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## Narratives of Tradition and Transcendence: A Nuanced Examination of the Magnolia Phenomenon

Libby Carroll

Baylor University—[Libby\\_Carroll1@baylor.edu](mailto:Libby_Carroll1@baylor.edu)

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### ABSTRACT

Two instantly recognizable structures grace the skyline of Waco, Texas. Rounded, looming, and rusted, the Silos form a geographical indicator of the presence of Chip and Joanna Gaines' home-centric empire — Magnolia. A brief drive through Waco soon reveals that Magnolia and its distinctive subculture are unlike any other entity within the city. Magnolia is not Waco, yet it defines Waco. Within this project, I seek to better understand the unique subculture of Magnolia juxtaposed against the drastically different environment of Waco. To fully understand the inner workings of this subculture, I compile details from frequent visits to Magnolia occurring over a period of three months, noting everything from the layout of the grounds to the products sold to the people who enter Magnolia's gates and their tendencies in a field notebook. My studies help me to assemble a comprehensive picture of Magnolia's unique subculture and its effects, both positive and negative, upon the city it inhabits. In doing so, I hope to contribute to scholarly understandings of the inequitable outcomes resulting from gentrification within Waco, addressing the lack of knowledge within existing literature about Magnolia's role in this process.

**Keywords:** gentrification; urban development; Magnolia; Waco

Between the market and the Silos lies a massive square of green AstroTurf, dotted with plush beanbags and reverent guests. These guests mostly consist of white women ranging from their late twenties into their sixties. Many of these women are accompanied by their families, leading their husbands who dutifully trail behind holding shopping bags and young children alike. Some women, instead, come in pairs or bring only their significant other. Many others travel in multi-generational family units, and still more explore the property in all-female groups. Seldom few come alone.

There seems to be an informal dress code among the women; an array of loose dresses, bright colors, soft pastels, and delicate florals catch my eye. Men are dressed more casually, but children wear their Sunday best. Each woman has carefully curled or straightened hair that they fuss or primp before taking photos. Selfies and group shots, individual portraits, in front of the Silos or on the green, with their iced tea jars and their brown Magnolia bags, or some combination thereof. Four middle-aged white women break this unspoken dress code donning matching, custom-made, bright purple, heathered t-shirts which read, "GIRLS TRIP: Cheaper Than Therapy." Becoming aware of my gaze, the women glance uncomfortably at me before retreating to a nearby food truck.

Just around the corner lies the second half of Magnolia, marked by the shopping village comprised of small, uniform, white shops constructed around a slightly smaller manicured green, between the Old Church and the storefronts of Magnolia Home and Magnolia Press. Security guards dressed in black roam the perimeter of the green and the fence. Though, against whom or what they guard, I cannot tell. This area, too, is bustling with activity and tourists, however, their demographic is markedly different from those I observed at Magnolia Market. These guests are almost all senior citizens, white adults aged 65 and older, who stroll from shop to shop, peeking in windows and milling around stores, and rest on benches dotted around the central green as they recount their purchases, engage in lighthearted discussions, and take group photos. The senior citizens all wear brightly colored lanyards holding large, laminated nametags, suggestive of some sort of group

Purple flowers dance up and down on their trailing vines, whipped back and forth by tempestuous winds. An overcast sky, heavy air, and the indecisive wind accompany me on a moody first day of study at Magnolia. As I stroll past the stately wrought iron fence that separates Magnolia property from the rest of the city block, ducking to avoid the dancing vines, the familiar melody of Ella Fitzgerald's "Cheek to Cheek" greets me. Growing louder as I turn the corner, past window boxes of tidy flowers, the song follows me as I enter through the gates, prepared to begin my ethnographic study on the people and customs that await inside.

The physical layout of Magnolia may be visualized best when divided into two halves sprawling across a rectangular property spanning two city blocks. The first half of Magnolia begins with the petite white bakery tucked away in a corner of the property, just outside of the fence. Passing by the bakery and into the gate, one encounters the massive white structure of Magnolia Market, styled after the rustic grain barn from which it was partially constructed. Across from the market looms the (now iconic) Silos, two rotund, rusty white buildings that fade into Waco's picturesque skyline. At their feet are plots of ornamental gardens. The manicured landscape of Magnolia stands in sharp relief to the neighboring city blocks which boast an old Baptist church, a school football field, and a Salvation Army shelter. On the day of my first visit, a homeless woman rests on a curb just outside Magnolia's wrought iron fence. Terribly thin, she sits on a street corner opposite Magnolia with her head in her hands. A police car drives past her cautiously. The sobering scene forms a strange contrast to my experience inside.

association. Curious, I approach a group of three older women who have situated themselves on a bench for a break. The women are eager to answer my questions, informing me that they hail from Illinois and Missouri and have been traveling on an eventful bus tour for the past few days. Realizing the extent of their dedication, I ask one woman whether Magnolia lived up to her expectations. “Oh, it’s everything I could have hoped for,” she gushes in reply. Later in our conversation, the same woman wonders aloud how Waco residents feel about the relatively new presence of Magnolia and the subsequent flow of tourists into their city. Her tone reflects a self-awareness, an understanding that Waco residents may not hold Magnolia quite so dearly as she does. I reply with similar curiosity, assuring my new friend that the search for an answer to this same question is the reason I am here. Magnolia—the celebrated home décor empire that rebranded Waco, Texas into a tourist destination—is drastically unlike the rest of Waco, both visually and otherwise. Even so, it has transformed the city and brought a unique, insulated subculture to downtown Waco.

To ground my research, I will briefly describe the manner in which Magnolia and the ‘Gaines phenomenon’ (Trapasso 2020) more broadly came into being. The story begins when Joanna Stevens and Chip Gaines met in 2001, soon after they had both graduated from Baylor University in Waco, Texas. The couple married in 2003, and Joanna stepped into the role of the designer within Chip’s business of renovating (or ‘flipping’) houses in the Waco area. Around the same time, the couple took out a loan to open a store they named Magnolia Market, fulfilling Joanna’s dream of running a home goods business. After the couple had successfully been renovating Central Texas houses for a decade, they were noticed by the HGTV Network which produced a show starring the couple. The pilot for their show, dubbed ‘Fixer Upper,’ eventually garnered over one million views. The concept struck a chord with viewers who tuned in with increasing numbers to view feel-good stories of families finding and creating their forever homes in a newly revitalized city with small-town charm. Growing to become wildly popular, ‘Fixer Upper’ put the Gaines, Magnolia Market, and Waco on the

map. The influx of money from the show allowed the Gaines to pursue other passion projects, such as purchasing two city blocks in the heart of downtown Waco, the home of two large, abandoned silos. This would become the site of many new ventures, including Magnolia Market at the Silos, Magnolia Press, Magnolia Home, Silos Baking Co., The Shops at the Silos, and more. During this period, the Gaines expanded Magnolia Reality (founded in 2007) and opened a restaurant, Magnolia Table, across the highway.

After the opening of Magnolia Market at the Silos in 2015, tourists began to flood into Waco, visiting the Silos at a rate of 35,000 a week (Brodesser-Akner 2016). Though ‘Fixer Upper’ stopped airing on HGTV after five seasons, as the Gaines elected to start their own television network, Waco’s newfound popularity remains undiminished. The influx of tourism has transformed the downtown area of Waco, as new businesses have sprung up seemingly overnight, and formerly worn-down streets have become picturesque and appealing. Waco—once infamous for the federal government’s raid of the Branch Davidian compound, the lynching of Jesse Washington, a devastating tornado, and the Twin Peaks biker-gang shootout—has gained the reputation as an ideal place to raise a family. Beyond its houses, Waco’s name has been restored. The story of ‘Fixer Upper,’ for many, is a story of redemption. But for longtime residents of Waco, upon whom the Gaines phenomenon’ has had varying, often harmful effects, the story of Magnolia is not representative of their experience. In Waco, there exists a growing divide between those who benefit from Magnolia and those who have experienced great loss as a result of Magnolia’s success. These contrasting stories provide two distinct pictures of Magnolia’s relationship with Waco, separated, as it were, by a wrought iron fence.

## Methodology

I conducted my ethnographic study over three months from September–November 2021 for my Professional Writing and Rhetoric 4309 Undergraduate Research and Publication class at Baylor University. For this class, I was instructed to choose a unique subculture as the

subject of a multi-month research and writing project. I chose Magnolia as my subject as I live as a student in Waco and am intrigued by the dissonant messages I encounter about Magnolia's effect on the city at large. To begin my study, I visited Magnolia Market at the Silos three different times, each for a period of a few hours, to sit and record my observations in a field notebook. During this period, lasting a few weeks, I also searched for relevant scholarship to inform my understanding of Magnolia's varying effects on Waco. My scholarly research, paired with my observations, led me to seek interviews with three people: a former Magnolia employee, who I will refer to by the pseudonym 'Megan,' a local couple with expertise in Waco's real estate market, Brian and Ashley Bundy (who I contacted through a distant family connection), and Anthony Betters Sr., a local Wacoan, 2022 Board President of the Dr. Pepper Museum, and City of Waco representative. These interviews were conducted in person and recorded after each participant signed a consent form detailing their knowledge of my project, their consent to use their words in my final report, and their right to request to read my report before it was submitted. I conducted my interview with the former Magnolia employee in September 2021, my interview with the Bundys in October 2021, and my interview with Anthony Betters in May 2022. After I finalized the bulk of my research and my interviews, I returned to Magnolia once more in October 2021 to gather notes on Magnolia's annual 'Silobration' event before writing my final report.

## **Gentrification, Space, and Place: A Review of the Literature**

To reach a better understanding of the phenomenon at work in my college town, I sought to undergird my firsthand research at Magnolia with scholarly literature about urban growth in Waco and beyond. One source, a Waco realtor, sheds light on how Waco has changed since the Gaines were first televised. Examining local trends in home pricing, migration, and property taxes, Clare Trapasso analyzes what has happened in Waco real estate as a result of what she terms the 'Gaines phenomenon,' 'Chip and Joanna effect,' and 'Fixer Upper effect' (Trapasso 2020). As she

observes,

The city has changed in good ways — and in bad for locals...Certainly, not everyone in Waco is a fan of their hometown's newfound fame. The Gaines phenomenon has led to swarms of tourists descending on the city. And out-of-towners with seemingly unlimited budgets are driving up real estate prices to new heights, leading to higher property taxes for longtime Waco dwellers (Trapasso 2020).

Higher property taxes are only one manifestation of the change resulting from the descent of tourists and out-of-town residents into a newly crowded Waco. Another tangible change is evident in the cost of local homes, whose average prices "shot up nearly 52.1% from 2015 through 2019 in McLennan County, which includes Waco... That's a tough pill for many longtime residents to swallow, particularly if they're making area wages" (Trapasso 2020). This shocking change in home prices is two-fold: on one hand, the drastic increase in home prices has made it much more difficult for local Wacoans to purchase a home that fits their needs. On the other hand, homeowners in Waco now live in and sell homes that have grown in value. It is a change reflective of new wealth flowing within the city that helps some and hurts others, furthering an already existing inequity.

Vast inequalities have been present in Waco for decades, a result of practices traceable to the Jim Crow era. For instance, as early as the 1930s, the Federal Housing Administration utilized practices of scoring neighborhoods on a color scale to help government agencies and banks decide whether they would issue housing loans or mortgages to applicants from various neighborhoods. The criterion for a good or bad score was almost entirely based on race. Consistently, neighborhoods with African-American residents were assigned low scores and marked in red. As a result, applicants from these communities were denied housing loans from government agencies and private banks alike. The practice of redlining was prevalent in Waco and continues to be relevant today. The income disparity between neighborhoods with majority white residents and neighborhoods



with majority non-white residents in Waco speaks to the modern inheritance of historical inequality. According to a 2021 report from Prosper Waco, many Wacoans are seeing an increase in their incomes. However, Wacoans who live in neighborhoods mostly comprised of minorities are seeing the opposite to be true: their incomes are stagnating, or even decreasing (Rhodes 2021). At the same time, economic activity prompted by tourism grows in Waco exponentially, almost overnight. This disparity points toward the reality of gentrification at work in Waco.

Understanding the complexities of this situation requires a nuanced perspective, one that Joel Kotkin and Wendell Cox offer in their writing for the Center for Opportunity Urbanism. Arguing that it is “time to move beyond the focus on gentrification led by the ‘creative class’” (Kotkin and Cox 2019, 72), the authors note that,

Life may have improved for many in our urban centers, but, as we have seen, many others are being left behind. Gentrification strategies, often focused on the downtown core, have done little for either the remaining middle or the largely impoverished working class, who together comprise the majority of urbanites (Kotkin and Cox 2019).

Their findings suggest that this is due to the “massive funds that are spent to attract more of the creative class and appeal to the hyper-affluent” which “have not, and will not, improve life for most urbanites” (Kotkin and Cox 2019, 72). In fact, “for many, this approach can only mean further impoverishment, largely due to higher rents, or lead to mass migration out of the cities that, for some, have been home for generations” (Kotkin and Cox 2019, 72). This principle is at play within Waco, where higher rent, property taxes, and home prices have forced longtime Waco residents out of their family homes in deference to the flood of affluent newcomers. Undeniably, Magnolia has helped Waco in remarkable ways and has even served to bring renewed life and activity to surrounding towns. Even so, Magnolia has not equitably grown Waco and has prompted gentrified circumstances that are nothing short

of devastating for many longtime Waco residents.

Waco’s real estate and citywide development practices are built upon attracting middle-class peoples to frequent and settle into increasingly gentrified areas of town, rather than investing in low-income families to create generational wealth and stability within communities of Waco’s longtime residents. In Waco, affordable housing is becoming increasingly difficult to find and secure as it often becomes unaffordable due to rising property taxes or is demolished to make way for new development. The latter circumstance befell the Oak Lodge Motor Inn, a massive property which formerly occupied downtown Waco. This 72-room motel provided affordable housing for many years for those in the Waco community who would otherwise be houseless. Conditions at the property were said to be terrible. As one Waco Tribune-Herald reporter observed, “during the last city inspection of The Oak Lodge Motor Inn at 1024 Austin Ave. after the 2019 fire, the property racked up 32 code violations, with officials noting failing walls, foundation and ceilings, broken windows and doors, and a lack of carbon monoxide and smoke detectors” (Saegert 2021). Yet, for many Wacoans living on fixed incomes or government assistance, Oak Lodge was the only housing option they could afford.

The developers responsible for the demolition of the Oak Lodge Motor Inn saw the situation differently. Describing Oak Lodge as “one of the last problematic properties in the downtown area” (Saegert 2021), developers planned to replace the inn with appealing condominiums and retail areas. “They plan to tear down the 72-room motel and replace it with a complex of 15 residential spaces totaling 23,757 square feet and three retail spaces totaling 8,710 square feet,” the reporter continues. “The expected sales price for the larger condo units would be \$452,000 each, and the expected sales price for the lofts would range from \$204,000 to \$312,750 each” (Saegert 2021). A few blocks away, in the heart of downtown, the same developers have built a restaurant and hotel, also meant to attract affluent tourists. These changes would act as a “welcome’ sign into downtown for visitors,

indicating they have reached the city core" (Saegert 2021). When the developers first announced their plans to demolish the Oak Lodge Motor Inn, they assured Wacoans that work on the project would begin only after current residents had secured new places to live (Saegert 2021). However, as another reporter tracking the story writes, "most leaving Oak Lodge 'will have no place to go, will end up sleeping on someone's couch or in a car'" (Copeland 2021). The former residents of Oak Lodge are what one local homelessness advocate describes as the "invisible homeless"—people who face housing insecurity, but often are not perceived or supported as such (Copeland 2021). The widespread, chronic housing insecurity in Waco is evidence of a "systemic issue that Waco doesn't have the resources for" (Copeland 2021). The development of affordable housing is crucial in addressing this issue yet continues to be pushed aside in favor of development policies centered around alluring the middle class to Waco.

Kotkin and Cox (2019) advocate for urban solutions that serve whole populations, rather than targeting tourist groups, arguing that "to successfully promote interaction and engagement that lessens bifurcation, cities have to start making improvements beyond their 'hot spots.'" For Waco, this could take the form of construction that expands beyond the flashy I-35 corridor and into the pothole-ridden neighborhood streets, housing solutions for the growing homeless population, and increasingly accessible job opportunities in the areas of manufacturing and production. In this way, Waco might "rather than depend on 'luring' a middle class... endeavor instead to build one" (Kotkin and Cox 2019, 73).

The gentrification of Waco has exacerbated previously existing social divides within the city. Authors Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (1992) explain this happening through the concept of economic segregation. In their view, this segregation has dangerous and far-reaching consequences for individual and community life. As they explain,

A whole generation of Americans has now reached adulthood cut off from direct contact with people from other social classes. It is now

entirely possible for a child of affluence to grow up in such a class ghetto, attend an Ivy League university and perhaps a top law school, and enter the working world without acquiring any firsthand knowledge of people unlike himself or herself. As a result, more and more Americans regard one another with mutual incomprehension and fear, and that accounts for no small share of the tension in our national political life (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992, 11).

To combat this segregation, many designers and architects plan public utilities designed to encourage a "sense of place" that "draws people out from their private realms to stroll and loiter with their neighbors," mixing economic classes and exposing people to the public (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992, 21). Magnolia represents such an attempt at creating a public gathering place. Yet my observations reveal that it is people from similar economic, racial, and political backgrounds that frequent Magnolia—people who generally are not even from Waco. In this way, Magnolia creates an artificial sense of place, unrepresentative of the city and its population.

Anthropological theories of space and place are also helpful in contextualizing these differing ideas about the spaces that Magnolia has both claimed and created. For tourists, these spaces feel deeply symbolic or sacred, calling to mind ideals of religious faith and family connection. At the same time, these spaces feel inauthentic to Wacoans who perceive Magnolia's messaging as contradictory to their lived experiences. Anthropological theories of space may help us to understand the origin, as well as the nuance, of these differing conceptions. Pauline McKenzie Aucoin (2017, 3) notes,

Space is considered by anthropologists to be a central element of social life... Engaged with and experienced both as a physical and ambient dimension, as distance, location, or topography, space is recognized as an important cultural medium, an idiom through which individuals can think and that can be culturally organized to produce spatial practices that are social, aesthetic,

political, religious or economic. Once embedded with significance, spatial constituents can be made to carry meaning as part of a geo-symbolic order.

Space, like time, is an invaluable medium through which cultural exchange takes place. By setting apart a space for cultural exchange and imbuing that space with meaning, the Gaines have created a gathering place, or a “framed space that is meaningful to a person or group over time” (Aucoin 2017, 3). As Aucoin (2017, 4) explains, when “sites take on cultural meaning, they come to be distinguished from generalized space as places.” The Gaines, by transforming two formerly rundown city blocks home to abandoned grain silos, have distinguished this forgotten space as a cultural hub, a place definitive of Waco. This illustrates another important aspect of the concept of space: far from having a fixed meaning, space may be imbued with different meanings as the surrounding culture changes. In other words, “analysis requires recognition that while space is situated in cultures, its meaning is not fixed and may be contested and changed over time through a dialectical, sometimes political process that reveals the praxis of space” (Aucoin 2017, 4). The Silos, once symbols of Waco’s bygone prosperity, have become symbolic of a new vitality present throughout the city. As our collective perceptions of Magnolia clash and change, so too will the symbolic nature of the Silos morph in our cultural understanding.

## The Central Green

Magnolia is never empty. Even during the odd hours of a Monday afternoon, Magnolia boasts a steady flow of patrons, a full parking lot, and grounds bustling with activity. This bustle is concentrated in Magnolia’s vibrant central green, a large rectangular turf squarely positioned between the Market and the Silos and lined by shaded picnic tables and an array of food trucks. I position myself at the only available seat to jot down notes. Every other table is filled with families sipping iced sweet tea in mason jars with striped straws, enjoying a quick bite to eat, or reviewing their treasured purchases toted about in brown paper bags. As I look around, I count eleven food trucks lining

the perimeter. Though each food truck contains different wares, each markets its products using similar buzzwords such as ‘custom,’ ‘artisan,’ and ‘gourmet,’ conveying the impression of an exclusive experience uniquely tailored for each guest. Naturally, the guests who partake in this experience are those who can fit within the class structure and afford the cost of Magnolia’s wares. This creates a rather uniform demographic of patrons who primarily consist of white, middle-class families. On the green, most families follow the same rhythm: parents wait in line to purchase food while their children play behind them on the green — the perfect place for a game of tag. While they run around or play with toys provided in a bin, adults who need a rest lounge on black and white striped beanbags in the shade.

From my vantage point of a picnic table, I identify another unique demographic occupying the green: adults taking photos. While the content of these photos remains largely consistent—photos in front of the Silos or the market with shopping bags and iced tea in hand—the people taking these pictures differ considerably. One style of picture-taking, which I have deemed the “vacation style,” appears to be more casual. Family groups, typically large and multi-generational, attempt to line up in front of the Silos, wrangle their children into standing still for a split second and take a photo where almost everyone’s eyes are open. While staged, the resulting photo tends to be at least somewhat true to life. This group’s clothing tends to consist of comfortable everyday wear. One person engaged in this style of photo-taking activity was a white, fifty-something-year-old man wearing a ‘Blue Lives Matter’ shirt.

In contrast, another group of picture-takers fill the green, a type I designated the “influencers.” Traveling with a single companion or small family unit, influencers carefully curate a highly stylized appearance, usually expressed through expensive, boho-style clothing. For them, Magnolia is as much about being seen as it is about seeing. Those who accompany the influencer type are similarly well-dressed, lending a photo-readiness to their group as a whole—except for one (typically male or older female) individual, who is denoted as the photographer, as was the case in a pregnancy

announcement I witnessed being shot on the green. The influencers pursue a meticulous photo-taking process: lighting, angle, framing, and pose are all considered in crafting the perfect shot. The result is one far more distanced from reality than the semi-functional family vacation photos.

## The Old Church

Another smaller green lies on the other side of Magnolia property surrounded by the tidy white shopping village of identical white cottages under the shade of the Old Church. Also comprised of turf instead of grass, the green is framed by meticulously groomed foliage and carefully placed stone paths. Not a single detail is amiss. These details work together to craft an environment that is not so much a photo destination as it is a place to pause and reflect, either within the walls of the church or under its shadow. As I note these findings, I witness a tender scene unfold on the opposite side of the green: a young mother sits on the turf under the shade of a tree holding a sleeping infant to her chest. It is a touching picture, one that calls to mind historical imagery of the Madonna and Child, one of serenity, transcendence, and holiness.

Undergirding this scene is the presence of the Old Church, a situation which lends an air of sacredness to the Magnolia grounds. The instantly familiar structure of the church creates a feeling of a divine ordinance, the sense that God's presence and favor are here. Tall, square, wooden, and white, with triangular vaulted ceilings and a picturesque bell tower, the church draws one's eye in and up toward the heavens. Stepping past the entrance into the church, one encounters clean walls of white shiplap (an instantly recognizable feature of Magnolia's brand) broken up by dark trims, vaulted beams, and huge windows. As a result, the church is filled with natural light that dances over the backs of the dark wooden pews. Two slender trees adorn the front of the room, potted in soft green moss. The white walls and sunlight flooding the room as well as the inclusion of natural elements work in tandem, giving an impression of purity, wholesomeness, and an alignment with that which ought to be. The evocative nature of The Old Church and its strategic presence lend to the carefully curated

space of Magnolia's grounds. Operating as a symbol of the divine, the church imbues the space with meaning and communicates "special realities" that relay "the basic dynamics of culture" (Low 2013, 6). The Old Church, a definitive part of Magnolia's subculture, conveys the sense of Magnolia as a sacred space operating in accordance with a higher order.

Not many guests visit the church, and those who do take a minute to gush over how pretty the inside is before moving along. Very few devote time to reading the plaque outside, which details the process of Chip and Joanna's discovery and renovation of the old church. Notable on the plaque is the statement that the Gaines "restored" the church to be used for a "new purpose" (The Old Church' n.d.). Be that as it may, the renovation process required most of the church to be completely replaced, including its foundation and frame. This revelation prompts a stunning conclusion. The Old Church is not an entity that is truly restored or one which births genuine restoration of those who wander within its wooden doors. Instead, like Magnolia, the church was artificially imposed on the city landscape. Stripped of its religious purpose, the empty church commodifies religious symbolism for Magnolia's gain, commercializing the sacred to convey authenticity.

## Interview with the Bundys

At this point in my research, I decided to seek out a firsthand account of how Magnolia has changed Waco culturally and economically. To gather answers to my growing bank of questions, I contacted Ashley and Brian Bundy, a local couple who have worked as realtors in Waco for the last decade. Ashley and Brian met each other at Baylor University, married, and went overseas to do missionary work for a few years after college. They moved back to Waco in 2008—as Ashley described, their church home is in Waco, and the transition back felt natural. Brian got his real estate license two years later and Ashley quickly followed suit. I began by asking the couple about how Magnolia has changed Waco's real estate industry. Brian replied by describing how at the start of his career, he had no trouble easily finding investment houses to flip, but once Fixer Upper



aired,

Everybody and their dog wanted to be Chip and Jo. It brought all these investors and was the advent of what was already going on with HGTV. Chip was not the first house flipper on TV... there was something about Chip and Joanna that was different from HGTV. I think it was something about small-town America. People could wrap their minds around a \$300,000–\$400,000 house and identify with that, instead of those \$1,000,000 listing TV shows in Los Angeles or New York.

Expanding on this thought, Brian touched on the literal and figurative following Magnolia gained in the years after the pilot of Fixer Upper aired. “There’s something weird, like, there’s a cult following, I mean another buddy of mine used to joke about how like Joanna could spit in a bowl and sell it for \$400 because it had her DNA in it. It was just really weird in that regard.”

I inquired about the masses of people flooding into Waco. Ashley confirmed my suspicions, asserting, “There’s not enough to supply for the demand. And so, the prices have just shot up.” Expounding on why this might be the case, Brian added his thoughts about how Obama’s presidency may have contributed to the demographic shift, prompting conservatives, who “want their second amendment rights,” “want to raise their kids in a school district that isn’t going to be super liberal,” and “want a faith base” to move to Texas. I followed up with the following comment:

That’s interesting, especially when you’re talking about why people feel the need to come to Texas, either religious reasons or rights, freedoms, tradition, raising a family. Those are all things that you see on the show, too.

Ashley agreed:

And that’s why people were drawn to them, this feel-good, traditional good value, you know — family, home, hard work. And I think they just are drawn to them... for better or worse, some people. I mean, we’ve had several

clients, like one, literally, I drove around for them for a day, and like they went to lunch, and coming back they said, ‘it didn’t exactly look like the show.’ There are some ugly sides to Waco that they didn’t realize were there. And then I had another couple that moved here, because of the show, for like 18 months. And they’re like, it’s too hot. They don’t like it. It (the show) is not always the best reason to make a move.

Processing this, I took a moment to change gears, and asked:

From another vantage point, y’all have lived here for quite some time now. How would you see — people are calling it the ‘Gaines Phenomenon’ or the ‘Fixer Upper Effect’ and just so many things — how do you see that changing Waco?

Brian simply noted that “it’s made it a destination.”

Ashley shared her thoughts on the Gaines and the change they’ve brought to Waco:

They’re sincere people (and) have done a lot of good for Waco. And I do feel like they tried, too. Honestly, when they first started, I thought they would take off and go to a bigger city. But they stayed here and encouraged and tried to feature local businesses. The community is changing, and at the same time, a few of the people that they have gotten behind have really done well. It’s changed their lives. I do think they are for local businesses to flourish.

Brian nodded along, adding:

I mean, people complain and moan about their property taxes and want to blame it on Chip and Joanna. It’s true. But as with anything, it’s like, ‘well, that house that you had that was worth \$150,000 is now worth \$250,000. So, you want to complain about that, too?’ I mean, it’s like how you can’t have your cake and eat it too. That’s not their fault... And I know I don’t know all the stories. And I know that they don’t publicize it too. But I know they’ve been

generous to people like if they know someone's story, and they hear, like, a single mom has struggled with this or that, they've done a lot of good in that regard. Just to let people know.

I thanked my interviewees for their time and perspective, which reemphasized and added nuance to my understanding of Waco's economic trends in housing, undoubtedly influenced by Magnolia. Though these trends are beneficial for some, such as homeowners who can afford to pay rising property taxes and profit by selling their homes at higher values, for others reliant upon fixed or low incomes, rising property foreshadow the loss of generational homes. This circumstance is a compelling instance of Magnolia's disparate influence on Waco's diverse community. With new knowledge in mind, I returned to Magnolia with a more nuanced perspective, my eyes attuned its both its positive and troubling aspects.

## Interview with Anthony Betters

For further perspective on the complex relationship between Magnolia and the city of Waco, I conducted an interview with Anthony Betters Sr., a local Wacoan and active community member who has spent over fifteen years in public service. Mr. Betters has lived in Waco his entire life. During our interview, he relayed the story of his mother's migration to Waco at age thirteen and her subsequent struggle to raise her children alone. After renting several properties downtown, his mother eventually entered into a lease-to-own agreement with David Hoppenstein, a real estate mogul who owned a significant number of properties in Waco and Central Texas in his lifetime. She was not the first person in his family to do so—Mr. Betters could recall four or five generations of family members renting from David Hoppenstein, as they lacked the financial backing to place a deposit on a permanent home. "The disparities," Betters observed, "are very very tough." Anthony Betters' mother threw herself into meeting lease payments. If she had missed a payment, she could have been turned out of her home, her money permanently lost. For thirty-five years, Betters estimated, his mother worked to

pay off her home. Now, after generations of renting, she owns her property.

Mr. Betters analogized this situation to that of the sharecroppers in the post-slavery period of Reconstruction in the southern United States. Sharecroppers were tenant farmers responsible for cultivating the land of plantation owners in the South. According to this arrangement, if it was a bad year and the crop disappointed, the owners would be financially unaffected, but the sharecroppers would be put in debt to the owners. Often this created inescapable situations of inequality, comparable to slavery. For the Betters family, Anthony Betters' mother has finally broken that cycle. A man of faith, Betters shared this story as a testament to God's provision, evidence of an answered prayer. Hoping to continue his mother's trajectory, Betters has worked to create generational wealth in his family by opening a family business, BETTERS4U Services. Through this business, Betters hopes to "help develop family members pursue talents and aspirations in a business approach" in order to "alleviate generational poverty," as is detailed on his LinkedIn profile. This, for Betters, is a continuation of the answer to his mother's prayer: he noted, "now, in her later years, she's starting to see a glimpse of what she prayed about in what her kids are experiencing."

Mr. Betters also serves in municipal government for the city of Waco, working in the division of watershed protection. His office is located in the Mae Jackson building downtown, named after the first African-American woman elected mayor of Waco. Now, Mr. Betters informed me, he is the only African-American man in the building. He saw the irony of this circumstance. In another capacity, Mr. Betters works as the 2022 Board President of the Dr. Pepper Museum in Waco. He is the first African-American man to lead in this role. Since his presidency (and other changes within the Board of Directors), the museum has undergone changes aimed at transforming the museum into an experience reflective of the many cultures within Waco. The museum now features an exhibit that can be experienced in Spanish, as well as English, and the new 'Sit Down to Take a Stand' exhibit at the soda counter details the history of sit-in protests

during the Civil Rights Movement and highlights the courage and dignity of black Americans who peacefully protested for their rights under affliction from whites. Given Mr. Betters' commitment to exploring multicultural perspectives, I was eager to ask about his perspectives on Magnolia and Waco's changing culture. For his part, Anthony Betters was eager to offer up his perspective as representative of some of the concerns and issues that the larger community of African-Americans see in Waco's changing culture, as well as within Magnolia's unique subculture.

After learning of Mr. Betters' background, I asked him how he thought Magnolia had affected Waco as a whole, and whether it had affected Waco equally. He answered immediately that Magnolia "impacts the whole city," and that Waco's recent revitalization proved that "Waco can be one of the vibrant cities in the United States." Betters credited the mayor and city managers for this development, noting that this reflects their progressive attitude towards the rise of new economic opportunities across the city. Drawing from his own perspective as a city employee, he observed, "the city is trying to change that whole outlook to where everybody can prosper from what's happening in the city. However, we all know that we will not all will benefit from it."

Mr. Betters also mentioned how the word "gentrification" is often brought up in conjunction with this conversation. For him, gentrification is a crucial aspect of how this "time of change" has impacted everyone throughout the city. He noted that in East Waco, wealthy people have begun to renovate homes, which increases their value tremendously. This causes property taxes to rise for the entire neighborhood, which is problematic for people who cannot afford to pay rising property taxes for their homes, even if they have owned those homes for generations. Oftentimes, these people are forced to move out. As a result, the demographics of the neighborhood change, as more upper and middle-class folks move in, and longtime residents migrate out. He stressed, "we haven't fully seen all of that, we just see a glimpse of that right now," warning that changes in Waco, at least partially resulting from Magnolia, have only just begun.

While Betters described Waco as a "vibrant city that's growing," he qualified that a characteristic of growth is "wanting to see everybody reach their full potential." This full potential, the "heartbeat" of the city managers, is "for [the] prosperity of all cultures." Betters expressed that he would like to see Magnolia change in this respect, as he remarked that he cannot "see" the celebration of all cultures visually when he visits Magnolia and notes the overwhelmingly white demographic that frequents its grounds. "That's what I would like to see a little bit more of at the Magnolia side of it," he explained, "is to embrace the cultures of people of color."

At Magnolia now, "you can smell the money," Betters laughed. In a more serious tone, he noted, "you can see the richness of our country, and how a certain group is left out." He connected this economic disparity to the systemic racism that has suppressed African-Americans nationwide, evident, he said, "especially what I can see in Waco." He acknowledged that this point is contentious, noting,

Some may debate that and say, 'you know what, you need to pull up by your own bootstraps.' I hear that...but different communities or families are completely different. I didn't come here with no family, no land, no nothin'. My momma didn't have anything to give us except for a prayer.

## A Window into Home

As I enter Magnolia Market, I am greeted by the sight of an elderly woman clutching brown Magnolia bags, pushed in a wheelchair by her middle-aged daughter, and accompanied by her thirty-something-year-old granddaughter. This familial scene is repeated in many manifestations throughout Magnolia Market and Magnolia Home, where multi-generational groups of women mill about and shop together. Observing these women, I begin to understand Magnolia as a destination that not only attracts families from all over the country but also brings together multiple generations under the ideals of home and family. Primarily consisting of white mother-daughter groups, the women meander about Magnolia, delicately turning

over products in their hands, admiring their quality and aesthetic. Next door in Magnolia Home, one white, middle-aged mother and her two, twenty-something-year-old daughters interact with a friendly salesman engaged in showing them a dining room rug. As the salesman lays the rug out on the floor, explaining its design, the women stare distantly at the rug. "It's so pretty," they gush repeatedly, unable to say or do much else.

The rug, like other objects at Magnolia, is elegant, muted, and comfortable. Its cozy feel echoes the overall tone of the store, which puts forth a carefully curated yet comfortable experience. Each intentionally arranged item, whether a chair, light fixture, placemat, or rolling pen, gives an illusion of realness, quality, and authenticity. Interpreted through anthropological spatial theory, these objects "evoke experience, thus molding experience into symbols and then melting symbols back into experience" (Low 2013, 5). The "existential and phenomenological reality of place... its smell, feel, color, and other sensory dimensions," is a crucial aspect of embodied experience, and often determines how people relate to different places (Low 2013, 5). The material realities of both stores—Magnolia Market and Magnolia Home—evoke feelings of being at home and at peace, which in turn creates an inviting sense of place. This welcoming sensation is diminished, however, when one takes note of the price of the products in each store. Like the three women admiring the rug, I too felt a sense of overwhelming distance because of the cost of Magnolia products. Though I am the daughter of middle-class parents and have always lived comfortably, Magnolia products are completely unattainable for my family's price range, let alone my collegiate budget. While I knew Magnolia was by no means synonymous with the people of Waco, I began to see that the tall iron fence and security guards form only superficial layers of division. Any true question of who is welcome at Magnolia is answered by the price tags. Who fits into Magnolia's vision of home? Those who are undeterred by the price of its products. In this way, the prices of Magnolia wares gatekeep far more effectively than the security-patrolled fence patrolled ever could.

## The Historic Grain Barn

In the back of the Market lie two unassuming double doors. Past these and down polished concrete steps, one enters the Historic Grain Barn. At the foot of the stairs lies a large vinyl sticker that reads, "100 Years of History," lending an air of long-standing tradition to the space. Of course, the unspoken conclusion of the sticker's argument is that Magnolia serves as a continuation of this long-standing tradition—that tradition itself is at the very heart of Magnolia. As I wander about the barn, noting the tall, vaulted ceilings, metal walls, and exposed rusting rafters, I consider the history of the space, curious about the purpose for which the grain barn was built. What did it formerly hold? Now, it is merely the home of a transient stream of tourists.

Interspersed throughout the Grain Barn, tables hold a wealth of Magnolia wares, including Magnolia pins and stickers, the Gaines' books, and racks of Magnolia caps and mugs. One wall is entirely filled with cupboards of Magnolia t-shirts. Many registers and a winding checkout line occupy another. The remaining free walls are burdened with many of the same signs I noticed inside the Market, both in greater variety and quantity. Home, family, faith, and friendship are all common themes on these signs of soft leather or rustic iron.

One sign, significantly larger than all the rest, hangs on a roll of paper almost as large as a person suspended on a prominent wall in the back. The sign displays a lengthy belief statement of sorts. Curious, I step closer and note the first line, which reads, "We believe in home, that it should restore us from today and ready us for tomorrow" ("Magnolia Manifesto" 2021). Transfixed by the sign, I leave the barn considering its place within Magnolia as a whole. It is only later in an interview with a former Magnolia employee that I found out the significance of the sign as the center of Magnolia's belief and being. It is called the Magnolia Manifesto. In my conversation with a former Magnolia employee, whom I will refer to as Megan, as she prefers to stay anonymous to remain in good standing with the company, I began to see how this Manifesto permeates everything Magnolia says and does.



Flipping through the packets given to her at Magnolia's orientation, Megan found two copies of the Manifesto and explained to me how this was incorporated into her training:

So okay, it's in this one, too, I think. Yeah. So it's in both of the orientation packets they give us... They say, why do we exist? Inspiring the pursuit of a life well loved. What do we do? Good work that matters. How do we work? Learning, ownership, and being a team player. So, we always, they have, a lot of these kind of life principles and things that they would talk to us about, just to kind of try to get us inspired.

When asked how that fits into Magnolia's culture, Megan pointed to the signs that pepper Magnolia's walls:

Magnolia overall, is just supposed to be like, all about togetherness and stuff like that. Like literally all of their signs, either say something about life well-loved, do good work, something with together, something with miracles, just they're all like these inspirational quotes and stuff like that.

I responded that I had made note of the prevalence of these signs on my last visit to the market and wondered about their significance.

Megan confirmed the importance of the messages conveyed on the signs, explaining that:

Whenever we had our orientation, they would sit us all down in a room, and then they would go over these PowerPoint-type things. And so they would break up the Manifesto into like different sections, and then talk about how we could embody each of these sections... So we believe in human kindness, I think that might even be in here. It has to be in here. It probably is 100%. But it says every Magnolia employee is personally responsible for ensuring guest experience is being met to the highest standard. So it really is all about making sure that that guest experience is just going really well. So that's kind of how the Magnolia that's

what they want everybody to perceive about Magnolia their brand when you're entering into it.

Processing this information, I replied, "It's interesting, it seems like the Manifesto is just so much more defining than I initially thought." "It's a big part of Magnolia," Megan reaffirmed, "They really base a lot off of it, even though, you know, a lot of people don't realize that."

Though unassuming compared to the looming Silos, the Historic Grain Barn forms the heart of Magnolia, a physical and symbolic center of history and tradition. The beliefs conveyed in the Magnolia Manifesto, hung on the Historic Grain Barn, are the basis from which all actions of the company flow. After talking with Megan, I conducted a bit of digging regarding the Grain Barn's history. I learned that the barn was originally home to a cotton mill whose products were stored in the Silos. At the turn of the century, this mill brought renewed industry to Waco, only to collapse due to bankruptcy a few decades later. The buildings sat empty for nearly half a century. Years later the Gaines encountered the buildings and sought to restore them under the same vision of bringing industry and new life to Waco. Whether history will redeem or repeat itself, no one knows.

## Conclusions

Two lines of the Magnolia Manifesto have not ceased to haunt me from the moment I first encountered them. They read, "We believe everyone deserves a seat at the table and everyone has a story worth telling. We believe in human kindness, knowing that we are made better when we all work together" ("Magnolia Manifesto" 2021). I see this ideal expressed so strongly at Magnolia, yet my studies reveal that it is an ideal only partially realized. The homeless woman who sat outside the fence on my first day at Magnolia did not have a seat at the table. Whomever the security guards are on alert against do not have a seat at the table. Native Wacoans, distressed and displaced by rising property taxes, do not have a seat at a table.

Magnolia believes fervently in the value of stories and storytelling, yet the only stories told

at Magnolia are those that travel to Waco. Much like the old church “renovated” by the Gaines, the stories that Magnolia values are artificially implanted, and do not accurately convey a wholistic narrative of Waco. The story of Waco is not told for what it is, nor are the stories of Wacoans elevated by Magnolia in accurate ways. The stories of this insulated subculture are incongruous with the stories of the broader Waco culture and serve to perpetuate an inauthentic narrative masquerading as truth. The truth is more complicated than the simplistic story Magnolia would prefer to tell, a false narrative of tradition and transcendence, undermined by a city both more broken and more whole than Magnolia would presume, lying just outside the wrought iron fence.

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