

Community Planning Confronts the Proposed Demolition of Public Housing

A Memphis Tale

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ALL BUT ONE of the public housing complexes built in Memphis during the New Deal are gone, replaced by mixed income developments through an aggressive use of federal HOPE VI funds. The last remaining public housing complex, Foote Homes, is now targeted for redevelopment under a Choice Neighborhood Planning Initiative. But a concerted grassroots community planning effort has raised the question whether Foote Homes stays or goes.

The Memphis Housing Authority is close to realizing what its director has defined as “his personal dream” of making Memphis a public housing-free zone where poverty will be de-concentrated, crime dispersed, thereby rendering Memphis a better place to live and invest. Should this dream become reality? And if so, who will benefit from it?



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Since 1994, no one has questioned this approach to fighting poverty in the Bluff City which has the highest proportion of residents living under the poverty line of any US metropolitan area. Newspaper articles and official statements have enthusiastically celebrated the city’s use of HOPE VI funds by the Memphis Housing Authority to reduce blight and crime, while public housing residents have been told, in one complex after another, that their American dream of a house with a backyard and a dog was soon to become reality. Instead, former public housing residents have been relocated with mobile Section 8 vouchers across Memphis’ sprawling territory. At present, less than 15 percent of the displaced public housing tenants have been able to return to housing in their original neighborhoods.

Demolishing Housing: Whose Dream?

At least one institution opposed the plan. Saint Patrick Catholic Church, located at the corner of Pontotoc and 4th, one block from the northwest corner of Foote Homes, is one of the oldest institutions in the neighborhood. Established as a white church by the Irish community shortly after the Civil War, it had developed as a racially-integrated, social justice-oriented parish. Saint Patrick parishioners were not surprised when, in January 2009, the city officially announced that their neighborhood was the target of a new redevelopment plan called the Triangle Noir. The plan intended to tap federal funds to develop a twenty square block area just south of downtown as an expanded entertainment district featuring new housing, a luxury hotel and as much as \$1.1 billion in public and private investments. A structural element of the plan was the proposed use of HOPE VI funds

to tear down the two public housing complexes that were the core of the neighborhood, Foote Homes and Cleaborn Homes. While the announcement surprised few parishioners, it disappointed nearly all the members of the congregation. Following almost 15 years of celebration of HOPE VI as the best strategy for dealing with poverty, many Memphians had concluded that the program was not as good as its supporters claimed.

Concerned about the impact this plan would have had on local residents, the church asked the Graduate Program in City and Regional Planning at the University of Memphis (CRP) to assist them in preparing a comprehensive redevelopment plan for the area. The neighborhood hoped to develop a resident driven planning process where the final plan would be the result of listening intently to people's needs and desires as well as relying on the best research available in the field of community development.

During the summer of 2009, Saint Patrick and CRP formed a broader coalition, called the *Vance Avenue Collaborative* (VAC), with two dozen community organizations sharing their displacement and gentrification concerns. The planning activities in the Vance Avenue community started in the fall semester of 2009. Students and faculty engaged in an intense outreach effort (including phone calls, door-knocking, emails, mailings, press releases, pulpit announcements in parishes). Community members were also encouraged to participate in these neighborhood-based outreach efforts. During the spring break, VAC carried out door-to-door interviews with 170 residents, and then, at the end of March, held a neighborhood summit.

The community development proposals, summarized in June 2010 in a document named *VAC Preliminary Planning Framework*, did not match those contained in the city-generated *Triangle Noir Plan*. Residents did not perceive housing as the top priority in a neighborhood where one of the few quality services citizens actually received was housing. The priority in the resident-generated Framework document was to provide additional neighborhood-based services and amenities (access to fresh food, neighborhood oriented retail shopping, a well-maintained park, healthcare, a homeless shelter, and after-school programs) as well as linking more explicitly to large downtown redevelopments, often

employing a large amount of public money, in order to create jobs for Foote Homes' low-income residents.

The very same month the community was presenting its *Planning Framework*, the city announced the receipt of its fifth HOPE VI grant for the redevelopment of Cleaborn Homes. Cleaborn was demolished shortly thereafter, and is currently in the process of being redeveloped. The Cleaborn planning, relocation, and development process confirmed most of the local residents' worst fears, echoing what many HOPE VI evaluators have found all over the country: involuntary relocation is a very painful process that frequently leaves the hard-to-house behind, especially when case-managers are not on top of their game. Despite several "wheels falling off the Urban Renaissance bus," the city is now aggressively pursuing another federal grant to redevelop Foote, but things are not going as smoothly as city officials had hoped.

The Last Chance to Get It Right

In an effort to address the strong criticisms leveled against HOPE VI by experts and scholars, by 2010 HUD has adopted a new, more holistic approach to public housing "redevelopment," with the launch of their *Choice Neighborhood* (CN) Grants Program requiring applicants not just to deal with housing but also to expand supportive services and educational opportunities for residents. CN also requires the minimization of resident displacement, their direct involvement in the planning process and the establishment of partnerships with neighborhood institutions. In Winter 2010–11 the city applied for a CN Planning Grant and, due to HUD's higher expectations regarding community engagement, it asked the Vance Avenue Collaborative and CRP to be responsible for the citizen participation aspect of the grant. The city hired other consultants to be responsible for planning related to housing and social services.

Beginning in July 2011, CRP replicated, in its new role as planning consultant to the city, most of the activities carried out during the Framework planning process, enlarging the number of engaged organizations and residents while significantly enhancing its data collection



Photo: Antonio Raciti

"We are a Community": Vance Community Leaders presenting their Plan to the City of Memphis Planning and Zoning Committee, October 2012

efforts. A community organizer was hired, and several training opportunities on community organizing—one at the Highlander Folk School—were organized as part of the planning initiative.

VAC involvement in the planning initiative resulted in a significant level of conflict: the city and other consultants expected the process to lead to the submission of a CN Implementation Grant that reflected the HOPE VI approach—relocation of residents with Section 8 vouchers, demolition, rebranding and redevelopment as a mixed-income project. While participatory activities are typically expected to

build consensus among residents, that did not happen in this case. CRP faculty and students collected a great amount of primary data that reinforced the findings from the previous phase (this time on the basis of the “bad experiences of many Cleaborn Homes residents”) that led to a strong preference for the rehabilitation instead of redevelopment of public housing units. Many disabled and under-employed residents feel like Foote Homes, while not “perfect” or “luxurious,” is really the “only sure thing they’ve got,” while lacking access to “everything else” (mostly living wage employment, healthcare and quality education).

In the summer of 2012, while university faculty and students, residents, and local institutional representatives were in the process of finalizing their reports to the city, CRP received a letter from the Executive Director of the Memphis Housing Authority terminating their contract “for convenience,” and local residents and institutional leaders were informed that “consultations” were over and decisions regarding the substance of the plan were about to be made without additional community input or review.

This generated a feeling of mistrust in many stakeholders. CRP

researchers were subsequently asked to finalize a community-driven transformation plan anyway, truly reflective of local aspirations and concerns. Once again, Vance residents, with the assistance of university planners, engaged in what Paul Davidoff envisioned decades ago: while city officials worked on their plans behind closed doors, a low-income community, with the help of “advocacy planners,” would be working on its own plan. Who is going to come out with better ideas? And better for whom?

Is There Any Space Left for Discussion?

Not surprisingly, the two “planning processes” have produced significant conflict. On September 13th the Vance Avenue Collaborative presented its *Vance Avenue Community Transformation Plan* to more than 100 local residents and stakeholders.

The plan looks at the last public housing complex in Memphis as an important community asset that functions as it was designed to during the New Deal, by enabling low-income residents “to get back on their feet.” The plan, in particular, proposes to undertake major renovations of the units one or two buildings at a time, relocating residents to near-by units for a period of no more than six months each. Demolition costs are avoided and relocation costs are significantly reduced, so that more funds can be used to address the real priorities: the creation of living-wage employment opportunities (intensive use of local workers during the

renovations, the establishment of a food-coop maximizing local employment), crime prevention through community policing, the promotion of environmental stewardship through community-based landscape improvements, and the increase of quality public education for all ages through the establishment a community school.

For a time, at least, the Vance Avenue Collaborative had fought the city to a standstill. The situation held through the fall and winter of 2012-2013. However, the city was not finished. The very same day the Vance Avenue Collaborative presented their plan for community review and revision, two city agencies (currently under the same leadership, acting *de facto* as a single agency) filed an application with the Memphis/Shelby Office of Planning and Development to adopt a new *Heritage Trail Redevelopment Plan* that no local stakeholders had the opportunity to see or read. The plan included the establishment of a new downtown TIF (Tax Improvement Finance) district to finance new redevelopment whose first step is the immediate demolition of Foote Homes, even before these agencies secure the funds needed to construct replacement housing.

Meanwhile, VAC has initiated an “Improve—Don’t Remove” campaign, featuring several strategies, including:

- An application to have Foote Homes listed on the National Register of Historic Places;
- An inquiry into the possibility of filing fair housing complaints

with the federal Department of Justice;

- A request that the ultimate decision regarding which plan is followed be made, after open hearings of both plans, not by one appointed official but Memphis’ elected city council.

At this point it is hard to predict how this campaign will affect the city’s decision making. However the campaign itself has had some real positive impact on the overall political atmosphere of a city where “usual business” does not include any form of public disagreement. Among residents and local businessmen, there is also a growing appreciation of the fact that, for the first time in many years, people in Memphis are now engaged in a serious civic discussion regarding the best way to make public investment decisions. They are also pursuing a discussion regarding how to understand persistent urban poverty in a manner that does not necessarily portray the poor as passive and self-destructive individuals to be blamed. People have observed public housing residents working with local service providers and community-based organizations to produce a plan that addresses issues of social decline with creativity and pragmatism, instead of preconceived plans that have been shown to fail! Aware of the failure of past HOPE VI projects to address the needs of a majority of former public housing tenants, an increasing number of local citizens and leaders have voiced their support for the resident-generated Vance Avenue Community Transformation Plan. P²