



# Transforming green walls into green places: Black middle class boundary work, multidirectional miscommunication and greenspace accessibility in southwest Atlanta



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## 1. Introduction

Whose greenspace is it anyway? Who has access to a particular greenspace, and what does access even mean? These questions trouble many geographers, city planners, social justice advocates, environmentalists and policymakers tasked with managing urban parks and other public “green” spaces (Williams, 2006; Brownlow, 2006; Barbosa et al., 2007; Boone et al., 2009; Carlson et al., 2010; Dai, 2011; Gilbert, 2014; Wolch et al., 2014; Sandberg et al., 2015; Davoudi and Brooks, 2016). Within the scholarly literature, greenspace accessibility generally refers to the spatial proximity of parks and other public greenspaces to an individual’s place of residence. Consequently, accessibility is often measured in terms of physical distance, acreage, walkability, and/or travel time (Bole, 2012). Researchers, planners and policymakers often debate the extent to which economically and racially marginalized communities disproportionately suffer from “greenspace deficit” compared to their wealthier counterparts (Pauleit et al., 2003; Joassart-Marcelli et al., 2011; Lapham et al., 2015).

Greenspace accessibility studies are likewise often complicated by the reality that redevelopment of underutilized urban wooded parks reconfigures human–environment relationships in unanticipated ways. City officials can also potentially aggravate existing equity deficits when they discuss “sustainable” greenspace redevelopment. Such discourse can actually contribute to the privatization of environmental resources and gentrification of city centers. Often, city officials must (re)consider the extent to which the right to the greening city can be equitably distributed across socioeconomic, gender, ‘racial’, and generational divides (Comber et al., 2008; Dai, 2011; Bole, 2012; Wolch et al., 2014; Sandberg et al., 2015).

With these broader points in mind, the critical questions that drive our greenspace research include the following: first, how do racialized and structural socioeconomic inequalities impact accessibility to a southwest Atlanta nature preserve? Second, to what extent do the stories and memories elicited by the preserve’s

contemporary redevelopment fit into a larger legacy of community disinvestment and neglect? Our work uncovers multidirectional miscommunication and communicative neglect within urban greenspace management and thus contributes a more holistic discussion to greenspace accessibility and governance literature. We also draw insight from multidisciplinary social science literature and the collective memory of local residents to collaboratively construct a more complete theoretical and practical knowledge of greenspace accessibility and encourage greenspace managers to pursue strategies of “place-keeping” in addition to “place-making” (Dempsey and Burton, 2012; Finney, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015).

Our community geography study also aims to explore the possibility for increased and more meaningful local resident participation in greenspace decision-making and alternative governance structures juxtaposed with widespread resident safety concerns, confusion and miscommunication with local officials. Community geography as an emerging interdisciplinary subfield embraces a participatory action research (PAR) methodological orientation to challenge top-down decision-making and democratize scientific investigation that normally validates the expertise of university researchers and delegitimizes the local knowledge of research participants (Freire, 1970). The embrace of mixed methods including community mapping and public participation geographic information systems (PPGIS) also situates community geography under a tradition of radical geography and citizen science. According to Robinson (2010) and Hawthorne et al. (2014), community geography builds relationships between universities, nonprofits, local governments and community groups in order to encourage resident empowerment, support multi-stakeholder community planning and address social and environmental disparities. Yet, our work proposes a more critical community geography framework that moves beyond “pluralistic assumptions of governance” to embrace political ecology and environmental justice perspectives on greenspace governance (Sandberg et al., 2015).

Furthermore, we conceptually investigate the mutually constitutive relation between the social and spatial via our discussion of multidirectional miscommunication. Multidirectional miscommunication as a form of communicative neglect impacts local residents’ constructions of fear and confusion, and by extension, underutilization of urban greenspace that function as “green walls”

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as opposed to “green magnets.” We use the term “green walls” to refer to boundary landscapes that separate neighborhoods of distinct socioeconomic or racial/ethnic characteristics (Solecki and Welch, 1995; Gobster, 1998; Stodolska et al., 2011). In addition, we argue that “green walls” develop in response to symbolic boundary-work on the part of socially and spatially distant residents and other greenspace stakeholders. Symbolic boundary processes interact to produce multidimensional collective identities for local residents who strategically employ commonality and/or difference to resist denigration of claims to full citizenship, negotiate survival and promote upward social mobility (Pachucki et al., 2007; Lacy, 2007; Rollock et al., 2011). As our research ultimately demonstrates, differing levels of social and cultural capital intersect with various boundary-making strategies to both constrain and expand opportunities for greenspace managers and volunteers, who must also counter marginalization in their everyday lives and equitably participate in environmental decision-making. Research on boundary-making strategies pursued by diverse stakeholders to differentiate social status and closeness to symbolic power has yet to be thoroughly and conceptually explicated in greenspace accessibility research outside of the present study.

### 1.1. Who Governs Atlanta’s Greenspaces?

In this study, we focus our analysis on local residents from five neighborhoods surrounding the Beecher Hills Lionel Hampton Nature Preserve (hereinafter called Hampton Beecher), a historically undeveloped greenspace located in southwest Atlanta. Given our desire to uphold the participatory aims of community geography research, we worked collaboratively with a local community-based organization, the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA). WAWA is an environmental nonprofit dedicated to community empowerment via watershed management, environmental education, and equitable inclusion in environmental decision-making (WAWA, 2014). Our collaboration helped uncover what many researchers term uneven community participation in environmental decision-making and shared greenspace governance (Hossein

et al., 2011; Sandberg et al., 2015; Davoudi and Brooks, 2016). Our collaboration also enabled us to meet WAWA’s goals to identify community priorities for infrastructural change within the nature preserve and devise practical solutions to increase usage of the greenspace by local residents.

We also interfaced with a multitude of greenspace managers and stakeholders within metropolitan Atlanta. These stakeholders, in addition to WAWA, influenced the conceptual direction of this study as they both witness and participate in boundary work processes that create “green walls” in southwest Atlanta (see Table 1). Although greenspace management has historically fallen under the jurisdiction of the state, nonprofits and other non-state actors are increasingly tasked with managing urban greenspaces. Multi-Stakeholder Involvement (MSI) in greenspace management thus offers opportunity for informal and formal collaboration (Hossein et al., 2011). Philanthropies also play an increasingly important role in land donation and fund raising efforts. Nonetheless, governments are singularly important stakeholders due to their role in coordinating and controlling management activities as well as their unique ability to set policy and provide legal frameworks (Hossein et al., 2011). Moreover, “MSI does not always contribute to better urban green space performance” if collaboration between state and society is not adequately balanced with sufficient regulation and implementation (Hossein et al., 2011: 808).

The complexity, contradiction and dynamism of shared greenspace governance in metropolitan Atlanta resists static or linear modeling as the jurisdiction of individual managers often overlap and their impact on local power relations changes over space and time. Nonetheless, most critical geography research finds that the rise in nonprofit environmental governance absolves the state of “former welfarist managerial functions” and “redistributes responsibilities, not power” (Roy, 2011: 91). Roy (2011: 91–92) specifically writes:

Market-driven states facilitate the privatisation of urban environmental resources, specifically at the hands of non-profits in the name of enhancing community participation, empowerment and individual rights and responsibilities. . . . non-profits

**Table 1**  
Example Atlanta Greenspace Governance Stakeholder Schematic. Roles and responsibilities overlap for different stakeholders, with fluctuating types and scope of collaboration.

Greenspace stakeholder	Examples	Governance roles and responsibilities
Local universities and academic researchers	Georgia State University and the Georgia State University Community-Soil-Air-Water (CSAW) Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU)	Conduct (community based) research; build capacity of understaffed community groups and nonprofits; legitimize expertise of scientists and non-scientists; help define local redevelopment priorities
Landowners	Cemetery and golf course owners	Support greenspace acquisition and maintenance efforts
Community groups	Neighborhood Planning Units (NPIs), Friends of Park groups, church groups, block associations, recreationists and bicyclist groups	Resist regulatory failures; create sense of belonging and ownership; provide volunteers for nonprofits; define local interest and concerns
Nonprofits	Trees Atlanta, PATH Foundation, Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, Atlanta Beltline Inc., Trust for Public Land, PARK Pride, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA), etc.	Write grants; fund and steward greenspace initiatives; interface with governmental officials; empower local communities; bring together volunteers; foster collaboration
Local, federal and state government	Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation & Cultural Affairs, Atlanta Regional Commission, Department of Public Works, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management, Department of Planning and Community Development, Atlanta Mayor’s Office of Sustainability, USDA Forestry Service, Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta Development Office, Atlanta Housing Authority, Georgia Community Greenspace Program, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, National Park Service, etc.	Critical role in urban greenspace performance via coordination of multiple stakeholders and long term visioning; fund initiatives; create and enforce policy and legal frameworks; manage “environmental subjects”
Law enforcement	Atlanta Police	Provide security and ensure safety for greenspace users; surveil and protect private property; criminalize homelessness
Philanthropies and charities	Arthur M. Blake Foundation, the Conservation Fund, etc.	Provide funds for redevelopment and property acquisition; nurture sense of belonging
Corporate interests, developers and private businesses	Home Depot, Atlanta Beltline, etc.	Contribute physical infrastructure such as park facilities and amenities; provide charitable donations; displace long term residents via gentrification; privatize natural resources

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