

# Introduction

Two pink plastic flamingoes peek their heads out from under the rim of an old metal trashcan. Sitting on the curb, they await the trash collector. On their way to the county dump, they will soon be laid to rest in a mass grave alongside moldy couches and greasy pizza boxes. Their former owner, Susan Mills,<sup>1</sup> is sad to see them go. Franny and Floyd, as she calls them, have been in her flowerbed amidst the dandelions and tulips for more than fifteen years, ever since her neighbor Joanne gave them to her in the spring of '92. The flamingoes are cracked and faded, one is missing a leg, and the other had its tail burnt off in an unfortunate incident with some fireworks last Fourth of July. Yet none of this bothers Susan. This is not why she's getting rid of the flamingoes. She's getting rid of them, she says, because she has to. Because, she says, the city leaders have declared the neighborhood, called River Bend,<sup>2</sup> an "area of improvement."

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all respondents and neighborhoods to protect their confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> I met Susan and her neighbors and became familiar with River Bend while conducting interviews for the project that led to the development of this project. That earlier project, entitled "Rusty Cars and Crystal Doorknobs: A Qualitative Study of Neighborhood Satisfaction and Class-Based Values," was completed in January 2007. The field work was done in December 2006 under the guidance of Stanley Lieberman. Respondents for that project were randomly selected using public directories from purposively selected census tracts. After they expressed interest in my educational endeavors, I stayed in contact with a handful of participants from that project as I developed this project, and they served as pilot subjects. The conversations presented here are drawn from those pilot interviews.

Standing on the porch of her home, Susan, who runs the meat counter of a local grocery store, looks out at the trashcans, and at Franny and Floyd's forlorn eyes. "What do they mean to you?" I ask her as we sip the instant coffee she just prepared.

She laughs. "Never really thought about it. I guess the first thing I think about is Joanne and how she got them for me after I helped her out when she was sick. She had gotten pretty sick, and so I helped out...Then her kids were still home, so I'd watch them, and I'd take her to the doctor. And when she was sick, we'd always talk about going to Florida, so when she got better, she got them, sort of as a joke...So that's what I think of most I guess."

I questioned her again, this time asking if the flamingoes represented anything about River Bend more generally.

"Well, on some level, the flamingoes represent that story, and that story represents the neighborhood," she replied. "Because it's a very strong neighborhood...I think we support each other. That's why, that's why this whole thing came as quite a surprise to me."

The "whole thing" Susan refers to is a decision by leaders of the city adjacent to River Bend, the decision which led Susan to place Franny and Floyd on the curb. For years, Susan and her neighbors have gotten used to their neighborhood—a grouping of mobile homes more than three decades old, literally falling apart and held together largely with boards of wood, scraps of metal, and the occasional strip of duct tape—being ignored by the commuters zipping along the adjacent highway, traveling between their large-single family homes on the

outskirts of town and their professional, white-collar jobs downtown. But now, developers have made plans to step in, clean the place up, and, they say, help it realize its potential. The land, they assert, is valuable; its only blemish now the run down mobile homes littered with rusty cars, old toys, and tacky lawn ornaments.<sup>3</sup>

Davis Owen, the manager of a development agency similar to the one with which the city has partnered to oversee the River Bend renovation, described the changes to me. “They’re trying to create a mixed use area that takes advantage of the beautiful location...An area with lots of space, with refined and cosmopolitan design. I think it will be really successful,” he said, offering pictures of neighborhoods his firm has designed as examples, all full of modern architecture, sleek lines, and minimalist landscapes—a far cry from River Bend’s current state.

During another point in my conversation with Davis, I pulled out a picture of Susan Mills’ home, complete with Franny and Floyd pre-disposal. “What do you think of this home?” I asked him. “Could you say anything about the people who probably live there?”

Davis chuckled at first. “Well I definitely couldn’t see myself living there...It looks like it’s falling apart, with shutters out of plywood...I’m guessing who lives here, they don’t take pride in where they live,” he said.

“And do you think anything of the flamingoes in particular,” I asked.

Davis chuckled again and leaned back in his chair. He squinted, looking carefully at the photograph. “It looks like, is a tail missing? It looks kind of like

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<sup>3</sup> Citations for newspaper articles dealing with the redevelopment have been withheld to protect subject confidentiality and can be provided upon request.

the whole neighborhood, just that not very up kept, dumpy kind of look. It looks like a place that's been neglected for a while," he said, before continuing on about the structural unsoundness of mobile homes.

When Susan Mills and Davis Owen looked at Franny and Floyd, they saw two completely different things. Susan saw a reflection of her neighborhood, her neighbors, and the relationships they value. Davis saw negligence, dumpiness, and a community in need of a serious overhaul. A symbol of camaraderie to one person signaled carelessness to the other.

Why does this pair of pink plastic flamingoes have such symbolic meaning? And why is this meaning so different for Susan, a working-class single mom, and for Davis, an affluent businessman? This project explores the symbolic meanings people of different classes attach to home and neighborhood appearance—to English gardens, makeshift shutters, and pink flamingoes. Talking to residents of working-class and upper-middle class neighborhoods about the values they hope to portray through their homes, and about the judgments they make based on others' homes, I examine the role that home and neighborhood appearance have in people's construction of class-based moral boundaries.

People's homes are of central importance to their lives. Their home are where they wake up in the morning, come home to after work, and spend time with friends and family. Having a home is often seen as the pinnacle of the American Dream, a universal standard of status that, once achieved, levels class differences (Blum and Kingston 1984: 159; Cohn 1979; Dobringer 1963; Berger

1960). However, dramatically increasing economic segregation indicates that not all homes are created equal (Jargowsky 1996, 1997; Massey 1996). Homogeneously low-income neighborhoods struggle with substandard qualities of housing and limited opportunity structures which trap their residents in cycles of hardship. This project goes beyond structural explanations and consequences to examine the moral meaning people attach to economically homogeneous neighborhoods, their appearance, and their residents. It takes the abstract ideal of the home as a marker of equality and turns it into a symbolic battleground in the war of class relations.

Specifically, this project asks the following questions:

1. What values or moral qualities do people consider to define a good neighborhood? Do these definitions differ depending on people's social class?
2. What visual cues or signals are attached to these values or qualities? How do these differ by social class?
3. Do people tie these values or visual cues to specific classes? If so, are they used to draw moral boundaries and to reinforce class boundaries?

To address these questions, I interviewed 84 residents of four neighborhoods—working-class and upper-middle class neighborhoods outside of two geographically diverse metropolitan areas, Boston, Massachusetts and Eugene, Oregon. The four neighborhoods represented the census blocks in the top and bottom five percent of income and educational attainment within each of the metropolitan areas. Randomly selected by a commercial survey agency using public directories, respondents were interviewed in their homes for approximately 45 minutes about their attitudes toward their homes and neighborhoods, their definitions of what makes a good or bad neighborhood, and their beliefs about what those neighborhoods look like. I supplemented interviews with detailed field notes describing the visual appearance of respondents' homes and neighborhoods.

Current literature indicates that economic segregation is dramatically increasing. Even though racial segregation has steadily decreased over recent decades, people are becoming more and more likely to live in socio-economically homogenous neighborhoods (Jargowsky 1996, 1997; Massey 1996; Fischer et al. 2004; Domina 2006; Iceland et al. 2002). Explanations for the persistence and growth of economic segregation have focused primarily on the limited opportunity structures of these areas, which trap people in persistent cycles of poverty (Swanstrom, Dreier, and Mollenkopf 2002; Wilson 1987; Jargowsky 1996; Massey and Denton 1993). The structural problems of low-income communities are well documented; limited opportunity structures, under achieving schools, limited public resources, and structurally unsound buildings mean that poor and working-class individuals rarely have the opportunity to

escape the type of disadvantaged neighborhood in which they were born (Swanstrom, Dreier, and Mollenkopf 2002; Jargowsky 1997; Mayer 2002). Economic segregation, in short, physically separates people of different classes from one another, a spatial manifestation of the class divisions permeating contemporary society.

These class divisions, though, extend beyond the streets of America's cities and into the minds of its citizens. Symbolic boundaries—the lines people draw to conceptually categorize, separate, and classify people—also persist along class lines. Lamont's (1992, 2000) work examining the cultural, moral, and economic boundary work of the working and upper-middle class indicates that both groups use symbolic boundaries to distinguish themselves from the opposing class. Moral boundaries—one type of symbolic boundary dealing with personal characteristics such as integrity, honesty, friendliness, and respect—are especially pernicious; their independence from financial capital prohibits a universal standard of comparison, leading both the privileged and the disadvantaged to define themselves as superior, and to view the opposing class contemptuously (see Sayer 2005).

Though symbolic and spatial boundaries are both drawn along class lines, they have rarely been brought together empirically or theoretically. Structural studies of the causes and consequences of segregation tend not to question internal thought patterns, while examinations of conceptual boundaries usually do not consider any spatial manifestations. Projects that have brought together symbolic and spatial boundaries have thus far either neglected the issue of class or

ignored the complexity of class relations by focusing exclusively on one class. A series of studies conducted in Europe revealed that people read moral meaning into particular housing attributes, yet they did not correlate differences in these readings to class position (Lindberg et al. 1987; Collen and Hoekstra 2001; Wright 1980). In the United States, a number of ethnographers have examined the ways in which neighborhoods serve as a framework for developing moral communities, but, like the European studies, these projects did not take into account differences in class position (Perin 1988; Halperin 1998).

The works of Maria Kefalas (2003) and David Southerton (2001) have been unique in their simultaneous handlings of class, neighborhood, and moral boundary work. Kefalas examined how residents of a working-class Chicago neighborhood draw moral boundaries from neighborhood appearance in order to distinguish themselves from nearby lower status individuals. Like the ethnographers before her, though, Kefalas' focus on one class and one neighborhood prohibits an analysis of inter-class relations. Southerton interviewed residents of three economically homogeneous neighborhoods of a British town about how they distinguish their neighborhoods from others. Although using neighborhoods as a unit of analysis, Southerton focused on symbolic boundaries broadly defined, not exclusively on their relation to neighborhoods or spatial boundaries. The research of Kefalas, Southerton, and the European and American scholars working before them suggest that neighborhood appearance has strong symbolic significance, and that economically homogenous neighborhoods can form the basis of moral communities.



The interviews I conducted with residents of working- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods outside of Eugene and Boston revealed strong class-based patterns in how people defined morally good and bad neighborhoods and the visual criteria people used to identify these neighborhoods. To the upper-middle-class respondents, a good neighborhood was one that valued privacy and personal space above all else. Visually manifested in large homes, open spaces, and distinct fences, privacy often was described as coming at the price of neighborly interaction—a price many upper middle class respondents were willing to pay. Coming in a close second to privacy was the value of “good taste.” Defined vaguely, good taste in lawn décor and home appearance is the type of thing “you know when you see.” According to upper-middle-class respondents, varied displays of good taste throughout a neighborhood reflect open-mindedness and a willingness to embrace modern or progressive styles. The upper middle class neighborhoods I visited were characterized by these qualities—large homes and spacious yards displayed a range of artistic, architectural, and landscaping styles. For these respondents, a bad neighborhood was defined by laziness and negligence—qualities reflected by a lack of maintenance, by makeshift or homemade repairs, and by clutter of toys, tools, cars, and lawn ornaments.

The working-class respondents described a good neighborhood as one in which interdependence and mutual understanding created close bonds between neighbors. These respondents were often more than willing to overlook occasional lapses in maintenance or cleanliness on behalf of themselves or their neighbors. Small houses and cluttered yards translated to efficiency—another

treasured value for working-class respondents. Many of the working-class homes I visited were under seeming constant disrepair—few brandished the standards of maintenance present in the upper-middle-class neighborhoods, and many displayed tools, toys, cars, and other objects in yards, on porches, and in driveways. For working-class respondents, a bad neighborhood was one in which neighbors did not know or depend on one another, in which spacious yards, large homes, and tall fences reflected people's social isolation. Large homes were also read as a sign of wastefulness—another major moral shortcoming for working-class respondents.

Troublingly, the working and upper-middle classes' moral definitions of good and bad neighborhoods were not just different, but in direct opposition to each other. The visual cues valued by and present in the upper-middle-class neighborhoods were read negatively by working-class respondents. Similarly, the cues valued by and present in the working-class neighborhoods were read negatively by the upper-middle-class respondents. Nearly all respondents, though, were reluctant to tie their judgments explicitly to class. The upper-middle-class respondents made clear that their standards of maintenance and taste were not dependent on money. They claimed that if an individual really valued privacy, he'd find a way to secure a decent amount of space. If he had a strong enough work ethic, he'd find a way to maintain his home to certain standards. Similarly, working-class respondents noted that the owners of large homes and spacious properties were not morally apprehensible because of their wealth, but because of their choices to use their wealth in a particular way. Respondents explicitly denied

that the moral boundaries they drew were related to class, yet the presence of the visual cues from which they drew these boundaries caused them to be drawn along class lines. In this way, respondents were able to distinguish themselves from members of the opposing class while simultaneously denying the salience of class divisions.

Theoretically, this project brings spatial and symbolic boundaries together. The people I spoke with used the visual cues of a neighborhood to construct moral boundaries along class lines. When working class people looked at their own neighborhoods, they saw in the occasional lapses of maintenance and cluttered yards a reflection of the neighborliness and mutual understanding they valued so dearly. When upper-middle-class people looked at their own neighborhoods, they saw the wide open spaces and physical demarcations of property as reflective of privacy and individualism. But when heads were turned and the classes looked at each others' neighborhoods, a much different picture was painted. The working class read selfishness and wasteful opulence in the upper middle class neighborhoods, while the upper middle class read laziness and negligence in the working class neighborhoods. Members of both classes used visual cues to draw class-based moral boundaries. In a cyclical process, these symbolic boundaries reinforce class divisions—the divisions that drive the economic segregation from which the boundaries first arose.

Though this theoretical stance may seem pessimistically deterministic, the findings of this project can be applied meaningfully to attempts at economically integrating communities, toward bringing people of different classes together, so

that they have access to similar resources, similar opportunities, and similar life chances. Rebuilding housing, providing public assistance, funding failing schools, and increasing local wages may be important components of revitalizing economically depressed communities, but without careful attention to the moral culture of the residents, these attempts are doomed to fail. The theoretical pessimism described above draws from the moral boundary work of the upper middle class; the key to change lies in the morality of the working class. Imposing change upon low-income communities under the assumption of upper middle class values, even if in the name of community revitalization, threatens to further marginalize disadvantaged residents as they struggle to live in a community built from a mindset antithetical to their own. Community revitalization informed by the findings of this project must incorporate the voices of the residents whose lives any changes will most affect. These are the voices of the disadvantaged—voices that in this project were more than willing to help one another, to lend a neighborly hand, and hopefully, to work together to envision a better and more equal society.