POCKET GHETTO: A GEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF BUTLER PLACE IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

A pocket ghetto is a small and isolated urban area that houses members of low-income minority groups. This term was introduced by Steven Flusty in his 1994 article, “Building Paranoia: The Proliferation of Interdictory Space and the Erosion of Spatial Justice.” The research will begin with a literature review of related geographic urbanisms, a history of the Butler Place neighborhood in Fort Worth, Texas, and a look at present day conditions in the public housing project. The study focuses on its formation as an isolated area surrounded by highways in part by the use of time series mapping, examines the use of interdictory space to define that isolation, and conducts an accessibility analysis to determine the true dimensions of its containment from the balance of the city.
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INTRODUCTION

An island on the land is a place of significant difference found among the larger homogenous framework of the landscape. Framed by three highways and built on the footprint of an early nineteenth century African American neighborhood that was ‘on the other side of the tracks,’ Butler Place from its origin to present has been an island on the land. There are complex approaches to Butler Place combined with a distinct topographical awkwardness that deter many prospective visitors away from the neighborhood. The entry and exit points are avoided by the middle and upper classes because of their complexity, physical appearance, or social perception. Physical barriers contained the neighborhood since its formation. The Trinity River provided a barrier to the east, and after 1876 railroads began to frame the neighborhood to the west and south. In the 1950s and 1960s, the construction of highway systems solidified the neighborhood’s containment, making entering and exiting the neighborhood only attainable by crossing under or above high-speed high-trafficked highways. An analysis of the history, evolution, and present day conditions of Butler Place make it clear that the neighborhood possesses characteristics of a pocket ghetto.

A pocket ghetto is a small area of low-income housing with high minority group concentration that is isolated by physical barriers. The term began to be used by geographers as they studied postmodern cities. Michael Sorkin in his book, Variations on a Theme Park, described three dominating characteristics of the postmodern city: generic globalization, theme park commercialization, and an obsession with security.  

The third characteristic, an obsession with security, is the most important in terms of this research because the function of a pocket ghetto is to contain or ‘secure’ certain people within a certain area. Such containment is achieved through the use of various interdictory spaces, a postmodern term used to describe spaces that facilitate security.

Beginning with a literature review of related geographic urbanisms and a look into the history of Butler Place, this research focuses on the evolution of Butler Place as an isolated area; analyzes the spatial structure of Butler Place; conducts an accessibility analysis for the neighborhood; and examines the use of interdictory space to define that isolation from the perspective of its role in the neighborhood geography of postmodern cities.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The term pocket ghetto originates from Steven Flusty’s 1994 article “Building Paranoia: The Proliferation of Interdictory Space and the Erosion of Spatial Justice.” Flusty defines a pocket ghetto as a public housing project or low-income area retrofitted with street barricades and other barriers. A term used to define one type of postmodern urban form, pocket ghettos fit into the larger picture of postmodernism.

Postmodernism, especially in an urban context, is attributed to the Los Angeles School. Michael Dear and Steven Flusty identify in their article, “The Iron Lotus: Los Angeles and Postmodern Urbanism,” that core to the beliefs of the Los Angeles School was the assumption that changes in the urban fabric of Los Angeles were symptomatic of socio-demographic changes throughout the United States. The end of the twentieth

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The new contemporary style ushered in new approaches to analyzing the postmodern city. Dear and Flusty reference Edward Relph’s description of postmodern urbanism as a “self-consciously selective revival of elements of older styles.” The smaller-scale combination of gentrification, heritage conservation, architecture, urban design, and participatory planning created a “new eclecticism in urban form,” which replaced the old vision of an industrial city filled with a dominating urban landscape. However, the entire city represents both modern and postmodern urbanism. Time edges, or “lines of discontinuity of the segregated metropolis where new confronts old” are the dividing lines between the postmodern eclectic areas and the spaces still dominated by an industrial landscape.

Brought upon by socioeconomic polarization, the new shift into postmodernism manifested itself in the physical form of the city. Accordingly, the city “is divided into fortified cells” of affluence and places of terror. The postmodern fortified city features destruction of public space, creation of forbidden cities sealed against the poor, streets where the homeless is deliberately contained, and crowd control through socio-spatial segregation. The driving force behind such socio-spatial segregation is the implementation of interdictory space.

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5 Ibid, 154.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 158.
A variety of exclusionary strategies comprise interdictory space, flavoring space with one or more of the following defensive characteristics: stealthy, slippery, crusty, prickly, and jittery. Stealthy space is space that cannot be seen, camouflaged, or more commonly, obscured by certain impediments. Slippery space is space that cannot be reached due to contorted or missing paths of approach. Crusty space is space that cannot be accessed due to obstructions such as walls, gates, and checkpoints. Prickly space is space that cannot be comfortably occupied. Achieving the desired amount of prickliness is in the details, and most sites can be made prickly “through the right amenities or the addition of the wrong ones.” Jittery space is under constant surveillance, and cannot be utilized unobserved.⁸

The combination of these various flavors of interdictory space becomes part of the built environment, creating distinctly “mutant typologies.” Of these typologies are block homes, luxury laagers, strong points of sale, world citadels, and pocket ghettos.

Residents of the pocket ghettos are “forcibly contained” within boundaries not determined by any real neighborhood’s social geography, but by “abstract statistical expedieney.”⁹ As a result of police-run checkpoints that permit only residents, communities are dismembered and isolated. Flusty developed the term pocket ghetto in response to the new “walled-and-policed urban containment zones” that were enforced in Los Angeles’ South-Central and Pico-Union neighborhoods, and their similarities to places like the Third Reich’s Warsaw and Lodz/Litzmannstadt ghettos.¹⁰ The typology of a pocket ghetto is not limited to police-barricades; tactically enforced isolation in any

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⁹ Ibid, 23.

¹⁰ Flusty, S (2013), private correspondence.
form can lead to the formation of a pocket ghetto. A concept similar to a pocket ghetto is that of Grady Clay’s sinks, and although almost half a century old, remains a useful notion for thinking about pocket ghettos. 11

Grady Clay introduced the term sink in his 1974 book Close-Up: How to Read the American City. 12 The concept of a sink fits into the larger picture of Clay’s perception of the city – a place where he believes there is “no true chaos, but only patterns and clues waiting to be organized.” 13 Amidst a puzzle of complex urban features, Clay attempts to recognize and communicate the patterns he observed in the city in a language that is “short and memorable” so that the city becomes easier to interpret and not “deliberately complicated” or “indescribable.” 14 One of the key urban features Clay identifies is the sink, defined as a place of “last resort into which powerful groups in society shunt, shove, dump, and pour whatever or whomever they do not like or cannot use.” 15 Characteristic of sinks is a ‘topographical awkwardness’ that makes them uninhabitable and undesirable for the middle and upper classes. Accessibility to sinks is limited because of nature or man’s contrivance. Most sinks in the United States are unseen from the majority of the population, shut off by maze-like streets and roundabout approaches, tucked and sequestered away “from the view of the vocal upper and middle classes.” 16 The isolation that characterizes pocket ghettos varies, but in many cases these areas were not always isolated; rather, an evolution within the city facilitated their isolation.

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11 Ibid.
13 Ibid, 74.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 75.
16 Ibid, 76.
A city’s social landscape is in direct response to its urban form. The morphology of a city thus has the ability to segment the social landscape, isolating people in the process. Modern urban planning featured projects that rapidly diffused across the global urban landscape. This facilitated the city to manifest itself as an intensely “uneven patchwork of utopian and dystopian spaces” that are physically proximate but institutionally estranged.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, the heterogeneous ‘worlds’ that makes cities the vibrant places they are premised upon “indifferent worlds and detached lifestyles.”\textsuperscript{18} Such a detachment from community integration raises questions for those charged with the planning and governance of cities. City planning, thus, “has ceased its historic role as the integrator of communities in favor of managing selective development and enforcing distinction.”\textsuperscript{19} One such tool used in segmenting the social landscape is a transportation system.

During the 1950s, Robert Moses implemented his highway systems, claiming that they would solve the issue of connectivity. However, while the highway systems did facilitate mass connectivity, they served another purpose – isolating certain spaces. This act was common for many urban planners around the county at the time. Society viewed particular spaces within the city as undesirable. The prospect of a highway system and the connectivity it brought to the city and between cities provided a chance for urban and transportation planners to section of undesirable locations. Thus, the connectivity the

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{19} Michael Sorkin, \textit{Variations on a Theme Park: The new American City and the End of Public Space} (Hill and Wang, New York, 1992).}
highway systems provided masked the true intent of their paths and locations - to isolate the undesirable spaces within the city.20

**HISTORY OF BUTLER PLACE**

Built on a 20-acre plot in 1939-1940, Butler Place replaced an area plagued by substandard housing with a public housing project to house 250 African American families, a library, and administrative facilities. Framed by Highway 287, Interstate Highway 30, and Interstate Highway 35 in the southeast area of downtown Fort Worth, the neighborhood’s original boundaries were comprised of Crump, Luella, Water, and East 19th streets.

The original 20-acre plot was a neighborhood with many names, including Chambers Hill and Hudson’s East. Deducing a date of origination from historical maps, it appears the neighborhood emerged in the mid to late 1800s.21 The legacy of the Civil War had dramatic effects on the population of Fort Worth. After 1865, the city rebounded by becoming a trail town, taking advantage of value of the longhorn herds that roamed South Texas by driving them north to markets in Kansas and Missouri. Fort Worth, the last stop Chisholm Trail, eventually “transformed into a bustling frontier town with a red light district” earning the reputation as “Hell’s Half Acre.” Fort Worth continued growing, and by the end of the decade, five railroads crossed the city and Fort Worth became a major shipping point for cotton, replacing its old reputation as “Hell’s Half Acre” with “Queen of the Prairies.”

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21 There is clear evidence of a neighborhood existing in the area dating back to 1886; however, older maps did not include the area, so it is possible that the neighborhood is older than 1886.
By the late 1920s, Fort Worth became a metropolis on the edge of the Great Plains with the cattle industry and burgeoning oil industry supporting the city’s economy. By the 1930s, however, the Great Depression had an effect on the city as employment began to decline and the new conditions of the Depression were apparent. These harsh realities were particularly evident in the housing conditions in the city. From 1930 to 1939, the total number of families grew from 43,000 to 53,000; however, there was only a net increase of 4,200 dwellings. Homes in “blighted areas” of the city lacked proper housing characteristics including running water, bathing facilities, and proper heating and ventilation. The buildings in these areas were not built large enough to house all of its occupants, and crime, including “juvenile delinquency, public intoxication, and non-payment of rent,” was high in this area.

The Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce petitioned the Public Works Administration to construct low-rent housing in the Chambers Hill district of Fort Worth in 1935. Located on the east side of Fort Worth, The Chambers Hill district, also known as Old Irish Town, was considered one of the most blighted areas of the city. According to a 1931 Survey Schools in Fort Worth, the area had recently transitioned from a mixed population of Whites and African Americans to a largely African American population.

A Texas Christian University Sociology Department study of the Chamber Hills area described the conditions of the neighborhood as dire, noting that: “(1) almost none
of the patrons of the area owned their homes; (2) school attendance was declining; (3) prostitution was more evident than elsewhere in the city; and (4) a greater percentage of African American families in low income groups existed in the Chambers Hill area than any other African American districts.”

The 1935 request for funds was rejected, and it was not until 1938 that the city secured funding for the construction of affordable housing in the Chambers Hill area. In the intervening time, the City of Fort Worth “conducted economic studies and compiled real estate data in the hopes of persuading the federal government to fund this and other public housing projects.” Eleanor Roosevelt visited the area during her husband’s presidency, commenting that she was “impressed with the terrible conditions in the location and seemed intensely interested in this slum clearance project.”

Both the downtown and Chambers Hill projects were funded on August 1, 1938, with the signing of a loan contract between USHA and FWHA. The contract stated that the USHA was to provide $2,231,000 to FWHA for building a 252-dwelling unit for white families (Ripley Arnold) and a 250-dwelling unit project for African American families (Butler Place). After the completion of Cedar Springs Place in Dallas, Texas, the plans for Butler Place were developed. Like Cedar Springs Place “the design of Butler Place was guided by economy and utility,” and the subsequent buildings adopted a “stripped or minimal Colonial Revival style.” Wiley G. Clarkson prepared the plans for Butler Place, with the assistance of numerous associate architects including Wyatt C. Hedrick, Hubert Crane, Joseph Pelich, Preston Green, Elmer G. Withers, and the Elmer G. Withers Architectural Company. The supervising architect was C.O. Chromaster and

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28 J. Bostick letter to the Honorable Jerome C. Martin, Councilman, City of Fort Worth (November 23, 1937), 2.
J.E. Morgan & Sons, an El Paso firm, served as the contractor. Fort Worth had never seen such a talented group brought together to “address not only a civic issue but also a socioeconomic problem.” The clearing of the site for Butler Place began on April 17, 1939, and was completed by July 24, 1939.\(^\text{29}\)

Butler Place housed a library/administration facility and enough units to accommodate 250 families. An 800 square-foot social room and an African-American branch of the public library was provided in the library/administration facility. The Star-Telegram reported on the first open house that “inspection of typical dwelling units revealed that they were planned with an eye to attractiveness, convenience, ventilation, sanitation, and economy.”\(^\text{30}\)

Engrained in the history of Butler Place is the legacy of I.M. Terrell High School. The high school was Fort Worth’s first black school during the time of racial segregation. Opened in 1882, the school was originally named East Ninth Street Colored School, but was renamed in 1921 in honor of its former principal, Isaiah Milligan Terrell. At its peak, the school served students from Fort Worth, Arlington, Burleson, Bedford, Roanoke, Benbrook, and Weatherford. Due to racial integration of schools, I.M. Terrell High School closed in 1973, but was reopened as an elementary school in 1998.

**MORPHOLOGY**

**Formation**

Pocket ghettos form by either intentional construction or containment or by the negligent evolution of urban form. In the case of Butler Place, it is the latter. The neighborhood came into existence long before the advent of the highway system. Thus,

\(^{29}\) Housing Authority of the City of Fort Worth, *Public Housing of Fort Worth, 1939-1940*, 10.

\(^{30}\) “Program, Open House Set for Negro Housing Project,” *Fort Worth Morning Telegram*, n.d., Fort Worth Public Library and Archives, Fort Worth Housing Authority, Series IV, Scrapbook.
the evolution of the transportation system in Fort Worth had a direct impact on isolating Butler Place from the city.

Before the construction of the highway system, Butler Place was a neighborhood that existed “on the other side of the tracks.” It consisted of neighborhood streets that extended from the railroad to the west to the Trinity River to the east. As time went on, this neighborhood maintained its form. In 1963 the City of Fort Worth implemented its Major Thoroughfare Plan that included constructing a new highway (US 287) that served as a connection for traffic travelling on IH30 to IH35. The construction of US 287 led to the immediate isolation of Butler Place, containing the city within its shadows and destroying many buildings and companies that were rooted in the culture of Butler Place in the process.

The formation of Butler Place as a pocket ghetto can be better seen with the use of time series mapping. Obtained from the Fort Worth Public Library’s Special Collections, the following five maps (1929, 1941, 1960, 1963, and 1964) help better explain the process.

![Figure 1: 1929 map of Fort Worth showing Hudson’s East, a neighborhood where Butler Place is located today.](image)
In 1929 Hudson’s East, which was the neighborhood where Butler Place exists today, featured a thriving African American community located on the east side of the railroad tracks, extending all the way into the southern limits of downtown as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 2: 1941 map showing Butler Place.

In 1941, the neighborhood continued to maintain its form; neighborhood streets such as Leslie and Milam extended to the Trinity River to the east and Kerrigan extended to the north, connecting the neighborhood to Fourth Street. It’s important to take note of what the Planning and Development Department labeled this neighborhood – “Colored Housing Project.”
In 1960, the residential streets of the neighborhood still existed to the northeast. It should be noted here that Kerrigan Street that once connected the neighborhood to Fourth Street is no longer in existence for reasons unknown.

Figure 4: 1963 map showing Fort Worth’s Major Thoroughfare Plan.

In 1963, the Planning and Development Department introduced its Major Thoroughfare Plane, which included a highway connection between IH30 and IH35.

Figure 5: 1964 map showing Butler Place and its containment by the three highways.

In 1964, the effects of the new highway connection are evident. Residential streets that once existed to the northeast of the neighborhood no longer exist. The new
connection further isolated Butler Place from the city. Although Butler Place always featured some sort of isolation due to the railroad bordering the neighborhood to the west, the area fell victim to complete containment when the US 287 connection was built.

**Structure**

The structure of Butler Place features key characteristics of both a sink and a pocket ghetto. The neighborhood displays a “topographical awkwardness” that is characteristic of sinks. Entering Butler Place is attained only through traversing complex routes comprised of maze-like streets and roundabout approaches. These complex routes consist of what I call *roads of hassle*[^1], or roads that people tend to avoid for one reason or another. Such reasons could be because of, among others, a negative perception, perceived danger, or poor lighting. These roads of hassle contribute to the overall complexity of the network approaching Butler Place. Grady Clay mentions that the purpose of perplexing routes entering sinks is to hide the neighborhood from “the view of the vocal upper and middle classes.” Certainly Butler Place’s location suppressed under the shadows of three major highways executes this perfectly. Such perplexing entry points discourages both visitors and inhabitants as it a hassle to venture into and out of the neighborhood.

The complexity of its access makes Butler Place an area of prime interdictory space. “Contorted paths” that make areas unreachable, or in this case difficult to reach, are characteristic of slippery space. There is only one entry point that is relatively straight, and that is I.M. Terrell Way. However, upon entering the neighborhood

[^1]: The term *road of hassle* is one of my own, and I developed the term with keeping my personal experiences in mind. It is common for commuters to prefer routes of least cost when traveling from one point to another. Thus, a perceived complex route deters the commuter because complexity almost inherently means higher cost. It is a *hassle* to drive a more complex route.
through I.M. Terrell Way, the path becomes immediately obscured by winding paths and grade changes. The other entry points twist and turn and traverse railroads and roads of hassle. Like crossing an icy road in normal shoes, the commuter is able to get to Butler Place, but certainly will slip on their way.

The highways surrounding the neighborhood act as impediments to access that make Butler Place stealthy space because of both their physical structure and their purpose. Physically, these highways are elevated as high as three hundred feet in some places, which obscures the view of Butler Place. Additionally, the functionality of a limited-access highway system is to provide a channel of high-speed traffic across vast distances. With speed limits of fifty-five and sixty miles per hour, commuters drive past Butler Place without even realizing the neighborhood exists because of their high-speed and focus on their destination.

The distinct containment of Butler Place by the three highways – Interstate Highway 30, Interstate Highway 35, and U.S. Highway 287 – is the most noticeable characteristic of the neighborhood. Functioning as walls, these highways act as a barrier separating Butler Place from the rest of the city. Although the true definition of crusty space is space that cannot be accessed, I divide crusty space into two different categories – literal crusty space and perceived crusty space. Literal crusty space is space that is literally inaccessible because of certain limitations. Take, for example, Area 51. A U.S. Air Force installation, Area 51 is only accessible to people selected by the U.S. military and who have high-security clearances. For a large majority of the population, Area 51 is literally inaccessible and represents literal crusty space because its borders are meant to and succeed keeping people out. Conversely, Butler Place falls into the category of
perceived crusty space. The physically imposing highway structures surrounding the neighborhood are perceived to inhibit accessibility to the area. People passing by the neighborhood view the highways as barriers keeping them out. Thus, Butler Place represents prime crusty space, albeit in its perceived form.

**Accessibility Comparison**

Analyzing the accessibility of Butler Place can help better understand how it functions as a pocket ghetto. I’ve approached analyzing the ease of accessibility to Butler Place with a simple assessment of how many entrance and exit points exist. To put the extent of Butler Place’s accessibility, I’ve also provided a comparison analysis to Como, another low-income high minority neighborhood in south Fort Worth.

There are six entrance and exit points into the neighborhood by vehicle. Those include (1) I.M. Terrell Way to the south, (2) Luella Street and (3) Stephenson Street to the west, (4) Morgan Street and (5) a freeway frontage road to the northeast, and (6) a freeway entrance ramp to the north. To the people who live in Butler Place, these access points are well known. However, to people who don’t frequent the area, these access points are elusive. Of course the same can be said for anyone visiting somewhere they do not know, but it is more so for Butler Place. This is because the access points to Butler Place are classified as *roads of hassle*.

Compared to other low-income and high minority neighborhoods, Butler Place is less accessible. Como exists on the south side of IH30 in the western part of Fort Worth. This neighborhood is home to a high minority population at 85 percent and is mostly low-income, with a median household income of $28,000. Como has 19 points of entry and exit into the neighborhood. Moreover, Como’s entry and exit points feed into three
minor arterial routes (Bryant Irvin Road, Horne Street, and Vickery Boulevard), allowing for fluid movement from neighborhood streets to minor arterial routes, and ultimately major arterial routes.

**Figure 6:** Comparative maps showing the difference in accessibility between Butler Place and Como.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is clear that Butler Place has always been an area that was contained and isolated. Even before the arrival of the railroad, the downstream neighborhood was isolated by the river meander to the east. The neighborhood’s location to the southeast of downtown proved to be an obvious location for the African Americans minority and as time went on it developed into an area that was literally on the other side of the tracks. The construction of the highways that frame Butler Place completed its isolation, making it a true pocket ghetto in the process.

The three highways that surround Butler Place were constructed after the neighborhood developed and are the key contributors in its containment. During the 1960s, highway development was taking place throughout the country. Locating a
highway system that travels through rural areas does not pose many problems; however, building a highway in a highly urban area can come with much resistance. I would presume that Interstate Highway 30 and Interstate Highway 35 did not cause much uproar due to the fact that they simply followed the old railroad paths. The construction of U.S. Highway 287 certainly caused uproar from the residents of Butler Place, then Chambers Hill, but due to the vast majority of the neighborhood being African American there was little worry about such uproar. It is a common practice in transportation planning to build infrastructure along paths of least resistance. The paths of the three highways surrounding Butler Place not only offer a relatively low physical resistance, but also a relatively low social and community resistance as the opinions of an African American community in the 1950s did not matter to the city’s planning department.

The idea of Butler Place being interdictory space to the people of the city and the city being interdictory space to Butler Place represents a sort of dualism that the pocket ghetto creates when examining Fort Worth through a postmodern lens. This dualism can be thought of as a kind of mirror image where both the city and Butler Place represent interdictory space simultaneously. However, the mirror image is not perfect. When looking at accessibility to both the city and the neighborhood, particular social and spatial conditions distort the mirror image. That is to say while the city and neighborhood may exist as interdictory space simultaneously, many people of the neighborhood want to venture into the city, but few people from the city want to venture into the neighborhood. Thus, the concept of symmetry plays an important part in thinking about neighborhoods that share characteristics with pocket ghettos. A pocket ghetto represents relatively symmetric interdictory space. It can be difficult to access due to complex approaches and
barricades and just as difficult to get out of due to those very complex approaches and barricades. Butler Place is relatively symmetric because far more residents want access to the surrounding city than residents of the city want access to the neighborhood. Thus, the neighborhood and the city do mirror one another in interdiction, but the mirror image is that of a distorting funhouse mirror where the distortion differs depending on which side of the mirror you’re standing on. For the residents of Butler Place, the image is very clear; for the residents of the city, it is as if the image is not even there.

Currently, there is an application pending that would make Butler Place a National Historic Site. The prospect of this admission would benefit the neighborhood greatly, as it would entail certain protections and benefits that would aid in the maintenance of the neighborhood. I do not see Butler Place evolving into middle-class neighborhood with large-scale upgrades. Gentrification is unlikely due to its unsuitable location, but noticeable revitalization is certainly possible, especially if the neighborhood achieves the recognition as a National Historic Site.

The more things change the more they stay the same. From first settlement to today, Butler Place was isolated. In all likelihood, the future of the neighborhood will be well rooted in its past isolation. Butler Place, the pocket-ghetto, will remain an island on the land.
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