

**OUTSIDE THE KING CENTER:** Andy Ambrose, a Park Service research historian, chats with a tourist visiting the facility.

**Auburn** FROM 1A

"I'm not allowed to take you in... On an average day, 1,000 tourists visit the street that some believe is the single most important stretch of real estate in black American culture."

But squabbles continue between the National Park Service and the separate Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in the neighborhood designated a national historic district in 1980.

The Park Service and the King Center cannot agree on how to manage the area, to the point that park rangers are forbidden to go onto the King Center's private property.

That is only one of the misunderstandings that have grown as common on Auburn Avenue as the shattered windows, overgrown lots and ragged handbills that mark the site of a street once heralded as "Sweet Auburn."

Now, the street is at a point of revival. But the diversity on Auburn Avenue has spilled over into the future. Plans range from turning the neighborhood into a roped-off museum to restoring its claim as the home of the most successful black businesses in the world.

In its heyday, Auburn Avenue boasted a flashy nightlife and regular visits from blues immortals such as Bessie Smith and Ray Charles. By day, black families filled the Royal Theatre — where they weren't restricted to the back or the balcony — and crowded around the soda fountain of Kates & Milton Drugs.

But Sweet Auburn turned sour when King won the fight against Jim Crow segregation. Suddenly, blacks were welcome on Peachtree Street but not on Auburn Avenue. The dazzling marquee came down.

Now, 15 years after King's death, the district is being redeveloped. One black developer plans a 330-room hotel, two nightclubs and a three-tier mall on the corner of Auburn and Courtland Street. Another investor is gearing up to revive the 76-year-old Fellows Building.

City Councilman Robb Pitts foresees a marketplace similar to Boston or Seattle's by getting city commitments for Auburn at the same time as the new developments in downtown's Underground Atlanta.

One businessman wants to see the sidewalks embellished, Hollywood-style, with stars honoring civil rights figures.

National Park Service plans range from leaving the area as is, to creating a closed walking tourist plaza a Williamsburg, Va.

Meanwhile, Coretta Scott King said she has a dream to make her husband's old neighborhood "a model of a beloved community that could be replicated around the world, where we work as neighbors."

**Sweet Auburn's people**

Amid all the dreams are the people of Auburn Avenue, and they know all about dreams that never come true.

In past years, they heard the blueskying in city studies about canals in the streets to create a mini-Egypt or an Italian people-mover system like that in Disney's World. And, an artist's rendering of a 1975 Great Park plan shows trees and fields all around the King Center, making homeowner Art Cato shout, "See that clump of bushes, that's where I live."

Cato's alarm is typical of residents, who are forming coalitions to protect themselves against feared displacement by the Park Service, the King Center, and both black and white investors.

Now, eight special-interest groups are pulling Auburn's eight blocks in eight directions. Small-business owners Business is hurting, and dying. They want things changed. But many want to keep it in black hands.

Black investors They refuse to take risks on an area they consider economically dead. Those who might take a chance say it can't be done without white help.

White investors Some are waiting to invest because they can't go into the area without criticism from black investors that lead the same

havent waited, and are capitalizing on homes and businesses once owned solely by blacks.

■ The King Center As Mrs. King stroves for a beloved community, residents complain that most of the land and much of the money from government grants go to the center. They argue that the center is ignoring the poor. Mrs. King responds, "We're not about setting up soup lines."

■ The National Park Service It was designated by Congress in 1980 as caretaker of the area, and it has the power to buy any piece of property it needs or veto any home improvements. The King Center fears government control of its land — so much so that it has refused to allow the Park Service guides to bring tours onto its property. And residents fear displacement.

■ The residents Many of them fear being forced to move because of the "park" designation placed on the area. Some renters are being evicted or having rents raised. Homeowners feel chased out as their neighborhood becomes a tourist attraction.

■ Absentee homeowners They fear a dying neighborhood. Many hope to sell their homes to the highest bidder, either the King Center, the Park Service or some private investor.

■ Hosea Williams A state legislator who neither represents nor resides in the area, he has singlehandedly stirred up Auburn by threatening to "picket, boycott and march on" City Hall. He leads a heterogeneous mix of all groups in the long run, he hopes to build his own museum to King in the neighborhood.

"The dream has turned into a nightmare," proclaimed Williams, King's longtime colleague, referring to King's "I have a dream" speech on civil rights. "The epitaph of the dream is 'The people closest to it, killed it.'"

Referring to the neighbors of the historic district facing a realignment, Williams said, "These people are true."

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"It is worth paying for: it is worth losing a job for I would rather be a free prisoner than a slave. I would rather die in abject poverty with my convictions than live in inordinate riches with the lack of self-respect."

...  
Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Freedom Speech," quoted on post cards sold at the King Center.

...  
Drug deals, prostitution and petty theft are common on Auburn Avenue after dark. Yet, small-business men worry that if the ladies with the painted lips and the men with the first-thick billboards are chased away, their businesses will surely die.

...  
The police come in to run out people from the place," said Miss Iona Patrick of Iona's Lounge, a 16-year landmark on the strip. "Every night the prostitutes might come in to buy drinks. Police keep running them out, the prostitutes spend money. They aren't bothering anyone in here."

...  
Business is down almost 100 percent, Miss Patrick complained. Two years ago, her tavern never closed. Many small-business owners along Auburn Avenue have remained because they cannot afford to leave. Most successful businessmen have left. They all want to see Sweet Auburn resurrected.

...  
A new day is coming for Sweet Auburn," said 91-year-old businessman John Calhoun. "And I'm going to live to see that bright day."

**Barbecue sauce and beer**

Now, a day on the avenue begins with barbecue sauce steaming in caldrons at the Auburn Rib Shack, just past the freeway bridge. A few doors down, Bennie Smith counts bottles of beer at the Ebony Lounge.

...  
During the day, merchants see busloads of tourists roll past them to the King Center. They want tourists to be dropped off a few blocks west, in the middle of their business district. Then, visitors could help businesses struggling to make it on Auburn Avenue.

...  
They could stop in places such as the Auburn Rib Shack and buy a small ribs sandwich for \$3.50 from owner Doris Clements. She wants her parents' decades-old business to survive right where it is.

...  
"Whatever happens to this area I



**CITYSCAPE:** A woman enters a bar at Bell and Auburn.



**MOVING OUT:** Sally Glanton, 81, at the door of house she rents, which King Center is taking over.

want to be a part of it," said Ms. Clements.

...  
The tourists could walk past the Ebony Lounge and see Bennie Smith. He has leas to fix in the roof of the 1904 saloon, adorned with a Budweiser sign above the register and pickled egg jars on the bar.

...  
"Where are the men who made it big on Auburn? Why aren't they helping?" he said.

...  
Some successful black-owned businesses survive on the street — a week, 11 hours a day.

...  
The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others" — Martin Luther King Jr., on a post card from the King Center.

...  
"I'm not rich, and I'd really rather not move, especially not into one of them old-age high-rises. I'd hate that," said Sally Glanton, 81, in her 10-room house mostly closed off with sun-faded bedsteads.

...  
She's being moved out of her rented home at 497 Auburn Ave. by the King Center. The center, which wants to convert the house to office space, is finding her a new place.

...  
"The Lord sent me to this place. He'll help me pick another," Mrs. Glanton said, admitting the house is too big for her and her adopted adult son. "If they need to move me out, I'll go."

...  
Mrs. Glanton has lived next door to King's restored birth home for 23 years. Mrs. King said she does not consider moving out renters the same as displacing homeowners. About 65 percent of the residents on Auburn Avenue are renters — and the King Center, the Park Service or ruthless investors could soon be the landlord.

**Houseing a touchy issue**

The housing issue is touchy amidst the Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of

the Southern Christian Leadership Conference founded by King, because "we are doing it in the name of a leader who fought for such people, and we might be displacing his neighbors."

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The Park Service insists it will "try to minimize" displacement; its goal is to buy all the houses belonging to absentee owners — about two out of five houses in the neighborhood — then restore them. Renters in those homes would be allowed to stay, paying about the same monthly rates.

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Residents have another fear — displacement by private investors attracted by tourist dollars and tax breaks.

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One renter, Carl Moody, 30, said he also feels "pressure that we might have to move. Things changed. I'm not prejudiced, but white people take pictures of us out here on the porch, and we feel like we're in a zoo."

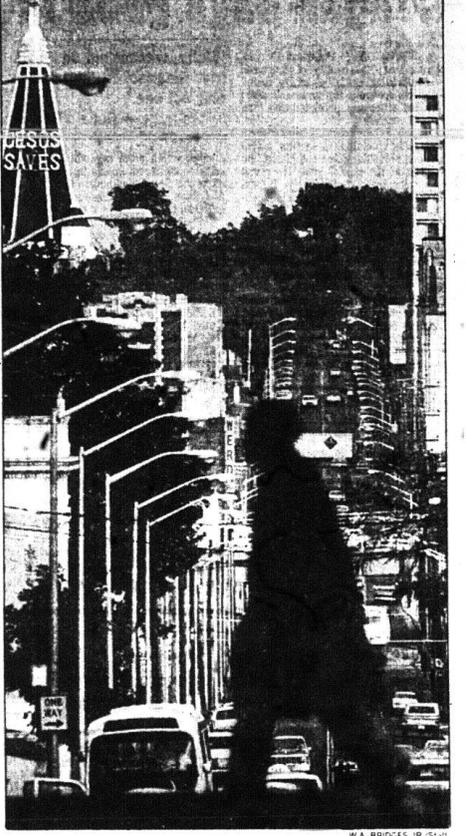
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The owner of that house, John Bunch, is one of four absentee landlords negotiating to sell to the Park Service, who set up offices next door.

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Buck, 56, who as a teenager once spent a summer on a tobacco ranch with "ML" King, said he cannot understand why present renters complain because they will be relocated to nice, warmer houses.

...  
Homeowner Florence McKingley, who rallied about 30 residents to form Concerned Citizens of the 4th Ward, responded sharply. "Even if our homes are cool and dark, at least they're ours to fix as we will in our own neighborhood."

...  
Across the street from Ms. McKingley's home at 515 Auburn Ave., the Park Service set up temporary headquarters. Renovating the Queen Anne-style house, which was a burned-out shell when donated to them, cost \$100,000.

...  
"How could we rebuild our homes



**HEART OF THE BUSINESS DISTRICT:** A view from Ivy and Auburn.

like they did? We can't walk in a bank and get a loan, we're poor," said Ms. McKinley.

...  
She also protests that residents are not represented on a 13-member Auburn area governing body set up by Congress. It is made up of King Center officials, city and state designers and two community representatives. None of them live here.

...  
"You have to have people who have some know-how on these boards," Mrs. King said. "You've got to have people who have a good reputation and have the means to generate money."

**Single largest landholder**

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More than \$5.5 million in federal dollars has poured into the area in the past seven years. About 70 percent went to King Center projects. The King Center also has gotten one-fourth of city-administered housing grants to the area since 1976. It is the single largest landholder.

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Before the King Center moved next to the church four years ago this month, most of the land for the \$13 million Freedom Hall was barren, leveled by urban renewal. The center urged the city to build a community center and swimming pool across the street.

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From her glass-enclosed office at the King Center, Mrs. King sees burned-out businesses and vacant lots along Edgewood Avenue.

...  
"You can see the poor on Edgewood," she said. "Some buildings ought to be torn down. We want to cause the revitalization of the whole community."

...  
Although much of the center's private money goes to the day-care center, reading classes, financial counseling and other social programs, "social work is not our major focus. We are supposed to teach the legacy and philosophy of my husband," said Mrs. King.

...  
"I did try to feed the hungry... I did try in my life to give those who were taking care of me, my own love and serve humanity." — Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech, Feb. 4, 1968, shown in a King Center film.

...  
The "relatively simple" problem of park ranger tours on the nearby private property should be ironed out within weeks, Park Service Director Janet Wolfe said.

...  
But major troubles remain etched in the faces of Sweet Auburn residents who have a front-row view of Auburn Avenue's ups and downs from their porches.

...  
Lifetime resident Alma Carter Gibson, 78, rocked in the cool breeze one recent afternoon and reminisced. "I recall ML running in the street as a child," she said. "We saw he would amount to something. People here put trust in him. We believed."

...  
"He told us government would fix our homes. We believed. He'd have done it but he died. His nasty said they'd continue his work," she said. "We believed. We're waiting."

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