



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Neighborhood Resistance to Redevelopment: A Case from Memphis, TN

By CED Program Interns & Students

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The City of Memphis, Tennessee was an early adopter and frequent user of HOPE VI funds to demolish traditional public housing and redevelop mixed-income sites. Over the past 15 years, the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) has received more than \$155 million Federal dollars to demolish five public housing complexes that had housed over 1,200 residents, only one fifth of whom returned to rebuilt housing. In 2009, MHA announced that it was preparing to demolish and redevelop the city's last remaining traditional public housing complex, Foote Homes, and its sister site, Cleaborn Homes, together comprising 497 housing units (1).

On paper, it looked like the redevelopment of Foote Homes and its surrounding neighborhood, Vance Avenue, was a foregone conclusion. MHA won a Choice Neighborhoods grant of a quarter million dollars to redevelop Foote Homes, and the broader Vance Avenue area was slated to be redeveloped into a tourist destination called Triangle Noir, with infrastructure, commercial, and housing upgrades funded by a \$102 million TIF (2). But MHA may have jumped the gun with its grand plans for the area's redevelopment.

MHA invited University of Memphis city and regional planning professors and students to get involved in steering the required resident input portion of the Choice Neighborhoods process. As this outreach team met with residents and neighbors in the Vance Avenue community, they learned very quickly that not everyone was on board with the plan to overhaul the neighborhood (and not just due to the anticipated resistance to change that accompanies many redevelopment projects). Vance Avenue community members were proud of the civil rights era history, strong social fabric, and robust minority-owned businesses in their neighborhood. Foote Homes residents, many of whom moved into Foote after being displaced from previous public housing redevelopments, reported that the historic structures were in good condition after interior renovations in the mid-1990s. Watching friends and relatives struggle to find decent Section 8 housing with the vouchers that replaced previous complexes, Foote Homes residents were eager to keep their homes and their community (3).

When the outreach team reported to MHA that they recommended shifting the focus in Vance Avenue away from total overhaul to upgrading existing homes and businesses, MHA dismissed them from further involvement with the project, and informed residents that the time for community input was over.

The team of residents, business owners, NAACP members, congregations, and university affiliates who had become involved then made a crucial decision: they took the information they had gathered in the original process and the goals they had set and decided to create their own plan, focused on saving Foote Homes and revitalizing Vance Avenue, to compete with MHA's demolition and redevelopment plan. Together, they formed the Vance Avenue Collaborative community organization, and developed the Vance Avenue Community Transformation Plan, a neighborhood plan that encompassed improvements to the physical, social, environmental community in Vance Avenue.

At this point, the Vance Avenue Collaborative has been engaged in the planning process for over two years. MHA's plan is being developed largely behind closed doors, despite increasing calls for transparency from the press and public, particularly in regard to the size and terms of the proposed TIF (4).

The Vance Avenue Collaborative plan, released late last year, has been a community-driven process that focused on collectivity and building connections, and cites as its guiding values Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community (5).

In addition to creating the Transformation Plan, Vance Avenue Collaborative has been taking steps to improve the



community by building on its assets. Their Facebook page publicizes an annual community cleanup. This past May, they launched the Green Machine Mobile Food Market, a repurposed city-bus-turned-roving-grocery-store with daily routes through the food desert neighborhood. They are working with U of M and visiting students to propose simple, cost-effective upgrades to the existing housing while applying for historic designation for Foote Homes. Organizers are hopeful that the tide of public opinion is turning in the community's favor. The Collective and their partners are now taking their plan to City Council, the Mayor's office, and HUD to counter MHA's proposal and ask for a more community-driven process moving forward (6).

The case of Vance Avenue teaches those of us working on revitalization and redevelopment that our pre-development planning needs to include an understanding of an area's historical nature and previous experiences of redevelopment. We may need to rebuild trust. One way to do so is by creating community processes where we're prepared to hear what residents actually have to say. We have to be willing to change our course, if necessary, always keeping an eye to improving the quality of life for community members. This may mean tilting development more toward preservation and less toward sweeping master plans. This case is also a cautionary tale of what can happen when residents are excluded from formal planning processes. The media and the public are no longer willing to turn a blind eye to development deals made behind closed doors. Shutting out opposition to a project does not make it disappear, and simply informing residents about development plans is not enough; if our goal is to improve lives, we must also involve and empower communities to steer revitalization themselves.

Sources:

(1) Reardon, K.M. (2013). "Pushing back against the demolition juggernaut." Shelterforce, Volume 173. Accessed online at

http://www.shelterforce.org/article/3470/pushing_back_against_the_demolition_juggernaut/

(2) University of Memphis Graduate Program in City and Regional Planning. (2012). The Vance Avenue Community Transformation Plan.

(3) Reardon, *ibid.*

(4) Rathke, W. (2013). "Great progress in saving historic Foote Homes, the last Memphis housing project." Chief Organizer Blog. Retrieved from

Great Progress in Saving Historic Foote Homes, the Last Memphis Housing Project

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(5) University of Memphis, *ibid.*

(6) Rathke, *ibid.*

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