

# Environmental Design and Urban Economics in the Montgomery Peacock Tract

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In 1850 the Montgomery, Alabama Peacock Tract neighborhood was a slave plantation. At its height in 1960, it was the African American cultural and commercial heart that powered the Civil Rights Movement. Since 1964, economic and environmental conditions of the Peacock Tract have declined dramatically. Much of the blame has targeted the residents, who are held responsible for high crime rates, unemployment and delinquency (Yawn, 2018). Instead of blaming the victims, this article seeks to clarify the impacts of centralized government planning on the downfall of the Peacock Tract. The results show overwhelming evidence that racially motivated government planning was used to systematically dismantle the social infrastructure that allowed the Peacock Tract to otherwise thrive.

Social infrastructure is generally defined as the social and environmental structures which facilitate the improvement and sustention of both physical and human capital. It makes cities engines of social connection, learning, and economic opportunity (Latham, 2019). Additionally, social infrastructure benefits from agglomeration economies; a higher concentration of social infrastructure produces compounding social and economic benefits (Glaeser, 2009). Without social infrastructure, it may be impossible for goods and information to be exchanged, decreasing the potential for social connections and business opportunities.

Previous research has highlighted two government initiatives that have targeted the Peacock Tract. The first initiative was the use of redlining maps by the Federal Housing Administration and Home Owners Loan Corporation, which cut off the Peacock Tract from federally insured loans (Edwards, 2018; Nelson, 2023). The second initiative was the construction of I65 and I85

through Montgomery in 1964, and its connection to a political conspiracy to displace the leaders of the civil rights movement and African American voters (Retzlaff, 2019). What is unclear however, is how the demolition of a fraction of the building stock in the Peacock Tract led to a major decline across its entirety. Longtime residents of the Peacock Tract have repeatedly emphasized the importance that the loss of social infrastructure played in the neighborhood's decline, however little formal research on this topic exists (Khari, 2021).

To understand the effects of the I65 and I85 construction on the Peacock Tract's social infrastructure, streets, housing and social infrastructure were mapped for the years 1953 (Figure 1) and 2022 (Figure 2) using geographic information software. A density heat map of social infrastructure was generated for both years to see agglomeration economies.



Fig. 1 Peacock Tract social infrastructure in 1953.



**Fig. 2** Peacock Tract social infrastructure in 2022.

The results support Retzlaff and the residents' anecdotal claims that I65 and I85 were major disruptors to social and economic sustainability. Additionally, the results show that social infrastructure in the Peacock Tract relied heavily on a complex system of agglomeration and networking. The placement of the I65 and I85 interchange demolished and disconnected the four largest social infrastructure hotspots, leading to a chain reaction of social infrastructure closures and home vacancies across the neighborhood.

For every unit of social infrastructure demolished, 3.63 other social infrastructure units soon closed, and 12.02 homes soon vacated. 53 units or 22% of social infrastructure was demolished for I65 and I85. 137 units of social infrastructure closed soon after. By the year 2022, 189 units or 78% of social infrastructure had been lost. The diversity of social infrastructure dropped from 20 to just 12 categories, with the greatest loss coming from private businesses. For every housing unit demolished, 1.93 other homes were soon vacated. For every 5 housing units demolished, 1 social infrastructure unit soon closed. 670 homes or 31% of housing stock was demolished for I65 and I85. 626 homes vacated soon after. By the year 2022, 1,296 homes or 59% of housing stock had been lost.

Due to threats of displacement, future advancements to replace lost social infrastructure should seek to include the residents. Insight article demonstrates, resident anecdotes are too often overlooked by researchers yet may provide critical insight into imbedded local challenges.

A special thank you to all the residents of the Peacock Tract for welcoming Auburn University to conduct research, and to Professor Robert Sproull for generous aid in mapping and research.

### Statement of Research Advisor

Aubrey's project highlights a critical issue on the negative effects of highway planning on minority neighborhoods during the middle of the 20th century. The location of the study, Montgomery's Peacock Tract community, proves that no place was immune to the type of institutionalized discrimination often occurring during this period - including those of historic civil rights significance. Aubrey investigated the state of the community's social infrastructure prior to the introduction of I65/I85 and compared it to what exists today. The results, presented through striking graphics and a compelling narrative, support similar research findings from institutions around the country, and the project's outcomes call for further inquiries into the current condition of cities throughout the United States - *Robert Sproull, Environmental Design, College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture*

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## Authors Biography



Aubrey Sanders is a senior research fellow of the Auburn University B.Sc. Environmental Design program and a Master of Urban Planning Student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Aubrey has been recognized for their ongoing research and practice in urbanism



Robert Sproull is an assistant professor in Environmental Design and a registered architect. His current research and teaching investigates the overlap between critical and social infrastructure systems with a particular focus on how highways have affected cities throughout the United States.