Conflicts of a gentrifying neighborhood

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Atlanta author Nathan McCall parks his Audi at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Randolph Street — ground zero for the affluence bomb that has landed on the Old Fourth Ward.

The wealth fallout is all around. Shotgun shacks have been scraped down and replaced with pastel Craftsmans. The street parking is now littered with Infinitis instead of early-model Fords. The minimart that sold lottery tickets and booze is now a trendy cafe offering smoothies and coffee drinks.

Frank Niemeir/Staff
(ENLARGE)

Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward is the site of Nathan McCall's latest book, 'Them,' which turns on divisions of economics and race. A formerly poor, crime-ridden neighborhood, the Ward is changing rapidly.

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"Let me show you where the $900,000 houses are," says McCall, with a smile, marveling at the fact that some real estate here is about to crack the million-dollar mark. "They've got elevators!"

This radical shift is the backdrop for his new novel "Them," a book as much about gentrification as it is about black-and-white relations.

An intown neighborhood that has struggled for years with crime and neglect, the Old Fourth Ward stretches to moviemaker Tyler Perry's new studios on the east, north to Ponce de Leon, west to Boulevard and south to DeKalb Avenue. Despite its pedigree as Martin Luther King Jr.'s stomping ground, the area was, for a long time, resistant to revitalization. When McCall went house-hunting here years ago, a thief stole the briefcase out of his car. But even then the change was coming. McCall noted the construction boom, and a story idea took root.

With his completed novel slated to reach shelves Nov. 6, McCall offers an informal tour of the neighborhood that inspired him, stopping first at the house of his main consultant, Johnnie Bussey, a 50-year resident. Bussey answers the door and immediately pins him with a question:

"Where's my book?"

McCall, 52, has not only brought along a copy of the new novel, he shows her where her name appears in the acknowledgments, which earns him a hug.

Chatting on her broad porch, where the windows are protected by burglar bars, Bussey comments on the transformation of the neighborhood. "I've seen it go from an affluent community to almost a second Vietnam," she says. "I'm very proud of it now."

The conflict in McCall's book occurs when the new arrivals fail to fit into the old neighborhood. But Bussey finds such conflict absent from her experience. "I just see people as people," she says.

As he drives past the cottages that served as models for some of his set-pieces — the disreputable gin-house he calls the Purple Palace, the front porch of another cottage where the "elders" would discuss the great issues of sex and sports — McCall says it may be economics rather than race that serves as a dividing line here. Despite the fact that there are still sketchy sections — a homeless camp is visible near new townhomes — poor people might be left out of the new Old Fourth Ward.

"It's a natural inclination to want to see the neighborhood improve," he says, "but there are different ideas about what improvement means."

Developers, many of them black, see improvement in skyrocketing land values. David Patton, former chairman of the Neighborhood Planning Unit M, which includes the Old Fourth Ward, says there are 3 million square feet of residential and business property under redevelopment here. But much talk of poor folks being pushed out is misguided, he says.

"A lot of the poor people that were here didn't want to stay," says Patton. "They wanted to go to the suburbs just like everybody else."