



Racially Restrictive Covenants: A Story of Segregation, Disinvestment, and Lingering Implications

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What Is a Racially Restrictive Covenant?

Restrictive covenants are legally binding agreements that white people placed into property deeds and other legal documents to ban non-white people from living in certain neighborhoods. Those targeted by racial covenants include Black and Brown people, as well as people who were once commonly seen as non-white, such as Jewish, Italian, and Polish people.

Racially Restrictive Covenants Today

Embedded in the Deed

Language was added to property deeds by sellers before enforcement of the practice was outlawed in 1948. In St. Louis, racially restrictive covenants often exist at a neighborhood scale.

Discharging Covenants

Property owners may reject the language of the racist covenant by adding a statement to their property title. It does not erase the covenant from property records.

Legal Implications

Racially restrictive covenants have no legal standing after the 1948 Supreme Court *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruling. To discharge a covenant, property owners must enlist legal help, often for a fee.

More Than 100,000

More than 100,000 racially restricted covenants still exist in deeds to properties across St. Louis City and County. However, they are most prevalent in the county, with 80% of properties built before 1950 having one.

Addressing Racially Restrictive Covenants Is Crucial to Creating Equity

Avenues for justice include but are not limited to addressing racially restrictive covenants.

Here are a few of the many ways for communities to address the covenants:

- Establish historical land markers that commemorate historically Black neighborhoods.
- Create community land trusts, with subsidies from city budgets.
- Post acknowledgment statements on city/municipality websites.
- Revoke fees associated with eliminating racial language in deeds.
- Discharge covenants and insert pro-fair housing language.
- Discard documents with racial language after they have been properly digitized, and support such efforts with legislation.

Why This Matters

There is no question that the existence of racially restrictive covenants has played a significant role in reinforcing segregation, stifling economic opportunity, and perpetuating harm for Black and Brown families in St. Louis for generations. Thoughtful, just steps to untie the knot of exclusionary practices should be a shared responsibility among communities and stakeholders. As we work toward a more equitable society, reconciliation and acknowledgment of past injustices should be paramount.



Resources

80% of St. Louis County homes built by 1950 have racial covenants, researcher finds, Corinne Ruff, St. Louis Public Radio

Confronting Racial Covenants: How They Segregated Monroe County and What to Do About Them, City Roots & Yale Environmental Protection Clinic

Just Deeds

Racially Restrictive Covenants, Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing & Opportunity Council

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