

Tulsa Star

The Continual Erasure of Greenwood

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by Senior Writer Lindsay Myers

By now, most Tulsans are familiar with the history of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, when miles of Black-owned businesses and homes were destroyed. Black residents have worked tirelessly for nearly a century to recover the history of Black Wall Street and their labor is finally being acknowledged. Yet, as our city’s collective memory is being restored, Greenwood’s physical presence is continually being erased. According to Dr. Alicia Odewale, professor of Anthropology at the University of Tulsa, Greenwood was much more than Black Wall Street, a wealthy neighborhood, at the time of the Massacre. All socioeconomic classes were represented in that space, from “negro shanties” to a large Black middle class. She states that “placing this community here was strategic.” It was a safe space that provided hope for opportunity and upward mobility. Greenwood was rebuilt on the backs of community members without the help of the city. This is a testament not only to the community’s resilience, but to their dedication towards establishing a safe communal space.

Dr. Odewale is currently working on a research project mapping the physical changes in Greenwood from 1921 to 2021. Eventually, this project will be available as an interactive map, which will allow community members to both research their own histories and submit documents associated with historical structures. In the meantime, survivors and descendants of survivors from the Massacre are encouraged to submit their own stories through a [City of Tulsa portal](#). Odewale states that the “city starts to get intentional amnesia... as soon as the sun rose” the morning after the Massacre. As time passes, there has been a “shifting and shrinking” of Greenwood and an “encroachment” of downtown development upon the neighborhood. Even when Tulsa’s own reports show North Tulsa at the bottom of their Equality Indicators, the city hasn’t done much to prevent this encroachment or to give back stolen land.

The Greenwood that Tulsans can physically see today is merely half of a city block and a handful of monuments. While the full story of Greenwood’s second erasure is still

being pieced together by community members, historians, and anthropologists, all recognize that a series of sweeping urban renewal projects are largely to blame. According to historian Hannibal Johnson's book *Black Wall Street: from Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historical Greenwood District*, the United States experienced a free market economy boom in the 1950s and 1960s favoring large corporations over locally-owned businesses. Community dollars began to pour into these corporations, making it difficult for local Black Wall Street shops to thrive. Rather than investing in already-existing local businesses, the county and city governments bought out Black-owned businesses in the 1970s in favor of urban renewal projects. Urban renewal, known to the North Tulsa community as urban removal, continues today, allowing downtown infrastructure to further encroach on Greenwood. Even before I-244 separated North Tulsa from downtown, other infrastructure was already acting as a barrier between the Black and white communities.

Another part of the Tulsa Development Authority's urban renewal projects, The University Center at Tulsa, was established in 1982 as a "**consortium of four universities**," including the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, Northeastern State University, and Langston University. Currently, only OSU and Langston remain in North Tulsa. In 1999, OSU "**took over**" the University Center through the passage of a law that designated it as Tulsa's primary public university. While this may appear to be a win for Tulsa, it has prevented the North Tulsa community from accessing historic Greenwood land, thereby blocking the hope of ever rebuilding the Greenwood neighborhood. In recent years, OSU-Tulsa has appeared to flaunt their takeover of Greenwood, most notably and visibly by building the "Tulsa Gateway Tower" on Standpipe Hill. The tower is intended to "welcome visitors and establish the campus as **Cowboy Country**." However, in reality, it devalues the historical significance of Standpipe Hill and its role in the Tulsa Race Massacre. While there is a plaque that recognizes its history at the bottom of the hill, the Gateway Tower's dominance of the hill is quite literally a representation of its power over historic Greenwood land.

While OSU-Tulsa does not appear to be going anywhere, they are making incremental changes to become more community-minded. In January, Emonica "Nekki" Reagan-Neeley became OSU-Tulsa's Assistant Vice President for Community Engagement and Student Services and she is not shy about OSU's negative history with the North Tulsa community. While new to this position, she has been a part of the campus since it was the University Center at Tulsa and grew up in North Tulsa. Her main focus as AVP is to "establish dialogue" and to ensure that OSU-Tulsa does a "better job at becoming a community neighbor," emphasizing that "It's time. It's past time." Reagan-Neeley hopes to create mutually beneficial partnerships with agencies and organizations with the goal of promoting education and social justice. She encourages community members to reach out and share their ideas about how OSU-Tulsa can better support the community, stating that it is "endless as to what we can do."

However, Greenwood is still being erased. Urban renewal is encroaching on North Tulsa. Some reparations cases from the Massacre are still ongoing, according to Odewale, but the story does not end here. History has shown us that North Tulsa is resilient. There is hope to move from what Hannibal Johnson calls a “Renaissance of Spirit” to a physical renaissance. This will require continual community input and resistance, keeping the City and organizations in North Tulsa accountable for their land use, and requiring them to prioritize the legacy of Greenwood over downtown profits.

Illustration: Patrick Norman

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