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## The deep roots of austere planning in Memphis, TN: is the fox guarding the hen house?

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### ABSTRACT

US cities operate amid a longstanding notion that excessive government impedes prosperity. Here post-recession austerity did not trigger new retrenchment, but instead exacerbated an *existing* vacuum of the public. In cities like Memphis, institutional or community-led planning cannot confront austerity by going *back* to something it was *before* the recession. Instead, genuine public planning must be invented *ex novo*, exploring why planning agencies have not truly been able to act for the benefit of *all*. The recent launch of Memphis' first city-led comprehensive planning effort in decades provides an opportunity for reflection. This article examines whether a new emphasis on planning in Memphis represents a positive disruption of the status quo or a merely a disguised continuation of growth-machine motives. The findings argue for the need to work on the small signs of authentic interest in public planning as a starting point for new anti-austere courses of action.

### KEYWORDS

Austerity; growth machine; case-study; public-interest; US South

The popular American television series Parks and Recreation chronicles the struggles of a mid-level bureaucrat who venerates public service above all else. Leslie Knope's idealism is comically stifled by the recalcitrance of Ron Swanson, the Director of Parks and Recreation and proverbial fox guarding the hen house: A public official who despises government and dreams of a privatized park system run by corporations. The absurdity of this juxtaposition makes for good comedy, but, in many ways, is a reflection of a longstanding notion in American culture that excessive government impedes prosperity and growth. Given this background, the term 'austerity' – referring to a need to pull public expenditure back from a previous phase of indulgence – doesn't resonate in the US in quite the same way as it does in other countries. In general, the US context – where mainstream planning, since its early days, has shown a market-serving nature – sets up a difficult terrain for city planners who seek opportunities to govern spatial urban dynamics in the interest of the common good. This challenge is heightened in many US cities, like Memphis, that have faced decades of urban decline and spatial inequity driven by suburbanization and political fragmentation, where public resources are limited by hard fiscal constraints in addition to ideology. This article uses the Memphis case to investigate how planners can operate in context where there is no henhouse to guard.

Unlike many European cities, with a long history of racial segregation and market-driven planning, a clear distinction between private and public has never really been present in many US mid-sized cities, including (or especially) in Memphis. The recession contributed to an *already existing*

vacuum of the public, i.e. a significant lack of capacity by public officials to intervene via social, economic, and physical transformations. This article presents Memphis as case study, building upon the existing literature on the US-style tradition of austere urbanism, for the purpose of contributing to the debate and considering actions.

The research relies on a mixed methodology carried out by three faculty members of the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of Memphis. The department places a heavy emphasis on engaged scholarship (Boyer 1996) carried out by community-university partnerships (Reardon 2006). During the past decade, the authors have collaborated with every local public entity that has a relationship to planning and each has been involved in engaged scholarship in the service of Memphis' distressed historic African-American neighbourhoods (Raciti, Lambert-Pennington, and Reardon 2016; Santo 2016). This case-study integrates data and lessons learned by in the context of these engaged research processes with data collected through additional archival research and a series of ten in-depth interviews with key informants from the public, private, non-profit, philanthropic, and financial sectors.

The case study describes Memphis over the years as a city that has been typical of the conditions described above: a city dominated by pro-growth rationale with a limited public planning function. However, public actors are not the only one who struggle to develop alternatives to market-based rationality.

Despite the US progressive planning tradition has placed much hope that forms of resistance against neoliberal market-driven forces could come from community-based organizations, in Memphis we observe the struggle and, often, the failure of community organizations against the power of cooptation and neutralization of local power structures.

It is against this historical backdrop that the analysis considers Memphis' recent (2017) city-led effort to develop a new comprehensive plan (*Memphis 3.0*) and the re-launch of a public Office of Comprehensive Planning. While this appears as a positive turn, the major role of private foundations and corporate interests as the driving force and funding source for more robust planning, raises questions of whether current efforts represent a positive disruption of the status quo or a disguised continuation of a growth-machine. This article proposes a more nuanced middle ground understanding, arguing that in places where austerity is a deeply rooted paradigm the problem needs to be faced from the perspective of a total 'reinvention' of the future. Today's public planners are not simply setting the fox to guard the henhouse – they are trying to figure out how to *build* the henhouse in the first place with a broad range of actors all on unfamiliar ground. Perhaps in cities like Memphis, the consequences of austere and market-serving urban governance are so significant that even their usual proponents are willing to take a different approach.

Here neither top-down public planning nor bottom-up community organizing alone can become powerful forces against old and new forms of 'austerity' by going *back* to something it was in some halcyon era. Instead, a genuine planning strategy needs to be invented *ex novo*, building on a deep understanding of why local planning agencies have never really provided guidance to spatial dynamics for the benefit of all or why community organizing struggle to succeed.

## **The market-serving nature of mainstream US planning: historic roots and the struggle for alternatives**

According to scholars, one of the main effects on the 2007–08 economic crisis has been the emergence of neoliberal *austerity*, the idea that cutting public expenditure on the welfare state is necessary to stimulate growth (Harvey 2007; Blyth 2013), as the leading governing paradigm across the world. The impact of this trend on planning depends on the specificities of each geographical and cultural context. This article contributes to the debate on how planners should face austerity from the perspective of the US context. It draws from parallel streams of literature: on the one side, urban

scholars studying the market serving nature and the growth imperative influencing US mainstream city planning; on the other, the responses by planning scholars in search of alternative approaches.

### ***The dominance of the market in US planning***

American city planning has always been sympathetic to property rights and business interests (Kayden 2009). Even the City Beautiful Movement, which led to the first zoning ordinances and supported major public expenditures for important civic infrastructures, can be considered the expression of urban business interests who saw public improvements as a way to maintain or increase urban property values (Squires 2002, 240). This became even more evident after World War II, when federal policy and local planning decisions facilitated rapid suburbanization triggering significant population loss and decline in older industrial cities.

Scholars have documented a 'growth imperative' in American cities, i. e. the convergence of public and private interests around a push for population growth and increasing property values. Peterson (1981) blames the American federal structure which allows capital to relocate freely and puts cities in competition with one another to maintain their tax base while preferring 'developmental' over 'redistributive' policies. Many urban governance scholars described the alignment of interests among private elites and public officials in developing concepts like the 'growth machine' and 'urban regime' (Hunter 1953; Elkin 1987; Molotch 1976; Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1989). The idea that 'pro-growth' public-private coalitions shape major decisions at the expense of the social urban fabric is reflected in the Urban Renewal programmes of the 1950s and '60s, which can be considered federally-backed attempts to make inner cities 'developable' and 'profitable' to the detriment of the most vulnerable urban residents (Gans 1959).

By 1980, the country's suburbanization would change the focus of politics at the federal level and the face of planning at the local level. In the 1950s, almost 75 percent of the population of America's metropolitan areas lived in central cities, but as the political power of cities was eclipsed over time republicans mobilized a distinctive suburban identity (Weir 1994, 340). The declining political importance of cities ultimately led to the abandonment of many federal urban programmes, most notably under Reagan in 1980 (Weir 1994; Cashin 2000). At the same time cooperation between localities and private developers in the form of public-private partnerships became common and mainstream planners finally moved to the front lines of economic development, abandoning a comprehensive rational model in favour of one based explicitly on market rationality (Fainstein 1991).

The 'pro-growth' rationality remains central in both conservative and liberal federal mandates and in local governmental agendas. One of the most representative examples is in the housing sector, where for twenty years federal housing programmes like *HOPE VI* and *Choice Neighborhoods* have been used to replace 'distressed' public housing with mixed-income real estate developments carried out through public-private partnerships; in other words, in order to 'privatize' the once-was public provision of affordable housing (Goetz 2003; Raciti, Lambert-Pennington, and Reardon 2016).

Even Obama's post-recession stimulus package has disappointed those who hoped for a twenty-first-century New Deal. The package was still framed within a rationale of public budget reduction (McGahey 2013) and Obama's urban policies worked in continuity with those of neoliberal predecessors (DeFilippis 2016). Yet, Obama's leadership triggered a populist reaction by the political right, which led to a new wave of austerity measures that are having a significant cumulative impact on American urban governments (Peck 2015).

### ***The long struggle for planning alternatives***

Many US planning scholars and practitioners have felt uneasy with the market-serving nature of mainstream city planning in the US and have been in search for alternative paradigms. While the voices of the 1920s and '30s who had envisioned planning as a way to improve workers' living

conditions were quickly silenced (Peterson 2009), a much louder movement arose in the 1960s and '70s. New theories and practices emerged, outside of City Hall, aimed at promoting more plural (Davidoff 1965), participatory (Arnstein 1969), guerrilla (Goodman 1971), and equitable (Krumholz 1982) forms of planning. This new planning stream called on community groups and coalitions to organize so that they could gain power against growth coalitions (Reardon 1994). In particular, a new Community Development Movement arose (Berndt 1977 ; Bratt 1989), based on the idea that 'local services and redistributive subsidies, along with decision-making authority and accountability, might be decentralized not only from the federal level to the municipal level but also from the public to community-based organizations' (Clavel, Pitt, and Yin 1997, 435). Community Development Corporations (CDCs) were created as community-based power blocks able to achieve 'equal partnerships' and 'social compacts' with economic elites (Shearer 1989).

Even in the prodrome of the Regan era, progressive community-based planners remained hopeful that the participatory, advocacy, organizing, and empowerment tools they had established would be enough to face the new age of austerity. Clavel, Forester, and Goldsmith (1980) predicted,

It is not likely that the legacy of the past twenty years of social action will be politically silenced. Instead one may expect a pendulum effect of workplace efforts and popular organizing, and a further proliferation of consumer, neighborhood, and environmental organizations, setting a potentially more progressive context for planning in the years ahead. (3)

However, after more than three decades, it is clear that this more progressive planning context has not materialized. Its own protagonists have expressed concerns about the increasing missing ties between formalized community organizations and the broader people's base and, most importantly, have documented and theorized the numerous tactics deployed by power structures to co-opt community-based organizations (Marris and Rein 1967; Piven and Cloward 1979).

The history of US progressive and empowerment planning can be paralleled with the more European scholarly debate on post-political urban governance. This stream of studies draws from political thinkers and philosophers like Žižek (1999), Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), and Ranciere (2004), who use the concept of post-politics to describe the discharge of traditional twentieth-century political categories and the transformation of political tensions into 'technical' policy issues. Urban scholars describe a post-political city as a place where public decision-making aligns with financial and growth interests. Post-political urban scholars provide accounts of the ability of neoliberal forces to co-opt and neutralize progressive forces, seizing participatory and community-based planning techniques, depriving them from their original political soul. In particular, they focus on the populist nature of post-political leadership, giving the illusion of a wider democracy through an intensive use of the participatory procedures (Swyngedouw 2010; MacLeod 2011). In the search for a counteracting strategy, post-political scholars look at the various forms of social and political insurgence and resistance against power as a hopeful 'return of the political', originating from 'marginal' spaces (Swyngedouw 2014; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014).

From a US progressive planning perspective, however, the post-political argument in favour of 're-politicizing' urban governance sounds obvious. Despite the many differences between US and European political and planning culture, what is considered a 'hopeful' direction for the post-political scholars (i. e. 'bottom-up', informal, extra-institutional, and truly 'political' resistance against neoliberal powers) was actually the very base of the progressive planning movement that questioned mainstream market-serving planning in the 60s and 70s and has been studied by many more recent planning scholars (see Sandercock 1998; Miraftab 2009 amongst many others).

Comparing the outcomes of decades of planning research on social movements and the post-political argument, it is clear that the very 'bottom-up', 'political' strategies created for truly 'democratizing' decision-making and planning always face the risk to serve the force they are created to counter. Social mobilizations and community organizations, when attempting to go beyond marginality and gain significant power, face the challenge of dilution in spaces of 'facilitated dialogue' and fake institutionalized participation.

## The Memphis case-study

As a city dominated by a pro-growth rationale, where public actors as well as community organizations struggle to develop alternatives to market-based rationality, Memphis offers an appropriate test case for the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

### *The old roots of Memphis' pro-growth soul*

Founded at the beginning of the nineteenth century by real estate investors as a commercial hub along the Mississippi River, Memphis' early growth was connected to the commercialization of 'king cotton.' With a growth imperative connected with a significant racial divide engraved in its birth certificate, Memphis-style Planning has developed all the symptoms of a market-serving pro-growth endeavour. It started as a posterchild of the American city Beautiful Movement during the new deal, when a white powerful political machine used city beautification to keep physical control of both white and black political *clients* (Biles 1986). Since then, the city has gone through all the major phases of Urban America, facing the progressive decline associated with rapid suburbanization and deindustrialization, with a severe racial and economic polarization. Following the desegregation of public schools and the civil rights uprising of the 1960s – which peaked with the sanitation workers strike in 1968, followed by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and military curfew – affluent white residents have moved to the suburbs, contributing to the decline of the inner-city. During these years, city officials used Urban Renewal to 'revitalize' the most historic, and heavily minority, central neighbourhoods, raising the suspicion that the white establishment used the bulldozers to hit the African-American middle-class harder than urban blight (Rushing 2009). The City's second main planning strategy against tax base loss has been periodic annexation. Since 1970 the city has annexed over 100 square miles of land, but its total population has remained essentially the same, as households have shifted outward beyond the boundaries of the city. Annexation strategies, coupled with the absence of basic planning normative and fiscal tools, have made Memphis, with twice the land area of Detroit but only half the population density, one of the most unplannable and inequitable cities in the nation.

In 1981, the City adopted a Comprehensive Plan, but one that lacked a clear strategy against urban sprawl and a real connection with land use regulations. The plan still considered the urbanization of undeveloped land a positive economic engine. It indicated priority governmental actions but did not provide recommendations on land use restrictions. It identified Downtown revitalization as a priority but without making the connection between central city decline and urban sprawl. In the 1977, following the example of many other US Cities facing downtown decline (Briffault 1999), Memphis established a downtown business improvement district, the Center City Commission, in charge of carrying out direct physical improvements and attracting private development through incentives. Since then, downtown investors have received significant incentives with almost no land use constrictions, allowing private investors to develop luxury homes along prime riverfront real estate. The consequence is the growth of urban spaces with a public appearance but private benefit.

### *The challenge of community-based development*

When Memphis residents elected their first Black mayor in 1991 there were 'high expectations in the black community that he do things very quickly and in an unprecedented way' (from 'Balancing Black Hopes, white fears with be Hard', *Commercial Appeal*, Oct 5, 1991). For two decades, black city officials aggressively pursued inner-city revitalization, with a special focus on historic distressed African-American communities. But the main characteristics of the growth machine remained, including privatization of public services and resources as well as public incentives to private



corporations – such as Electrolux, Nike, Bass-Pro etc. – with no strings attached, all in the name of job creation (no matter how low is the pay!).

Additionally, the special interconnection between social and racial issues in Memphis fed the public perception of ‘black leaders taking care of their inner-city brothers and sisters.’ This breeding ground gave birth to a local and black version of the strong populist leadership that is so commonly associated with the contemporary neoliberal conjuncture (Swyngedouw 2010; MacLeod 2011), including a powerful bureaucrat who, for nearly twenty years, served as director of *both* the Division of Housing and Community Development *and* the Memphis Housing Authority, and at one point was also appointed as the City’s chief financial officer (the Director, from now on). Having grown up poor in Memphis and risen to success, the Director had a special connection to inner city residents. But while he was revered by many, he was feared by others – those outside his circle or wary of his oversized influence. Locally, he was commonly compared to both Boss Crump and Robert Moses (Lauterbach 2016). During his ‘reign’ he directed the flow of hundreds of millions of dollars of government funding to high profile inner-city redevelopment projects. His approach to development reflected the very mechanisms described by scholars like Marris and Rein (1967), Piven and Cloward (1979), and Stoecker (1997): was characterized by significant private sector involvement and strategies that offered an appearance of open community engagement and support for the Community Development world while actually neutralizing any potential dissident voices.

The Director’s community revitalization strategies varied according to the development potential of the area in question, as can be showed comparing the events characterizing two apparently similar historic inner-city African-American neighbourhoods: Vance and Klondike Smokey City (KSC). Both neighbourhoods have a history of vibrant middle-class black communities, where a strong social fabric bred organizations that played key roles in the local civil rights movement. Since the 60 s, however, deindustrialization and disinvestment accompanied by physical, economic and social decline, eroded the organizing capacity of each community. Their location, however, give them a very different real estate marketability.

In the KSC neighbourhood, located at the core of the poor and highly polluted north Memphis district, away from downtown in an area that was once home to industrial uses, the small doses of community development resources directed to neighbourhoods in this area are like drops of water in a desert. In the 1990s, at the suggestion of the Director, two neighbourhood-based organizations consolidated to form the KSC CDC. In cities where CDCs can target external (meaning not local) funds from a variety of public and private sources, this might have looked like a simple suggestion. On the contrary, in Memphis it was really an instruction to be followed coming from the main source of money for community development.<sup>1</sup> Besides small grants from local foundations, the main economic engine for Memphis’ vast number of neighbourhood-based CDCs was the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) programme, which was managed by the Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD), at ‘the entire discretion of the Director, who used to have a very personal connection with all the local CDC leaders’ (from an interview with a key player in the local philanthropic community). For the entire time the Director was in office, KSC CDC was one of the many low-capacity black community-based organizations receiving small funding streams unable to address a relentless urban decline but enough to guarantee loyalty to the Director.

While neighbourhoods spread across Memphis’ sprawling geography struggled for a share of community development resources, areas closer to downtown – like the Vance Avenue neighbourhood – with higher private market development potential, received a different kind of attention. While located just outside of downtown and adjacent to Beale Street, Memphis’ biggest entertainment and tourist district, Vance was, in 2010, also home to the city’s last remaining public housing complex, Foote Homes. Federal funding programmes were created in the 1990s to support redevelopment of public housing complexes, which had become symbols of ‘concentrated poverty’ and inner-city decay due to decades of disinvestment and deferred maintenance. Between 1995 and 2011, the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) had used the federal HOPE VI programme to redevelop all but one former public housing sites as mixed-income developments, relocating public

housing residents into private market rentals through a voucher system (Goetz 2003). In 2011, HCD and MHA successfully applied for a Choice Neighborhood grant to plan the redevelopment of the last remaining one, Foote Homes, in Vance. Because of federal guidelines for community engagement, the City had to officially involve a community coalition called Vance Avenue Collaborative, originated by a long-term partnership between the UofM and a dozen of community organizations (two of the authors were part of the UofM team involved in the partnership). Inspired by the US empowerment planning tradition (Reardon 1994), the Collaborative had used a participatory-research methodology to identify the most preferable development option for Foote Homes according to local residents' needs. During the Choice Neighborhood Planning Initiative, the Collaborative generated a plan rejecting the demolition of Foote Homes and offering an alternative renovation approach called 'Improve Don't Remove Foote Homes.' Despite the community engagement rhetoric of City officials, the Collaborative was ultimately excluded from process due to their rejection of demolition, which the Director called 'the only option available.' This gave birth to significant conflict. On one side, residents were asking the city to keep the public housing system in place, while investing in other types of improvements for the benefit of local residents. On the other side, the city was pursuing the transfer of public money for low-income housing from public to private hands through a rental voucher system, and the public subsidization of private development in highly valuable central urban areas. The Collaborative was ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the relocations and the approval, in 2016, of a Choice Neighborhood Implementation Grant (Raciti, Lambert-Pennington, and Reardon 2016). The effort of the community to resist the will of the City did not last, due to the weakness of the Collaborative, whose majority of members were either subjected to the direct financial and/or personal influence of the very forces they were supposed to contrast.

The planning stories of KSC and Vance can be considered two faces of the same coin. In KSC, where decline seems almost insurmountable, the very community organization that is supposed to operate for the benefit of the powerless is not only characterized by a very limited capacity but also operates with a dependence on centralized power in the hands of black bureaucratic leadership. In Vance, where real estate interests had a higher motivation in the full 'replacement' of the local low-income community, the best tools of empowerment planning failed to provide a successful alternative due to the cooptation by a neo-populist leadership of many of its members.

### ***Memphis growth-machine in the face of the financial crisis***

The 2008 crisis hit Memphis already declining inner-city neighbourhoods particularly hard and the city lacked any capacity to plan for a reaction. The 250 planners working at the time for the City Planning office were not engaged in planning efforts beside development approval procedures.<sup>2</sup> According to interviews of former employees, the fact that their salaries were all paid by development fees caused a staff reduction of almost 60% following the recession.

In parallel, according to interviews, those involved in the community development sector 'saw a lot of their good work they had done in the 90 s and early 2000s get undone.' One interviewee noted a sense of discouragement amongst CDCs leaders as follows:

We are working to build property values in these neighborhoods and finally seeing progress, then you know, that crisis came through and tore a hole in all that and it's like, why are we doing this? Ironically the resources available increased because the Federal Government put in lots of dollars for neighborhood stabilization so some of the CDCs had more money than they had had before.

According to the interviewees, the irony resided on the fact that Obama's stimulus package only increased the resources in the hands of the Director, strengthening his popularity amongst CDC black leaders without creating additional efficacy.

The crisis exacerbated frustration with the Director's approach to community development, leading the local financial elite to involve local CDCs in a strategic planning effort to prioritize the little resources at hand. A private planning consultant carried out a 10-month-long planning process in



almost complete autonomy from public planning agencies. In a city lacking any real planning capacity, where development decisions were entirely managed by HCD and its Director, the local ‘growth coalition’ had decided to face the crisis by coordinating efforts to improve efficacy. The document called *Greater Memphis Neighborhoods: A Blueprint for Revitalization* proposed a strategy of neighbourhood triage (Cooper-McCann 2016), through which community development funding would be channelled to only three chosen neighbourhoods, and the creation of a local financial intermediary, Community LIFT, responsible for finding funding sources independent from the public hand. Leaders of organizations in neighbourhoods that were not amongst the chosen three remained loyal lobbyists for power centralized with strong populist bureaucrats while developing a suspicious attitude toward this style of citywide planning.

### Memphis 3.0: two tales of the same plan

The Director’s actual power ended mysteriously in 2015, when he chose to resign in the face of criminal allegations, which never led to any formal charges. The fall of the bureaucrat who was called ‘the most powerful man in Memphis’ corresponded with the election of a new Mayor, who, in November 2016, introduced a multi-stage, two-year public comprehensive planning process. Unlike other recent local ‘planning’ actions, the Memphis 3.0 initiative – meant to guide the city into its third century – came directly from the Mayor’s office and corresponded with the reinstatement of the Office of Comprehensive Planning and the creation new public planning staff positions.

The return of comprehensive planning is partially the result of the timely alignment of a variety of interests that introduce complexities and paradoxes into the narrative. The new Mayor appointed a Transition Team charged with developing ‘policy playbooks’ for various public functions, including city planning. According to our interviews, momentum associated with the success of previous county-wide planning process called *Midsouth Regional Greenprint* was a significant factor in the new mayor’s interest in planning.

In 2011 Memphis/Shelby County was one of 61 communities awarded a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to develop of a regional ‘green infrastructure’ plan. While limited in scope, those involved in the development of the *Greenprint* have said that they intentionally gave the document a framework that explicitly resembles a comprehensive plan as a way to lay a foundation for future action, as clearly reflected in the written purpose of the plan, which is

to enhance regional livability and sustainability by establishing a unified vision for a region-wide network of green-space areas, or *Greenprint*, which serves to address long-term housing and land use, resource conservation, environmental protection, accessibility, community health and wellness, transportation alternatives, economic development, neighborhood engagement, and social equity in the Greater Memphis Area. (Memphis-Shelby County Office of Sustainability 2014, 9)

Ironically, our interviews point to the recession as being a disruption that contributed to a new focus on planning, rather than resulting in austerity measures that eliminated public planning. The *Greenprint* itself is case in point, as the HUD funding that supported the programme was tied to post-recession federal stimulus spending.

In many ways, the *Greenprint* which occurred between 2012 and 2014, did lay a lasting planning foundation by supporting a public entity, raising awareness of planning issues, and engaging the local philanthropic community in supporting planning implementation. The infusion of federal funding supported the operation of the Memphis-Shelby Office of Sustainability. The planning process, involved a wide range of community stakeholders, playing a major ‘educational’ role amongst the philanthropic community. It showed them the advantages of planning, to such an extent that local foundations have become the main financial and managerial engine – with only secondary involvement of public agencies – behind the physical execution of the most important sections of the new green infrastructures.

Parallel to the public sector visibility associated with the *Greenprint*, a push for planning was also emerging among corporate and private sector interests in Memphis. A subgroup of the *Greater Memphis Chamber of Commerce* called the ‘Chairman’s Circle,’ identified ‘promoting a long-range plan for Memphis’ as one of its top priorities. The group hired Peter Park (former planning director in Denver, Colorado and Milwaukee, Wisconsin) as a consultant and organized trips for local public officials and other business leaders to visit cities with stronger public planning functions. Around the same time as the Chairman’s Circle efforts, a loose partnership had formed between several local foundations, the Memphis chapter of the Urban Land Institute and Community LIFT with the similar intent of catalyzing a planning function. The partnership had already pooled resources to hire Toni Griffin, a planning consultant who had recently directed Detroit’s long-range planning efforts, to develop a strategy for how Memphis should approach planning.

The influence of these powerful corporate and philanthropic interests, triggered by the recession, was likely equally (if not more) important than the inspiration coming from the *Greenprint*’s success. In this sense planning is seen as a response to the stagnation of the recession – where planning means ‘creating growth’ and the elite recognize that business interests cannot thrive in a city so broadly affected by poverty. The fact that corporate and real estate elite interest in planning came as a response to the impacts of the recession on business interests was proved by the fact that, in the early stages of the Memphis 3.0 process, the Memphis Chapter of the Urban Land Institute and the Memphis Business Journal co-hosted a public titled, ‘Why Comprehensive Planning is Good for Business.’

### **Red flags**

In this perspective, one might question whether or not the process represents a real departure from Memphis past planning context. Although Memphis 3.0 is a public sector initiative being managed by a revamped public planning office, there is actually no city funding involved. The entire endeavour, including the new city planning staff positions, is supported by private funding provided by a combination of the largest local philanthropic foundations, a large national philanthropic foundation with an interest in Memphis, and local corporate interests (e.g. Memphis Tomorrow, an association of the CEO’s of Memphis’ largest businesses).

The elite has had clear access to power over public decisions. Beyond providing financial support for the whole process, the largest funders also have had direct input on the process and its outcomes, since each funding organization was represented on a 17-member Memphis 3.0 Advisory Board. (One of the authors of this paper also serves on this board.) Among other things, the board has reviewed the work of city planning staff, including the vision, goals, and objectives being developed for the comprehensive plan.

Typically, the obvious self-interest of these private sector actors could be considered antithetical to the kind of planning that is truly public. Strong believers of bottom-up, participatory, community-based approaches to planning would search for antidotes rising from a genuine engagement of the public, with a particular focus on the neighbourhoods and the voices that are most disadvantaged. As a matter of fact, the whole planning process was developed with an emphasis on the importance of community engagement and public participation. Not surprisingly, though, the most marginalized voices did not play any significant role in the process. During a first phase, engagement was implemented in two ways: (1) General city-wide public meetings, mostly populated by Memphis’ usual suspects and meeting goers, aimed at identify a shared vision for the plan; (2) Thematic working groups with ‘invited’ experts and stakeholders aimed at developing a base of shared urban knowledge to be used for the prescriptive section of the plan. Broader participation was expected during a later geography-based District Planning phase. Each district hosted a series of dedicated public meetings aimed at identifying planning goals and priorities to be pursued.

Participation from residents in the most distressed and disenfranchised portions of each district was minimal. While some of this was due to the normal challenges of mobilizing low income

residents, we also observed that neighbourhood leaders who benefited from The Director's approach to community development simply chose not to participate in Memphis 3.0 events.

While it is encouraging that the process has created a public office, the planning process is also full of outside experts who have been hired as consultants to develop various elements of the plan. These experts tend to be standard bearers of neoliberal approaches to planning – focusing on design and New Urbanism as solutions, and suggesting small, Do-It-Yourself Tactical Urbanism interventions. The in-house staff is comprised mostly of entry-level planners with little experience in managing conflict or consensus building, so, while the process could have been the opportunity for authentic public dialogue about choices and priorities, it did open the door to neoliberal influence and work to ensure the current status quo. As Purcell (2009) notes, 'What the neoliberal project requires are decision-making practices that are widely accepted as 'democratic' but that do not (or cannot) fundamentally challenge existing relations of power' (141).

Finally, the overall plan is based on a central idea, expressed in the vision statement: 'In our third century, Memphis will build up and not out.' The premise is that economic growth and real estate prosperity – pre-conditions for the enhancement of residents' quality of life – will occur only if the city stops spreading out and starts densifying. For this purpose, every district planning process was based on the identification of inner-city 'anchors,' specific geographic locations where resources would be targeted to get the 'most bang for the buck.' Not surprisingly in an era of 'Austere Urbanism,' (Peck 2015) the plan is developed under the assumption that public resources are so limited that most of the initiatives will be carried out by the private or the non-profit sectors. Moreover, very much like most US comprehensive plans, the land use indications in the plan have the value of suggestions for future regulations and do not change the current code.

### ***The Devil, and the hope, are in the details***

When viewed simply through the lens of the scholarship on neoliberal influences on urban governance, Memphis 3.0 might appear as an example of the neoliberal fox guarding the hen house. In this more cynical assessment, neoliberal values are being directed through a process that, echoing the critiques of European post-political scholars, gives a convenient appearance of being democratic and public. However, our research, and an understanding of the context at hand, show the necessity for a much more nuanced narrative.

Yes –in Memphis, planning resources are controlled and distributed by a restricted circle of private and philanthropic actors. But given the long-term vacuum of the public, there is evidence that the private circle is pushing an effort for a strong and genuine public planning, seeking to create a space for democratic process where one did not exist.

Meetings of the Memphis 3.0 Advisory Board have consistently focused on the planning process more than the elements of the plan. In the first two board meetings it quickly became apparent that members of the body, including those representing funders and corporate interests, were worried the public involvement component of the process was not robust enough – resulting in shallow 'public input' but not in more meaningful public 'engagement.' The group expressed their desire for how the plan would be viewed in year to come, saying that the legacy of Memphis 3.0 should be not just a checklist of successfully implemented policies, but also the existence of a formal and enduring infrastructure that broadly supports for citizen participation in all manners of public decision making.

After decades of incentives and business-friendly public policy, Memphis is still a city with a shrinking population and stagnant tax base. What is gained by the suburbs is lost by inner-city neighbourhoods and vice-versa in a zero-sum game, that is unsustainable for both low-income residents and the corporate elite. In a context where the public sector lacks resources and capacity, and where the broad socio-cultural system is indifferent, if not hostile, to the very concept of planning, it is a collection business elite that is leading a change of mindset. Our research indicates that the influential actors behind this push are seeking real 'inner-city revitalization,' referring not just to the physical structures but also communities. This seems based on a recognition that financial growth

is not possible without a certain amount of socio-cultural fairness, which can only be systematically addressed by a strong and effective public sector.

Credit should be given to the young city planners attempting to navigate the unavoidable tensions that arise among unlikely partners trying to forge new ground. For example, when one of the philanthropic funders suggested that local ‘power brokers’ who are currently working on issues of blight and economic development in Memphis be given more direct input in the comprehensive plan, a young public servant pushed back, responding that ‘if we keep asking the same people to tell us what to do, we’ll get what we already have.’

As a reflection of this, the plan contains a great amount of data on social issues whose analysis led to the identification of strategies for making anchor development socially inclusive, like the provision of affordable housing, and, most importantly, the enhancement of the very problematic public transit system (in a city where the lack of mobility options a major obstacle to upward mobility of distressed urban residents).

Based on our interviews and participatory observation, *Memphis 3.0* appears to be an attempt to create a public planning function – one that simply looks messy because it is being led by an unlikely and unprepared group of actors. Instead of dismissing the process just as the last phase of a long history of market-serving urban governance related to a broad ‘anti-governmental’ culture, we believe that, in the context of a city that has never really been a true *polis*, the conduct of today’s planners should be evaluated considering the long-standing cultural and institutional limitations that they face.

Today’s planners are not simply setting the fox to guard the henhouse – they are trying to figure out how to *build* the henhouse in the first place. And while private sector interests are at the table, they seem to have a sincere interest in creating a public function. Perhaps after trying to act independently from government for so long, philanthropic, corporate, and nonprofit leaders are realizing the necessity of capable public actors, who are ‘not kept hostages by private corporations and able to pursue courageous choice’ (borrowing the words of an interviewee). The *ex novo* invention of public planning puts all of the players involved – private funders and public servants – on unfamiliar territory.

## Conclusion

Based on both historic and recent events, it is clear that in Memphis, public planning aimed at pursuing the common good faces significant structural challenges. Historically, planning has been used to promote growth, and been complicit in fostering sprawl, with consequent disinvestment in inner-city neighbourhoods. During the 1990s, when a new black leadership was elected with the expectation of a change of direction, public comprehensive planning was replaced by a populist managerial spatial decision making that combined the use of public resources for the benefit of the private sector with a neoliberal use of participatory planning, the cooptation and dismantling of community-based organizations and the defeat of the few counter-voices. More recently, the Memphis 3.0 comprehensive planning process appears to remain constrained by limited capacity and a reliance on private sector influence. We believe that a closer look to reality can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the spread of austere city planning, showing that in places where austerity is a deeply rooted paradigm the problem needs to be faced from the perspective of a total ‘reinvention’ of the future.

While the lack of public planning has made Memphis one of the most inequitable cities in the nation, we believe the Memphis case is highly representative of many US mid-sized cities with a history of pro-growth planning as well as weak and coopted community organizations. In many of these cities, the crisis has ironically given birth to recent ‘confusing’ comprehensive planning efforts claiming to address both real estate prosperity and social justice. Simply labelling these efforts as ‘neoliberal’ – even post-political – gains no ground for public planning. And advocating a social uprising against such efforts would likely reveal the lack of a civic capacity needed to mobilize for structural change.

This article proposes a more constructive way to look at the extreme nature of the spatial and socio-economic consequences of certain aspects of US-made urban austerity, with the ultimate purpose of enriching the possibilities for planning action in the face of the contemporary conjuncture, based on the context specificities. In Memphis-like cities, the consequences of austere and market-serving urban governance are so significant that even their usual proponents are willing to take a different route. While this might allow weak public institutions to gain attention and strength, it is important to maintain a critical perspective, recognizing all the limitations of the current public planning initiative. However, here, where community organizations are either weak, or co-opted by power, it is unlikely that change would come *just* from the bottom. In the US conjecture that ‘comprehensive planning is good for business,’ we believe that there are spaces for action and re-invention of a brand-new future, where planners can take advantage of the nuances of ‘pro-growth coalitions’ whose nature might be less ‘uniform’ and monolithic than it might appear. These spaces might not look as ‘genuinely political’ as both European post-political scholars and US progressive planners would hope; however, in certain ‘ultra-austere’ urban context, they might be the only spaces that are left.

## Notes

1. According an interviewee, the Director opposed the coming to Memphis of big national financial intermediaries like LISC, because he ‘did not like the idea of having competition or losing control’.
2. As put in the words of a former city planner:

[The Director] devised his projects and proceeded to implement them without a bit of input from other City agencies or the public. He implemented them without a plan visible to any of us, but I suppose envisioned by him in his own mind. He caused various divisions like Police, Fire, Parks and Public Works to change their long term plans to comply with his projects.

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