

HOW RISING SEA LEVELS ARE GENTRIFYING MIAMI

Rich investors are buying up high ground—in historically black neighborhoods.

BY JULIENNE GAGE



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LESS THAN 100 YEARS AGO, the introduction of air conditioning made Miami one of the most desirable tourist destinations in America. Today, with a metro area population of nearly 3 million, it's an even bigger cosmopolitan hot spot, with residents of all socioeconomic backgrounds vying for land in a sea of traffic and, to some degree, rising tides.

Like most of America's urban centers, Miami is facing widespread gentrification. Plagued by limited public transportation and a desire to work and play in artsy urban districts, increasing numbers of affluent and middle-class residents have been moving inland, pushing immigrants, minorities, and the working class far into the suburbs or beyond county lines.

Climate change, according to some community activists, is exacerbating this phenomenon. In fact, it could soon make Miami a major U.S. focal point for climate justice.



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Historically, being on the teal-colored ocean or bay was a priority for the privileged, so the poor were relegated to the interior—with black people specifically being subject to redlining and segregation—removed from much of what gave Miami the nickname “Magic City.” But on average, Miami is only about six and a half feet above sea level, so as the climate warms and tides rise, some investors and renters are moving inland, searching for higher ground in historically black neighborhoods such as Overtown, Liberty City, and Little Haiti. It’s a phenomenon local activist Valencia Gunder refers to as “climate gentrification.”

Gunder, 33, grew up in Liberty City, popularized by the Oscar-winning 2016 film *Moonlight*, which speaks to the juxtaposed joys and struggles of black Miami. This northwest neighborhood was built in the 1930s to alleviate population density in downtown Miami’s Overtown, one of the only neighborhoods for people of color during segregation. It accommodated middle-class African Americans with modest single-family homes and yards. Over the years, endemic poverty and racism would take its toll, as would South Florida’s tumultuous drug wars of the 1980s and 1990s. But Gunder says Liberty City still had a lot of perks.

“My next-door neighbor was a lawyer and the other neighbor was a big-time pastor. My grandma was working two jobs, but we lived on the same street for many years, so I know what a healthy mixed community can look like,” she said, during an interview from the renovated living room of the Liberty City home she bought through a short sale with first-time homebuyer incentives.

She fears Miami-style gentrification will replace that with snobbery and indifference. Liberty City is minutes from the freeway, Miami International Airport, and the city’s downtown—and an easy 20-minute drive across Biscayne Bay to Miami Beach. These features, combined with low real estate prices, appeal to outsiders.

“It’s really strange to see rich people driving their Bentleys through Liberty City, or walking their poodles across the street from the projects,” she said.

Gunder is convinced these investments have a climate component, since Liberty City and its neighboring Little Haiti rest at 10 feet, Miami’s highest elevation. She says she first began recognizing the role of climate change in 2016, when high-end developers showed up at local city commission meetings announcing their expectation that Liberty City and neighboring Little Haiti would one day become beachfront property.

“We may be thinking about next week, but they’re thinking about the next 20 years,” she said.

‘The most grossly unequal city in America’

One such developer is Miami realtor Peter Ehrlich, a New York transplant who began investing in residential and commercial real estate in Miami in the 1990s and owns about four acres of “high”-elevation property around Little Haiti. He started on the beach, then moved inland in search of better prices.

“At the time, I didn’t think about sea level rise in the slightest, but since then I think about it immensely because it’s in the news almost every day,” he said, noting that it certainly has reaffirmed his decision to invest in Miami’s higher-elevation urban core. He says he doesn’t know any realtors who are investing in those areas with the express purpose of avoiding sea level rise, but that it would make sense for them to begin considering that.

Referring to land near the train tracks in Little Haiti, Ehrlich told *The Atlantic* during a 2016 interview, “Even though the tracks are a mile in, that may be the future waterfront.”

In January 2017, the real estate website Zillow called Little Haiti the hottest residential neighborhood in South Florida. Its home values were expected to rise 4.6 percent, compared to 1.6 percent in the rest of the region.

Realtor Phalange Brutus, a Little Haiti native, says housing prices reflect the rising tides. From the early 2000s until now, modest three-bedroom homes in that area have jumped from the low \$200,000s to nearly \$1 million following the recovery from the 2008 foreclosure crisis. During that same period, the sea level began rising faster.

Now Brutus is working with the community outreach group Catalyst Miami, which offers leadership workshops to address neighborhood resilience. “These developers have a lot of money, and with that money comes a lot of mitigation and risk assessment,” he said. “That’s why I started to realize there might be something bigger going on here.”

Activists say a map project initiated by Hugh Gladwin, professor of global and sociocultural studies at Miami’s Florida International University, helped confirm this. It shows the time periods when various parts of Miami will end up underwater, underlining just how vulnerable the region is in an era of rapid climate change.

“In most places, they build dikes, dams, or levies to keep water out, but we can’t do that here because the water is all underground,” he said. While New Orleans flooded like a bowl during Hurricane Katrina, Miami is actually a sponge-like mound of limestone with an aquifer underneath. Increased rainfall and rising tides cause saltwater to breach freshwater wells, which can lead to brackish drinking water supplies all over.

But Gladwin says climate is more a contributor than the main culprit of Miami’s long cycle of boom-and-bust real estate. Jesse M. Keenan, a Harvard professor of architecture and urban design, agrees. “It’s more infill gentrification than climate gentrification, but does that distinction really matter? Probably not. In the long term, you can probably figure that climate gentrification will be used for moving capital,” he said. “Miami is the most grossly unequal city in America.” Indeed, a 2016 Brookings Institution study pulled from 2014 Census data showed Miami’s wealthiest 5 percent make about 10.2 times more than the poorest 20 percent.

With the Everglades on one side and an ocean dotted with tiny islands on the other, South Florida’s narrow land mass can be hard to navigate. That’s especially true for the poor and working class. The further north or south they move, the longer and costlier their commute. For a time, Miami’s southern suburbs were a viable option. Many affluent residents left this region following widespread devastation from Hurricane Andrew in 1992, so for many years homes were cheap. But today those communities are feeling the squeeze from southbound Miamians, and that’s likely to continue as Florida Keys residents displaced by Hurricane Irma last year move north in search of stable, affordable housing.

Gladwin says South Florida will surely suffer if the blue collar and service industry residents start heading north to other states for better job and housing options.

“People in South Florida pay almost 50 percent of their income for housing, which is astronomical,” said Gladwin. “There’s no way to keep local businesses going if you don’t have a workforce.”

The city of Miami Beach, located on a barrier island separated from Miami and the rest of the mainland by Biscayne Bay, recently invested \$500 million in a pump system officials hope will push floodwaters back into the sea. They’re also considering designs drawn up by about 50 of Keenan’s Harvard students, who have proposed everything from building a sea wall and raising streets to growing patches of bayside mangrove and sea grass and sculpting giant rain-catching cisterns that double as artwork.

“I wouldn’t call them solutions. We think there’s a present way of thinking and then there’s the 2100 way of thinking, which is when things really go off the rails in terms of science. But there’s this 15- to 25-year period that is more difficult to plan for,” said Keenan. “When you invest in resilience intervention and mitigation, it raises the level of performance. That increases amenities, and with that comes the more desirable area or location. As a consequence, you have a reverse gentrification where the speculative investment moves in and people get priced out.”

‘Our home, our culture’

Gentrification has set off all sorts of culture wars in Little Haiti. Last year, the neighborhood won a battle to officially change its name to Little Haiti. That pleased most Haitians and some historic preservationists, but it upset others, who remember Lemon City as the black neighborhood that came before. The renaming also brought complaints from realtors who said investors of all backgrounds prefer neighborhoods with simple names and suggested that the name Little Haiti has a negative connotation.

Activists with Little Haiti’s Family Action Network Movement (FANM) say the area can be referred to by both historic names, and they feel protests are part of a larger effort to rid the area of Haitian businesses, cultural centers, and houses of worship, not to mention the residents themselves.

“Most of the business owners in Little Havana are Cuban, but now when you come to Little Haiti, big corporations are buying the places and they want to remove the Haitians,” said FANM communications and development director Rhenie Dalger. “They can’t just take all Haitians out of Little Haiti like that. This is our home, this is where our culture lies.”

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation invested millions to restore and build out a colorful old Caribbean marketplace into what is now known as the Little Haiti Cultural Complex, which houses culturally relevant boutique space, as well as a state-of-the-art auditorium, classrooms, and a mural-infused terrace for meetings, recreation, arts education, and broader community engagement with Miami’s ever-growing arts districts. But even it survives on renting event space to non-Haitian clients.

Meanwhile, in Overtown—once a major destination for jazz artists who were invited to perform but not stay in Miami Beach hotels—the sense of neighborhood is quickly being evaporated by high rises. There are efforts to restore and preserve a few Overtown buildings, most notably churches, including one that was turned into a small cultural center. But even the home of influential African-American businessman Dana Albert Dorsey (1872-1940) rots behind a chain-link fence, a shredded blue tarp on its back roof offering little protection from tropical downpours. It’s hard to miss the construction cranes climbing into the sky a few blocks from the official city sign marking this as a historic property.

This is heartbreaking to Pastor Willie Williams, who grew up in the neighborhood. In the 1990s, he was able to purchase two tiny buildings his family had rented for barber and notary services along Overtown’s main street for four decades. Then, in 2008, he sold a large suburban home he owned further north and moved his family back into the area, to serve as an example to others.

“This was my mission, to come back home and make a difference, to give people hope to fight so that they have something for their grandchildren,” he said.

He wishes other church leaders could do the same, but his current mortgage and expenses are \$8,000 a month, so he understands how hard it is for those who own property to hold onto it. Still, he encourages his parishioners to consider selling to church and community groups if they do decide to move on.

Empty high-rises

Miami native and Christian environmental justice activist Vickie Machado admits South Florida’s faith-based communities could be doing a lot more to acknowledge and address these issues. She’s a doctoral student in ecology and religion at the University of Florida in Gainesville. She also mobilizes people of faith to start dialogues around the intersectionality of the environment, poverty, and religion in places such as Flint, Mich., and native communities in the Midwest and Hawaii, but she has yet to bring a group to her hometown to study climate gentrification.

“People forget Florida’s deep environmental and social history because [the state] is so transient,” she said, but she added that despite its international makeup, racism has been endemic there since the beginning of colonization and U.S. expansion. “I think if the church or faith-

based groups can get organized, they'll start to see that the social injustice issues are happening around land and resource-based issues," she said. "It's ground zero for climate change."

Developers are also gentrifying low-lying neighborhoods such as Little Havana, Brickell, and West Grove, a historic Bahamian community that sits slightly inland from the shores of the affluent Coconut Grove neighborhood. These areas are closely connected to the amenities of downtown Miami and the county's metro and train lines.

In contrast, nearby Miami Beach is walkable, but it's an island. With a long lease, a one-bedroom with a bay view, pool, and gym in the South Beach neighborhood can cost the same as, or less than, a loft in a gentrifying mainland neighborhood. But the luxury is temporary for most. In recent years, heavy rains have caused so much flooding that parked cars float down South Beach's streets. In 2016, there were reports of a live octopus washed up in a parking garage, and even with the new pump system, flooding persists.

That's no biggie for high-season tourists who rent or own property in new developments and renovated buildings. But the flooding losses are significant to the working- and middle-class long-term residents. For years many hospitality workers—a large portion of whom are foreign-born—managed to squeeze entire families into quaint art deco structures, evading hurricane evacuation by boarding up jalousie windows to weather the storms. Now they know their beach days are numbered.

But even inland, the Miami area's generally low salaries and high housing costs are catching up, so it's hard to say how long even the upper middle class can enjoy the magic. Even though the foreclosure crisis has passed, plenty of downtown high-rises are mostly dark at sundown, as homeless people bed down on the sidewalks below.

Looking at data from the FIU and Harvard studies, it's hard to imagine too many more generations will be able to stay in any part of South Florida, even if climate analysts, engineers, politicians, and activists can pool a mass of money and talent to navigate these inevitable geographic changes—because eventually it may be all be underwater.

Back in Liberty City, Valencia Gunder says she's worried, but determined.

"I'm fighting against the system, but I'm hopeful," she said. "I am still a big believer in mitigation and adaptation, and I do believe that if we all work together to come to some solutions, that we can live with the water."



Julienne Gage

Julienne Gage is a Miami-based journalist who investigates economic development in the U.S. and Caribbean.

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CONTACT

Office
408 C St. NE
Washington DC, 20002
Phone 202-328-8842
Fax 202-328-8757
Email sojourners@sojo.net

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