

# The Politics of Property: Place-Making in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia

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## ABSTRACT

Una, Saxon, and Arcadia are three neighborhoods in Spartanburg County, South Carolina undergoing an era of neighborhood reorganization, change, and development. As historic textile mill villages from the county's age of industrialization, the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhoods today are characterized by privately-owned, mid-century mill homes and a high population of renters. Neighbors are concerned about the dilapidated housing stock falling into disrepair and the resulting impacts of abandoned and condemned properties. To advocate alongside Una, Saxon, and Arcadia residents for equitable neighborhood investment, our research team conducted two years of mixed-method ethnographic research across the three neighborhoods to determine the impacts of abandoned and condemned properties on neighborhood wellness. Through our research collaborations, our team identified deeply personal and political associations between residents, their homes, and their stake in the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia community. Advocating for equity in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia cannot be simplified to one policy recommendation or development plan. Rather, collective organization and engagement amongst residents bolstered by key stakeholders, such as the county, may provide an equitable and inclusive path to reimagining neighborhood futures.

**Keywords:** neighborhood wellness, place, community, housing, grassroots organizing, sustainability, Spartanburg County

**H**ome is where you lay your hat, an older man told me as I sat down at the table of the first community organizing meeting for the neighborhoods of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. “This neighborhood is my home. Lived here, worked here, grew up here, raised children here...” he continued, fiddling with the fingerless gloves wrapped carefully around both hands. The gloves looked expensive, no visible wear or tear except for around the fingers which had obviously been intentionally cut. I stayed very still and quiet, unsure of whether the gentleman was talking to me or talking just to hear himself talk. Even if I had thought of a response it would not have been quick enough. Before I could blink, Daniel Atkins was telling me his life story.

Spartanburg born-and-raised, Mr. Atkins has lived in the Saxon neighborhood for all seventy-three years of his life. His neighborhood has been transformed by the creation and eventual dissolution of the textile industry; mill houses cover the small 5.9-mile radius of the neighborhood he grew up in. As industry grew, so did the neighborhood. Mr. Atkins recounted stories of his youth telling of locations he learned to play baseball, places where communities gathered, and the beauty of his once ideal neighborhood. But, when the textile industry left, it took just as much as it had given. The downturn of economic revenue led to the deterioration of the neighborhood’s physical landscape, as well as the sense of community sitting right within. With tears in his wrinkled brown eyes, Mr. Atkins explained to me the sadness he carries with him because of his neighborhood. He watched, year after year, as his neighborhood transformed into something he is ashamed of: a place lacking safety, community, infrastructure, and, most importantly to Mr. Atkins, peace. Five years ago,

Mr. Atkins started advocating for change through local grassroots organizations. Two years ago, his family home burnt down. Seventy-one years of memories became nothing but ashes in an instant. Mr. Atkins burned his hands in the fire trying to recover his valuables before fleeing the flames. At seventy-three, Mr. Atkins is grieving, not for the loss of close friends or family members getting up there in age, but for his home. In the physical sense, Mr. Atkins grieves his belongings and the structure of the house that kept him safe for his entire life. But, in another way, Mr. Atkins is grieving the loss of what his community once was.

Bustling industry and life in the mill shaped neighborhoods like Una, Saxon, and Arcadia in the early 1900s. With neighborhood homes, grocery stores, churches, health clinics, and recreation all located within a comfortable walk from the workplace, textile mills, residents built tight-knit communities, known as mill villages, that decreased reliance on outside resources. The sustainability of such communities depended solely on the success of the textile industry, as local mill owners financed the development of mill village houses and infrastructure. Across counties like Spartanburg, and more broadly, the Southeastern US, textile mills and corresponding mill villages sprawled throughout rural geographies, transforming former farmland into small suburban neighborhoods.

The physical and cultural landscape of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia changed after the collapse and dissolution of the textile industry in the post-war era South. As textile mills were sold, repurposed, and sometimes even left to rust and rot, decades passed in mill village neighborhoods without investment, maintenance, or new development. Former mill villages within Spartanburg County, especially Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, now struggle to provide equitable housing, social resources, and safety to longstanding neighborhood residents in the face of gentrification, rapid population growth, and an ever-increasing demand for affordable housing. Resident committees and neighborhood associations across Una, Saxon, and Arcadia have actively requested additional county support since the early 2000s without acknowledgement—a

growing concern being the disproportionate density of abandoned and condemned properties in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia when compared to other neighborhoods in the County. Residents, much like Mr. Atkins, who have grown tired of waiting for investment from the county are now determined to create a sustainable neighborhood redevelopment plan leveraging grassroots community knowledge, experiences, and power.

Our interdisciplinary research team, comprised of nine undergraduate students and two professors, ethnographically analyzed neighborhood investment to determine the impacts of abandoned and condemned properties on neighborhood wellness. In this context, neighborhood wellness is defined and measured by the social, spiritual, physical, and economic well-being of a collective community. Educational institutions, social resources, housing stock, and community relations all play vital roles in a neighborhood's ability to thrive. Our team sought to become experts and partner with experts. This meant becoming knowledgeable in public policy and process, housing, and relevant theory, and intentionally partner with resident experts in local history and community experience. This also meant not only understanding but collaboratively analyzing neighborhood histories, positioning us in such a way that we can identify patterns or trends to help support local activist efforts, especially those of our partners in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia.

After eighteen months of community-based research in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, property and place continue to be central to our understanding of neighborhood wellness and community investment. Through personalized neighborhood van tours, life-history interviews, participatory mapping workshops, and resident surveys, our mixed-methods ethnographic study analyzes the politics of place-making through a participatory action lens (Elwood et al 2015; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) describes the process of acquiring knowledge through movement, perception, and weathering through an environment. Navigating the cultural geography of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia through the eyes of residents was a powerful

testament to the complexities and contradictions that define home. When individual livelihoods are tied directly to physical locations, the personal becomes the political. In this article, I argue that the politics of property in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia are deeply personal and inextricably linked to nostalgia, community sovereignty, and the concept of 'home.' The abandoned and condemned properties across Una, Saxon, and Arcadia demonstrate the complex challenges of centering equity and sustainability in local policy and practice.

## Research Methodology

Before I was a student researching the impacts of abandoned properties, I was a ten-year-old living in a twenty-year-old trailer just an hour away from the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhoods, learning firsthand what living in substandard housing felt like. Whenever my research takes me to communities of mobile homes or properties with fallen-in structures in the backyard, I am reminded of home. Fortuitously, many of the streets and corridors that define the landscape of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia remind me of the homes I knew as a child. My personal entanglements with home, housing, and poverty drive me to search for sustainable, community-driven solutions to issues of housing insecurity in neighborhoods like those wherein I grew up. However, my experiences in childhood do not grant me immunity from the colonial dynamics that accompany the traditional role of 'researcher' and 'subject.' Our work in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia is framed by the pedagogies of participatory action research and popular education which both seek to decolonize the hierarchies of researcher-subject and teacher-student relationships (Freire, 2005; Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). In Paulo Freire (2005, 48)'s work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the statement, "the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" encapsulates what it means to

create change with, rather than for, members of a community. Through establishing partnerships with community organizations such as the United Residents of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia (also known as the 'Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhood association'), and the Una New Life Community Center, as well as with community leaders and activists, our team worked to learn from the community residents that know their history and needs best. This methodology required us as researchers to actively practice unlearning and relearning as it relates to the institutional dynamics that exist between Wofford College and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Furthermore, our research was rooted in a theoretical understanding of poverty, urbanization, gentrification, and equitable community development. While the American meritocratic myth that anyone can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and rise from poverty into the middle class is still widely believed, modern interdisciplinary scholars and ethnographers largely agree that American public policy and systemic racism have produced the modern housing crisis, encouraged gentrification, and influenced growing wealth disparities between neighborhoods or zip codes. Ethnographer Mathew Desmond (2016) explores American experiences with poverty, substandard housing, and eviction in his text *Evicted*, wherein Desmond (2016) historically analyzes the deterioration—first economically and then later physically—of American middle-class suburbs post-Great Recession. As our team would discover in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, while the trope of greedy, profit-hungry "slumlords" prevails in neighborhoods in substandard conditions, there are compounding structural barriers that better explain the decades of disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods. Desmond (2016) points to the 'professionalization of property management,' or the process of turning housing into a business, as one explanation for the increased rate of evictions, transiency, and homelessness in the decades following 1970. Property owners are primarily concerned with maximizing profits through rent collection in an era where "affordable rental stock has been allowed to deteriorate and eventually disappear" and

"vacancy rates for low-cost units have fallen to single digits" (Desmond 2016, 47); the high demand for affordable units lowers the incentive to forgive late payments, maintain cheap rent prices, and reinvest in the upkeep of property.

Race and urban sociologist Richard Rothstein, in his 2018 publication *The Color of Law*, adds nuance to Desmond (2016) as Rothstein (2018) crafts an argument of how unconstitutional neighborhood segregation has been codified in policy and practice on local, state, and national scales across the United States since the inception of public housing, thereby resulting in intentionally impoverished communities of color across our nation. In analyzing the origins of homeownership as a pillar of the American Dream, Rothstein (2018, 60) details how, in 1917, government officials believed "communism could be defeated" by increasing white homeownership, "the idea being that those who owned property would be invested in the capitalist system." In the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia mill villages, developed during the period of capitalist property politics described by Rothstein, property ownership was only an option for the wealthy, white elite of industry. Most textile workers in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia were renters, building no home equity or generational wealth; a truth still experienced by neighborhood residents to this day.

Renters and homeowners across the USA neighborhoods desire equitable, new housing and infrastructure investments that begin to reconcile their experienced disparities in neighborhood wellness; however, gentrification poses a real threat to the already diminished vitality of economically vulnerable communities. It should be noted that gentrification is not just a set of outcomes that happen to communities but is also an active process that is shaped by various stakeholders (Brown-Saracino 2009). Rothstein (2018, 190) also contends that "actions of government in housing cannot be neutral about segregation;" therefore, incentives to build new housing in "already segregated neighborhoods in the hope (usually a vain one) that their projects will revitalize deteriorating areas" do not reverse segregation and racial wealth disparities but, in fact, exacerbate them. This exacerbation is exemplified in the impacts of

Urban Renewal policies on low-income communities of color where an estimated 1,600 neighborhoods were demolished (Thompson Fullilove 2004). As we understand the ways that people are “rooted to place,” we can better address inequitable housing policies and practices by linking personal connections to place with data-informed political practice (Thompson Fullilove 2004).

Needing empirical data to frame the community’s conversations of change to spur investment, the Community Revitalization Partnership Committee of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia (CRPCUSA) reached out to Wofford College researchers to support their endeavors. Because the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhood organizations had long since been advocating for change at the county level prior to the start of our research, we designed a mixed-methods study in which we could create dialogue between quantitative statistical data and existing qualitative neighborhood narratives. Storytelling, or the sharing of lived experiences and struggles, creates a contextual backdrop for using quantitative data as a tool for advocacy. Centering the voices of residents, our qualitative data collection methods include (1) surveys, (2) interviews with neighborhood residents, city/county officials, and housing experts, (3) van tours with neighborhood leaders and residents, employing participatory-storytelling methods (van leaders each chose locations central to a narrative that illustrated their relationship with the Una, Saxon, or Arcadia communities. Through van tours, we learned locations of unofficial neighborhood boundaries, historic structures that no longer exist, previous sites of community gathering, and sites of passed generational trauma), (4) archival research at the Spartanburg County Downtown Library, (5) participatory neighborhood workshops, or ‘Community in Conversation’ sessions with residents, and (6) participatory mapping workshops comparing youth and adult perspectives. Quantitatively, the data we obtained was analyzed and compared using cluster analysis and density maps created with ARCGIS Pro. In total, our research team surveyed over 500 homes in the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhoods, interviewed more than 30 individuals, and

consistently drew crowds of fifteen to thirty or more individuals at neighborhood workshops.

## Property of the Past

In 1902, John A. Law Sr., a northerner with an English background, was the sole owner and developer of Saxon Mill — a textile mill on the outside edge of Spartanburg’s city limits. The mill village surrounding Saxon Mill became known solely as Saxon, a name reminiscent of Law’s English roots. Once constructed, the mill structure had weaving rooms, a grade school, and mill village store. Polly Foster, a former employee of Saxon Mill recalled the wide dirt roads and weatherboarded houses covering the village (Leonard 1983). In 1910, it was reported that 87% of southern mill workers lived in mill villages, not necessarily by choice but because of the low wages provided by mill work (Teter 2002). Towards the latter half of World War I, Saxon residents documented the creation of “community organization, which called for monthly ‘town meetings’ where residents discussed subjects pertaining to the good of the community and appointed committees of residents to try to act upon the ideas” (Teter 2002). Historical records point to Saxon being a connected community (Leonard 1983; Teter 2002). Holidays were celebrated by backyard gatherings of neighbors and fruit, nuts, and candy provided by the Law family. Historian Michael Leonard (1983) describes the Law family frequently welcoming large families with children into the low-rent homes in the village. Neighbors gathered frequently on porches for prayer meetings and hymnals; people congregated, waiting for the church doors to open. Teter writes, “regardless of circumstance, it was the sheer act of visiting that bound mill villages together. As a retired Saxon worker later put it, ‘we visited each other, we talked to each other, we were concerned about each other.’” This same nostalgia prevails today in the last remaining generation of mill village children living in the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia area.

During the same time, the Ligon family, originally from the midlands of South Carolina, were well-respected businessmen looking for further investments at the turn of the 20th century. Having already founded the American

National Bank in Spartanburg and dedicated much of his life to the profession of pharmacy, H. A. Ligon partnered with the Manning and Cleveland families to start the Arcadia textile mill in 1903. Ligon's wife is credited with naming the mill after the "undisturbed beauty," which reflects Arcadia's definition as a "region of simple and quiet pleasure" (Marriam-Webster 2022). The mill was quite successful, opening with an estimated 300 looms and 12,000 spindles. These numbers tripled before the year 1915. Within this 12-year period, 300 mill village houses were constructed in Arcadia, half of which were built in the era of the Mill's grand opening followed by a second wave of construction in 1920. Expansion of the mill to a secondary location, situated right across the street from the original plant, began in 1923. Both Arcadia and Saxon Mill produced profits well into the early 50s, with a short lull in cash flow signaled by the Great Depression.

While the mills projected continued profits, the textile industry declined, and with it, mill village life. In *Textile Town*, Teter (2002) submits both the Saxon and Arcadia Mills were sold to new investors a few decades after first opening; Saxon Mill, purchased by Reeves Brothers, and Arcadia Mills, purchased by Fred Dent, were never the same. Following the end of World War II, Dent made a move to sell the mill village houses to current employees and potential investors. In the fall of 1950, all 300 homes were inspected and reported to be in sub-standard condition. Almost every home required foundational and exterior work before it could be sold. Barely taking the inspection report into consideration, Dent sold the houses in the spring of 1951 (Teter, 2002). Many of the houses were purchased by current or former mill employees who rented the houses from Mayfair Mills, while the remainder were sold to investors as rental properties.

Una's neighborhood history is distinctly different from that of Saxon and Arcadia. Una, settled in the early 1900s, is a community situated between two major rail lines. Men in Una worked in the surrounding textile mills, railyards, and farms, while women stayed home to tend to children's education and family gardens. A common saying among its residents today is that 'Una' is an acronym for "U need

anything?" While this may seem friendly and charitable, the slogan refers to Una being a haven for anyone interested in drugs, alcohol, or sex. Though residents state the neighborhood was not always this way, Spartanburg historian and *Textile Town* author, Betsy Teter (2002), states, "The community of Una was founded by immigrants from the mountains who worked at local mills but didn't like the rules associated with living in the villages. During the strikes of the 1930s, many blacklisted workers found refuge there." And, while a community opposing the norms of mill village life does not necessarily equate to the present-day prevalence of substance abuse and sex work in Una, it is interesting that even in the early days of its origin, Una was presented as a neighborhood that actively opposed traditional social conventions.

In more recent history, the Spartanburg County Consolidated Action Plan, published in 1998, outlines the specific budgets for projects across the county meant to increase the quality of life for all residents. Found under the 'Goals' section of the Consolidated Action Plan (1998), Spartanburg County states, "The prospects of a better for all, and a social and physical environment void of poverty is not only laudable, but attainable if it has the full support of the county" (1-26). Based on archival research and review of 100 years of Spartanburg County government records, reports, and histories, we determined Una was recognized, for the first and only time, as a priority area for neighborhood revitalization by the county. Recognizing a need for infrastructure improvements, \$100,000 of the county's \$1.6 million budget went toward the creation of sidewalks and repaving roads. Stop the Violence, a national non-profit with a branch located in Una, received \$20,000 for the promotion of safety among Una residents. The revitalization plan directly recognized Una as a 'high crime community.' Although well-intentioned, the funds distributed in Una did very little to satisfy residents' needs. In an interview an employee of the County stated, "We were able to do a lot of work in Una. We built 2 new homes, did an extensive amount of housing rehabilitation, partnered with Habitat for Humanity, made improvements to roads, did sidewalk repair, built the Una Fire Station,

assisted non-profits in the Una area [monetarily], and held clean-up days.” Contrastingly, in a neighborhood coalition meeting the week prior, neighborhood residents complained that the county “built a few sidewalks and left” in the early 2000s. In the same meeting, our research team learned of several different leadership groups that have been working in Una since the 90s, all focused on creating positive change in the spirit of the community. Spartanburg County had not again invested in the Una, Saxon, or Arcadia neighborhoods until the renovation at the Arcadia Mill — a project labeled as gentrification by many community residents.

With properties across the three neighborhoods falling into disrepair, one must consider both the historic and current investments made in the housing stock by both public and private ownership. Private ownership by textile mill companies created a neighborhood environment in which residents were reliant on the mills to fulfill community needs. As described by Teter (2002) and Leonard (1983), mill village residents looked to the mill for neighborhood grocery stores, churches, recreational and holiday gatherings, and even elementary education. When the textile industry owners sold their properties to private landlords, residents lost the vital heart of the community structure. Spartanburg County has invested in the neighborhoods when intervention was deemed necessary, like in the early 2000s during the Stop the Violence movement. However, County investment has done little to impact residents in tangible ways that progress neighborhood equity or upward economic mobility. Each new residential development project in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, funded either publicly or privately, impacts property value, amongst other things, and changes the affordability for long-time residents. Thus, another reason why neighborhood leaders are interested in defining the future of housing and equity in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia.

## Impacts of Abandoned and Condemned Properties

An interview with Spartanburg County Environmental Enforcement Officer clarifies the

difference between homes labeled unfit versus those labeled as condemned — both ‘unfit’ and ‘condemned’ structures appear on the County’s official condemnation list. ‘Unfit’ homes have no power or water, bug or rodent infestation, minor weather damage, or have been damaged in minor fires. While these properties are unfit conditions to support human life, the structure is not an imminent danger. Nelson explained these homes are easily repaired and quick to move off the condemnation list. Conversely, properties marked by the term ‘condemned’ are properties with structural damage and pose an imminent threat. In this circumstance, it is illegal to enter the property, unless you are permitted to rebuild the home. Whether officially condemned or perceived abandoned, survey data indicates that 78% of participants are negatively impacted by the substandard condition of structures in their neighborhood.

In August of 2022, Una, Saxon, and Arcadia had a combined total of 48 officially condemned structures. Within Spartanburg City limits, there were 118 condemned structures, while outside city limits there were 313. Una and Arcadia, being completely unincorporated, contributed 8 structures each to the county’s total. Saxon, on the other hand, has land located both in and outside Spartanburg city limits. To avoid confusion, our findings refer to Saxon as two unique neighborhoods: Saxon-City and Saxon-County. Each division of Saxon had 16 condemned structures for a combined total of 32. 1.68% of the total land parcels in the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhoods are condemned whereas 2.55% of land parcels are condemned in Saxon alone. Because Una, Saxon, and Arcadia are geographically smaller when compared to other neighborhoods across Spartanburg, there were 7.75 condemned homes per square mile in the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia area combined. To put this in perspective, it takes the average person between 15 and 22 minutes to walk one mile. In high opportunity neighborhoods, or neighborhoods whose proximity to resources promotes economic mobility, it is unheard of to walk for 15 minutes and pass approximately 8 condemned structures, but in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia this is a daily reality (HUD 2020).

When houses across Una, Saxon, and Arcadia fell into disrepair slowly throughout the 90s and 2000s, community leaders made a push for the condemning of homes in unlivable conditions. However, we believe the count of condemnable properties to be underestimated. The process of condemning a home is vulnerable and exposing. In interviews, neighborhood residents report transience is high, with some landlords charging rent by the week. Neighborhood fire-fighters, community health workers, and residents all report the conditions of such rental properties to be substandard and hazardous. If you were to report your landlord for a safety violation, and your home becomes condemned, where do you go? How difficult will it be for you to quickly find a new home? The price of rent is not the only factor influencing a family's ability to find quality, affordable housing if their home is condemned. Proximity to job opportunity, transportation access, family stability, and access to neighborhood resources are all at stake. For Arcadia resident Darius who rents a mobile home by the week, he fears reporting his landlord for the large holes in the bathroom floor, leaving the house exposed to insects and rodents, would cost him his security deposit, his home, and potentially his connection to reliable transportation.

Residents attribute increased drug use, homelessness, and prostitution since the late 80s to the reality of living alongside deteriorating structures. These are just three of the many negative impacts 78% of research participants reported experiencing in relation to abandoned and condemned properties. One fire fighter in Una went as far as to say the station never refers to a structure as "unoccupied" because of the homeless population circulating through Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. In December of 2012, what was left of the abandoned Saxon Mill was burnt to the ground. Una Fire Department Chief Jeff Hadden, a lifelong Saxon resident and student at the mill's elementary school in the early 70s, was on duty when the mill caught fire. Newspaper headlines across Spartanburg speculated the cause of the fire, fought by an estimated 100 firefighters, was suspicious. While news outlets never published a cause of the fire, conversations with Chief Hadden reveal a long

history of abandoned structures catching fire in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia as the homeless population tries to stay warm in the winter months. Some residents confirm accounts of individuals experiencing homelessness seeking shelter in vacant homes near their home address, while others believe the properties to be drug houses and hot spots for prostitution. Abandoned and condemned structures in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia are distinctly connected to illegal activity and vagrancy.

While only 35.6% of survey respondents mention crime, drug use, homelessness, or prostitution in their responses, resident interviews provided more insight into the true neighborhood culture cultivated by illegal activity and the availability of structures open to the public. In an interview with a former Stop the Violence community organizer in Una, the neighborhood in the late 90s is described as a place for individuals who "do not want to be told what to do" and crossing the train tracks into Una meant someone could live freely, could live as they pleased. This cultural narrative mirrors Teter (2002)'s, as she describes Una's creation by those who were unsatisfied with the rules of mill village life.

While Teter (2002) does not explicitly describe Una as a dangerous or undesirable neighborhood, her analysis alludes to a prevailing spirit of lawlessness that could not be found in the bordering mill village neighborhoods owned and regulated by the mill companies. Her analysis, written in the era of the Stop the Violence campaign and increased neighborhood poverty, arguably helps to shape public perception of Una as a 'lawless' neighborhood. In life history interviews with Una residents, individuals recall family members creating a home in Una because of the proximity to industrial job opportunities. These interviews also point to the late 80s and early 90s as the first years of increased crime in Una. One resident recalled, "I then moved to Cleveland Street [in the 90s]. We were surrounded by drug users and drug houses. There were many encounters where people would come to my door asking for *what I owed them*. When I opened the door with my gun, they realized I wasn't the person they were looking for. People were killed on the street



here. When it rained, blood would come up from the pavement.” With violence and crime controlling the narrative of Una throughout most of the 90s, Una obtained a reputation amongst Spartanburg residents as an area where anything goes. Arguably, public perception of Una as a high-crime neighborhood does little to support community and county buy-in for necessary neighborhood investment.

Perhaps the nonconformist nature of Una is indicative of its historical origins, or perhaps, the perceived increase of homelessness and drug use over the past 40 years can be attributed to the hands-off nature of the county. The Environmental Enforcement Office describes their role as “compliance enforcement” and questions if it the local government’s responsibility at all to better maintain neighborhoods. Arguing for residents to utilize partnerships to create change, the officer interviewed spoke of self-compliance as the best way to keep neighborhoods safe and clean. Residents of the Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhoods actively oppose the policy and procedure of the Spartanburg County Environmental Enforcement Office. Participants of the first ‘Community in Conversation’ session engaged in group discussion of distrust, county neglect, and under the counter deals speculated to occur between landlords and county officials. They described Environmental Enforcement’s policies as apathetic and inaccessible, not conducive to transparency and clear lines of communication between residents and local officials. For community activists like Mary Sharp, calling the county to file a complaint becomes the start of a chain reaction of redirections and miscommunications. Despite county claims of investigating every potential code violation and preemptively inspecting mobile homes once a year, residents feel overlooked and forgotten. Our first participatory mapping workshop, hosted in Una, revealed the relationship between county officers and Una, Saxon, and Arcadia residents to often be hostile; one woman recounts the police laughing off her complaint of trespassing as they asked, “well, what do you expect? You live in Una.” The state of the housing stock is attributed to the neglect of the county and the exploitation of tenants by property owners.

## Property Ownership, Power, and Profit

Themes of ownership, investment, and value play a key role in understanding the geography of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. As individuals acquire more land than is sufficient or necessary, they accumulate more authority over physical space and resources. Neighborhood landlords, for example, arguably own more land/housing units than John Locke and other political philosophers would describe as sufficient for one individual in the scope of the common good. Often called ‘slum lords,’ rental property owners in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia are perceived by residents as neglectful. During the first neighborhood ‘Community in Conversation’ session, conversations connected neighborhood landlords with narratives centering money, power, and greed. “They have all the power in this neighborhood,” one resident said. Everyone clapped and audibly agreed. Residents, in this case, are referring to the power to dictate the neighborhood’s standard of living. Sustainability scholars refer to this property conflict as “conflict between private interest and the public good” (Green and Haines 2016, 3). While it is in the interest of the public good to provide and maintain quality housing, private interest maintains that property owners should invest the smallest amount of money for the largest amount of gain possible. This is where the breakdown between our ‘free market’ capitalist society and the paradigm of community sustainability begins to breakdown. Profit outweighing the public good acts as a barrier to achieving socio-economic equity. Research in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia considers the implications of disparities in property ownership on the common good.

Through interviews with Spartanburg-based real estate professionals, we attained understanding about the motivations of property owners in low-income neighborhoods. Put simply, there will always be a need for cheap housing, and property owners can capitalize on the vulnerability of poverty. Affordable homes will always provide a return on investment, regardless of their quality or condition, because there will always be families in need of affordable housing that have limited

options for mobility outside of their neighborhood. And, while property owners may simply be trying to provide for families of their own, they perpetuate the cyclical nature of decreasing property value and devaluing investment in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. If you know you can charge only \$400 per month for rent and make a profit each time, what incentive do you have to invest in the maintenance and upkeep of the home? Even if a landlord wanted to renovate or update housing, this would increase the property value and therefore the property taxes associated with that home; anyone charging affordable, unsubsidized rent will likely not turn a profit if property taxes were to increase. Ownership comes with power, and there is not yet a sustainable solution to regulating abuses of power in property management.

As Una, Saxon, and Arcadia residents collaborate to envision just and equitable neighborhood futures, community leaders recognize rental property owners as key stakeholders in the discussion. Identifying prevalent rental property owners in the neighborhoods is the first step in getting all key stakeholders to the table to discuss how to promote equitable neighborhood change. Our research finds that Una has the greatest number of rental properties compared to Saxon and Arcadia, with one family owning most of these rental properties. C.D. Buff and his sons, Clifford and Ray Buff, are locals of Spartanburg. Between the family's two LLCs, Eye to Eye Rentals and Inman Realty, and the sons' individual property ownership, county tax assessor records show the Buff family owns a total of 175 land parcels in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. Land parcels in Spartanburg County can potentially house multiple houses, structures, or mobile homes. In both Una and Saxon, the Buff family owns more land parcels than any other rental property owner in the neighborhoods, proving them to be an integral part of the neighborhood's social ecology with great influence over the neighborhoods' futures.

In 2001, Philadelphia researchers determined that physical distance between homes and condemned properties correlate to a net loss in property value (Bass et. al 2005).

While property value decreases, the purchase and renovation cost of condemned homes increases, and there is no longer an incentive for independent landlords to purchase single-family homes. Gentrification then becomes an imminent threat to neighborhoods and their histories as it becomes much more profitable for property management companies to acquire condemned lots for future large-scale residential developments. Gentrification degrades the social geography of a community, which Sarah Judson (2014) describes as the linking of place to community identity. In Arcadia, the site of Mayfair Mills, after sitting abandoned for a decade, has been repurposed into luxury lofts and apartments. The Mayfair Lofts website lists a pool, off-leash dog park, grilling area, fire pits, parking garage, and community arts center as amenities available to its residents. Once a site of community, the Mayfair Lofts now sparks controversy among Spartanburg residents. While renters in Arcadia struggle to find both quality and affordable housing in the area, the Mayfair Lofts works to gentrify the area, outpricing the individuals who have lived there for years.

To combat gentrification, the City of Spartanburg requires a small percentage of all new residential builds to be designated as 'affordable housing,' as defined by HUD. These new developments have been labeled 'mixed income' housing. Though Una, Saxon, and Arcadia are located within the greater County footprint, the prospect of mixed-income housing developments is not out of the question for the neighborhoods. As a response to the affordable housing crisis of the 2000s, many scholars lean into the mixed-income model of housing developments as solutions to cyclical poverty (Kleit 2005; Kontokosta 2013; Tach 2009). Pauline Lipman (2009) argues mixed-income housing developments and policy are rooted in paternalism and perpetuate displacement, racial segregation, exclusion, and control. Specifically, Lipman (2009; see also Kleit 2005) draws upon the Hope VI pedagogy, or the idea that placing low-income families and students in proximity to middle-class individuals will raise poor individuals to a higher social status, to explain how hierarchical belief systems such as this give rise to exclusionary practices that continue racist and classist

segregation. Lipman (2009)'s biggest critique is that the creation of mixed-income developments in historically low-income neighborhoods is not done in collaboration with the individuals being displaced. Through our research in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia and across Spartanburg's neighborhoods, we have heard community leaders and residents criticize development that is done *to* their communities as opposed to *with* their communities. What outsiders see as a new apartment complex and economic opportunity, community members view as an imposition on their community sovereignty. Certainly, this critique of mixed income urban development is necessary to consider as many new developments in Spartanburg are advertised as 'mixed-income.'

With discourse of revitalization, renewal, and master plans sweeping through Spartanburg's neighborhoods, it is important to center residents' desires in all development choices. In a meeting hosted by Spartanburg's Northside Voyagers, a group of community residents who act as the steering committee for redevelopment in the Northside, one voyager recommends that all renewal with neighborhoods and their residents should be done with them, not to them. The Northside neighborhood, sharing a border with Saxon, experienced community-led revitalization over the past ten years. According to an interview with staff at the Northside Development Group, "There was a 50% vacancy rate in homes because of all the condemned and abandoned properties that were uninhabitable." Today, the east side of the neighborhood's percentage of parcels with condemned homes is less than one percent. The Northside succeeded in preserving the neighborhood's history and bringing visibility back to the once forgotten because of strategic investment and resident-driven redevelopment. Many community leaders in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia view the Northside as a model for community-driven redevelopment and hope to redefine property ownership across the neighborhood through similar strategies.

Following the elimination of abandoned and condemned properties, residents are interested in improving the existing market for affordable rental properties across Una, Saxon, and

Arcadia. Many attribute the neighborhood's overall decline to the poor management of rental properties after being sold by the mill corporations. Specifically, long-term residents believe neighborhood property owners to be "slumlords," with no interest in providing quality housing to neighborhood tenants. Referred to by a Una, Saxon, and Arcadia neighborhood resident as "the last heaven of affordable housing left in Spartanburg," rental property owners in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia have slim profit margins and little incentive to reinvest in their rental properties. This leads to a cycle of neglect in both the aesthetic and structural upkeep of the property. With decades of neglect by both property owners and tenants alike in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, residents across the neighborhood are, at best, experiencing a decline in their property value and, at worst, residents are living, playing, and raising families in substandard conditions with limited options for relocation. Alongside advocating for the removal of condemned structures, Una, Saxon, and Arcadia residents identified quality affordable housing, affordable home upkeep, and lawn maintenance as valuable resources in the larger conversation on adverse landlord-tenant practices.

## Envisioning Ideal Futures: Linking the Personal to Place

Her words, like a time machine, transformed the quiet streets of Saxon into a living memoir of her past. There on Pioneer Place I listened in awe as she painted pictures of her childhood through storytelling. The place she learned to ride her bike, the route the school bus took on the way to school, the woods where she heard the local Klan chapter gather at night in the 70s — each are physical landmarks of distant memories now kept alive through nothing but experience. Angelia Edwards, a community health worker born in Saxon, South Carolina, continues to invest in her birthright community even after moving away from the neighborhood. In June of 2022, Angelia led our research team on a guided tour of Saxon, describing the neighborhood as she knows it. Despite her family's experiences of racism and systemic injustice in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, Angelia will forever refer to Saxon as home. As the Co-Chair of the College Park Neighborhood

Association, a subdivision within the Saxon neighborhood boundary, she advocates for resident-driven and informed neighborhood change and collaboration.

Like Angelia, many residents with generational ties to the mill-village communities in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia find themselves remembering the days of years past. Community nostalgia has played a powerful role in shaping the narrative surrounding steps forward in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. Individual life-history interviews with generational homeowners and participatory mapping workshops with current residents illuminated a collective narrative held in the community conscious in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. To residents, the 60s and 70s represent idyllic decades of neighborhood pride, community engagement, safety, and opportunity. Residents of the time recall sleeping with their windows open and doors unlocked, a stark contrast to life in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia in the 90s. When asked why he returned to Saxon in the 90s after leaving for a successful career in the Navy, local firefighter Tim Brown replied, "I came back because my mom was afraid to live alone. The neighborhood was a little different when I returned. It didn't fit the picture of the place where I grew up." Violent crimes in the neighborhoods were at an all-time high (Spartanburg County Consolidation Plan 1998).

The question remains: how can Una, Saxon, and Arcadia residents take pride in their homes, neighborhoods, and communities when so much of the neighborhoods' landscapes are entangled in complex dynamics of property, ownership, and governance? Through monthly neighborhood association meetings and additional topic-specific committees, neighborhood leaders and residents are engaged in the process of place-based organizing to envision and establish ideal neighborhood futures. Often, these meetings bring about discussions of community nostalgia, identifying experiences that allow residents to remember the streets of Una, Saxon, and Arcadia as lively, vibrant neighborhoods. The recent allocation of \$1 million in federal ARP funds from Spartanburg County for the demolition of condemned structures in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia has

neighborhood leaders eager to continue to advocate for housing equity in their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood investment has a profound impact on the housing stock, identity, and well-being of a community. In Una, Saxon, and Arcadia investment, or lack thereof, correlates to an abundance of abandoned and condemned structures. Residents express feeling unsafe in relation to condemned properties and are fearful of drug use, homelessness, and prostitution growing. Although it is difficult to pinpoint a singular cause or entity responsible for the state of disrepair and disconnection in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia, everyone has a part to play in reshaping the future. Meaningful partnerships committed to achieving population-level goals in terms of creating intentional, place-based community development are necessary for building a sustainable Una, Saxon, and Arcadia. Residents' voices must be centered and amplified to truly recapture the neighborhood identity so many feel has been lost. Creating a sustainable future requires innovative solutions to complex problems. The work in Una, Saxon, and Arcadia is far from over; I would argue it is just beginning.

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