

October 14, 2017

Dear Neighbor,

I am writing in response to the Flock Realty ad that was published on the back of the October 2017 issue of the Urban Times. The ad has been widely condemned, yet some Facebook conversations document the ongoing debate about whether or not the ad is racist and classist. The bias in this advertisement is more difficult to understand than more obvious discriminatory occurrences, such as the recent march organized by white supremacists in Charlottesville. Flock Realty's bias is disguised as a celebration of progress. Like other veiled discriminatory language, it is harder to identify as a problem, and therefore, harder to fight.

This ad reveals the powerful bias commonly held by our dominant culture (which includes Flock Realty) that declares certain kinds of places to be "unseemly." By criminalizing a neighborhood and the people who live there, Flock encourages its audience to view all low income communities as a threat to our "peace and prosperity."

One of the reasons this ad is so important to unpack is because of its connection to the long history of discriminatory housing policy in the United States. In the mid-20th century, urban neighborhoods were systematically disinvested in as a result of redlining, which relied on government produced maps that designated areas as more or less desirable for real estate investment. Using these maps as a guide, lenders, real estate agents and neighborhood organizations worked to ensure that people of color and certain ethnicities were excluded from real estate investment opportunities. As a result, many members of our society were denied the opportunity to build personal wealth or benefit from other advantages of homeownership. Ta-Nehisi Coates presents a comprehensive and compelling history of housing discrimination in the U.S. in his article, "The Case for Reparations" (The Atlantic, June 2014). He writes, "Redlining went beyond FHA-backed loans and spread to the entire mortgage industry, which was already rife with racism, excluding black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage."

I chose to live in the Near Eastside because of its complexity and diversity, but I am increasingly unsettled by ongoing redevelopment efforts, which often rely on relocating poor people to make room for mostly white, middle and upper class homeowners. Flock Realty, along with other "banks, brokers, and bureaucrats," profit by acquiring inexpensive property and turning it into expensive residences. The harm caused by poverty and marginalization do not go away when developers pretty up a neighborhood—the people burdened by these issues are simply relocated to another part of our city.

I used to think that the growing equity in my house was the result of my goodness: I made a smart real estate decision; I help clean up my neighborhood; I make improvements to my property. But this simplistic and self congratulatory narrative ignores the discriminatory housing policies that have limited access to safe and affordable housing for low income

neighbors, especially people of color, while benefiting white, middle class homeowners like myself.

The Flock Realty ad—much more subtle than redlining maps but perpetuating the same bias—attempts to legitimize the displacement and exclusion of people from their own neighborhood. The ad also attempts to reassure someone like me—a white, middle class, homeowner in the Near Eastside who receives a free copy of the Urban Times at my doorstep each month—that the successes of Flock Realty’s recent development project has created a better space, cleansed of “unholy habitats,” which will lead to an increase in my property values.

If homeowners are placated by rising property values, redevelopment projects like Flock’s will continue to whitewash our neighborhoods and move us further away from diverse and inclusive communities. In his 2011 book, “How Racism Takes Place,” George Lipsitz writes, “The white spatial imaginary idealizes ‘pure’ and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior.”

Increased neighborhood safety and stability are needed in our communities, but I oppose short sighted changes that lead to the displacement of our low income neighbors. This ad has been productive in that it has increased awareness; now more of us need to do the hard work of changing perceptions and policy to break the cycle of housing discrimination.

I challenge our community, especially those of us protected by our homeowner status, to get to know more of our neighbors so that we can work together to accomplish equitable neighborhood change that benefits a greater percentage of our community members.

Yours,

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Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, June 2014. Web.

Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2011. Print.