

# A Season of Urban Vignettes » Gentrification-By-Subdivision in Transnationalized South Phoenix, Arizona, USA

## *A Tsunami Of Homes*

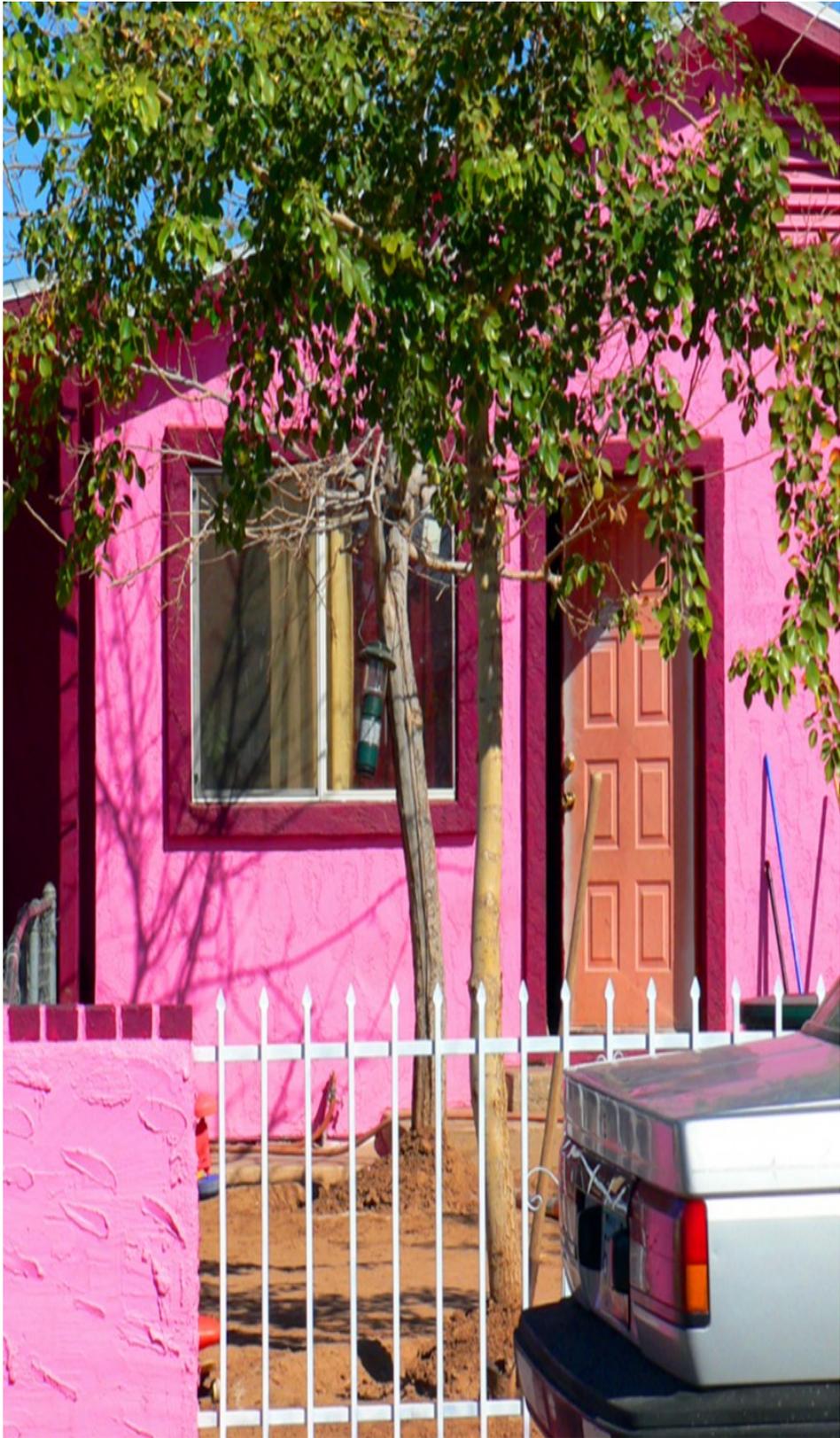
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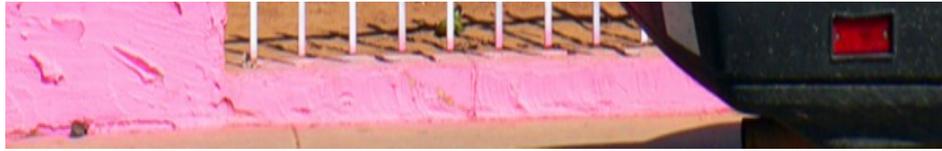
*By Kristin Koptiuch*



Since 2001 as part of a larger project investigating “urban vertigo” in Phoenix, Arizona, I have photographed the rollercoaster ride from disinvestment to reinvestment and back in a part of my city known as South Phoenix. Just a stone’s throw from Phoenix’ CBD, this was long the historically redlined, even demonized part of the metro area. Segregationist housing policies had marooned black and Latino families in this urban landscape beset by industrial dumping and toxic racism, poor schools and minimal services.







Interspersed with cotton fields and citrus orchards, older historic *barrios* bore the distinctively colorful imprint of a Mexican aesthetic and a kind of Latinoized mid-20th Century modernism prevailed in an area that now would merit designation as a food desert. Longstanding neighborhoods proliferated African American culture too, through churches, mosques and businesses. Under-resourced communities relied upon small, independent corner stores and informal enterprises that catered to vernacular tastes. The area's substandard housing stock thwarted the house-lust of the prototypical gentrifier, as did its distinctive ethnic and immigrant spatial-cultural aesthetic. In any case the centrifugal force of urban sprawl had leapfrogged to bump outward the desert city's edges, ignoring South Phoenix as a minoritized, inner city zone of abandonment.



But as sprawl challenged the commuter's threshold for edge-city living, boomtown ingenuity by the city's Real Estate Industrial Complex seized upon nearby South Phoenix to deliver gentrification-by-subdivision. Instead of displacing existing ethnic communities, developers unleashed a veritable tsunami of new homes built on farmland adjacent to older neighborhoods. AVAILABLE signs sprouted in abandoned fields. Farmers awaited land sale to boomtown developers primed to make a killing on the next nostalgic "Citrus Groves" residential subdivision. Bargain prices enticed intrepid settlers into the emergent urban frontier along the South Mountain foothills.



A flood of purportedly well-heeled US white Anglos moved into new gated residential subdivisions, mostly unaware that the too-good-to-pass-up deal they'd landed was part of wholesale public-private efforts to discipline, colonize, and profit from an area long disdained in the city's dominant urban imaginary. No tropicaesque fuchsia houses are permitted in these new subdivisions (built, ironically, by don't-ask-don't-tell undocumented low-waged Mexican immigrant construction workers). One finds only bland uniformity in tasteful tans regulated by the private governance of homeowner associations, and sturdy gates to secure this (implicitly white) middle class aesthetic for

the now bucolically re-christened, South Mountain Village.



A furtive but decisive border came to divide South Phoenix, entrenching the social inequalities that increasingly reverberate across this and other US cities. Complex right-to-the-city struggles ensued between “old” South Phoenicians and the new South Mountain Village people. Before these struggles could be worked out, the 2008 recession burst the housing bubble and an inundation of mortgage foreclosures brought plummeting home values and devastated residential integrity to South Phoenix’s bubble-era subdivisions. Investors picked up homes for pennies on the dollar. Will this displacement render the new developments as desolate as the abandoned citrus orchards that during the boom years had sprouted those AVAILABLE signs? Can re-devastated South Phoenix be reclaimed without resorting anew to racial minoritization? Will it become another of Arizona’s newly minted ghost towns? The verdict remains out.

*More photos are available in Flickr.*

*This Urban Vignettes season 3 contribution was written by Kristin Koptiuch. Kristin is an urban ethnographer researching urban culture and social space in Phoenix, where she has lived for over 20 years now.*