

Flipping the Script

Toward a Transformative Urban Redevelopment Agenda in Chattanooga, Tennessee

Courtney Elizabeth Knapp

TO SOME FOLKS—in particular, those who can afford to access the fruits of the city’s impressive downtown revitalization—the story of Chattanooga’s renaissance is linear and progressive: for thirty years, Chattanooga has been undergoing a citizen-led downtown urban revival. Historically a leader in the New South, with one of the most diverse industrial and manufacturing economies in the nation by mid-century, the “Dynamo of Dixie” suffered massive deindustrialization and economic restructuring between the 1960s and 1980s. Population loss followed, and insult was added to injury in 1969 when Walter Cronkite referred to Chattanooga on the national evening news as the “Dirtiest City in America” due to its pervasive environmental pollution.

Despite these setbacks, the historic “Chattanooga Spirit” of bipartisan cooperation in the pursuit of economic development prevailed, and in 1982 a new generation of committed public officials, residents, entrepreneurs and urban real estate developers banded together under the Moccasin Bend Task Force to retrieve the city from the brink of collapse. Initiated by the local and county governments to study the assets of a 22-mile long stretch of the Tennessee River and make recommendations about the redevelopment of publicly-owned land along the waterfront, the Task Force reignited a public passion for the city, catalyzing substantial reinvestment in several downtown neighborhoods. Over thirty years, the combined efforts of the

public, private, foundation and nonprofit sectors have labored to produce a true “twenty-first century waterfront”—leveraging hundreds of millions of dollars in private and public reinvestment, inspiring a multigenerational Back to the City movement, and expanding its arts-history-and culture based tourist economy.

Today, the riverfront and surrounding neighborhoods stand as testament to the power of these connections. No longer covered in soot, the freshly scrubbed downtown offers a range of cultural, environmental, social and economic amenities. One of the most compelling aspects of more recent urban revitalization efforts in downtown Chattanooga has been their emphasis on re-working historically erased cultures and histories into the local urban physical and social landscapes of the city. Three major components of the *21st Century Waterfront Plan*, for example, are:

- the construction of an interactive public art installation called the “The Passage,” which highlights the history and culture of the Cherokees at the site as well as the city’s crucial role during the Trail of Tears;
- a Memorandum of Understanding between the City of Chattanooga and the Cherokee Nation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, which “in the spirit of repentance” for indigenous dispossession, intended to bind the parties “together in a relationship” expressed in Cherokee as *Du-na-li-i-yv* and described in English as “a friendship between groups”; and
- the redevelopment of Renaissance Park on the north bank of the Tennessee River, a public space which includes the site of “Camp Contraband”—



Courtney Elizabeth Knapp is a doctoral candidate in City and Regional Planning at Cornell University.

the original free African American community in the city—as well as public art and landscape design installations representing the forced and voluntary migration of different populations across the city.

These ongoing efforts provide innovative examples for using place-making and urban revitalization processes to engage in the work of cultural recognition and historical reconciliation. The transformation of the riverfront back into a “Cherokee”—and to a lesser extent, African American—“place” of cultural meaning and belonging, combined with policy measures aimed at formalizing “repentance” and establishing a set of mutual stakes with respect to the preservation and support of Native American culture and history, has produced a unique and fertile physical and cultural urban landscape for thinking through the intersections of cultural recognition and economic development in 21st century equity planning.

Exclusion, Expropriation, Violence and Neglect: Alternative Narratives

While the urban history described above is uncompromisingly optimistic, other, more critical narratives have evolved alongside it. These perspectives argue that for the majority of residents living within the urban core, Chattanooga’s renaissance has been both a blessing *and* a curse. Everyday accounts from local social justice activists working in housing, workforce development, and transportation describe complex legacies of unequal access to planning and development decision-making circles and resource pools. These story lines talk not of inclusion, mutual benefit, and revival, but systematic exclusion, asset expropriation, violence and neglect.

Among *these* versions of development and urban change, forsaken political promises and the constant threat of physical and cultural up-

rooting and dislocation prevail. For example, the Chattanooga Housing Authority’s current annual and five-year plans recommend the sale or demolition of the city’s last two remaining large-scale public housing developments during the current fiscal year. The loss of College Hill and East Lake Courts promise to force as many as nine hundred very low income families into a rapidly gentrifying housing market with a super-saturation of Section 8 vouchers and no public policies to ensure an affordable housing supply meets this dramatic and imminent need.

The *Times Free Press* reported in August 2011 that the city “defies trends” when it comes to new housing construction, and market rate/luxury housing development in particular. Between 2007 and 2011, 2,539 new rental units were added to the local housing stock; most of the centrally located developments charge rents ranging from \$600 for a studio to \$1200 for a two-bedroom.

Ironically, current Census Bureau estimates reveal that 76.7 percent of households living in the urban core cannot afford to pay market prices for housing at those costs. Over the past ten years, housing cost burdens have risen substantially; rent and mortgage increases have outpaced income growth, and today, more than half of urban core households now live in “unaffordable” housing relative to their incomes, with 28 percent of renters and 14 percent of homeowners considered “severely burdened” (50+ percent) by housing costs.



Photo: Courtney Elizabeth Knapp

“The Passage” highlights the history and culture of the Cherokees at the site as well as the city’s crucial role during the Trail of Tears.

The result of this selective engagement and reinvestment is a highly uneven and contradictory urban landscape, where most struggle, many lose, and a few win. This is illustrated by recent figures which show that Chattanooga had both the second fastest growing poverty rate between 2007–2009 *and* the third fastest gentrifying rental housing market in the nation in 2012.

Historically African American, working class neighborhoods on the south side, north shore and east end of the city have experienced the most dramatic demographic shifts. In one north Chattanooga census tract, median gross rents rose an estimated 84.3 percent between 2000 and 2010; in another neighborhood on the southside—one of the areas targeted for creative and cultural redevelopment by the city—the African American community went from being 76.2 percent of the population in 2000 to 30.6 percent in 2010, while whites went from being 10.5 percent in 2000 to 60 percent in 2010. During this same time, median home values increased by 190 percent and median gross rents rose by 37.2 percent.

Given these trends, it's clear to many: serious efforts must be undertaken to coordinate social justice struggles across the urban core and build an alternative urban development vision upon them. The failure to do so, they say, promises that downtown Chattanooga will become little more than a cosmopolitan museum; a playground for the economically privileged, with virtually no safeguards to prevent the displacement of low-income residents from their homes and neighborhoods. Ironically, a city built on the backs of the economically oppressed—which openly acknowledges Cherokee removal and African American slavery as parts of its complex, multicultural heritage—completes its dispossession by inducing the city builders' descendants to peripheral, disinvested spaces, disconnected from families, jobs, urban services, public amenities, and historic connections to place.

In this oppositional storyline, the acknowledgment of historical urban violence, such as with the above mentioned public space The Passage, is an important symbolic gesture. But it can hardly be considered complete reconciliation with historic exploitation and

injustices. Janelle Jackson and Ash Lee Woodward Henderson, organizers with the anti-racism organization Concerned Citizens for Justice (CCJ), stress the need to reverse the equation: “We’re for reconciliation, but it comes at the *end* of a process. Before reconciliation there must be *truth*—then *justice*.”

Community Groups Flipping the Script

Presently, there are several popular organizations working to flip the mainstream script of urban revitalization in Chattanooga, illuminating the highly uneven terrain of reinvestment across the city and calling for a more equitably developed city. Volunteer-based groups such as Concerned Citizens for Justice (CCJ), Occupy Chattanooga, Chattanooga Organized for Action (COA), the Westside Community Association, Idle No More Chattanooga and the Grove Street Settlement House question Chattanooga’s storybook tale of urban progress through a range of creative, place-based public activities and initiatives, including marches, history tours, protests, street theatre, justice schools, skill sharing, storytelling workshops, spoken word, free stores, discussions with community elders, and solidarity fund raisers.

Importantly, these groups integrate the typically cultural and symbolic work of placemaking with an economic justice-based vision for community planning and development, demonstrating the inextricability of these two elements to a transformative urban social justice movement in a diverse city comprised of many historically oppressed groups searching for material security and cultural belonging in their communities. Cultural development is not a set of relics; it is the active production of communities of belonging.

Also crucially, these groups make links between seemingly disconnected struggles across time and space. During an August 2012 “Organizing the Hood” training co-sponsored by CCJ and COA, lifelong radical activist and former Chattanoogaan Lorenzo Ervin urged participants to draw power from these historical and geographic connections when engaging in their own social justice struggles:

We have laid down a foundation for you . . . We've showed you a way of doing things. Some will say, "Oh, the cops are doing this to me, or the cops are doing that." Well, they've done it to others. And they found the strength to stand up and fight back. You must do the same.

Such everyday activities among physically and/or culturally uprooted folk to create places of security and belonging—are older than Chattanooga itself. They date back to 18th-century struggles between the Chickamauga Cherokee and colonial settlers over land encroachment and resource exploitation, and carry forward through the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries vis-à-vis struggles against Native dispossession, slavery, post-Reconstruction racism, Jim Crow segregation, generations of labor exploitation, Urban Renewal, and today, public-private partnership driven gentrification across the urban core.

Another example of contemporary script flipping was the October 2011 March Against Police Brutality, organized by Concerned Citizens for Justice. Held



Photo: Jared Story

during a major annual outdoor sports festival, participants marched to key sites of Cherokee and African American oppression and resistance, drawing attention to these historical moments and connecting them to contemporary struggles for social justice across the city. Their message that "poverty is violence" disrupted the myth that urban reinvestment is shared by everyone in the city.

Fortunately, several groups have recognized the need to shift from being primarily reactive to proactive in their strategies for demanding a more just and sustainable city. To address these concerns, several important initiatives have taken place.

First, an action research project involving input from several local groups, Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning, and the Chattanooga Public Library, launched the "Planning Free School" on the library's new fourth floor dedicated to civic engagement. The Free School is organized around four types of workshops: issue-based discussion and research groups, skill shares, transformative placemaking events and critical conversations. Importantly, this public initiative is dedicated to framing the discussion in terms of just sustainability, offering space for alternative and underrepresented community members to articulate their own goals for the city and develop planning skills to help realize them. The Free School has hosted community workshops focused on analyzing census housing data, integrating the arts and culture into equitable development, and assessing mobility barriers among low income and disabled residents.

Relatedly, the outspoken social justice organization Chattanooga Organized for Action transitioned from being an individual membership-based protest organization to becoming a coalition of neighborhood-based organizations from primarily subsidized rental and mixed-tenure low income neighborhoods across the city. COA is working closely with the Planning Free School to develop processes to enable both neighborhood-based visions and a larger, longer-term "People's Plan for Chattanooga." Although it has and surely will continue to be an uphill journey, a just city has appeared on Chattanooga's horizon. **P²**