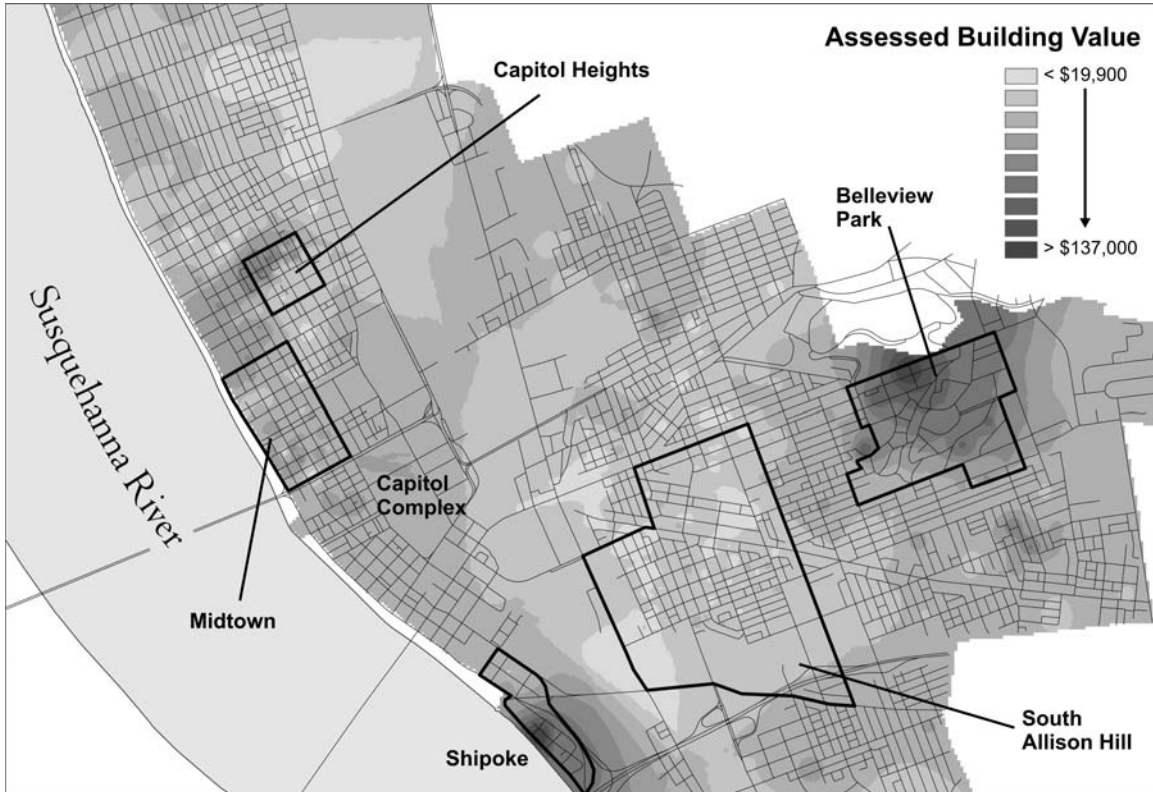


Figure 7. Interpolated surface of building values.



Figure 8. A group of abandoned and vandalized buildings in South Allison Hill.

recently renovated buildings within Capitol Heights are in stark contrast with the older surrounding neighborhoods, and the remaining vacant lots are being prepared for new construction (Figure 9a). Despite the newness of most of the buildings in Capitol Heights, the overall design of the neighborhood is meant to blend into the surrounding urban fabric, a strong indication that the City of Harrisburg and Struever Rouse Homes have embraced the ideals of New Urbanism and traditional neighborhood design for inner-city revitalization—a growing trend in planned gentrification (Larson, 2005). Driving and walking through South Allison Hill, we noted the “patchiness” of this neighborhood, where some streets exhibited buildings in good repair but others were characterized by wholesale abandonment. Particularly along Derry Street, in the blocks between 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, we noted many buildings being renovated (Figure 9b). In Midtown, the houses are generally well kept and there are few visual indicators of change.

The maps of land and building values (Figures 6 and 7) place these neighborhood dynamics in a broader context. Higher land values (Figure 6) tend to be associated with the riverfront and the Capitol Complex. Midtown, which has a riverfront location and is close to the Capitol Complex, has land



Figure 9. (a) Vacant lots in Capitol Heights, and (b) Derry St. renovations in South Allison Hill.

values that are relatively high. The locational features of Midtown have likely contributed to the persistence and stability of this neighborhood. In South Allison Hill, the blocks between Derry St. and Market St. show higher values than the rest of the neighborhood, since these two roads serve as primary connectors to downtown Harrisburg. We note that, in terms of land value, these more accessible areas of South Allison Hill and Capitol Heights are strikingly similar. Although South Allison Hill is literally on the “other side of the tracks,” it is comparable to Capitol Heights in terms of its proximity to the Capitol Complex and thus has similar potential for gentrification.

Building value seems to be more sensitive to differences between neighborhoods (Figure 7). The abandonment of South Allison Hill is reflected in the relatively low building values for this neighborhood. However, we do note a great deal of heterogeneity in South Allison Hill, indicating that some blocks in this neighborhood are faring better than others—as noted above. Building values in Capitol Heights tend to be higher than that in South Allison Hill, and in some cases exhibit values higher than nearby Midtown. The effects of the Capitol Heights redevelopment project can also be seen quite clearly, with higher building values associated with the areas of new construction or recent renovation. Despite the field evidence for renewal on Derry St. in South Allison Hill, the building value estimates do not coherently reflect these observations.

Bellevue Park and Shipoke stand out as the most expensive neighborhoods. Large lots and large, stately homes characterize the Bellevue Park neighborhood. These characteristics, along with its park-like landscape, have long made Bellevue Park one of the most desirable neighborhoods in the city. Shipoke, on the other hand, is a neighborhood that reflects recent gentrification in an almost stereotypical way. In Shipoke, the historic row homes are brightly painted and fastidiously maintained.

## CONCLUSIONS

Neighborhood dynamics in Harrisburg, as presented here, illustrate some key aspects of the geography of gentrification. As noted by others (Lees, 2000; Redfern, 2003), urban policy clearly has an influence on patterns of urban renewal. Capitol Heights is a dramatic example of this point. Because of the locational characteristics of Capitol Heights and the cooperation of the City, it was likely viewed as a “safe bet” by the private investors. Indeed, in the areas where the Capitol Heights redevelopment project is completed, assessed building values are as high as or higher than many areas of Midtown. While the social implications of planned gentrification are not the focus of this paper, we do note potential issues related to the displacement of



urban poor in the case of projects like Capitol Heights (Freeman and Braconi, 2004; Smith and Graves, 2005).

Although there are indications, particularly in field visits, that smaller-scale urban renewal projects in South Allison Hill are at least partially driving neighborhood dynamics in this area, the future of this neighborhood is less clear. There is no definitive evidence presented here that the small scale, parcel level urban renewal efforts are linked to higher land or building values. We do note that while the elevated frequency of parcel adjustments indicates some level of renovations occurring here, the vacancy rate and the landscape itself largely tell a story of abandonment. With that being said, the public programs promoting revitalization in South Allison Hill are clearly aimed at the physical upgrading of properties owned by individual homeowners or businesses. In the long term, these approaches, if properly funded, may better serve the existing residents. Furthermore, South Allison Hill has attractive architecture and similar locational characteristics to Capitol Heights and this may ultimately help to drive spontaneous gentrification if Harrisburg's population and economy continue to stabilize.

Methodologically, we found the combination of spatial analysis, spatial modeling and field validation to be extremely effective. That results from these various analyses converged lends confidence to our overall conclusions regarding patterns of stability and change in Capitol Heights, South Allison Hill, and Midtown. We agree with O'Sullivan (2002) that these approaches are valuable in terms of providing an empirical understanding of the geography of gentrification.

As noted in the introduction, these results are the first in a longitudinal study of neighborhood dynamics in Harrisburg. Future results will be important in understanding the nature of urban renewal and urban dynamics in Harrisburg, particularly regarding the success or failure of ongoing projects in South Allison Hill, the continued stability of Midtown, and the broader impacts of the Capitol Heights project. In the latter case, will an urban renewal bow-wave spread into the adjacent blocks, particularly to the north of this neighborhood? Ultimately, this case study can provide a basis for comparisons to be made between different policy approaches to urban renewal and gentrification, questions that are particularly salient to research in the geography of gentrification.

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