



The Impact of I-65 and I-85 In Montgomery, Alabama

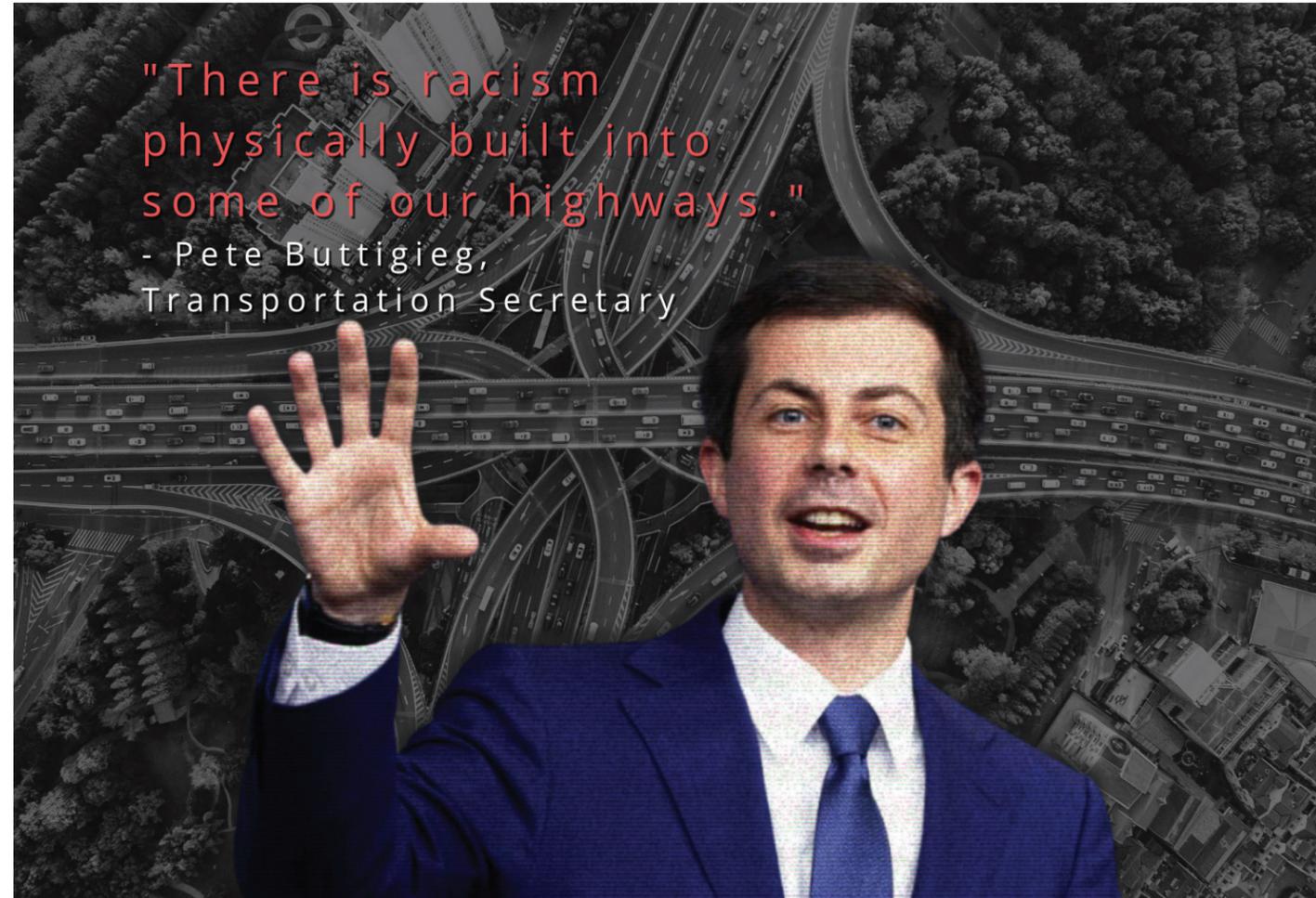
Kayla Heard



THE INTERSECTION OF RACISM AND THE TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

How the I-65/I-85 Exchange Dismantled the Black Community

Kayla Heard



"There is racism physically built into some of our highways."

- Pete Buttigieg,
Transportation Secretary

An image of Transportation Secretary, Pete Buttigieg depicting his views on the history of public transportation infrastructure in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

On April 6th, 2021 in an interview with the Grio transportation secretary, Pete Buttigieg, succinctly stated, "There is racism physically built into some of our highways". This statement ensued a huge debate amongst politicians and U.S. Citizens alike. Upon further investigation one can evidently see the validity in Buttigieg's statement.

Interstate and highways are a major part of our society, and take us from the west coast of California all the way to the east coast of Virginia. The history of mass interstate and highway construction in the United States began in 1956 when the Interstate Highway

Act was passed under President Eisenhower's term. \$26 billion dollars was used to build 41,000 miles of interstates and highways across America. The federal government funded 90% of the project while state governments paid the remaining 10% of the cost. According to President Eisenhower, the purpose of these new roadways was to eliminate dangerous and inefficient traveling routes and provide "speedy, safe, and transcontinental travel." The Interstate Highway Act is considered President Eisenhower's greatest domestic achievement.¹

¹ Deborah N Archer, "White Men's Roads Through Black Men's Homes": Advancing Racial Equity Through Highway Reconstruction," *Vanderbilt Law Review* 73, no. 5 (October 2020): pp. 1259-1330

However, this great achievement did not benefit all citizens. State governments were allowed to decide how and where they wanted the infrastructure to be built, and during a time of racial tension, some states used this act to further encourage segregation and racism. As a result many communities were divided and destroyed. Today we will be exploring how major public transportation infrastructure affected Black neighborhoods during prejudice and racist times in the Southern state of Alabama.

CONTEXT

One of the cities negatively affected by the interstate system is Montgomery, Alabama. As a whole, Alabama is recognized as the home-place of the Civil Rights Movement, but Montgomery played the most pivotal role. Montgomery is the place where in 1955 Rosa Parks started the Montgomery Bus Boycott movement after refusing to move from her spot on the bus for a white man. It is also the place where Dr. King ended the 54-mile Selma to Montgomery march. The march was organized to protest voting right injustices for Black people.²

The Black churches were the center of the movement. Not only was the church a meeting place for protesters, but it was also a place of refuge. It provided spiritual, emotional, and moral support. People could fully express their thoughts and feelings. The church was also the place where people found out information pertaining to protest and marches.³ In Montgomery there were many churches that participated in the movement, including the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, Holt Street Baptist Church, and First Baptist Church.

According to a current Black resident of Montgomery, the Black community was truly unified during this era. Black people had everything they needed in their own communities, but they knew the importance of having the same political freedoms as White citizens. They would protest until they received them.

² "Civil Rights Movement in Alabama." *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Encyclopedia of Alabama. Accessed October 10, 2021. <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/s-121>.

³ Smith, Maria. "Churches Pivotal to the Civil Rights Movement to Visit Today." *Explore Georgia*. Explore Georgia, October 2018. <https://www.exploregeorgia.org/things-to-do/list/churches-pivotal-to-the-civil-rights-movement-to-visit-today>.



Photo : Getty Images | Black people fought for the right to be equal citizens. This is an image of Rosa Parks, unlawfully at the time, sitting in front of a white man on the bus.



Photo : Bill Hudson/Associated Press | There was much police brutality occurring during peaceful protest. In this image a police dog attacks a black man.



Photo : Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons | The Civil Rights Movement was successful due to the strong sense of unity. This image depicts people of all walks of life young/old and black/white singing together in unison.

THE CAUSE : THE MAN WITH THE PLAN

State and local agencies had control of where the interstate and highways were placed. During the time the Interstate Highway Act was passed Sam Engelhardt was the Director of the Alabama State Highway Department. He held this position from 1959-1963. He was a prominent and respected Montgomery attorney and an Alabama State Senator from 1954-1958. According to some citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, Sam Engelhardt, “[Came] from an established family in Montgomery. Everyone [he was mentioned] to said that he is a person to be considered respectable and that he commands prestige in the community.” However, these views were only held by a certain group of people. ⁴Engelhardt was also a leader of the White Citizen’s Council and had a known history of segregating communities.

In 1957, Engelhardt was instrumental in the creation of Law 140 which is also known as the Tuskegee

⁴ Burns, Stewart. Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott. United States, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012.



Gerrymandering Act. Tuskegee, Alabama had around 4,600 Black citizens that represented around seventy percent of the city’s population. Around 400 of the citizens were registered to vote. Engelhardt single-handedly redrew Tuskegee’s city lines, and within the new city limits there were only twelve Black eligible voters.⁵

As a fierce pro segregationist, Engelhardt also used his position as director of the Highway Department to decimate the Black community in Montgomery, Alabama, when he planned I-65 and I-85. His strong racist views were his primary motivating factors to join politics. He had inherited plantations that were worked mostly by poor Black farmers, and wanted to ensure that they wouldn’t “take his land”. Engelhardt saw the unity within the Civil Rights Movement and the NAACP as a threat to the white citizen’s lives. In his opinion Black people caused problems in “nice white towns”, and need to be dealt with succinctly.

Engelhardt openly stated, “ Damn niggers stink. They’re unwashed. They have no morals; they’re just animals. The nigger is depraved!” ⁶Engelhardt certainly had no intentions separating his personal views from politics, and in 1965 the interstate construction

⁵“A Right to Vote Vs. A Gerrymander.” LIFE 43, no. 4, July 22, 1957.

⁶ Bagley, Joseph Mark. “School Desegregation, Law and Order, and Litigating Social Justice in Alabama, 1954-1973.” Dissertation, ScholarWorks at Georgia State University, 2014.

"We will have segregation in the public schools or there will be no public schools."

"I STAND FOR WHITE SUPREMACY SEGREGATION."

Above is an image of Sam Engelhardt, and to the right are a few quotes of his. Engelhardt was a known pro-segregationist. “I stand for white supremacy segregation” was printed on his campaign cards for state senate.

began.

THE EFFECT : THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Construction would soon begin, but not without opposition. The people in the Black communities fought back to save their businesses and homes. In 1961, a prominent minister of the Black community, Reverend George Curry sent a petition containing 1,150 signatures to highway officials on all levels: federal, local, and state, protesting the pathway of the new interstate. At the time it was estimated the interstates would destroy 600 Black homes, so an alternate route through mostly vacant land was proposed. Reverend Curry argued that the purpose of the interstate was to uproot and dismantle communities with prominent Black leaders.

The church, which was a very important aspect of the Civil Rights Movement, was also a target. According to Reverend Curry, Sam Engelhardt stated his intentions to target Ralph Abernathy’s church. Ralph Abernathy, who was a close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., also joined the efforts to stop interstate construction through predominantly Black neighborhoods. He sent a telegram to President John F. Kennedy in October of 1961. The Black opposition did help stall interstate construction, but ultimately it was unsuccessful. Rex Whitton, the Federal Highway Administrator, told Engelhardt to allow the Black citizens to calm down first, then proceed with the construction of the project.⁷

In total the interstate displaced around 1,700 citizens and many businesses. People were given so little money for their homes and properties that some were

⁷ Mohl, Raymond A. “The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt.” PRRAC. Poverty & Race Research Council, 2002. <https://www.prrac.org/pdf/mohl.pdf>.



From left to right : Rev. Curry, Dr. King, and Albernathy

Photo : Public Domain

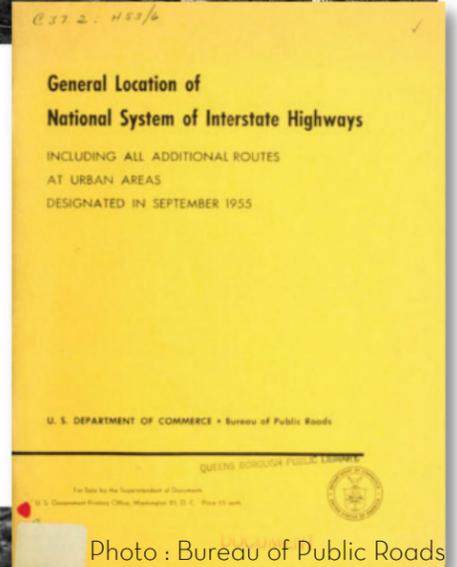


Photo : Bureau of Public Roads



Photo : courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History

The images above show the start of construction of interstate 85 in Montgomery. Large areas of land have been cleared out, and one can clearly see the destruction of the community. The yellow book depicted above was created in 1955. In the book an alternate route, disturbing less communities, is proposed, but ultimately ignored.

Photo : Taken by Kayla Heard



Photo : Taken by Kayla Heard

left homeless.

THE ONGOING ISSUES

Today this is what some of the Black communities look like. Aside from the historical homes (like the Dexter Parsonage House or the Dr. Richard Harris house, which sits a few blocks away) many of the homes are dilapidated.

The striking images to the left show the current status of the surrounding neighborhoods.

The caption of the sign on the white house: "To the youth: A brief moment of our history was in chains, that is not your future. Don't give your life away to the prison system. Stop the unnecessary shooting, killing, and robbing. No excuses, there's always another way."

Although there are many other causes of the destruction of the Black communities, the interstate was one of the first major steps.

Walking down the streets, as they are now, it is hard to imagine a lively community.

According to residents of the area, the community was beautiful and bustling. There were many spaces of leisure created by Black people, specifically for Black people. Today parts of the community is barren. Large lots

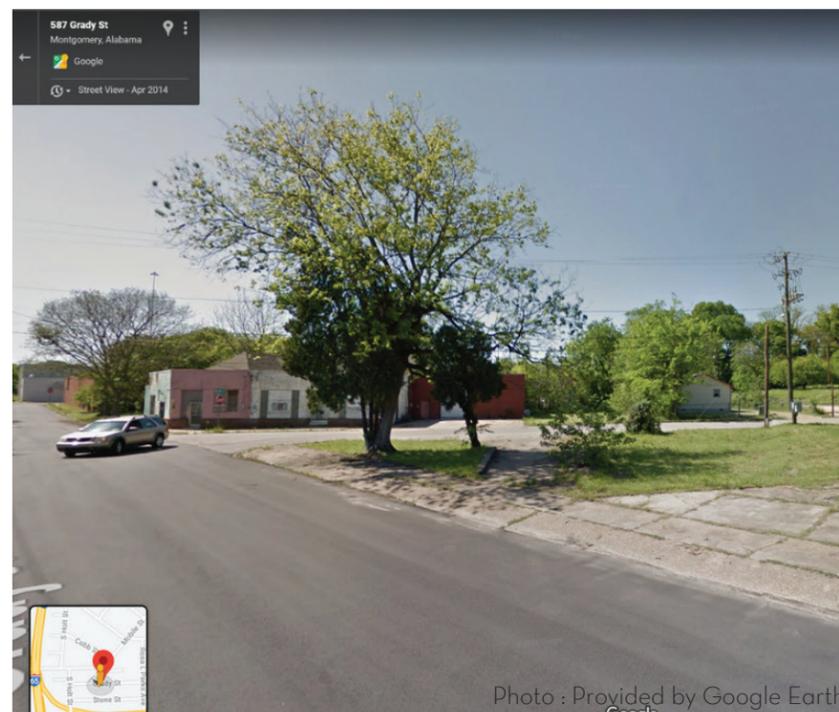


Photo : Provided by Google Earth



Photo : Provided by Google Earth



Photo : courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History

The magnitude of the interstate exchange is vast. Many homes and businesses were displaced due to the infrastructure being placed directly through existing neighborhoods that consisted of poor black families.

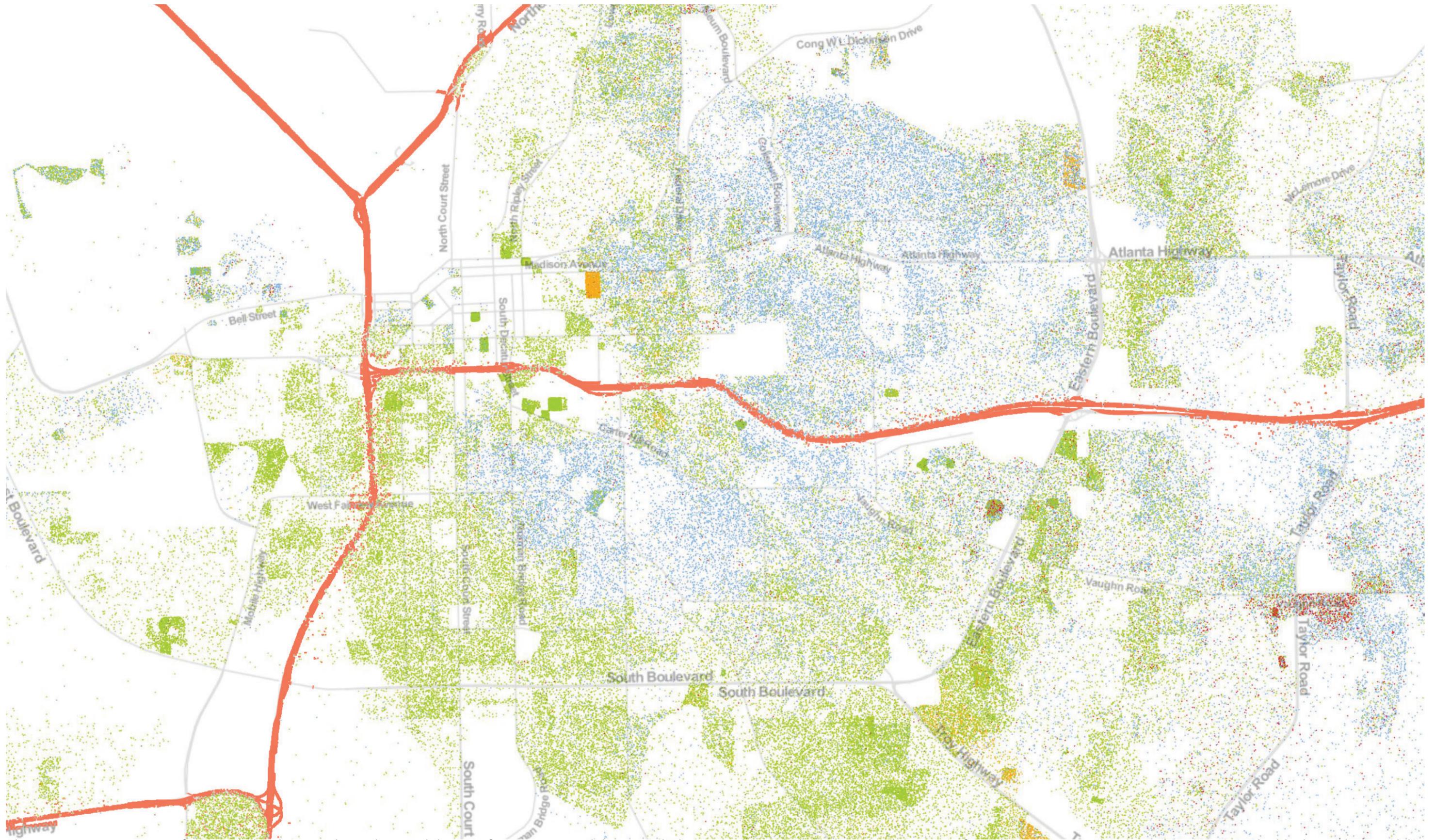


Photo : courtesy University of Virginia | This dot map shows the racial density of Montgomery, Alabama and where people resided in 2010. The data comes from the US Census. The green dots represent the black population, while the blue dots represent the White population. The red line depicts the interstates (I-65 and I-85) that go through the city. The interstate exchange, which is extremely large and disruptive, interrupts the majority black communities.



Photo : Taken by Kayla Heard



Photo : Taken by Kayla Heard

sit vacantly.
CONCLUSION

At the edge of these neighborhoods you can see the dead ends. These “dead end” streets is where the death of the community occurred. Beyond the overgrown plant-filled wall is the busy and bustling interstate system. The bushes and trees do not block much of the sound. The loud cars pass through all day and night. Even after all these years, there is still little solace.

Engelhardt changed the face of Montgomery and ultimately the lives of many Black families that lived there. This was truly a “dead end” for the community.

Today, these roadways are still being heavily used. According to the Alabama Department of Transportation, in Montgomery, Alabama approximately 180,000 cars a day drive on I-65 and I-85.⁸ There are many historically significant areas nearby. As more attention is placed on the Civil Rights Movement, more spaces are created to recognize the fight for equal rights.

The past can not be change, but it can certainly be acknowledged and embraced.

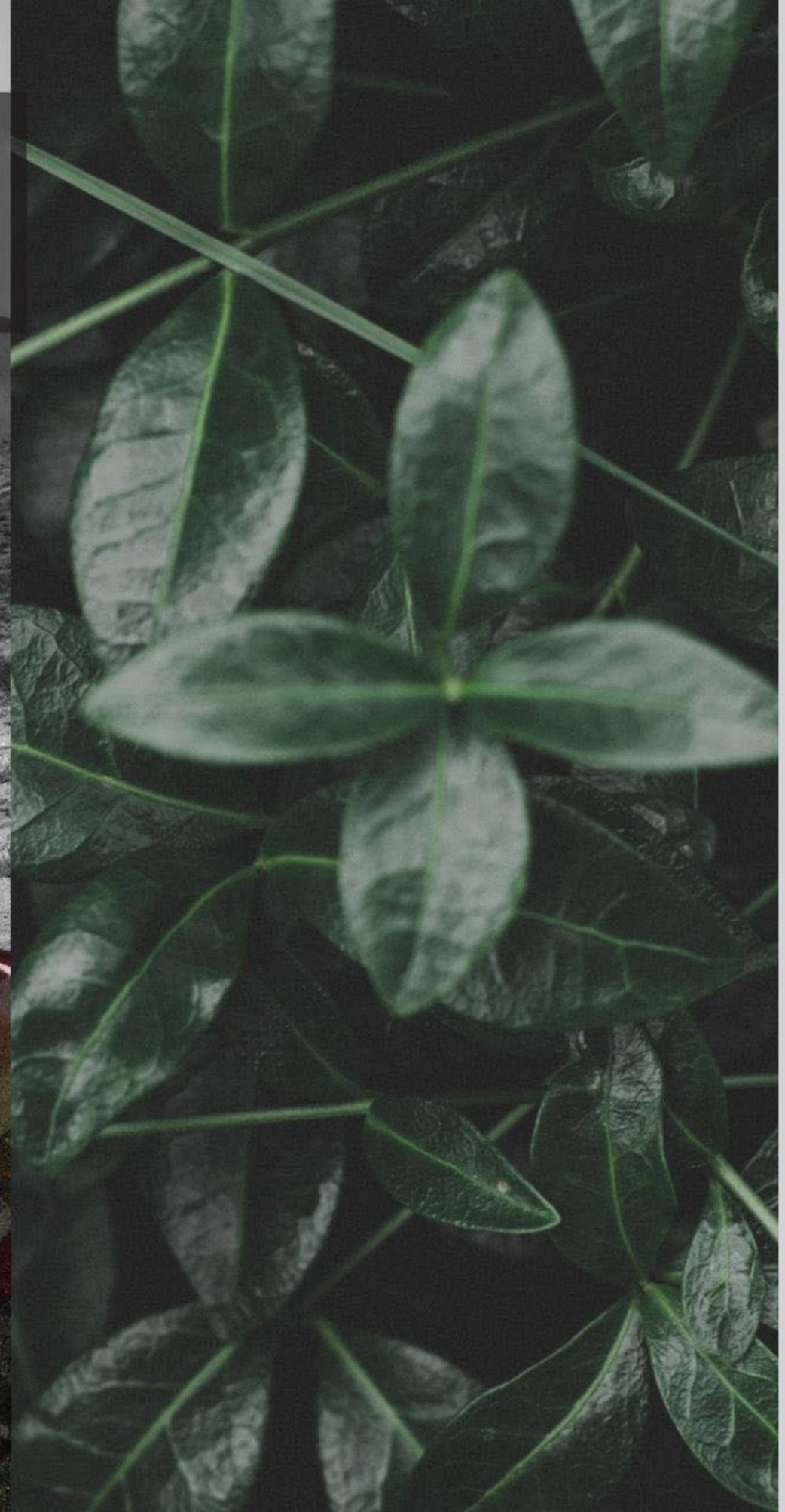
⁸ Yawn, Andrew J. “Neighborhoods Cleaved by Montgomery’s Interstates.” The Washington Times. The Washington Times, March 17, 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/mar/17/neighborhoods-cleaved-by-montgomerys-interstates/>.



Photo : Taken by Kayla Heard

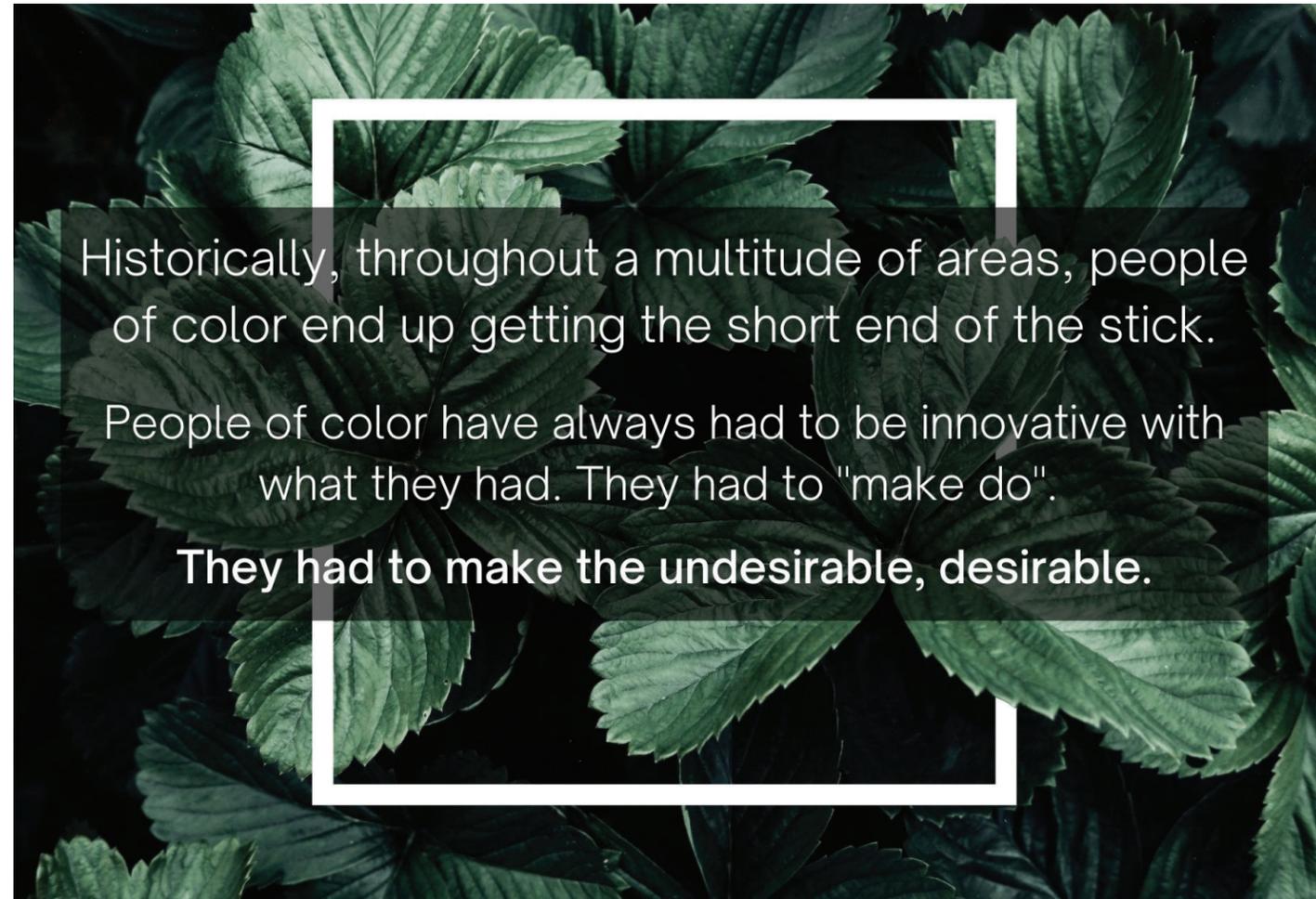
Making Undesired Black Spaces Desirable Again

Kayla Heard



THE DESIGN

Making the Undesirable, Desirable



Historically, throughout a multitude of areas, people of color end up getting the short end of the stick.

People of color have always had to be innovative with what they had. They had to "make do".

They had to make the undesirable, desirable.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout American history black people have been abused, neglected, and ignored a countless amount of times throughout multiple areas of life. This is extremely evident with the building of both Interstate 65 and 85, and it's intersection in Montgomery, Alabama. The interstate was built during the height of the Civil Rights Movement by a staunch self-proclaimed segregationist and racist named Sam Engelhardt. The interstate ripped through the heart of the black community with the sole purpose of destruction. Over a thousand people had to relocate. Some families who were already poorer weren't even paid what their land was worth. Without any decent compensation many were left without homes. Today the damage can still be seen, heard, and felt. The community is littered with dead ends. You can hear the cars racing on the adjacent interstate. One

can imagine the high amounts of pollution residents experience. There is a feeling of bleakness. This is the plight of black people in America.

The goal of this design project is to revive and re-energize this once lovely community through community-building spaces. The City of Montgomery is currently planning a Civil Rights Trail that passes right under the interstate intersection. This is not only a perfect opportunity to reconnect the community, but also a great opportunity to show the resiliency of black people to those who visit from around the world, thus making this project nationally and globally significant. The proposed project will include activated underpass spaces (equipped for walking and riding bikes, a small eatery, a tourist stop gift shop, and a community park.



Image depicting quilt made by African American. It is consisted of unique patterns and a variety of colors.

A quilt is such a beautiful and magnificent thing. It is a creation made with love from all the scraps of fabric that were left out. All of the misfits come together to create a functioning whole. To make a quilt is to take the undesirable and make it desirable. This is what black people in America have always had to do. During slavery black people were given the scraps of everything including food, building materials, and fabric. Although they were given the worst pieces that wouldn't stop them from creating beauty. Talented black seamstresses would make clothes for their owners. Then they would take the scraps home and with pure talent sew them together to create blankets to stay warm during the cold winters.¹

¹ Breneman, J. A. (n.d.). African American quilting: A long rich heritage. Women Folk. Retrieved December 1, 2021, from http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/afam.htm.

The chosen concept of this project is the magnificent quilt which is the symbol of sustainability, functionality, and resiliency. It is a symbol of hope that represents the progress and future success of the neglected black community. Activated and lovely spaces will thread through the destructive interstate to create a sense of unity once again.



Image of Harriet Powers "Bible Quilt"



Place for play

Art/Information

Place to sit

Walking trails

This precedent study is a perfect representation of what spaces need to be included in the underpass design. Lush plants, places to sit, sidewalks, art/information boards, and places for people to play need to be incorporated. The spaces need to be beautiful for those passing through, but they also need to be helpful to the surrounding neighborhoods.

CURRENT CONDITIONS



Image of the current surroundings of the interstate exchange. It is a blank canvas waiting for design intervention.



Image of the current surroundings of the interstate exchange. There are a few trees, but more landscaping is needed to beautify the area.



Image of unused buildings that currently sit on the proposed commercial area. Space is designated for a small eatery and a gift shop.



Image of unused land for the proposed community park. The plot of land used to be a sport's field for the former Loveless School, which sits to the right.



Commercial Zone With Small Eatery and Gift Shop

Landscape For Buffer From The Interstate



Yellow active area for walking or riding bikes



I-85

Future Civil Rights Trail

2

1

I-65

New Community Park With Playground



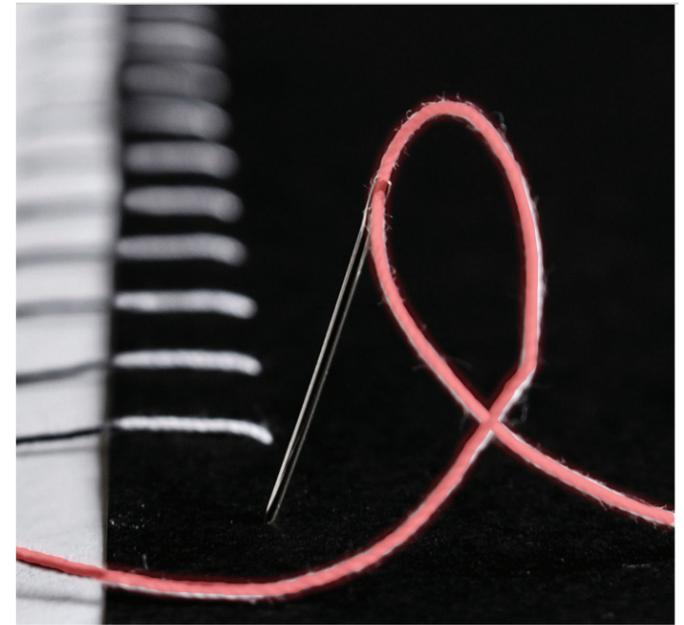
This plan reconnects the neighborhoods with lively community spaces.
1. Location of Future Welcome Sign
2. Location of Current Informational Marker



Red is the commercial zone, green is the proposed landscaping, yellow is the "active area" for walking and riding bikes.



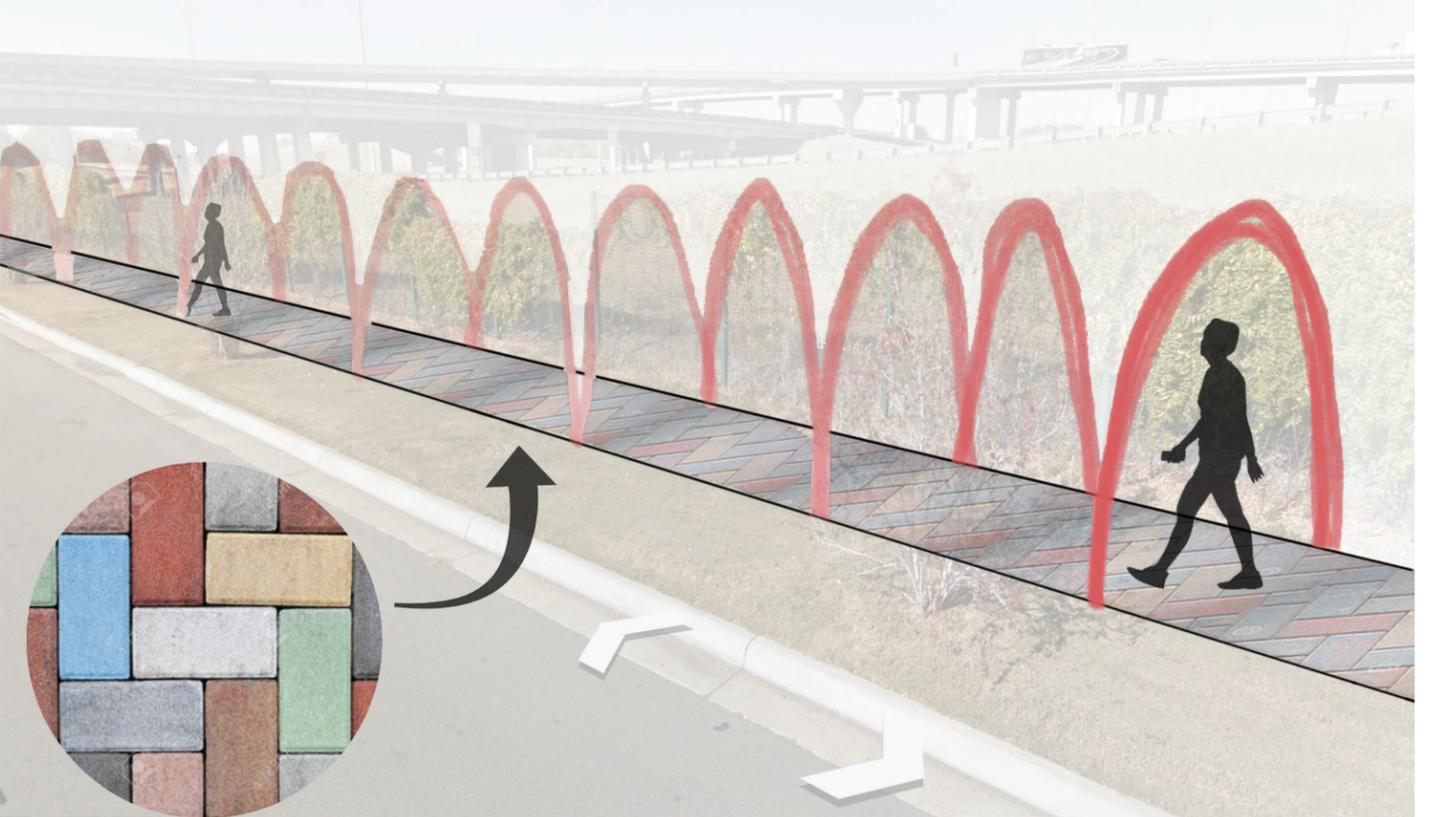
Image of a quilt made from scrap fabric pieces.



Color pavers line the pathway that sits under decorative curvacious structure depicted below. This structure is inspired by the image at the top most right of the page. The needle and thread and represents the sewing of the black community back together, while the pavers represent a quilt.



The quilt is a beautiful collage of different patterned fabrics. Artwork featured on the columns of the underpass are of quilt patterns. This artwork represents the desire for beautiful spaces through creativity and innovation.



The structure appears to weave in and out of the ground, much like a sewing motion.

WORKS CITED

Archer, Deborah N. "White Men's Roads Through Black Men's Homes' : Advancing Racial Equity Through Highway Reconstruction." *Vanderbilt Law Review* 73, no. 5 (October 2020): 1259-1330. <https://cdn.vanderbilt.edu/vu-wpO/wp-content/uploads/sites/278/2020/10/19130728/White-Mens-Roads-Through-Black-Mens-Homes-Advancing-Racial-Equity-Through-Highway-Reconstruction.pdf>.

Bagley, Joseph Mark. "School Desegregation, Law and Order, and Litigating Social Justice in Alabama, 1954-1973." Dissertation, ScholarWorks at Georgia State University, 2014.

Breneman, J. A. (n.d.). African American quilting: A long rich heritage. Women Folk. Retrieved December 1, 2021, from http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/afam.htm.

Burns, Stewart. *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*. United States, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

"Civil Rights Movement in Alabama." *Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Encyclopedia of Alabama. Accessed October 10, 2021. <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/s-121>.

Cusick Director, Julia, Julia Cusick, Director, Sam Hananel Associate Director, Sam Hananel, Associate Director, Claudia Montecinos Associate Director, et al. "The Role of Religion in the Civil Rights Movements." *American Progress*. Center for American Progress, June 9, 2004. <https://american-progress.org/article/the-role-of-religion-in-the-civil-rights-movements/>.

Mohl, Raymond A. "The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt." *PR-RAC. Poverty & Race Research Council*, 2002. <https://www.prrac.org/pdf/mohl.pdf>.

"A Right to Vote Vs. A Gerrymander." *LIFE* 43, no. 4, July 22, 1957.

Smith, Maria. "Churches Pivotal to the Civil Rights Movement to Visit Today." *Explore Georgia*. Explore Georgia, October 2018. <https://www.exploregeorgia.org/things-to-do/list/churches-pivotal-to-the-civil-rights-movement-to-visit-today>.

Yawn, Andrew J. "Neighborhoods Cleaved by Montgomery's Interstates." *The Washington Times*. *The Washington Times*, March 17, 2018. <https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/mar/17/neighborhoods-cleaved-by-montgomerys-interstates/>.