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# Urban Design as a Collective Enterprise: The Challenge of Housing Development in Memphis (TN, USA)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses three theoretical frameworks to critically reflect on the outcomes and implications of an urban design process stemming from an action research planning experience. The process, focused on the re-development of a public housing complex in the Vance Avenue Neighborhood (Memphis, TN, US), was carried out by a community university partnership—the Vance Avenue Collaborative—playing a fundamental role in trying to re-orient planning practice and research in the city of Memphis. The paper offers some general insights to reflect on the role of urban design as a public and civic endeavor supported by collective interdisciplinary research.

## KEYWORDS

Urban design; action research; cultural heritage; housing development; community development

## Introduction

Scholars and practitioners across design disciplines have broadly debated the conceptualization and practice of urban design (UD from now on). The main concern of this debate has focused on the definition of UD as an ontological category and, as such, on the theoretical and practical implications of a new established field with an identifiable object of inquiry (Rowley, 1994; Cuthbert, 2007; Child, 2010). Over time, this conversation has been drifting away from the main horizon of reaching a shared definition of the field and acquired fuzzier boundaries to the extent that UD has been described as an ‘urban frame of mind’ (Krieger, 2009), acknowledging the ‘un-thingness’ of UD and its multifaceted ontological qualities. Consequentially, among many others, three major arenas were generated and have been explored in academic literature, identifying controversial debates focused on specific issues related to UD practice and research.

The first ground of debate uncovers the tension existing between those interested in defining the very core of the boundary object of UD, intended either as the practice embedded in the urban planning enterprise promoting the public good, or the strategic approach creating private value and strengthening private real estate. The second ground focuses on various disciplines and sciences involved in the broadly defined UD enterprise, and how these are combined in either a multi-, inter-, or trans-disciplinary fashion to produce UD outcomes. The third centers on the involvement of various actors—ranging from laypeople to professional experts—in the UD process through numerous forms of what is generally referred to as community design, participatory design, or community engagement for UD.

This article aims to explore these three grounds by critically reflecting on an action research planning process carried out in Memphis (TN, USA) by a capacity-building community/university partnership (Reardon, 2006) called the Vance Avenue Collaborative (from now on the Collaborative), made by a research team (the author was one of the members of this team) at the University of Memphis and a network of grass-roots organizations in the Vance Avenue Neighborhood. The partnership, born in 2008 and dissolved in 2015, has achieved several results in the field during the years of its operation (Raciti *et al.*, 2016; Saija & Raciti, 2017), but ended after a long and controversial planning process mainly aimed at addressing the problem of the potential displacement of 400 families from the core of the Vance Avenue area: Foote Homes public housing complex.

More specifically, this article reflects on the embedded UD outcomes and implications generated by the city of Memphis on the one side and the Collaborative on the other. Reflecting on the previous three grounds of debate, the article reclaims the importance of considering UD as a strategic tool embedded in city planning, and as such, situates its fundamental core in the process of molding the physical environment of a place while intentionally affecting democratic, social, environmental, and cultural issues rooted in local contexts. In such a way, UD vividly reflects the system of values framed in any planning effort aimed at changing the built environment.

### Three Theoretical Underpinnings

In the last 10 years, the discussion on the existence of UD as an independent field of study and its role within the overarching umbrella of design disciplines have been largely debated (Krieger & Saunders, 2009; Banerjee & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2011; Cuthbert, 2011): a discussion that has been generating rival theoretical positions in the search for an ontological definition of the UD enterprise. Three major concerns have been broadly addressed: these have been related to (1) the debate on public and private gains occurring while implementing intentional modifications of the built environment; (2) the melting pot of disciplines and sciences collaborating in shaping UD practice, ranging from social and environmental sciences, design disciplines, and the art in general; and (3) the relationships that might be established between experts of those disciplines and laypeople involved in the conceptualization and practice of UD.

The tension between public and private interests in the UD enterprise has always been a main concern in the conceptualization of the field. At the forefront, there has been a strong preoccupation for the production, development, and management of the public realm. What is public space, how is it created, what are the outcomes of UD processes, how these are managed over time, and who gains and loses from them (Benn & Gaus, 1983; Madanipour, 2003; 2010; Punter, 2007) have been fundamental questions explored in assessing UD practice. This stream of research parallels its complementary one, which has been more concerned with the production of private value through the use of UD as strategic approach (Bentley, 1999; Blomley, 2004; Peiser & Schwann, 1993; Zukin, 1991, 2009). The first set of critiques has been increasingly concerned with the greater number of UD processes controlled by powerful groups, following private market rationales, compared to the ones oriented toward public interest goals. In the structural changes that cities are experiencing with the actual global economy,

contemporary UD seems, in fact, to be promoting certain social groups over others through the withdrawal of its public development goals (Madanipour, 2006; Child, 2010). This has led some to question the implications of such an acknowledged misstep in the UD practice, arguing that UD as an independent field is a creation of neoliberalism and, as such, public concerns cannot be reflected anymore in its agenda (Gunder, 2011). In order to counteract this drift, Gunder advocates for recapturing UD as a subset of planning in such a way that its public mission would be reestablished (2011). Contrary to his perspective, some have argued that retaining UD under planning would not guarantee the reestablishment of UD as a public enterprise, as many planning experiences demonstrate (Banerjee, 2011; Steiner, 2011). This debate, deeply rooted in English speaking countries, has mainly revolved around one of the major UD trends carried out in many of those countries: the very well-known and practiced New Urbanism (Duany, 2000). On one side, this UD paradigm has been defined as the ‘new doxa’ (Gunder, 2011), carrying neoliberal principles and perpetuating the fallacious idea that a new utopia of a spatial order will guarantee a moral and aesthetic order (Harvey, 2000); on the other, acknowledging failures and successes of the movement, it has still been framed as the UD cutting-edge vanguard, entailing principles of sustainable design, social justice, and community values (Tallen 2005, 2011).

This first ground of debate has also led to the breaking of a slightly different discussion shaped around the concepts of the multi-disciplinary (Bently 1999), interdisciplinary (Inam, 2002), and trans-disciplinary (Baccini and Oswald 2008; Hunter and Schulenburg 2014) nature of UD. This heterogeneous set of perspectives has led to the effort of defining the UD field as a practice that urges the interaction among disciplines spanning various scientific domains. Carmona’s ultimate definition of UD as ‘mongrel discipline’ establishes its theoretical legitimacy in a broad set of sciences, professional practices, and the arts, and acknowledges its existence as a distinctive field, however maintaining heterogeneous theoretical roots (Carmona, 2014). While it appears that there is still an inconsistency on types (multi, inter, trans) of contribution of disciplines stemming off the broader framework of established sciences (whether social, environmental, or design) and their potential interaction to shape UD practices, there is a convergence on the idea that the production of knowledge underpinning the UD practice should be generated within a complex framework generated by a combination of disciplines and sciences: a firm point that was conceptualized more than 20 years ago in the definition of the ‘catholic’ approach for UD (Moudon, 1992).

Ultimately, a third ground of discussion has been focused for a long time on how UD practice and research should take into account laypeople’s involvement. This conversation has led to the generation of multiple methods to work with or for ‘community’ (however defined) groups in order to achieve UD outcomes that are, for instance, more ecologically sustainable (Hester, 2006; Halprin, 2011) or democratic (Sanoff, 2000; Shiffman *et al.*, 2012) to list a couple of examples. In these and similar processes, UD research and practice have often overlapped in order to inject a dose of innovation in the outcomes of the design process (Forsyth, 2007). Within this third ground and generally speaking, scholarship in UD can be classified into either case study research of community design practices (Francis, 2001)—for example researchers building an understating of participatory design cases where people give input to the design process—or community engagement in UD research (Pothukuchi, 2005;

Forsyth *et al.*, 2010)—for example people and researchers collaborate in various ways throughout the research process substantiating the UD proposal. Without exploring the differences between these types of research paradigms (see Saija 2014 for a good reference), research approaches inspired by action-research have profoundly detached themselves from various forms of participatory research, and have been characterized by long-term and reciprocal forms of partnerships (established between laypeople and professional researchers) able to achieve small incremental changes along the course of the research process (Reardon, 2006). Referring to this main epistemological framework, few action research examples have informed UD practices explicitly dealing with the shaping of the urban fabric. In these cases, community/university partnerships have carried out processes where strategies (including UD ones) to address issues at stake have been entangled with highly political and very controversial situations, which have been revealed because of the very nature of the epistemological approach used. In other words, what in these experiences might be considered physical outcomes in the improvement of the built environment have always been deeply entrenched with crucial and unresolved questions in decision-making policies. These questions have been addressed (but not necessarily solved) through a long and constant process of exchange and sharing between expert researchers and their partners. Emblematic cases in this direction can be found, for instance, in the work done in US urban areas such as Philadelphia (Spirn, 1998, 2005) and East Saint Louis (Reardon, 1998a, 1998b, Lawson, 2007; Sorensen & Lawson, 2012), or in more recent work in Italy (Saija, 2014a; Raciti, 2016; Raciti and Saija, 2018). In these examples, incremental improvements in the physical environments parallel constant challenges to address structural problems, such as democratic decision-making, social and environmental justice, public negligence, and so on.

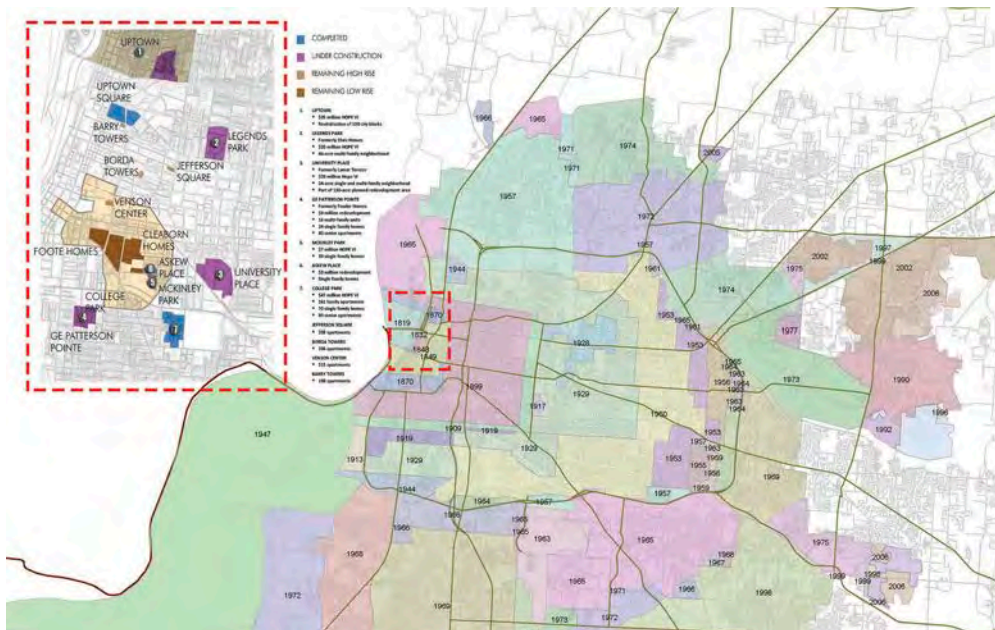
In what follows, these three grounds are explored, firstly, sharing the story of an action research planning process specifically aimed at addressing housing challenges in Memphis (TN), and secondly, emphasizing the role that UD, embedded in this planning process, has played along the way.

## **The Planning Process for the Vance Avenue Neighborhood in Memphis, TN, US**

### ***UD as Urban Development Enterprise***

During the last century, the city of Memphis has carried out an intense process of urban transformation, mainly related with the expansion of the city boundaries through development of new urban sprawls and the consequential consistent pattern of suburbs annexations (Shelby County, 2014). More recently, since the 90s, a massive process of urban transformation has also been carried out through the re-development of inner-city public housing complexes (City of Memphis, 2008). This process entirely reshaped many of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown, where public/private partnerships have been established to demolish public housing and substitute the existing housing stock with mixed-income developments (usually with a mix of public, affordable, and private-rate market housing developments). The two main public agencies promoting and carrying out these interventions have been the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) and the Housing and Community Development (HCD), which have undertaken the re-development of the majority of inner-

city neighborhoods. Over time, federal HOPE VI grants have been used to demolish and rebuild inner-city neighborhoods including College Park, Green Law Place, Legends Park, Magnolia Terrace Senior Facility, McKinley Park, Metropolitan Apartments, University Place, Upton Square Apartments, Uptown Homes, and Legend Park Senior Housing (Figure 1). This process of demolition and reconstruction in the name of a new Memphian identity has used UD as a vehicle to promote a future image of the city based on slogans sponsoring a more just, diverse, wealthy, and sustainable future for the residents impacted by these new re-developments. Using categories identified by Madanipour (2006), city ‘regulators’ (Memphis elected officials and administrators) and local ‘producers’ (the key-players in real estate development) have pictured a new city free from public housing, referring to the new Memphis-to-come as ‘the City of Choice’ (MHA, 2013): a vision that would have been implemented by going through a process of bringing all ‘communities nearer to the end of the traditional “public housing” and to homes: shifting from housing to homes’ (quote from Memphis former Mayor in 2012). Over time, the popularity of these discourses have spread due to the buy in of future and former residents—the ‘users’ maintaining Madanipour (2006) categories—of redevelopment projects, especially for the underlining assumption of similar discourses: the promise to live in a private-style house built in a better place than stigmatized public housing.



**Figure 1.** 1819–2014 Memphis Annexations Diachronic Map (on the right) with a detail of the Triangle Noir Plan graphic (on the top left), showing MHA properties developed over time affecting the geography of inner-city neighborhoods. The dark brown area bounds the limits of the last low-rise public housing neighborhood in Memphis: Foote and Cleaborn Homes. Sources: Memphis Annexations (Shelby County, 2014); Detail of the Triangle Noir Plan (City of Memphis, 2008).



### ***The Vance Avenue Neighborhood and the Planning Proposal for Redevelopment***

Overall, public housing complex demolitions and re-developments have been accomplished with almost no opposition raised by the residents directly affected by these major urban transformations. In 2008, the only exception was represented by the case of the Vance Avenue (VA) Neighborhood. VA is a historic Memphis' neighborhood located at the southeast corner of Downtown Memphis just south of Beale Street and the historic Robert Church Park. It is an area that has changed drastically during the 20th century when new development to the east of Downtown caused a significant portion of Vance Avenue's population to move to the Annesdale Park and Central Gardens areas of the city. In the 1940s local, state, and Federal officials attempted to address the area's decline through the construction of more than 1,500 public housing units. In the 1950s and 1960s, the city used Urban Renewal funds to clear large numbers of the area's housing and commercial units in the hopes of attracting new investment to the area. Between 1990 and 2000 VA experienced a drastic loss of population, which grew again by 2010. This growth, however, was reflected in the core of the neighborhood made of two main public housing complexes—Foote Homes and Cleaborn Homes ('low-rise public housing' in [Figure 1](#))—and paralleled the fact that one quarter of all of the land in the neighborhood and one third of all of the houses were vacant.

In 2009, the formerly known Triangle Noir Plan (City of Memphis, 2008), later called the Heritage Plan (City of Memphis, 2012), was crafted with the main goal of creating an 'urban renewal project [to] pay homage to the work and legacy of several notable African American pioneers through the redevelopment and re-deployment of several historic sites and approximately 20 city blocks within the heart of inner city Memphis' (City of Memphis, 2008). The plan was made to generate an application to the department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in order to gain the last round of HOPE VI funds to transform the public housing core of the neighborhood which, declared 'in a state of blight and decay' by MHA (City of Memphis, 2008), was destined to complete demolition and re-development using similar approaches used in the last 30 years. The mostly populated areas of VA, Foote and Cleaborn Homes, soon became the main target of the VA neighborhood redevelopment project proposed by the city.

### ***The Birth of the Vance Avenue Collaborative***

Skepticism about the Triangle Noir Plan brought the VAN St. Patrick Church former priest to contact the City and Regional Planning (CRP) Department at the University of Memphis (UoM) in order to ask for technical support and explore potential alternatives to the redevelopment project proposed by the city. The main rationale to reach out to the university was to question and work around a never-questioned and unchallenged urban issue in Memphis: the practice of displacement of public housing residents, followed by the production of new urban developments, mostly built following New Urbanism principles, where—according to regulators and producers—all the former residents could have the chance to stay. This dominant practice was, in fact, questioned by some of VA residents who have had direct or indirect (through their relatives and friends) relocation experiences, which were not correspondent with the image described by UD slogans.

This sentiment mirrored many other cases around the US where HOPE VI projects, implemented through demolition and displacement, did not necessarily result in beneficial outcomes for former residents. As reported in many studies, several housing scholars have revealed the negative consequences on former residents impacted by these housing experiments. As a matter of fact, the hypothesis at the base of HOPE VI programs—which sustains that the redevelopment of the physical fabric will automatically entail improvements in the quality of life of communities living in those projects—has been strongly questioned (see Goetz & Chapple, 2010 for a good overview). This broad and overall consistent scholarship has led to the conclusion that the level of success of these projects is overwhelmingly low and that other strategies—including community organizing and policing, more effective property management, and physical design methods (Goetz and Chapple, 2010)—would be more conducive to address revitalization of public and affordable housing complexes. Moved from this stream of research, VAN leaders and residents' skepticism gave birth to what became an eight-year-long (2008–2015) planning process carried out by a community/university partnership established between the Vance Avenue Collaborative and the CRP Department. The Collaborative, initially formed by a loose group of residents and neighborhood leaders, evolved over time in a formal entity that grouped more than 25 organizations in the neighborhood, including non-profits, business owners, service providers, and local churches. The initial work of the collaborative was almost immediately confronted by the major event of the demolition of Cleaborn Homes when, in 2010, the city was finally awarded one of the last HOPE VI funds (Figure 2).

### *Learning from Past Mistakes?*

During the same year, moving on from the critics and failures of the HOPE VI Programs, the Obama Administration changed its main housing policy to the Choice Neighborhood Program. This new program, learning from previous HOPE VI-Style past mistakes, aims at



**Figure 2.** Demolition of Cleaborn Homes (on the left); Inauguration ceremony for the redevelopment of Cleaborn Point at Heritage Landing (on the right). Sources: Picture from the Memphis Flyer News Blog available at <http://www.memphisflyer.com/NewsBlog/archives/2011/04/12/demolition-begins-at-cleaborn-homes> and screenshot from news coverage available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzbU3ukfAcQ>.



transforming distressed public and assisted housing with a comprehensive approach in which 'local leaders, residents, and stakeholders, such as public housing authorities, cities, schools, police, business owners, nonprofits, and private developers, come together to create and implement a plan that transforms distressed HUD housing and addresses the challenges in the surrounding neighborhood' (HUD.gov). In 2011, MHA and HCD applied for the first funding opportunity available for the Choice Neighborhoods planning efforts. In order to apply, MHA and HCD had to create a governance body composed of three major groups that could accomplish the required program goals: transforming the physical urban fabric into a mixed income complex (housing group), supporting positive outcomes (health, safety, employment, mobility, and education) for the families who live in the targeted area (people group), and creating conditions under which viable new mixed-income neighborhoods can grow (neighborhood group). To fulfill these requirements, HCD and MHA asked CRP at the UoM to join this new effort and be in charge of the Neighborhood Group, where CRP would have been responsible for the outreach activities collecting data to support the Choice Neighborhoods Planning process.

Despite skepticism, due to the recent past history of collaboration with the City, HCD and MHA, and the recent demolition of Cleaborn Homes, CRP in consultation with the VAC leadership decided to undertake this effort in light of a renovated comprehensive approach to neighborhood revitalization. During data collection through individual interviews and community meetings (activities carried out between 2011 and 2012) the VAC's old argument to save the housing complex and mobilize the entire social capital of the neighborhood to undertake a rehabilitation process re-emerged repeatedly. During the main community summit hosted in the neighborhood in February 2012, the rehabilitation option was tested through a participatory exercise in which participants were asked to choose among four alternatives of UD scenarios for the remaining public housing complex (demolition, partial conservation, half demolition and half rehabilitation, total conservation). This public moment confirmed findings of individual interviews and small community meetings: while the majority of the residents opted for the total conservation option, the city and public agencies were still leaning toward executing a demolition project, strongly pushing back on the findings of the data collection process carried out by the VAC. These two rival positions were unable to reach common ground to make a determination negotiated by the two parties. If at the beginning of the process, the city's agencies seemed to embrace changes at the federal level—encouraging innovation through the implementation of Choice Neighborhood and overcoming the limitations of HOPE VI-Style planning—revealing findings gained through the process that the City itself established in the first place were easily dismissed: few months after the February meeting the contract with the university was 'terminated for convenience.'

## **The Counter Community Transformation Plan and Its UD Proposal**

### ***An Independent Process***

Although excluded from the institutional planning process, the VAC decided to spend the following months creating a planning document that could encompass their vision for the public housing complex. The final document included a broad set of physical

and social analyses of VA and six signature projects addressing issues repeatedly raised through the controversial planning process: within the overall preservation-oriented strategy framework, other policies and programs were laid out to address crime, education, sustainability, and cultural issues identified as main priorities in Vance (Collaborative, 2013). The existence of this independent planning process showed that not only the majority of the residents wanted to resist the relocation superimposed by local public institutions, but most importantly that the Collaborative was willing to undertake a proactive and independent approach to build an alternative road map to lead the future of the Vance area. To reinforce this argument, the Collaborative organized two main events during the independent process. One first major event aimed at sharing with the general public the status of academic research on public housing relocation: CRP invited Vance residents, leaders, business owners, and the broader city public to a CRP-sponsored videoconference titled ‘What do we know about Public Housing in US?’, the main panelists of which were some of the scholars engaged in housing research. The public had the opportunity to ask these internationally renowned scholars, questions and raise concerns related to the relocation process. Many of the skepticisms expressed by Vance residents already displaced from other public housing neighborhood were confirmed during this public dialogue. For the first time in Memphis, a public platform to discuss one of the main policies that had affected inner-city neighborhoods over the past 20 years was opened. This process of democratizing housing research findings bolstered and encouraged the immediate follow-up Collaborative event: the march to City Hall ‘Improve do not Remove Foote Homes.’ With this event, the Collaborative was formally asking the mayor and the entire city council to recognize the importance of maintaining the public housing and to invest public funds and resources in a restoration process. As the formal name of the campaign report, it was not only a protest against the removal of the complex, but moreover the proposition of an alternative to the one advanced by the city (Figure 3).

### ***The Urban Design Proposal Embedded in the Counter Plan***

The set of community-generated research questions answered in the alternative plan was mainly concerned with the definite acknowledgment that research findings on relocation practices in public housing suggest practitioners look at alternative strategies to demolition, especially physical improvements and design upgrades of existing complexes (Vale, 2002). Since the very beginning of the VAC process, many of the initial participants highlighted the importance of maintaining the public housing complex as a symbol and legacy of the African American struggle in Memphis and fundamental stepping stone for its residents to ‘get back on their feet.’ Many of the people interviewed referenced the public institutions and sites of historic importance and how many Vance residents significantly contributed to important events in the city’s history. Some of contents of the first Data-Book Report (Collaborative, 2009) contained statements such as: ‘the history of the neighborhood is the greatest undiscovered asset of the community,’ or ‘[there are] important monuments and edifices that relate to the historical events and meetings in the Civil Rights Movement.’ All the interviewees considered these elements as important physical landmarks to be considered while going through a community planning process (Collaborative, 2009). These discoveries spurred a further exploration of the neighborhood’s history in the alternative planning process



**Figure 3.** The meeting with City Officials after the ‘Improve do not Remove’ March to City Hall carried out by the Collaborative to advocate for the Foote Homes preservation. Source: Vance Avenue Collaborative Archive.

(Collaborative, 2013). The Collaborative developed awareness that reclaiming public housing also meant launching a process of restoring and celebrating a fundamental part of the too often neglected history of urban places in Memphis. Through the counter planning process, the VAC implemented in practice Hayden’s conceptualization of supporting and celebrating community identity through UD (1997): a physical restoration defined, firstly, as a UD process of ‘claiming the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of American history’ (Hayden, 1997, 11) and, secondly, as one embedding a poetics generating ‘creative ways to interpret modest building as part of the flow of contemporary city life’ (ibidem). Highlights of this research showed how the complex was the birthplace of many relevant figures of the Civil Rights Movement and African American culture. Among these, the Hooks family, Carla and Rufus Thomas, B. B. King, Cornelia Crenshaw and many others, whose image of the neighborhood was tied to a strong community instead of a stigmatized ghetto. The existence of this rich community along with the sites and buildings of the Civil Rights Movement became the basis for a UD proposal focused on the restoration of the entire public housing stock, using a series of architectural and engineering techniques in order to preserve and rehabilitate<sup>1</sup> the housing complex.

At the same time, one of the main concerns in terms of the physical maintenance of the existing buildings was related to the presence of mold across the foundations of many buildings’ structures. Research showed that the De Souto Bayou running through the neighborhood was buried when the public housing complex was built and the new outdoor landscape was flattened in order to build the complex. This discovery brought the Collaborative to work on environmental restoration options, exploring practices carried out in similar cases (see Spirn, 2005 for a compelling action research case on environmental restoration) that could help and inspire the restoration and re-functionalization process, and on the establishment of new neighborhood programs related to the enhancement and maintenance of the exterior landscape.



**Figure 4.** Sketches of the Urban Design proposal contained in the Triangle Noir Plan (on the left); Sketches of the Urban Design proposal for the Vance Avenue Neighborhood produced during the collaborative planning process and included in the VAC Community Transformation Plan (on the right). Sources: City of Memphis, 2008; VAC, 2013.

A context-based sensitivity toward environmental and historical issues was at base of the UD proposal contained in the Community Transformation Plan. Along with the proposed restoration of the building and the day-lighting of the De Souto Bayou, a system of trails and rearrangement of the external area of the public housing units was proposed. The trail system was designed to tie together important locations in the neighborhood, showing with murals, written stories, and public art, the historic significance of the complex. A new greenway system following the bayou path was integrated into the proposed historic trail system. The reorganization of the landscape gave the occasion to look at the entire physical landscape with a more holistic approach, creating a sequence of private, semiprivate, and communal areas aimed at enhancing people's sense of stewardship of the complex. Moreover, enlarged porches would serve the restored units, front porches and backyards would serve the immediate surroundings of the housing complex, and a series of community and learning gardens would transition areas to the greenway system along the day-lightened bayou (Figure 4).<sup>2</sup>

The UD proposal—from the restoration of the housing complex, to the realization of semiprivate porches and backyard spaces, from the design of the green way to the building of the new Foote Homes Park—identified specific design actions that could be undertaken with public investment and supported through the management of the existing neighborhood organizations. The independent plan containing this UD proposal identified the existing network of non-profits as the main subjects in charge of constructing and maintaining the new landscape design for the complex, which ultimately would be kept in the hands of the housing authority.

### Discussion Session: Mirroring Three Theoretical Underpinnings

During eight years of partnership, the relationship between the Collaborative and the city had become increasingly contentious mainly because of the VAC challenge of the long history of rooted practices of public housing redevelopment in Memphis. Since the 90s', public inner-

city neighborhood regeneration projects have been carried out with the underlining assumption that distressed housing conditions are mainly due to a general decline of civility and a lack of people's capacities in terms of individual responsibility. Community development policies reflect this assumption and prescribe a course of action to restore a social order through approaches supposedly carrying the seeds to reactivate civil norms and vibrant markets in declining neighborhoods (see Wolf-Powers, 2014 on restoration of norms and market). VAC's work challenged this assumption and established a process aimed at understanding neighborhood problems and building patterns of change in the frame of establishing an open moral community (Mandelbaum, 1988). A community that, dismissing the utopian ideal of a community-to-come entailed into the slogans for the new Memphis—has embarked in a collective research process aimed at overcoming group affiliations, races, or beliefs and trying to answer questions related to context-ingrained approaches of community development for the greater good. These two distant and diverging approaches were fundamentally based on opposite rationales backing different ways to attribute value to public housing and consequentially embedding very specific types of changes in the built environment.

Under the three lenses identified in UD literature, the story of the Collaborative offers a fertile ground for reflection on UD practice and research challenges and opportunities. Firstly, the creation of a safe space for people to share their most pressing concerns related to the city community development approach (Raciti *et al.*, 2016) allowed the VAC to engage in a UD process that, over time, achieved very different outcomes compared to those usually anticipated in well-established community development practices. When UD outcomes are produced with the open intention of being modified by the local context (instead of exclusively modify it), findings on the ethical implications of those potential outcomes become powerful forces constantly re-shaping the initial directions that might be identified for urban regeneration. In other words, UD in the first community development framework is a firm (and quite obvious) consequence of the established policy backing the regeneration process; UD framed in action research is a device which helps participants figure out what types of desirable transformation of the built environment make sense while going through a phase of agreeing on community values and principles. In these two distant and diverging approaches lays the fundamental difference between participatory practices and action research (Saija, 2014b); while the first involves public *charrettes* and community events aimed at asking participants what they want (e.g. what type of single family house in a mixed-income, mixed-raced, new-urbanism-styled 'community' in the case of UD sponsored by the city), the latter aims at sharing and exploring structural questions that are, no matter what, entrenched in the process of urban regeneration (e.g. the real affordability of single family houses in the New Urbanism neighborhood to come).

Secondly, UD through action research revealed the only superficial Solomonic separation between rival positions of advocates for the private (privileging private developers in the building and managing of the public housing projects) versus the public interest (maintaining the public housing structure as it was) while shaping the urban fabric. While, in fact, the city UD proposal was initially conceived as a vehicle to spur development in the downtown area and foster private over public interests, the VAC UD process led to the conclusion that advocating for the preservation of the public housing complex was not preventing the private interests from being involved in the redevelopment of the area. As a matter of fact, public housing surroundings included in the perimeter of the Choice Neighborhood Initiative could



have been targeted for infill development, restoring (instead of replacing) the declining surrounding neighborhood, while the public housing section could have been maintained, restored, and reactivated. Retaining UD within the main umbrella of a planning process built on collective values entails a powerful potential that is rarely explored in practice. Hopes and aspirations for public housing redevelopment in inner-city America has been given mostly to the New Urbanism approach, including those cases where the possibilities of exploring alternatives were suggested by local residents. As shown in many of the new urbanism critiques related to democratic values (Harvey, 2000), environmental claims (Spirn, 2000), and lack of a cultural understanding of existing ways of living (Moudon, 2000), US cities still have reach traditional neighborhoods (currently declining) that wait to be mended instead of being rebuilt. A UD approach that would engage with this slow work of restoration is needed; one that would re-engage UD with its place-based dimension in a way that important human values, environmental concerns, and cultures and heritage would be recognized and strengthened.

Finally, this opens a reflection to the last domain of debate raised at the beginning of this paper. There is a claim here to reframe UD as an aesthetic *deweyan* experience (Dewey, 1934/1980): a form of art that is the outcome of everyday life experiences and, as such, reflects their political, economical, cultural, and environmental dimensions. For being the material expression embedding these multiple dimensions, UD has to encompass the use of various disciplines to craft outcomes reflecting these very same dimensions. From this perspective, interdisciplinary approaches are most likely the more conducive: those in which disciplines maintain their sovereignty but establish a reciprocal relation among them (Alvargonzález, 2011) in order to substantiate actions reflecting these intangible dimensions. In the VAC case, the UD proposal reflects the physical outcome of a project generated through (1) the continuous interaction of students and faculty overlapping their disciplinary competencies ranging from engineering, architecture, planning, anthropology, and sociology and (2) the activation of those competencies into action taken to interact with residents and neighborhood leaders.

### **Conclusion: The Value of UD as Collective Enterprise**

While debates on the meaning of UD and its ontological qualities are still undergoing and unresolved, cities changing rapidly under the pressure of economic capital and UD interventions play significant roles in these processes. UD as a ‘frame of mind’ is a useful notion to conceptualize the multifaceted theoretical positions navigating the field, but the ‘unthingness’ of UD might be counterproductive especially while going through urban regeneration interventions, such as those that many contemporary cities are experiencing in trying to reconfigure their historic cores. Ultimately, the practice of UD comes down to very tangible outcomes that strongly change the urban fabric and deeply affect communities living in these newly generated projects. The collective process critically analyzed in this paper aims to encourage the urban designers’ community to step out of their comfort zone of design approaches conceived as a doctrine and embark on collective research processes facing very uncertain circumstances in order to generate highly intentional and context-based UD interventions. Being the ‘thingness’ of UD is strongly tangible in the day-to-day domain of practice, this paper invites the use of the numerous design theories—developed for context-sensitive environmental, cultural, perceptive, and historical UD

interventions—to be shared in the framework of action-oriented and collective research experiences. Context-based discoveries might lead to more innovative and just UD outcomes not only aimed at modifying built environments but, moreover, aimed at bolstering relations between communities and those environments.

## Notes

1. According with guidelines of the department of interior, the Collaborative explored the possibility to have Foote Homes listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Despite being supported by many local organizations advocating for preservation and various experts, the process of formal recognition of the complex found strong oppositions by local institutions. Nevertheless, the restoration proposal was generated following the Department of interior guidelines for preservation and rehabilitation.
2. A more detailed visualization of the proposed design was elaborated after the completion of the Community Transformation Plan thanks to an international community design workshop funded and organized as part of Dr. Laura Saija's Marie Curie Research Fellowship (Saija 2017). A video communicating the UD proposal was prepared by one of the workshop participants, Sara Tornabene, and it is accessible at: <https://vimeo.com/108988628>.

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