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Overtown: neighbourhood, change, challenge and “invironment”

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This paper explores how residents of Overtown, a low-income neighbourhood in Miami, Florida, view the positive and negative aspects of their neighbourhood “invironment” through photographs taken by residents. The “invironment” [Bell, M., 2004. An invitation to environmental sociology. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press] alludes to the interactions between environment/surroundings and the human body. Residents involved with a community social justice organisation were provided with a photographic workshop and cameras to visually document the positive and negative aspects of their neighbourhood. These participant photographers provided narratives paired with their photographs which were then exhibited at local community events. During the exhibits, community members’ comments on the photographs were recorded. This paper analyses community issues through both photographs and neighbourhood comments inspired by the photographs. The following themes of importance to residents were derived from the photographs and discussion with residents: Housing, Public Space, Neighbourhood Economy, History, Environmental/Invironmental Issues, Human Capital and Power. These themes were all connected by residents’ concerns about inequality in Overtown compared to other neighbourhoods in Miami.

**Keywords:** environment; Overtown; African-American; photography; neighbourhood

Introduction

In the shadow of downtown Miami, a historic African-American neighbourhood called Overtown struggles for a say in its future and improvement in the quality of life for residents. However, gentrification, development and real-estate speculation rapidly encroach on Overtown, accompanied by the threats of resident displacement and change of the neighbourhood beyond recognition.

This research sought to explore interrelated questions. First, how do residents of Overtown “see” their neighbourhood? Second, although Overtown is an urban neighbourhood, is there an interaction between social and environmental justice issues in the neighbourhood at any level? This question was based on previous research in the area of environment and social justice activism in local neighbourhoods performed by one of the researchers (Smith-Cavros 2009).

Brown et al. (2004) note that in neighbourhoods facing challenges, place attachments have important potential to stimulate neighbourhood improvements. Place attachment is strong for many in Overtown since some residents have a long and emotional history in the community, going back generations. However, outside of the Overtown community,
Many residents of Miami perceive Overtown in negative terms. The City of Miami’s own governmental website contained a press release discussing “eliminating slum and blight” in the Overtown area (Adderley 2009). Local governments have often seen increased development as a panacea in challenged urban neighbourhoods (Watson 2009). Building “improved” housing in a neighbourhood, however, is no guarantee that residents of that neighbourhood will benefit from that housing depending on its price and availability. Gentrification lauded by city officials in Overtown is not popular in all quarters. “Overtown residents and civic activists complain that nearby development... does nothing to revitalize their neighborhood” (Levin 2009, p. 4).

McKnight and Kretzmann (1996) note that there is a tendency to describe and classify low-income neighbourhoods by “their deficiencies and needs” (p. 3). They proposed that development should start with surveys of neighbourhoods and their residents to create “needs maps” and “assets maps” which would highlight both challenges and opportunities in the neighbourhood in map form. However, we were interested in using a tool that would be complementary to traditional methods like surveys and at the same time place direct and tangible power in the hands of community residents to explore, identify and operationalise positives and negatives within their own community. Wang and Burris (1997) pioneered the idea of “photovoice” noting its goals are “(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (p. 369). Warren (2005) also discusses how photography might help to amplify the voices of participants in qualitative research. We believe that photography is a tool that can augment community planning processes from the community’s street-level perspective, in a personal, creative and empowering way. It may also reveal or explain linkages between people and their environment that are not obvious from other standpoints. Photography of neighbourhood issues and its exhibition may also provide exposure and networking opportunities for community groups to affect actual change.

**Methods**

As researchers in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Division at Nova Southeastern University and at the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy at Florida International University, with previous research experience in Overtown (Smith-Cavros 2007), our intent was twofold. First, we wanted to examine how Overtowners (residents of Overtown) viewed their community. We sought to discover a wide view of how residents felt about their overall surroundings, what they perceived as positive and worth preserving in Overtown, and what they saw as negative and undesirable.

Second, we wondered if neighbourhood social issues interacted with local environmental issues. Gentrification is a social issue in many poor and minority communities and it can also be an environmental issue. For example, gentrification can mean that undeveloped lots or existing green space that neighbourhood children use to play become off-limits, it can mean increased vehicle traffic and emissions in a neighbourhood, and it can mean upscale business construction to support new housing units. Would social issues important to residents also be issues which could impact the neighbourhood environment in the eyes of residents? Our original focus was to ask residents about their “environment” to see if connected social and environmental issues were present.

The research team believed that using visual anthropology and qualitative methodology to consider these questions would allow people to look at their community through a literal and metaphorical lens and to speak more fully with their own voices. We also wanted to
combine visual data from the photographs/resident-photographers with their own narratives and the narratives of other residents. There is a several-decade history of researchers utilising participant photography in research. Wang and Burris (1997) combined visual and ethnographic data in photovoice and they describe it as a way in “which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (p. 369). Photography in research has also been used and discussed by others including Schwartz (1989) and McDonnell (2009) who notes that the use of photography by research participants in order to enhance collaboration is still replete with ethical dilemmas although it “remains a promising way to address some power issues inherent in ethnography” (p. 7). Sources such as Pink (2001) were consulted which describe challenges with visual research from subjectivity of analysis to ethical considerations and Prosser (2000) who described the “moral maze of image ethics” (p. 116). The resulting research proposal was IRB approved through our respective universities and researchers were granted non-exclusive permission by participants to use and exhibit all photographs taken during the project for educational purposes about the Overtown neighbourhood and related issues.

The research was done in partnership with residents who participated in a non-profit social justice grassroots organising group in Overtown called Power U Center for Social Change. Power U was founded as an environmental justice organisation in 1999 and early campaigns focused on improving the neighbourhood environment including successful efforts to reduce air pollution from a cement plant in the neighbourhood, to get sound barriers erected along the highway, and a collaboration with the local Greenpeace chapter to prevent the dumping of contaminated mud from a river dredging project in the neighbourhood. However, as the pressure from development increased and residents and Power U members were being increasingly displaced, the organisation recognised that the improvements they were winning were not benefitting residents who were being forced to leave the neighbourhood, and so they began to do anti-gentrification work. Some of the participants in our project had been involved with these efforts, and others had not.

The Overtown research was part of a larger project we designed in which similar participatory visual research was also performed in Little Havana, a Hispanic-American neighbourhood in Miami as well as in Homestead, Florida, a community with many Latin American migrant workers. However, this paper focuses only on Overtown as each neighbourhood project differed in approach and nuances as well, although all three projects were connected by using the question of neighbourhood “positives” and “negatives” and the concept of environmental and social justice issues as a starting point.

For our Overtown project we purchased inexpensive cameras and distributed them to 12 Power U participant photographers to facilitate a possible examination of neighbourhood issues, including potential social and environmental issues. By using a visual approach to this project, we attempted to accomplish several things. First, we hoped that residents would be able to identify and document positive and negative neighbourhood situations and issues. Second, we felt that the creation and exhibition of their own visual images would give residents a more public arena in which to discuss their neighbourhood. Third, we hoped to connect the aforementioned three projects for possible networking opportunities between neighbourhood social justice organisations from different parts of Miami-Dade County with linked neighbourhood photographs.

Through Power U we set up meetings with residents in Overtown who were recommended by the staff of the non-profit community organisation. The residents who would take pictures were, therefore, already neighbourhood activists. However, we wanted to get a broader issue perspective; so we decided to plan neighbourhood exhibitions of the resulting photographs in public spaces in Overtown so that less vocal, non-activist
residents also had a chance to submit comments on the photos and on neighbourhood changes they agreed or disagreed with. For the exhibits, we decided to interview the photographers to better understand why they took the pictures they did and to use quotes from these interviews for exhibit narratives.

We passed out cameras with film to 12 residents from teenagers to senior citizens. Most Overtown residents do not own cameras, so providing them for the participants was a necessity as well as a small benefit for participation. Each resident also received film for up to 72 exposures. In addition, since few of them had experience with photography, an afternoon workshop with a professional photographer and his assistant was also provided at Power U. The group talked for several hours about the “how to’s” of photography, its history and the ability of photography to reveal truths about people and neighbourhoods. The instructors included a look at examples of socially relevant photography such as that of Depression-era photojournalist Dorothea Lange. The photographer explained, “The picture you choose must be personal, move you. It doesn’t have to be technically perfect … the emotion of it is important … This is one way of being loud … through imagery.”

During the photography workshop we also introduced our research framework to participants. We asked them to photograph what they liked and did not like about their “neighbourhood environment”. We were clear that they were not limited to a narrow definition of “environment”.

All photographs were initially developed in 4 × 6 format and researchers sat with residents one-on-one to review the photographs and gather comments about what they represented. We then had two group meetings where residents shared their work with each other, and discussed the issues they brought up. Over the course of several months through this process we worked with participants to decide which two photographs were their “favourites” in terms of both quality and reflecting issues of importance to them and their community. The chosen photographs were then blown up to exhibit size 8 × 0 prints. We also interviewed the participating photographers about the photographs they took and their life experiences in Overtown, using their comments as part of our data set and also as narratives to present with the photographs in neighbourhood exhibitions of the photographs.

The resulting photographs with paragraph-long narratives comprising direct quotes from the participant photographers were exhibited in two Overtown locations. One exhibit was during the Sankofa land dedication. Sankofa refers to a mythical African bird that represents learning from what happens yesterday for tomorrow (Gamble 2009). The dedication ceremony referred to City of Miami-controlled land in Overtown which had been slated for a 220 million dollar project known as “Crosswinds” (after the developer) that would have included over a thousand condominiums (Torres 2005). Many Overtown residents protested against the project which they felt provided little chance of home ownership for neighbourhood residents due to cost. Eventually, the County stepped in and took back control of the property from the city and the project was halted. Overtown community organisers then sponsored Sankofa where over 100 community members gathered to “reclaim” and name their land. The photos were exhibited outside during that neighbourhood get-together on 26 January 2008. The second exhibition of photographs was during a community health fair on 29 March 2008 where neighbourhood residents came for free medical tests and educational exhibits.

At both of these photographic exhibitions, the researchers were present to continue the research with additional Overtown residents who were viewing the photographs for the first time. The two researchers stood by the photo exhibits with an oversized pad of paper and pens and an easel. After viewing the displayed photographs, Overtown residents were asked
to write (or tell the researchers, so the researchers could record their comments) “Things they Liked About Overtown” and “Things They Disliked” as well as any comments on the photographs themselves.

Later, we analysed the photographs, the interviews with the participant photographers and the exhibit comments from Overtown residents, to see what themes were demonstrated and shared in the photographs, the interviews and the comments recorded from residents who saw the photographic exhibits. This was accomplished through qualitative thematic analysis using concept maps and lists (Seale 2012, pp. 367–380). Seven themes were identified through the photographs, interviews and comments and will be discussed later in this paper.

Environmental justice and “environment”

The environmental justice movement began in the 1970s when communities of colour, especially black communities, began to call out the pattern of “environmental racism” that meant they bore a disproportionate burden from hazardous facilities in their neighbourhoods. In North Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, and other mostly Southern states where de facto segregation is still widespread, communities began challenging the siting of toxic waste dumps and polluting factories in black neighbourhoods (Lerda 2002). The seminal research by Bullard (2001) led to the conclusion that

All Americans, white or black, rich or poor, are entitled to equal protection under the law. Just as this is true for... education, employment, and housing, it also applies to one’s physical environment. Environmental discrimination is a fact of life... defined as disparate treatment of a group or community based on race, class, or some other distinguishing characteristic. (p. 7)

Central to the framing of environmental justice issues is the understanding that the environment is not just the domain of the “natural” which exists separate and remote from humans and needing protection from human activity, as it is in the traditional environmentalist–conservationist understanding of the environment (Taylor 2000) but that the environment is a human environment, or “where we live, work and play” (Turner and Wu 2002, p. 1). Taylor (2000) argues that an Environmental Justice Paradigm (EJP) has grown out of the struggles of communities of colour and so links environmental/ecological concerns with social justice concerns in a way that does not reject but extends more mainstream environmentalism. EJP reflects the experiences of being enslaved, forcibly removed from land, made to work under harsh conditions and otherwise controlled. Self-determination and civil and human rights are integral components of the EJP. Framing environmental problems as problems of racism elevated them to moral issues, and allowed those affected to connect environmental issues with the historical struggle for equality (Taylor 2000).

It quickly became clear in our exploratory research discussing environment with our participants that Overtown residents viewed the idea of “environment” in a broad way. This is not to say that specific “traditional” environmental issues have not been relevant in Overtown. Cement plants and power transmission lines near schools, park and recreation space, and community greenspace, and growth are all issues residents mentioned, photographed and/or have worked on. However, they did not generally fall into a separate category to the residents we worked with. Instead, these issues melded into the myriad issues that are present in the entire Overtown environment in a wider way. We desired a broader way to discuss people and environment and a more useful way to frame related
issues. Our research framework reflects this through the descriptive term “invironment” (instead of “environment”) as coined by Bell (2004) and Bell and van Koppen (1998). The concept of “invironment” is putting the idea of the human body and its interaction with and dependence on the conditions around it back into dialogue about “environment”. Bell notes that

\textit{invironment} refers to the inner zone of the environment, where we find the body in perpetual dialogue with the environment. Environmental issues, then, would be issues that concern the dynamics of that inner zone of dialogue, with health being perhaps the prime example. (2004, p. 127)

Where we can shop, the food we eat, what we can buy, the types of dwellings we rent, the neighbourhood we live in, the green space available, what goes into our bodies from pollution to illegal drugs, access to healthcare, grocery stores, etc … all reflect the idea of “invironment”.

These issues came up in our research with Overtowners who described challenges from lack of stores and food shops, to a shortage of low-income housing, to gentrification, to worries about recreation space and tenement-like indoor conditions. All of these affect health, welfare, quality of life and the environment [read invironment] of a given area. Evolving to this broader view (in our analysis and discussion of this research) that also aligns with environmental justice perspectives gave us a larger platform from which to frame our own examination of “invironmental injustice” and community issues. Readers are reminded every time they read the word “invironment” that it is inclusive of human issues. And most importantly, “invironment” seems to be descriptive of the way Overtowners described their situation.

**Overtown history**

In order to understand residents’ photographs and their concerns, it is necessary to understand the history of black residents and the significance of Overtown as a neighbourhood, from the early days of Miami.

Fields, Miami historian, writes:

When the decision was made to incorporate Miami as a city in 1896, black men were used as voters but later disenfranchised. Since the required number of white males registered voters did not participate, black male registered voters were used to reach the number required by state law to form a new city. Nearly one-third of the men who stood for the incorporation of the City of Miami were black. After helping Miami become a city, the black incorporators lost their civil rights to existing public policy. Residents of Overtown in the late 1800s were subject to Black Codes, which, in the 20th century, became Jim Crow laws, restricting the civil rights of black people in every phase of life throughout the South. (2002, p. 17)

Nonetheless, for many years, Overtown flourished as a cultural, economic and familial beacon for blacks in South Florida. It did this in an era of legal segregation, through a profusion of shops, businesses, restaurants and entertainment venues run by blacks, becoming known as the “Harlem of the South” (Dunn 1997).

Segregation ended and urban renewal, described as “Negro removal” by some residents, bulldozed its way through in the 1960s and 1970s. Construction of I-95 and I-395 through the heart of Overtown, beginning in the 1960s, shook the neighbourhood and “total forced displacement was estimated at 12,000 people” (Nijman 2011, p. 52) or up to 40% of its
population (Dluhy et al. 2002). In addition, “the large spaces beneath the elevated expressways swallowed up a large part of the area and turned it into a wasteland” (Nijman 2011, p. 52).

For more long years in the late twentieth century, Overtown persevered through drugs, violence and riots that made national headlines. Changes in welfare, sparse employment opportunities, construction and decreasing funds available for community social services also have taken their toll on the neighbourhood. While Overtown residents no longer face legalised segregation, the neighbourhood is still racially homogenous and most residents live below the poverty line. Seventy-five percent of residents are African-American and Overtowners have a median household income of $13,211.99 (City of Miami Planning Department 2012).

Lopez (2012) notes that “in Overtown, the median family income is about $13,000, with high school graduation rates hovering around 50 percent” (lines 23–25). Today, while many issues from the past contribute to challenges in the present, a seemingly new issue has joined them: gentrification. Overtown is one of the last remaining areas of affordable real estate within minutes of the central business district of booming Miami, Florida. While none of the other challenges have managed to disappear the neighbourhood, outside investors buying up the very ground beneath Overtown are a potentially potent threat to the community. In reality, this “new” issue is a continuation of the urban renewal policies that have caused the decrease in population of the neighbourhood since the 1960s. Pieces of land in Overtown have been held without development for decades by private owners who presumably are waiting for a better climate in which to sell their investment at a higher profit. The real-estate crash of 2008 and beyond temporarily halted much development in South Florida. However, some new “affordable” housing units have continued to be built, including in Overtown, although prices remain out of reach for the majority of Overtown residents (Olorunnipa 2011). What happens to the land and people in Overtown, whether historic buildings and historic family names will remain a part of Overtown in the future and whether residents will be forced to relocate to more affordable areas will be determined by the action (or inaction) in the present and in the immediate future.

The results
Residents who participated in this project photographed a wide variety of people, places and situations in their neighbourhood. Generally, residents expressed their frustration about perceived inequalities in neighbourhood issues noting the “only thing we need [in Overtown] is the same services they have everywhere else.” Another participant commented, “I love this community but nobody helps us do nothing.” The feeling that those in power have not listened and are not listening is expressed by a resident who said “Overtown needs help. There’s been a lot of mayors in the city of Miami. They all promise jobs, buildings, but they don’t do nothin.”

Seven themes were identified (through thematic analysis using concept maps and listing) in the interviews with participant photographers and from resident comments recorded during photographic exhibitions. Sometimes a single word or image was used to categorise themes (i.e. housing or an image of a house) while in other cases multiple words or images were used (i.e. for transportation: bus, car, bicycle, “by foot”). Quotes by participants are used to further elucidate the theme content and what they each signify.

The themes were: Housing, Public Space, Neighbourhood Economy, History, Environmental/Environmental Issues, Human Capital and Power. Housing was most often mentioned by participants (based on the number of mentions of the theme identifier
“housing” by participants) and most-photographed as a “subject”. This was followed by Human Capital (researchers looked for mentions of people and their capacity or limits) and Power (the term “power” or situations that exemplified its use or misuse). However, most of the themes overlap somewhat; therefore ordering all of the themes is, we believe, less important than understanding their inherent interrelatedness.

Each sub-section below discusses one of the themes and how it relates to interviews and comments by participants at the photo exhibitions as well as how that theme appeared in photographs residents took (as alluded to in their interviews/narratives and also as analysed by researchers from the content of the photos).

**Housing**

Residents commented at length about housing in Overtown, most often in regard to their concern and/or anger about encroaching gentrification. Participating photographers visually displayed how gentrification and housing challenges made them feel and interviewees and commenters at the photo exhibits described housing issues. Several resident-photographers took pictures of smaller, older Overtown buildings with modern buildings looming over them and getting threateningly closer. One photographer took a picture of a mural under an Overtown highway overpass which he entitled “Constructing Over Community” (Figure 1). The mural depicted the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz being squashed under a house with only her stocking-clad feet sticking out and a menacing highway overpass looming. When asked why he took this particular image, the photographer noted, “It’s the ‘Wizard of Oz’, which shows that a lot of people cannot afford condos and too much construction is being built

![Figure 1](image-url)  
*Figure 1. Constructing over community.*  
Photograph by Jabril Ivory.
right on top of us, crushing the Overtown community until there’s nothing left.” Other related photos included one entitled “Land for Sale” showing real-estate signs. The participant photographer said this depicted how the community could be “sold out” from under them. Several participants also took pictures of half-demolished buildings and vacant lots. One photographer entitled her photo “Boarded Up Housing That Could Be Lived In”. She noted that this particular public housing had been vacant for almost a year, indicating a frustrating lack of concern for the critical housing shortage in a neighbourhood where it is not unusual for families of five to share two or three rooms.

Another photographer provided the following narrative for a photo series he entitled “Gone Forever”, which showed three pictures of affordable housing before, during and after being bulldozed:

I took this photo because it reminds me of so much of what is going on in my community with public housing and low-income housing. It represents something we should keep, preserve, and restore. This destruction is something I do not like to see. The last occupant had to move while all else around him is being destroyed.

The written comments from residents of Overtown who viewed the photographs on exhibit supported the photographers’ concerns. One neighbourhood resident wrote “What I dislike is the condos that are displacing people!” and another described, “The people who are homeless that’s one thing I would like to be change.” While people are concerned about their own housing challenges, they also display concern through photographs and comments for the housing interests of those around them.

Public space

The concerns of Overtown residents about public space may be best embodied by a prominently displayed “No Trespassing” sign warning near the Culmer Community Center. One resident-photographer explained, “You have to go ‘in’ or ‘out’ but you cannot sit in front [of the community center]” – and laughed at the irony of this. Upon seeing the photography exhibit, another resident further explained, “We don’t have but one recreation center and it has a ‘no trespassing’ sign in front of it – no pool halls . . . no game rooms. Then they wonder why the kids use the buildings [for graffiti].”

Overtown residents who viewed the photo exhibits commented on other public space issues including law enforcement. “They took up all the bus benches – no more out there – there’s nowhere to stand. If you’re standing, the police harass you.” and another wrote, “The police aren’t here to protect – they come to arrest.” According to a recent study (Young et al. 2007) “A remarkable one of four (25.6%) Overtown men reported having been a victim of police violence, and nearly two-thirds (65.9%) reported having been incarcerated” (p. 140).

One omnipresent image in the photographs and mentioned by participants was related to the loss and misuse of public space during the construction of the interstate which residents feel benefited other areas of Miami (while Overtown bore the costs). While the community was geographically fractured to support the public transportation projects I-95 and I-395, these projects benefited those with cars (primarily non-Overtowners) and displaced neighbourhood residents through eminent domain and took away vacant lots used as unofficial parks.

Residents do, however, have pride in successful community use of their public spaces. One woman took photographs of the public art in the community, a mural by noted
Overtown artist Purvis Young. She explains, “I like [the mural]. I don’t know what I like about it . . . it’s weird . . . it’s motion. It’s not somebody posing. It seems like movement. It is like Overtown. Everyone’s the same, but they’re different.” Another photographer took a picture of a local Malcolm X mural commenting, “[The mural] also gives people the opportunity to express different views of history.”

Another photographer took a picture of public space of which residents are proud, the new “Welcome to Overtown” sign which is surrounded by colourful flowers. She also noted that “A lot of people [in Overtown] have their own little garden. And right now there’s a community garden. It’s open to the public and when plants are ready to harvest it’s given to churches who [distribute].” Another explained how the trees (although fewer than existed historically pre-“urban renewal”) in Overtown public spaces also give young people the ability to collect fruit in the neighbourhood. “At least [the fruit] is used. When we were young, we did it. I’ve seen [Overtown] kids [today] going around selling Spanish limes and mangoes, too.”

Finally, there arose visions of the possibilities of future use for public spaces. After photographing an empty, littered lot, one resident described, “What this vacant lot represents to me is public property, for the current public use.” Other residents viewing the photos on exhibit suggested a movie theatre for Overtown, and another a youth centre in available public space to give young people more activities to participate in. One young person, after viewing photographs of Overtown spaces, suggested on our comment board that a neighbourhood bike centre (a shared public space) would be good to encourage bike use and would also be beneficial to the overall natural environment. Another commenter wrote the location of a nearby bike co-op to share it with other viewers.

**Neighbourhood economy**

Neighbourhood economy was another theme mentioned by Overtown residents and related issues were the focus of several photos. Memories of how Overtown used to be, with thriving black businesses, are invoked in stories. One photographer took a photograph of the old “Miss Emma’s Store.” She explained,

> We used to walk down the street to Miss Emma’s, picking up pennies for bubble gum. I used to have dreams about going there . . . and dream about an empty field, too. It’s not the same. Miss Emma used to really talk to you. That was back in the day when you misbehaved, everybody beat your behind. But Miss Emma was nice.

Shopping once meant buying locally and supporting neighbourhood businesses of people you knew. After viewing the photo exhibition, an elderly Overtown resident explained,

> They’re good photos. A lot of them remind me of the old days. I’m a lifer [in Overtown]. Not my entire life — I’ve been away — but I always came back . . . Overtown is different than it used to be. I remember before I-95. It was happening. It was swinging. I was too young to go to them legally, but it had nightclubs . . . movies, stores. It was tragic [what happened].

Other exhibition attendees wrote, “[We] don’t have enough mom and poppa businesses.” Others mentioned specific kinds of stores needed from a shoe store, clothing store and laundromat to a “Dollar Store”. A few expressed disdain for “big-name” chains and one commented “We don’t need no Starbucks.”

One young entrepreneur who sells ice cream out of his hand-decorated truck explained (at a photo exhibit) how he tries to “buy locally”, saying, “I keep the money in the
community – when I sell some ice cream, I go get a haircut, and we support others and people support us.”

Several comments from exhibit participants centred around the limited places to buy groceries in Overtown. In addition, photographers took pictures of empty stores.

Used to be Crown’s Supermarket . . . People shopped at Crown’s when it was good, then it went downhill. It closed. Now people shop wherever they can get to. People usually walk to Winn Dixie or take the Metromover to Publix. Or spend three times the amount of money at the corner store.

**History**

History was another area of concern to both project photographers as well as the residents who viewed the exhibited photographs. Several residents took pictures of historic boarding houses and “shotgun” houses in the neighbourhood. Residents who viewed these pictures emphasised the preservation of historic structures, differentiating these from buildings they thought were public hazards and needed to be torn down. One photographer wrote, “I think we should keep this shack, restore it and preserve it for people to see.” Not only do residents want to preserve buildings for their historic value, but also as a teaching tool for those who do not remember Overtown’s heyday. They perceive the buildings as a living history lesson and a positive Overtown legacy.

As the previous story about the historic “Miss Emma’s Store” demonstrated these are not just “buildings” to residents, they are a reminder of their own ancestors who once populated Overtown, their values, their stories and their lives. These are symbols of pride. One project photographer, who had briefly left Overtown to live out-of-state and has since returned, noted,

The reason I came back to Miami? I ran into negative people who had different value . . . I came back here so [my daughter] can grow up where I grew up. She can learn my values but not making my mistakes.

After viewing the photography exhibit, one resident wrote “Overtowners 4 life” on our comment board which is a common saying from those who expect to live and die in Overtown. It reflects tenacity and a sense of community. Without further historic preservation, Overtown may lose identity. With a sense of positive history imbuing current environment, the potential of Overtown is clearer to residents and non-residents alike.

**Environmental/environmental issues**

Environmental/environmental issues abound in Overtown, and were reflected as a theme in this project. One resident who photographed a vacant lot explained, “I don’t know who owns this piece of land, but they should come to the neighborhood, find out what people need, and build something on it. There is always garbage on it, and nobody cleans it.”

Other environmental concerns were more specific than the generalised concern of neighborhood litter. One of the project photographers noted, “I took a picture of the [now closed] chemical plant.” He explained that in a previous job, “I used to handle [chemicals] . . . it actually says this stuff causes cancer . . . if you overspray, sometimes you get a fish kill. That plant’s been there for years and who knows what’s been there over the years and what’s left.”
Another resident-photographer took pictures of one of two cement plants in the neighbourhood. She described how there were previous neighbourhood protests on environmental justice issues through Power U.

We did an action in ’03 or ’04. It did help to fix things . . . We did “toxic tours” – had people go around the neighborhood and tell ’em about all the toxic places – including where they used to burn all the garbage – the incinerator.

Other photographers expressed concern about power transmission lines close to the school and other hazardous sites that they believed were too close to schools and parks.

Sometimes, broader issues of environment were related to zoning and/or safety. Alleged neglect on the part of agencies that are supposed to protect citizens also accompanied the environment theme. One resident photographed a hazardous light pole, crooked and threatening to tip over, saying,

I took this photo because it made me mad the way my community is neglected over and over again. This represents a lack of respect and concern for Overtown and its people. Period. The post in this picture has been that way for over 3 years. (Figure 2)

Another photograph was of a burned out apartment building and the photographer described the situation as follows:

No one saw to the residents’ complaints while the smell of gas was present. There was an explosion and four children and several adults were badly burned. No repairs were made to the complex as of yet. I feel these types of things should and could have been prevented. This represents something that should not happen in no one’s community.

Figure 2. Another dirty treatment of my community.
Photograph by Reginald C. Munnings.
Human capital

People as human capital emerged as a central theme in the photographs taken for this project. Even when people were not the subjects of the photograph, photographers related issues back to people. For example, in identifying buildings in photographs, the photographers described them as an ex-residence of their relatives, as a potential living space or as a place where there used to be a black-owned business. People are the heart of Overtown. For example, one photographer commented on his subject, “He’s an old-timer . . . represents the neighborhood.” Another photographer took a poignant photo of an elderly local shoemaker, the last one in Overtown (Figure 3). The photographer commented,

I took this photo because I have seen this man all my life in my community doing what he do, repairing, shining shoes, perhaps making shoes. I remember he had a shop alongside a drug store for a very long time, until it was replaced by the Metrorail, which is exactly where he is standing in this photo.

People are represented or described by participants as replaced by “progress”. The same photographer commented on another picture whose subject was the destruction of public housing, “The last occupant had to move while all else around him is being destroyed.”

Overtown residents are aware that they are not viewed through a positive lens by many outsiders. One photographer explained why she photographed local youth.

People make things seem like it’s a ghost town, but there’s people living here. The young people are very involved in Power U and it’s good – we need to get young people involved and thinking different, instead of getting involved in violence.

Figure 3. Shoemaker/Mr Lovell.
Photograph by Reginald C. Munnings.
Another photographer, who recorded pictures of her hard-working young relatives commented, “They’re entrepreneurs from Overtown – they have a Metro PCS Store. They started out doing DJ work . . . brothers trying to do something. People say people in Overtown don’t do anything and it’s not true.”

**Power**

Power (and perceived lack of power) was the final theme that became evident through photographs and comments. “There are some people in this neighborhood who will stand up and complain . . . The forces-that-be want everyone out of [Overtown] and they’ve wanted that since the expressway.” Many of the photographers took photos of empty lots, broken-down buildings and problems in the community that reflect a lack of power. Nonetheless, one resident wrote, after viewing the photographs, “Numbers is a positive thing. It makes people down in City Hall [take notice]. They think about voters.” Another resident explained, “They talk about how this neighborhood is run down but a lot of it is the city’s fault. Tear it down or fix it up. (The city) looks away a lot in this neighborhood.” Some residents place blame for neighbourhood issues squarely on the shoulders of local, state and federal politicians, diverted public funds and government apathy as well as prejudicial treatment of Overtown compared to other neighbourhoods. “We don’t have a bus that runs all night long like on the Beach. We need to go to Winn-Dixie and it costs us a dollar and a half. They pay 25 cents (on South Beach).” Other residents blame their own neighbours as well, and some qualify this with the explanation, “You wonder why people trash this neighborhood — they have no hope.”

In spite of being very aware of the negatives in their community, there are also many positive exclamations about the unique and positive character of the Overtown area and the tenacity of its residents who have rarely been handed power, but have at times created it. Community residents who saw the photographs from this project wrote many messages on our project boards that referred to the recent struggle to stop the “Crosswinds” condominium project in Overtown and a few examples follow. One resident wrote on our comment board, “The people united will never be defeated. 3 years in the struggle and WE WON.” Another explained, “This [struggle] gives people more confidence. Got rid of this condo. They feel like they can do something.” Several described the resilient spirit that many believe characterised their neighbourhood: “And Power U keep fighting. You might don’t win right then and there but you believe you going to win.” The defeat of the condominium project was seen as a victory for Overtown by many residents, another of whom said, “Overtown needs low-income housing. We need not to be pushed out of Overtown for richer people. The Indians has been pushed from over here, now it’s the black people. More housing and homes for families. We won.”

**Discussion**

The research team hoped to uncover themes that are paramount in residents’ minds about their neighbourhood, see if and how they were connected to ideas of invironment (our interaction with and dependence on our surroundings) and/or other factors, and what bearing the issues might have to Overtown’s future. The themes are indeed connected to invironment in Overtown and also to the overarching reality of social inequality.

The most tangible themes described and photographed by residents (housing, public space, neighbourhood economy issues, environment/invironment) link to the concept of invironment in several ways. The theme of housing and discussions of development
demonstrated how the relationship between Overtowners and their neighbourhood has been changed. One photographer discussed and documented trees that had been torn out: “I took pictures of these two trees because it used to be our apartment here. They cleared this whole thing. It used to be trees and stuff. Cleared for these houses...” She also pointed out “This is where they used to have the tree. It was huge. People used to sit there and drink under the tree. People tore it down. They chopped it down... Generations climbed in that tree.”

Another resident explained, “When I was a child, there were more fruit trees here than people could name – bananas, mangoes – all over the place.” Many trees once present in Overtown were removed due to “urban renewal” (Smith-Cavros 2007). Native trees that provided connectivity for birds and other animal species in urban areas were lost while Overtown residents lost shade, food sources and recreational sources and landmarks like the Seagrape that defined their local and family history.

Housing has had many other implications on environment including health, environmental, psychological and economic ramifications. Participants mentioned: people regularly cooking on hotplates, to insect infestation, to lead paint in old buildings, to undependable electricity and plumbing, to overcrowding. Much of the housing in Overtown presents direct (toxic and irritant materials) and indirect health effects (stress, overcrowding). This occurs in an area where healthcare is already sparse, for example, “Only one of three (33.3%) Overtown men reported having a primary care physician or health practitioner” (Young et al. 2007, p. 140). Other health effects of substandard housing are demonstrated in recent research in Miami’s impoverished inner-city areas (including Overtown surrounds) which demonstrated “unacceptably high levels of lead dust and soil in areas where children live and play” (Gasana et al. 2006, p. 228).

The public space theme also intersected with environmental issues. The construction of highways and their effects on the neighbourhood and public space described and photographed by participants was a textbook case of environmental injustice. Participants who described and photographed the general lack of access to public space and/or green space also reflected ways in which neighbourhood challenges connect to environment.

Issues related to neighbourhood economy such as lack of shopping affect Overtown environment in various ways. It is difficult to prepare a healthy meal from local convenience stores which stock, according to participants, many fatty grades of meats, little fish and even less fresh produce. Junk food is easy to find in Overtown, fresh food is difficult to find and organic food is not available in local stores and is cost prohibitive in downtown stores accessed by public transportation. This has environmental implications on the health of residents. Currently, fresh produce is seasonally grown and sold locally part of the year through a public Overtown garden (Roots in the City 2012). Expansion of programmes like this would improve the quality of environment of local residents.

Litter, hazardous sites, zoning and code enforcement were also discussed and photographed by residents in the environmental/environmental theme. Each one of these can have profound effects on the human body, the neighbourhood identity and the natural environment of Overtown.

The remaining themes are Human Capital, History and Power and these each link to Overtown environment. The traditional residents of Overtown were described as “disappearing” or being “pushed out” – much like endangered species. To residents, their history and neighbourhood would be a disappearing habitat due to issues like gentrification – except for the actions of neighbourhood activists. We see environment, the idea that the body interacts with and depends on the conditions around it, visible across the interconnected themes. The power to affect environment (their neighbourhood, their environment, their conditions) remains a contested issue in Overtown complicated by social inequality.
The themes that arose from participants’ photos were many, diverse and complex. Nonetheless, in the eyes of residents, a single issue connects them: inequality. Residents see housing, public space, shopping, business/job opportunities, historical preservation and environmental/inenvironmental injustices in Overtown as unequally distributed compared to other neighbourhoods in Miami. Even acknowledgement of Overtown’s role in the history of Miami seems lacking to residents. Nonetheless, local activists persist. There is an Overtown of the future that residents clearly envision but it seems to stand in contrast to what residents feel local politicians, planners, developers and real-estate speculators envision. All of the themes seem to go back to the ground under Overtowners’ feet and what will become of it.

For now, the housing market crash has slowed threats to Overtown from some large-scale developments of the kind that Miami saw in the mid-2000s. Nonetheless, three characteristics in relation to Miami’s volatile real-estate market remain consistent. First, while there have been continuing cycles of boom and bust, the land for housing is geographically limited. Greater Miami is bordered by the Everglades on one side and the ocean on another. Second, Miami’s favourable climate and other factors continue to draw residents. Its geographic location and bilingual population beckon to immigrants. Third, gentrification pressures are pushing into Overtown from surrounding neighbourhoods, such as the arts-led gentrification of Wynwood (Feldman 2011) directly to the north which has brought increasing attention to Overtown from the arts scene (Munzreider 2009). A new arts museum is being built just east of Overtown, and the recent announcement of plans to build a large resort casino in the same area could dramatically increase the need for workforce housing. This is in addition to the pressure from expansion of the medical district on the western edge of Overtown, which has also prompted discussion about the need for more housing for professionals in close proximity to the new facilities. Combined with the new City of Miami zoning code which emphasises dense, walkable urban neighbourhoods, this means that Overtown continues to figure centrally in urban redevelopment plans for Miami’s city centre. The question is not whether change will occur – rather only who will participate in and who will benefit from the changes in the neighbourhood.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) suggest that emphasis on deficiencies in economically challenged communities results in a self-defeating deficiency-oriented view. Residents of Overtown who participated in this photo project and those who commented overall did not reflect this view. While they recognised deficiencies, most equally, and even more often primarily, recognised strengths. Indeed, residents appear to have their own intuitive unwritten neighbourhood “plan” that benefits them and contrasts with the lurking gentrification, privatised public spaces and de-historicalisation which they perceive negatively. While others from outside may think of Overtown solely from a deficiency standpoint, residents clearly do not. And we believe this was revealed more fully through the use of photography by participants, which stimulated in-depth discussion among the photographers as well as thought-provoking comments from neighbourhood residents who viewed the photographs.

The residents’ positive and active ideas for the neighbourhood and environment include: preservation of its rich history and culture, more open access to public space and green space, equal city services, safe and affordable housing for local residents using existing vacant buildings and lots, local economic growth, more trees, inexpensive and reliable public transportation options, a bicycle centre, a movie theatre, more “mom and pop” stores and additional recreation centres where children can hang out. Overall they seek a holistic improvement in environmental quality of life.

The photographs taken for this project and the interviews performed provided rich data about the environment in Overtown and gave residents a chance to exchange ideas about their community. We believe that this allowed a unique and useful examination of
Overtown issues that was academic — but also local — with participants’ voices and visions exchanged with the Overtown community and beyond. The Overtown photographs became part of the exhibits described previously as well as an additional exhibit (in conjunction with other similar photography projects in two other low-income neighbourhoods — all a part of the research team’s larger project) entitled “Love and Respect for Self and Community” exhibited at Florida International University in August 2008 and at the Miami-Dade County Public Library in October 2009. This gave participants in all three of our photography projects the opportunity to have their works publically displayed and to meet and network with other individuals and members of community social justice organisations (from which many of the photographers hailed).

For participants, the power to change was sometimes a source of empowerment — and the perceived lack of power to change was also sometimes a frustration. However, participants expressed a desire for change and demonstrated the possibility for it, too. Change does not have to be large to accomplish something worthwhile and perhaps inspire other changes. One photographer told the story of how his photography for this project empowered him and “got something done” in the community:

First, I started talking to Emily [researcher] and she said “take pictures of things that are good and bad [in Overtown]”. I’m kinda pissed about a lot of things . . . so I went inside and said, “what are you going to do about this post” [that was broken]. He [store owner] said “I been talkin’ about it for 4 years, nobody do anything about it.” The police were watchin’ me [take pictures of the post]. I just kept takin’ pictures. I started talking to people about the post at church, at Power U. Then, somebody cut that post. Then they came and connected the wires to the building. But the point is the squeaky wheel finally got the grease. Evidence [the photos] moved.

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