

Formations of Space: Formal and Informal Claims in Flood Mitigation Buyout Lots

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Abstract

Histories of flooding in Houston Texas and Lexington Kentucky have prompted the creation of disaster mitigation strategies, one of which utilizes federal funds to buyout homes for demolition in flood prone areas. Property buyouts leave empty lots of land in neighborhoods where people may still be living, and these lots vary in maintenance and use both by residents and government officials. Residents may interact with the open spaces created by property buyouts in ways that were not intended for in the creation of the buyout lots by governmental agencies. Buyout lots are not a neutral entity. In their existence, they are interacted with, maintained, and used differently across neighborhoods and communities. This research aims to understand both social and political factors that influence the use of buyout lots in neighborhoods through an analysis of interviews, photographs, and ethnographic data from Houston Texas and Lexington Kentucky. Land use of buyout lots raises further questions about the intersection of governmental policy and land management with inhabitant lived experiences and desires across neighborhoods of varying demographics. Open spaces from property acquisitions offer a diverse range of experiences as sites of formal interaction where governmental agencies follow legal codes concerning the use of buyout lots, and as informal spaces where residents create meaning and use buyout open spaces according to community desires. The creation of buyout lots requires planning, and the governmental intended use of these lots is not always realized as buyout open spaces become sites of community interactions. In understanding these interactions, future buyout lot design can complement community needs and desires by understanding what communities have independently created and facilitating this further.

Methodology

A mixed-methods case study of post-buyout space in Harris County, Texas and Lexington, Kentucky. **Research Methods Included**

- Door-to-door surveys in Harris County Texas
- Semi-structured interviews with residents in Harris County Texas
- Mapping out buyout lot locations
- Inductive coding of interview and photo data from Dr. Zavar's research in Lexington Kentucky, 2010-2012, Harris County photos and interviews.
- Coding of interview data on a broad scale broke down into two themes of formal and informal use of buyout lots. This code reflected the dichotomies of participation and appropriation, as well as state agent and resident, which was a constant factor in interviews.

Introduction

Nationwide, residents in flood prone areas may engage with flooding mitigation practices in the form of voluntary property buyouts. These property acquisitions lead to the removal of homes from properties, leaving behind empty plots of land. (Binder, Greer, and Zavar 2020, 497). These buyout lots may remain empty lots or may be given a designated use such as a detention basin or park by the city municipality. Buyout lots can be understood as both **formal** spaces in which land use is assigned by a government entity that is restricted by legal codes governing use of buyout lots, and as **informal** spaces in which residents interact with buyout open spaces in ways their design was not intended for. In the late 1990's the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) alongside with the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG) began property acquisitions of 38 homes that had repeatedly flooded in the neighborhoods of Cardinal Valley, Port Royal, and WGPL (Site Map: Lexington Kentucky) (Zavar 2016, 38). In Harris County, property buyouts began after Tropical Storm Allison in 2001, and continue to this day with an expansion from FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant after Hurricane Harvey in 2017, prior to which 3,000 buyouts had occurred (Site Map: Houston, Texas) (Binder, Greer, and Zavar 2020, 498).

Results

Interview data reflected that residents with buyout lots in their neighborhoods interacted with these spaces in daily activities. In the neighborhood of WGPL residents cut a section of the fence and created paths across the buyout open space, informally shaping the buyout open space by reflecting their needs of mobility access in their community. WGPL inhabitants also placed no mow and no walking signs along the bank of a stream on the lots as a community effort to keep debris and trash out of the stream. While their initial efforts were of their own volition, the no mow program was adopted by the City of Lexington to reduce stream contamination. Appropriation of buyout open spaces that represent residents' desires reclaim space in a meaningful way for residents as the living agents in this space. Some buyout lots are further formally developed by city jurisdictions. Houston's Pasadena Park featured a detention basin, track, soccer fields, and a community art wall which replaced an apartment complex, reduced flooding, and increased recreational activities and property values for residents. Other buyout plots, while technically public land, add barriers to deter access such as "No trespassing" signs or road blockades sectioning off empty lots on completely bought out streets. However, residential use of these open spaces creates a socially public place, even when one is not invited. Spatial appropriation by residents within buyout open spaces challenges the notion of city ownership as indicative of prescribing the activities that occur within lots. This planning usually comes from the top down: municipalities decide the usage of the space and do their best to facilitate that usage, or lack thereof, by limiting or promoting the area's own forms of architecture.

Conclusion

Buyout lots offer a wide range of interactions that expose tensions between who is allowed in their space, who maintains it, and how often. Buyout lots are understood as both formal spaces in which residential usage of the buyout lot falls in line with the intended design by governmental officials, and as informal spaces where residents use them in ways their design was not intended for. We see neighborhoods with active residents and city connections design and produce their desires formally onto buyout open spaces, and we see residents in the community informally creating meaning, use and memory in these spaces as well. Buyout lots offer a diverse range of experiences and are perceived and treated differently in many neighborhoods and by city management. We see in practice how ideas that span around "rationalizing public space... legitimate public activities" and thus also constricts them to confines understood along socio-political lines that reflect inequalities (Mitchel 1995, 124). In understanding buyout lots as multifaceted and reflections of social realities, their design and creation can be more reflective of residential desires. By at least recognizing that residents appropriate and create meaning within these spaces, this factor should be addressed within buyout lot design.

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Visualizing Formal and Informal Sites of Participaiton

Formal Sites of Participation



Pasadena Park Track/ Soccer Fields and Detention Basin



Lexington Port Royal Neighborhood Concrete Labyrinth

Other Examples

- Parks
- Dentention Basin
- Walking Trails
- No Trespassing" Signage
- Road Blockades
- Sports Fields

Informal Sites of Participation



Lexington WGPL Resident Made Walking Path Out of Neighborhood

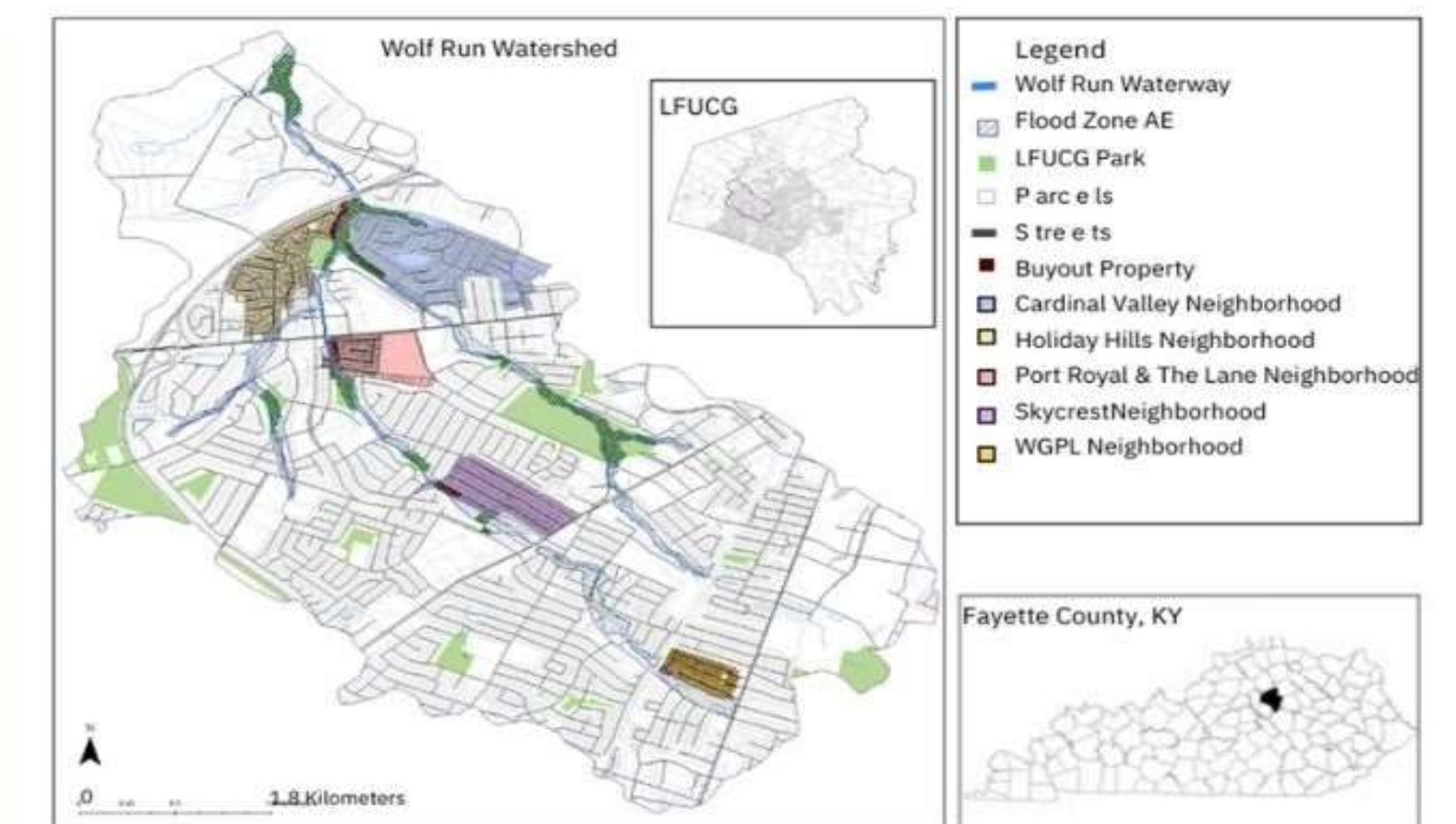


Lexington WGPL Resident No Walk Zone Signage

Other Examples

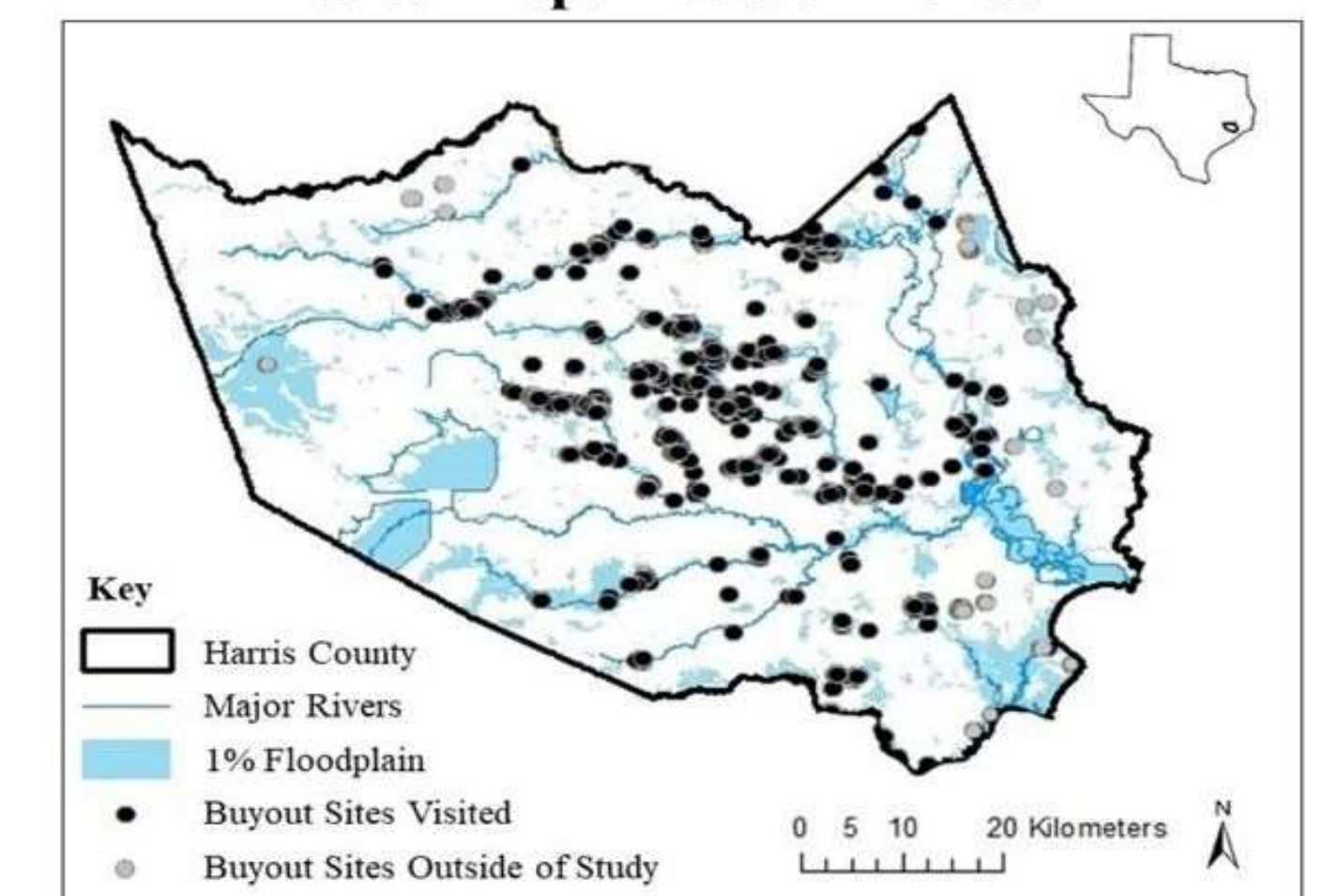
- Picnics
- Desire Paths
- Dog Walking
- Mobility Access
- Residential Marketing Tactics
- Managing Landscapes

Site Map: Lexington Kentucky



Data Source: LFUCG GIS Department

Site Map: Houston Texas



Data Source: (Zavar 4, 2023).