Historic Old Fourth Ward Park: Histories and Contexts

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| **The Park**  **1800s.** The site of the Historic Old Fourth Ward Park starts as the Ponce de Leon Springs. It supplies water to the city of Atlanta.  **Early 1900s.** Developers build an amusement park at Ponce Springs, and later fill the lake in order to build a baseball stadium.  **1928.** Sears-Roebuck builds its southeastern retail and distribution headquarters.  **1986.** Sears-Roebuck discontinues operations on the site.  **1990.** the City of Atlanta purchases the Sears building and converts it into office space for city operations, renaming it "City Hall East." However, only about 10% of the site is actively used, costing taxpayers for a vacant property. In addition, the site’s basement frequently floods, and the area is known for having high crime rates.[[1]](#endnote-1)  **2011.** The City of Atlanta finally determines to address the chronic flooding issues in the area. The typical solution in such situations, building a large cistern underground to control stormwater runoff, would cost $40 million. But Atlanta takes a different route: it builds a park, with a retention pond that can sustain runoff from a 500 year flood for $17 million less than the cistern. The park includes event spaces, walking and bike trails, a splashpad, and a skatepark, and has spurred many businesses.[[2]](#endnote-2)  **2014.** As a direct result of the park, Jamestown Properties purchases and renovates the City Hall East site, turning it into the largest adaptive reuse project in Atlanta’s history, including 1.1 million square feet of retail, office space, and apartments now known as "Ponce City Market." |  | **The Old Fourth Ward**  The Springs are an important community space for Atlantans. Many visit the Ponce de Leon Lake to cool off during the summers.  African Americans become the majority demographic in The Old Fourth Ward during the first half of the 20th century, with many middle and upper class black neighborhoods.[[3]](#endnote-3)  The Old Fourth Ward was Martin Luther King Jr.’s boyhood home, and an important site for civil rights activism in the midcentury. Today, it includes the [Martin Luther King. Jr Historic Site](https://www.nps.gov/malu/index.htm).  Though the Ponce de Leon Lake no longer exists, water has been running in the same direction for thousands of years. As a result, there are frequent floods, bringing sewage and wastewater runoff. This hurts the majority-black community living in the Old Fourth Ward.  In 2000, the Old Fourth Ward is 80% black and 16% white.[[4]](#endnote-4)  Before the Park, this area of the Old Fourth Ward is an important living and congregation spot for some of Atlanta’s least-valued citizens, such as the homeless and prostitution communities. These communities are ousted by development, rather than included in a vision for a safer Fourth Ward.  Furthermore, with BeltLine redevelopment, rents and property values skyrocket.[[5]](#endnote-5) Citizens and homeowners receive frequent, unsolicited attempts to buy them out cheap,[[6]](#endnote-6) and promises to create affordable housing falter.[[7]](#endnote-7) As a result, many of the communities that created the Old Fourth Ward, and are the trustees of its history, can no longer afford to live there.[[8]](#endnote-8) In 2010, the black population has dropped to 55.9% and the white population has risen to 34.6%.4 In Atlanta itself, the black population has dropped from 67% in 1990 to 54% in 2016.5 |

Applying Key Concepts to the Old Fourth Ward

The Historic Old Fourth Ward Park constitutes a triumph of engineering ingenuity and economic revitalization, while simultaneously raising important questions about gentrification and population displacement in the Old Fourth Ward itself. Across the nation, many are asking similar questions about other urban renewal projects.[[9]](#endnote-9)

One way to approach these questions is to think about the key concepts described in the [Summer Session Sustainability Track Framework](http://serve-learn-sustain.gatech.edu/sites/default/files/documents/summer_session_sustainability_track_framework.pdf). These key concepts can serve as a barometer for assessing infrastructure projects like the Historic Old Fourth Ward Park.

For today’s exercise, we’ve placed a card on your table. On one side of the card you’ll find a key concept from our framework. On the other side you’ll find a set of questions:

1. Select one member of your group to take notes.
2. Working with your group, talk through the key concept, and the questions.
3. The final question on your card asks you to prepare an answer that you’ll share with the entire group. Work together to decide what your answer will be, and elect one person to share that answer with the entire group. You’ll have butcher paper and markers, so feel free to write and draw!

1. **References**

   . [Weible, David. "Ponce City Market: Atlanta's History in the Making." National Trust for Historic Preservation (2013).](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://savingplaces.org/stories/ponce-city-market-atlantas-history-making%23.WyklZadKh9M&sa=D&ust=1529426986319000&usg=AFQjCNEzUMre55ToC5FKrU_c3UgIrfT8Sw) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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4. . 2000 and 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . [Housing Justice League and Research Action Cooperative. BeltLining: Gentrification, broken promises, and hope on Atlanta’s Southside (2017).](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjoj_HjwODbAhVtp1kKHYZHBS8QFggpMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fstatic1.squarespace.com%2Fstatic%2F59da49b712abd904963589b6%2Ft%2F59dedb75f7e0ab47a08224b5%2F1507777424592%2FBeltlining%2BReport%2B-%2BHJL%2Band%2BRA%2BOct%2B9.pdf&usg=AOvVaw08YGzQ7JL8EZcRlwMb2rQ2) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . [Powers, Benjamin. "Putting the Brakes on Runaway Gentrification in Atlanta." CITYLAB, (2017).](https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/11/putting-the-brakes-on-runaway-gentrification-in-atlanta/545555/)  [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . [Mariano, Willoughby, Lindsey Conway and Anastaciah Ondieki. “How the Atlanta Beltline broke its promise on affordable housing.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (2017).](https://www.myajc.com/news/local/how-the-atlanta-beltline-broke-its-promise-affordable-housing/0VXnu1BlYC0IbA9U4u2CEM/) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Immergluck, Dan. "Large Redevelopment Initiatives, Housing Values and Gentrification: The Case of the Atlanta Beltline." *Urban Studies* 46, no. 8 (2009): 1723-745. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . See: [Checker, Melissa. "Wiped Out by the “Greenwave”: Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability." City & Society 23, no. 2 (2011): 210-29](https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1548-744X.2011.01063.x), and [Loughran, Kevin. "Parks for Profit: The High Line, Growth Machines, and the Uneven Development of Urban Public Spaces." City & Community 13, no. 1 (2014): 49-68](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cico.12050). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)