

## **From Bombingham to Thirdspace: The Smithfield Neighborhood and the Spatial Rhetoric of Exclusion**

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"Bombingham" is a moniker that the city of Birmingham, Alabama gained in the 1960s due to the concentrated terrorism targeting its Black neighborhoods, but this violence was no accident — it was the material consequence of decades of rhetorical strategies that justified confining Black residents to specific areas of the city, turning those neighborhoods into pressure chambers sealed by policy, fear, and neglect. We know the haunting images: the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, civil rights leaders' homes scarred with soot and littered with broken glass. We rarely hear about how this tension builds — only how it explodes. But no story is complete with only a climax.

This resource demonstrates how rhetoric doesn't just describe or reflect spatial injustice — it actively constructs it, building discrimination into the very geography where people live, work, and build community. Through the lens of spatial rhetoric, students can understand how language, policy, and visual documents like maps function as powerful tools that shape both the physical and social dimensions of space. The accumulation of seemingly neutral planning documents — zoning ordinances, insurance maps, federal housing policies — creates a rhetorical architecture that systematically excludes communities while appearing objective and necessary.

We make these discoveries through Edward Soja's *Thirdspace*. What Soja does is expand on the theories of French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre's school of thought is that space is analyzed by absolute space, abstract space, and lived space. Soja envisions these concepts as first space, second space, and third space. Both scholars believe that spaces do not communicate in binaries like and/or or either/or.

Birmingham's Smithfield neighborhood serves as an exemplary case study for this analysis because it reveals the complete transformation of space through rhetoric across multiple decades through thirdspace. Originally conceived by Dr. Joseph Riley Smith as a progressive space of Black opportunity and homeownership in the early 1900s, Smithfield was systematically reconceptualized through municipal zoning laws in 1926, federal redlining maps in 1933, and urban renewal policies that displaced established Black homeowners. Each rhetorical intervention reshaped not only how the space was perceived by city officials and lenders, but how residents themselves could inhabit and navigate their community. The

progression from opportunity to containment to explosive resistance illuminates how spatial rhetoric operates across thirdspace.

For rhetorical studies, this framework offers students transferable analytical tools for examining spatial injustice in their own communities. Students learn to read maps, zoning documents, and urban planning materials as rhetorical artifacts that actively construct social reality rather than merely reflecting it. They also discover how marginalized communities develop counter-narratives and resistance strategies to reclaim spatial meaning, from Dr. Smith's original vision to the transformation of Smithfield's churches into sites of civil rights organizing.

The detailed case study of Smithfield's transformation appears in the appendix, providing the historical foundation necessary for understanding how spatial rhetoric accumulates over time to produce material consequences. Through this Birmingham example, students gain critical literacy in spatial analysis while connecting historical patterns of exclusion to contemporary issues of housing, urban development, and community organizing.

## **Course Applicability**

### **Undergraduate Courses**

- Introduction to African American Rhetoric
- Rhetoric of Social Justice
- History of U.S. Public Policy: Rhetorical Perspectives
- Race, Rhetoric, and Social Justice
- Introduction to Urban Studies

### **Graduate Courses**

- Spatial Rhetoric and Policy
- Critical Race Theory and Rhetoric
- African American Rhetoric and Public Discourse
- Advanced Composition Theory

## **Key Pedagogical Themes**

**Spatial Rhetoric of Containment and Resistance:** This theme addresses how government documents like redlining maps and zoning ordinances function as rhetorical artifacts that systematically exclude communities while appearing neutral and objective. Students learn to read these materials not as neutral tools, but as powerful rhetorical strategies that construct racial boundaries through language, visual design, and policy implementation. The Birmingham case demonstrates how the same physical space gets

rhetorically reconstructed over time — from Dr. Smith's progressive vision to federal redlining to violent manipulate containment — showing that spaces aren't neutral but constantly reimagined and recreated through rhetoric.

**Counter Spatial Narratives:** Here, we discuss how marginalized communities develop rhetorical strategies to resist dominant spatial definitions and reclaim meaning within constrained spaces. Through examples like Dr. Smith's original financing arrangements, the transformation of Smithfield churches into civil rights organizing spaces, and Mary Monk's legal challenge to zoning restrictions, students examine how residents used language, community organizing, and cultural practices to counter official narratives. This theme helps students recognize agency within oppression and understand how an education on thirdspace can reshape spatial meaning even within systems of constraint.

**Materialist Rhetoric of Space:** The critical understanding that language and policy don't just describe physical spaces — they actively shape material conditions like home ownership opportunities, neighborhood investment, and community safety. Students explore how seemingly abstract concepts like "blight," "urban renewal," and color-coded map zones translate into concrete consequences: denied loans, displacement, property devaluation, and ultimately, in Birmingham's case, targeted violence. This framework teaches students to trace the material effects of rhetorical choices in policy and planning documents.

**Evolution of Spatial Control:** How spatial rhetoric adapts and intensifies over time, with each new policy building upon previous exclusionary frameworks while maintaining plausible deniability. The progression from Birmingham's 1926 local zoning ordinance to 1933 federal redlining maps to 1960s urban renewal shows how spatial control becomes more sophisticated and institutionalized across governmental levels. Students learn to identify how contemporary spatial rhetoric (gentrification discourse, "revitalization" language, zoning "reform") continues these patterns while appearing progressive or race-neutral.

**Rhetorical Architecture of Federal Policy:** How New Deal programs created rhetorical contradictions that simultaneously offered economic opportunities (like Works Progress Administration (WPA) employment) while institutionalizing segregation through housing and lending policies. Students examine how federal agencies like the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and Federal Housing Administration (FHA) used scientific-sounding language and visual rhetoric (maps, grades, surveys) to legitimize discriminatory practices on a national scale. This theme demonstrates how federal rhetoric can override local practices and shows students the power of

institutional language to shape lived reality across multiple communities simultaneously. An understanding of this will show students the power of language. What means “blighted” to one group of people means something completely different to another group.

## **Essential Terminology**

**Spatial Rhetoric:** The study of how language and symbols shape the way physical spaces are interpreted. In this context, it refers to how government policies like redlining framed Black neighborhoods as “hazardous” while Blacks and those on the margins felt these places were home. Who gets to define where “home” is?

**Redlining:** A discriminatory practice by which banks and government agencies denied loans and homeownership opportunities to Black communities based on racially biased Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) maps that color-coded neighborhoods from green (desirable) to red (hazardous), reinforcing segregation.

**Thirdspace:** Edward Soja's concept that combines the material reality of physical space with the social construction of spatial meaning, creating a dynamic analytical framework where spaces are simultaneously real, imagined, and lived. Smithfield exemplifies thirdspace as it exists as actual geography, symbolic representation of Black opportunity or containment, and lived community experience.

**Spatial Triad (Lefebvre/Soja):** The three interconnected dimensions through which space operates and can be analyzed.

**Conceived Space (Representations of Space):** How architects, planners, and policymakers design and envision spaces through maps, blueprints, and official documents. Dr. Smith's original subdivision plans and federal redlining maps represent different conceived visions of the same physical area, showing how official spatial imagination shapes material possibilities.

**Perceived Space (Spatial Practice):** How space is experienced and navigated in daily life, shaped by social rules, boundaries, and expectations. The 1926 Birmingham zoning ordinance created new spatial practices by legally restricting where Black residents could live, fundamentally altering how people moved through and understood the city's geography.

**Lived Space (Representational Space):** The actual cultural practices, memories, and everyday realities within spaces that often resist or exceed official definitions. Smithfield residents' transformation of churches into civil rights organizing spaces exemplifies how lived space can challenge conceived and perceived spatial limitations through community action and cultural practice.

**Spatial Injustice:** A framework for analyzing how discrimination becomes embedded in geographic arrangements through the systematic exclusion of marginalized communities from resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. Birmingham's progression from opportunity to containment to violence demonstrates how spatial injustice accumulates over time through interconnected policies and practices.

**Urban Renewal:** A federal policy framework that used rhetoric of "slum clearance" and "blight removal" to justify the demolition of established Black communities and their replacement with public housing projects, highways, or commercial developments. This seemingly progressive language masked the systematic displacement of homeowners and destruction of generational wealth in communities like Smithfield.

### Primary Sources

**Armes, Ethel. *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*. Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 1910.**

This 1910 industrial history provides contemporary documentation of Birmingham's rapid development and the working conditions facing Black laborers during the transition from Dr. Smith's progressive vision to municipal spatial containment policies. Armes's interviews with industry leaders offer rhetorical evidence of how spatial development was conceived and justified during this crucial period.

**Sanborn Map Company. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama*. Vol. 1. Sanborn Map Company, 1911. Library of Congress.**

[https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00015\\_005/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00015_005/).

This foundational 1911 map shows Dr. Joseph Riley Smith's original conception of the Smithfield area, with distinctive street names and planned residential lots that demonstrate his progressive vision for Black homeownership and community development. The map functions as a rhetorical document of conceived space, illustrating how spatial planning can reflect economic opportunity and social possibility before later policy interventions reshape the same geography.

**City of Birmingham Zoning Commission. "City of Birmingham, Ala. Zone Map." July 13, 1926. Birmingham Public Library Digital Collections, Cartography Collection.**

<https://bplonline.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4017coll7/id/1121/>.

This rare racial zoning map demonstrates how municipal policy transformed Birmingham's spatial rhetoric after the 1917 *Buchanan v. Warley* decision, classifying areas as "industrial" or "residential" while effectively restricting Black residents to flood-prone valleys and polluted industrial zones. As one of only two surviving copies, this document reveals how seemingly neutral planning language masked discriminatory spatial containment strategies that preceded federal redlining policies.

**Nelson, Robert K., LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, and Nathan Connolly. "Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America." Edited by Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers. *American Panorama: An Atlas of United States History*. Digital Scholarship Lab, University of Richmond, 2023.**

<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/map/AL/Birmingham/context>.

The 1933 HOLC redlining map of Birmingham provides crucial visual evidence of how federal housing policy institutionalized spatial segregation through color-coded risk assessments that labeled Black neighborhoods as "hazardous" (red zones) while promoting white homeownership in "desirable" (green) areas. This interactive digital map allows students to examine how Center Street functioned as a rhetorical and material boundary, with yellow zones on one side and red zones on the other, demonstrating how federal rhetoric transformed local spatial relationships.

**University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections. *Birmingham News Photograph Collection, 1835-1974*. University of Alabama Libraries, Tuscaloosa.**

<https://archives.lib.ua.edu/repositories/3/resources/17>.

This collection of 38 black and white photographs documents the civil rights era in Birmingham, including images of bombed homes and civil rights protests that illustrate the violent culmination of decades of spatial containment rhetoric. These visual primary sources demonstrate how spatial injustice ultimately produces material violence, showing the progression from policy documents to lived consequences in the Smithfield community and broader Birmingham area.

**Birmingham Public Library. *Department of Archives and Manuscripts: Civil Rights Documentation*. Birmingham Public Library. <http://www.cobpl.org/locations/central/archives/>.**

The Birmingham Public Library's archival collection contains local documentation of the civil rights period, including materials related to the bombing campaigns that targeted Black homeowners who challenged spatial boundaries. These primary sources provide community-level perspectives on how residents experienced and resisted spatial containment, offering counter-narratives to official policy documents and demonstrating how local archives preserve spatial rhetoric from multiple viewpoints.

## **Secondary Sources**

### **Core Academic Sources**

**Feldman, Lynne B. *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle-Class Community, 1890-1930*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999.**

Feldman's study of Smithfield from 1890-1930 provides detailed analysis of how middle-class African Americans used economic self-help, institution-building, and community organizing to create spatial autonomy within Jim Crow constraints. Her examination of how residents "actively shaped the world" around them through businesses, schools, and civic associations offers crucial evidence for understanding counter-spatial narratives and resistance strategies that challenged dominant definitions of Black space in Birmingham.

**Kynard, Carmen. *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacy Studies*. SUNY Press, 2013.**

Kynard's framework for understanding how Black students experience institutional space provides crucial analytical tools for examining how Smithfield residents navigated spatial containment within educational and civic institutions. Her concept of "vernacular insurrections" illuminates how Black communities use language and cultural practices to resist dominant spatial narratives, directly applicable to understanding how Smithfield churches transformed from religious spaces into civil rights organizing centers.

**Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell, 1991.**

Lefebvre's foundational spatial triad of conceived, perceived, and lived space provides the theoretical framework for analyzing how Birmingham's Smithfield neighborhood was systematically transformed through rhetorical interventions. His argument that "social space is a social product" directly supports the case study's demonstration of how policy documents, zoning

maps, and federal programs actively constructed spatial inequality rather than merely reflecting existing conditions.

**Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.**

Reynolds bridges spatial theory with composition studies, offering pedagogical frameworks for teaching students to analyze how rhetoric constructs place and identity. Her work provides instructors with practical approaches for helping students understand how the Birmingham case study connects to broader patterns of spatial exclusion in American communities and how writing itself becomes a tool for spatial resistance and reclamation.

### **Additional Sources**

**Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. Liveright, 2017.**

Rothstein's comprehensive analysis of how federal housing policies institutionalized segregation provides essential context for understanding Birmingham's place within national patterns of spatial exclusion. His detailed examination of HOLC redlining maps and FHA lending practices directly supports the case study's argument about how seemingly neutral federal rhetoric systematically excluded Black communities from wealth-building opportunities.

**Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell, 1996.**

Soja's concept of "thirdspace" as simultaneously real, imagined, and lived provides students with analytical tools for understanding how the same physical location (Smithfield) can be conceived as opportunity (Dr. Smith's vision), perceived as containment (federal redlining), and lived as resistance (civil rights organizing). His framework helps students grasp the dynamic, contested nature of spatial meaning-making.

### **Map Reading and Visual Rhetoric Sources**

**Wood, Denis. *The Power of Maps*. Guilford Press, 1992.**

Wood's analysis of how maps function as rhetorical documents rather than neutral representations provides students with critical frameworks for reading the Sanborn, zoning, and HOLC maps as active agents in spatial construction. His work demonstrates how cartographic choices about color, scale, and categorization carry ideological weight, essential for understanding how Birmingham's maps justified and perpetuated spatial segregation.

**Harley, J.B. "Deconstructing the Map." *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1-20.**

Harley's foundational essay on maps as social constructions provides theoretical grounding for analyzing Birmingham's planning documents as rhetorical artifacts. His argument that maps "re-present the world" rather than simply represent it directly supports the case study's demonstration of how successive mapping projects reshaped Smithfield from opportunity to containment, showing students how to read cartographic rhetoric critically.

### **Birmingham-Specific Historical Sources**

**Connerly, Charles E. *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980*. University of Virginia Press, 2005.**

Connerly's detailed examination of Birmingham's planning history provides essential local context for understanding how Smithfield's transformation fits within broader municipal strategies of spatial control. His analysis of the 1926 zoning ordinance and subsequent planning decisions offers instructors concrete examples of how local rhetoric interacted with federal policies to create the conditions that eventually led to the bombing campaigns.

**White, Marjorie Longenecker. *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide*. Birmingham Historical Society, 1981.**

White's industrial history illuminates the economic contexts that made Dr. Smith's original vision possible while also explaining how steel industry demands shaped residential patterns and labor geography. This source helps students understand how economic rhetoric about industrial development intersected with racial rhetoric to create the spatial arrangements that defined Smithfield's evolution.

### **Contemporary/Popular Sources**

**"How Redlining's Racist Effects Lasted for Decades." *NPR's Fresh Air*, interviewed by Terry Gross, May 3, 2017.  
<https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>.**

This accessible interview with Richard Rothstein provides instructors with audio content that helps students connect historical redlining practices to contemporary housing inequality. The discussion of how federal rhetoric shaped material conditions offers an engaging entry point for students to understand spatial rhetoric's ongoing effects beyond the Birmingham case study.

**Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*, June 2014.**  
**<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.**

Coates's analysis of how federal housing policies created and maintained the racial wealth gap provides contemporary relevance for the Birmingham case study. His examination of how spatial exclusion translated into generational economic disadvantage helps students connect historical spatial rhetoric to ongoing patterns of inequality in American communities.

### Discussion Questions

1. **Analyzing Spatial Rhetoric:** How do the 1911 Sanborn map, 1926 zoning map, and 1933 HOLC redlining map tell different rhetorical stories about the same physical space? What does this reveal about how rhetoric shapes our understanding of place and how policy documents function as rhetorical artifacts?
2. **Conceived vs. Lived Space:** Compare Dr. Joseph Riley Smith's original vision for Smithfield with Mary Monk's lived experience in the 1960s and the community resistance documented in the Sallie Russell case of the 1930s. How did rhetorical strategies transform the same physical space from opportunity to containment, and how did residents challenge these transformations?
3. **Counter-Spatial Narratives:** Examine the various forms of resistance employed by Smithfield residents across different decades: Dr. Smith's alternative financing (1890s-1910s), the Russell homeowners' legal challenge (1930s), and Arthur Shores' constitutional litigation (1940s-1960s). How do these examples demonstrate the evolution of spatial resistance strategies, and what rhetorical tools did each generation use to challenge dominant spatial definitions?
4. **Federal vs. Local Rhetoric:** How did the 1917 *Buchanan v. Warley* Supreme Court decision create rhetorical tensions with Birmingham's 1926 zoning ordinance and federal New Deal housing policies? What does this progression reveal about competing rhetorical authorities and how different levels of government used spatial rhetoric to achieve conflicting goals?
5. **Visual Rhetoric of Maps:** How do maps function as rhetorical documents rather than neutral representations of space? Analyze how cartographic choices about color (yellow vs. red zones), scale, and categorization carry ideological weight in the Birmingham case study.

What stories do these visual elements tell, and how do they justify material consequences like denied loans or bombing campaigns?

6. **Economic Rhetoric and Material Consequences:** How did language about "urban renewal," "slum clearance," and "blight" function rhetorically to justify the displacement of Black homeowners in Smithfield? Examine how seemingly neutral economic terminology masked discriminatory practices and connect this to contemporary debates about gentrification and neighborhood "revitalization."
7. **Institutional Spaces and Educational Resistance:** Using Kynard's framework about Black students' experiences in institutional spaces, analyze how Parker High School and other Smithfield institutions functioned as sites of spatial resistance. How did the community's creation of educational and cultural institutions challenge dominant narratives about Black intellectual capacity and community organization?
8. **From Pressure to Explosion:** The opening argues that we "rarely hear about how this tension builds — only how it explodes." How does understanding the spatial rhetoric of containment change your interpretation of civil rights era violence? Trace the accumulation of rhetorical and policy interventions that led from Dr. Smith's progressive vision to the bombing campaigns of the 1950s-1960s.
9. **Contemporary Connections:** Where do you see similar spatial rhetoric operating in your own community today? Analyze how current zoning laws, development projects, urban planning initiatives, or housing policies use language to justify spatial arrangements. How do contemporary examples of "choice neighborhoods," "opportunity zones," or "transit-oriented development" function rhetorically?
10. **Legal Rhetoric as Spatial Resistance:** Examine how the Samuel Matthews case (1947), Mary Monk's challenge, and the Sallie Russell homeowners' case (1935) used federal courts and constitutional arguments to challenge local spatial containment. What does this reveal about how marginalized communities can use legal rhetoric to contest spatial injustice, and what are the limitations of this strategy?
11. **Community Agency and Self-Determination:** Analyze the continuity between Dr. Smith's original economic empowerment model and contemporary Smithfield organizing (like SCAT's goal to "write our own check for what we need in our community"). How do these examples demonstrate persistent strategies of spatial self-determination, and what do they suggest about community resilience across generations?

12. **Rhetorical Architecture and Built Environment:** How did Wallace Rayfield's architectural designs for both Smithfield homes and the 16th Street Baptist Church function as forms of spatial rhetoric? Examine how building design, neighborhood layout, and architectural choices can embody and communicate community values, professional achievement, and cultural identity.
13. **Historical Continuity and Change:** Compare the spatial containment strategies used in 1920s Birmingham with contemporary patterns of residential segregation. What rhetorical strategies remain consistent across nearly a century, and what has changed? How do current discussions about housing policy, school zoning, and neighborhood development echo or differ from the Birmingham case study?
14. **Intersectional Analysis:** How did class, gender, and regional identity intersect with race in shaping Smithfield residents' experiences of spatial rhetoric? Consider how Mary Monk's position as a working professional woman, Dr. Smith's role as a landowner and physician, and residents' status as either homeowners or renters affected their relationship to spatial containment and resistance strategies.
15. **Transferable Analytical Framework:** How can the concepts of conceived space, perceived space, and lived space be applied to analyze spatial rhetoric in other contexts? Choose a contemporary spatial issue (campus planning, neighborhood gentrification, suburban development, etc.) and demonstrate how this theoretical framework reveals the rhetorical construction of spatial relationships and power dynamics.

## **Appendix 1: Case Study**

### **The Smithfield Neighborhood and the Spatial Rhetoric of Exclusion**

The concept of spatial injustice operates through three interconnected dimensions that help us understand how rhetoric shapes physical and social spaces. Henri Lefebvre's foundational framework examines how spaces are conceived by planners and policymakers, perceived through social rules and boundaries, and lived through actual cultural practices and everyday realities. Edward Soja builds upon this framework with his concept of "thirdspace," which captures how spaces are simultaneously real, imagined, and lived — constantly contested through rhetoric rather than remaining neutral or fixed. The Smithfield neighborhood in Birmingham demonstrates how the same physical space can be rhetorically reconstructed over time through policy interventions, transforming from opportunity to containment to sites of resistance.

#### **Conceived Space: Dr. Smith's Vision**

Birmingham was known as "The Pittsburgh of the South" because of how quickly it developed as a steel powerhouse. The growth was so exponential that the formerly enslaved from more underdeveloped areas in Alabama where plantation life was more dominant migrated there for paid work in the steel industry through steel plants like Alice Furnace, close to downtown Birmingham. Birmingham, which didn't become a city until after Emancipation, was attractive to the formerly enslaved because there were never many cotton plantations in Jefferson County. The land was considered not to have the premium quality of soil needed to produce crops, so it was difficult for plantations to develop in central Alabama and thrive. What was determined, however, when there were talks of a new railroad that would make commerce more palatable, was that the area boasted many of the resources needed to produce steel.

This burgeoning steel industry attracted many unskilled workers with limited infrastructure to house them. Many of the steel mills did offer company housing, although this housing was rudimentary compared to that provided for white workers. Black workers usually worked for less money for more work and had fewer options.

Dr. Joseph Riley Smith, a local surgeon that inherited one of the few plantations in Jefferson County from his father, John Smith, a successful Jefferson County land and slave owner, was one of the first children born to white settlers in Jefferson County. He was also the owner of a great deal of commercial real estate in the city. Dr. Smith is relevant here because he sold land to some of these newly arrived Blacks when their options were few. He also provided financing options for them. Dr. Smith contributed to Black wealth in Jefferson County and the new city of Birmingham. Because of this,

Smithfield was a conceived space that Dr. Smith had enough pride in not only to name after himself, but many of his loved ones as well.

Not only was Dr. Smith one of the most successful men in this new enclave, but he was also orthodoxically progressive. During a time when the Civil War and Reconstruction had rapidly come through and changed Southern culture, Smith landed a hand to Blacks and whites. Even though the newspapers wrote about Black people being breeders of crime and disease, he was a benefactor to both. He sold and leased land to both blacks and whites alike. He even started the Joseph R. Smith Schools — one school for whites, and one for Blacks. He funded both schools along with funds from the state of Alabama. His benevolent actions reveal a man that had an innate love for charity and people.

The [1911 Sanborn map of the Smithfield area](#) shows us how Dr. Smith planned out his land — even giving the streets distinctive names. While those names were changed many times over the last century, Dr. Smith's legacy was the genesis of a newfound power for Black Birminghamians. Not only did he give new opportunities for schools and homeownership, but he also gifted land for a church (Davis 126).

Edward Soja tells us in *Thirdspace* that Lefebvre had a similar spirit as Dr. Smith. Although he was born of privilege, he liked to view the world from the periphery. It was through this lens that Lefebvre was able to develop a nuance way of seeing the world. As opposed to seeing the world through a binary either/or and/or lens like a Marxist, he saw the world in a radical way; no vantage point was the same. Instead of subscribing to the racist rhetoric of the time, Dr. Smith decided to lead in his own autonomous way as he, whether consciously or unconsciously, made Smithfield a thirdspace.

As time went on, the effects of modernism impacted the sense of self in many Blacks, and the Black middle class grew. Scholars of the time like Booker T. Washington, who advocated for Blacks to create their own success, motivated the Black dollar. When the city initially provided primary and secondary schools for Blacks, the Smithfield community was able to start the first Black high school in the county. It eventually became the largest Black high school in the world, according to *Ebony* magazine in 1951. Not only was Washington's rhetoric influential in the beginning of Industrial High School (Now A.H. Parker High School, named after its first principal), he was also a mentor for the second formerly trained Black architect in the United States, Wallace Rayfield. Dozens of buildings in Birmingham are credited with Wallace's designs including the mansions of many newly minted Black business people.

## Perceived Space: Zoning, Segregation, and Containment

With Black people becoming more aware of themselves through new thriving enterprises and society pushing back on certain ideas, Birmingham settled into more both de jure and de facto segregation. The positive thing is, with Black success came Black businesses, so the people in Smithfield were able to support their own, in the vein of Washington. Black scholars like Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the first Black men to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University, began advocacy that started with the Niagara Movement and eventually moved along the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Through his *Crisis* magazine, Black creativity emerged and the "New Negro" that Alain Locke later wrote about communicated this new liberation of the Black man.

This liberation did not come without challenges within the context of the Smithfield neighborhood and how people in Birmingham perceived this space. Before the 1920s, there were no strong de jure racial lines in the city, but a federal precedent eventually changed that throughout the country. *Buchanan vs Warley* of 1917 deemed segregating residential areas unconstitutional. The perception was that Blacks should remain in their own communities, like Smithfield and not be allowed in other parts of the city that Blacks did not historically inhabit. Eventually, in 1926, the city of Birmingham — despite a federal law — created a zoning ordinance that restricted Blacks to live in areas that mostly consisted of the Valley Creek area that routinely flooded, near the polluted industrial areas, and near railroad tracks. Although Dr. Smith created this land of opportunity in an unheard-of progressive fashion for the time, one can only imagine that his intent was for there to be guidelines and criteria on how this land should be managed.

The [1926 zoning map of the city](#) of Birmingham shows certain areas classified as "industrial" or "residential." This is not to be confused with redlining maps created by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation during the Roosevelt Administration to facilitate loan processing, but maps like these foreshadowed how space was to be perceived through the lens of those with power. Smithfield Court and Elyton Village were not initially on this map because those are public housing communities erected in the late 1930s as part of New Deal "slum clearance," but it is important that we notice how they function spatially. Elyton Village was the first white public housing community erected exclusively for white families. Smithfield, in contrast, was erected for Black families. Notice how Center Street straddles behind the Smithfield housing project. What appears to be just an arbitrary marker, this marker was the catalyst that eventually led to "Bombingham." Exclusion, discrimination, and restriction are words to describe how

Smithfield transitioned from the progressive space Dr. Smith intended it to be into the confined place city officials perceived it should be.

Dr. Smith's land was perceived as a place that was "home" to many families, but who gets to determine what is home? When Dr. Smith sold and leased his land to Blacks and whites in Smithfield, those families had the right, according to Soja and Lefebvre's theories, to perceive this land as home. When the city of Birmingham decided to take advantage of urban renewal funds, they didn't view the property that they needed to raze to build Smithfield Housing Projects in the late 1930s in the same way that they themselves saw figurative and metaphorical home. If they had, the decision to displace so many families with few options to rebuild would have been far more difficult. Residents did push back. In fact, Sallie Russell was a Smithfield resident who did not want to sell her home to Birmingham Public Housing during the planning of Smithfield Court. She and many other resisted being forced into a conceived space when they already had their own lived spaces.

### **Lived Space: Community Identity and Cultural Practice**

After the city of Birmingham unlawfully rebelled against *Buchanan vs Warley*, Dr. Smith's land was now legally signposted and the way the inhabitants of Smithfield initially perceived their space changed. The force was far more intense. The Federal Government under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt developed plans to restimulate the failing economy from the 1929 Stock Market Crash. One of their initiatives was to save people that were in jeopardy of losing their homes. This one goal was rather paradoxical considering white people were able to save their homes by financing with newly developed 30-year amortized loans and opportunities to purchase brand new homes in new subdivisions like Belview Heights to the West of Smithfield through the Federal Housing Administration, or FHA. The HOLC and the FHA worked in tandem to create maps more sophisticated than the 1926 Birmingham zoning map. These maps were used nationally as tangible archetypes to show lenders and banks who, what, and where were worthy of insured mortgages.

Those groups that exist inside of the margins mostly see those on the outside of the margins through a gaze that does not depict the realities of those that live and thrive in these spaces. Anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston says in her 1934 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," "Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life" (79). Working-class Black Americans are colorful with many gradients. Within these gradients is a powerful love for what some may call "extra" or "doing too much." Hurston goes on to say "On

the walls of the homes of the average Negro one always finds a glut of gaudy calendars, wall pockets and advertising lithographs. The sophisticated white man or Negro would tolerate none of these, even if they bore a likeness to the Mona Lisa. No commercial art for decoration" (82). Although her analysis here is a critical analysis of the way Black Americans engage with the English language, her observation on Black life — especially Black Southern life that that of working- and middle-class Smithfield was embodied through its residents around the beginning of the 20th century is astute. This embodied expressiveness, richly documented by Hurston, is not incidental — it is a lived spatial rhetoric.

These live spaces were not inclusive to places we would consider "home." The Black church also became a site of resistance — a third space. When homes were bombed and the community needed to come together, then churches like the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church became third spaces. When the community wanted to create a high school, classes started at the same church. The church was where Dr. King spoke and organized. It was these lived spaces that led to many outcomes that changed the trajectory of Black life in Birmingham, Alabama.

### **Rhetorical Maps: From Redlining to Bombing**

The [1933 redlining map of the city of Birmingham](#) shows that same area on Center Street that is rhetorically significant. Center Street is a wide thoroughfare that spoke, just as rhetoric does at times, without words. The message was clear: one side of the street was yellow, but the other side of the street was glaring red. The paradox here is that what was once somewhat possible in Dr. Smith's vision of his land was now a site of tension. Dr. Smith was negotiable with Black people and allowed them to purchase homes, but with the legislation of the Roosevelt administration, homeownership for Black people became not only a nuisance, but almost impossible. To add insult to injury, because there were so many opportunities for white families to purchase homes with little to no money down and favorable terms, there was not much need for a segregated housing project like Elyton Village. In fact, Elyton Village *needed* to be integrated because families that were once homeowners in Smithfield lost their homes not by choice but by force because the city deemed most of their homes as "blighted" and used federal funds allocated for "urban renewal" to displace them with not many options to purchase new homes, so hence the epoch of the death of generational wealth for Black families in Smithfield. Many families were already embedded in the community, so they either had to rent or become public housing dwellers. This reality was their lived space, contrary to Smith's conceived vision.

## Resistance and Reclamation: Mary Monk and Civil Rights Rhetoric

Mary Monk, like many Black people of Birmingham, worked hard to achieve some dignity for herself in the middle of the Jim Crow South. She worked at Miles College and had created a career for herself, something seldom done by women of the time, but was increasingly happening because of initiatives for women to work after WWII. Back then, the epitome of status was a brick home on a corner lot. Smithfield was becoming increasingly filled with them due to a burgeoning Black middle class that included Arthur Shores, Fred Shuttlesworth, and the family of Angela Davis. Mrs. Monk wanted to join the elite class, and felt she deserved to.

Her mission did not come without challenges. *The Birmingham News* article, "[Horrific years of 'Bombingham' Captured in Vintage Photos](#)" shows her brick home at 950 Center Street was bombed because she challenged the 1926 zoning ordinance — a precursor to the redlining maps. Aside from Mrs. Monk's home, there were other homes bombed on the same street or in the vicinity. These bombings culminated in her lawsuit filed by Arthur Shores. These bombs were generally related because they mostly had the 1926 Ordinance as the underlying catalyst. Because Smithfield had become landlocked — as a result of a developing Black middle class with limited places to house them — the ordinance had to be revised, which created tension among the white neighbors who were territorial over their side of Center Street.

These bombings reached a climax when the advocacy for the Smithfield community became highly visible. The bombings, along with Birmingham's refusal to integrate the public schools, and dozens of school aged children being arrested during the Children's Crusade, created a new rhetoric in a place that was historically religious. Many civil rights meetings — some frequented by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — turned church into protest. This movement made the antagonists more and more enraged. The tension became so intense that a person that was rumored — and decades later acquitted for some of the bombings — bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, fatally taking the lives of four innocent Black girls.

Birmingham became a case study, as it has in this lesson, on the negative impact of hate and how, like Henri Lefebvre said in his book *The Production of Space*—"Social space is a social product." Space is not neutral. It is always political. The bombing of the church became so prominent, it became a rhetorical artifact for change. It was one of the catalysts that eventually led to the signing of The Civil Rights Act and The Fair Housing Act which eradicated de jure segregation and legally ended redlining.

## Conclusion

The Smithfield case study demonstrates how spatial rhetoric operates as an accumulative process, where each policy intervention builds upon previous exclusionary frameworks while appearing neutral or progressive. From Dr. Smith's original vision of Black homeownership opportunity to the systematic containment achieved through zoning ordinances and federal redlining, the same physical space was rhetorically reconstructed to serve different ideological purposes. Yet throughout this transformation, Smithfield residents developed counter-narratives and resistance strategies—from maintaining cultural practices that preserved community identity to transforming religious spaces into sites of political organizing—that challenged dominant spatial definitions and ultimately contributed to national civil rights legislation. This progression reveals how rhetoric doesn't merely describe spatial arrangements but actively constructs them, making the study of spatial rhetoric essential for understanding how language and policy shape the material conditions of community life. Students can apply this analytical framework to examine contemporary spatial rhetoric in their own communities, recognizing how planning documents, development projects, and policy language continue to construct social reality through seemingly neutral technical discourse.



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