

The Fight for Foote Homes

A Peoples' Struggle to Save Public Housing in Memphis, TN

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Storm Clouds on the Horizon

The last quarter of the 20th century was an extremely challenging period for the City of Memphis, which experienced significant business, employment and tax revenue losses as a result of decades of deindustrialization, suburbanization and disinvestment. Nowhere were the city's economic problems more visible than in its Downtown that confronted widespread retail and office space vacancies, crumbling infrastructure and an escalating crime rate. Following significant public investment in the city's waterfront and entertainment districts by local, state and federal agencies, a small group of forward-looking developers undertook a series of high-risk projects at a time when most real estate professionals viewed the Downtown market as a hopeless case of inner city decline.

The success of the Peabody Hotel restoration and Harbor Town, South Bluffs and Uptown developments, re-ignited investment and development interest in the Central Business District (CBD) generating dozens of new residential condo conversions that attracted

thousands of new residents. The Downtown Memphis Commission (DMC) – a partnership between local government and the private sector responsible for supporting the ongoing revitalization of Downtown Memphis – prepared a plan designed, in large part, to identify additional land to accommodate future entertainment, tourism and residential development.

One of the key recommendations of the Downtown Memphis Commission's *South Forum Development Plan* was the redevelopment of the Vance Avenue Neighborhood located immediately south of the CBD. The plan sought to transform this historic African American community into a vibrant mixed-use district attractive to people interested in living in Downtown with its riverfront location and views, elegant building stock, and vibrant cultural scene. A major obstacle standing in the way of the local development community's CBD expansion plan, was the location of two public housing complexes, Cleaborn and Foote Homes, sheltering more than 900 of the city's poorest families.

Residents' Decision to Organize

Shortly after the Downtown Memphis Commission issued its *South Forum Development Plan* the City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD) and Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) released its *Triangle Noir: an Urban Renaissance Development Plan* that recommended the demolition of Cleaborn and Foote Homes to accommodate the expansion of nearby cultural institutions, tourism-related businesses from the Beale Street corridor and new market rate housing.



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The publication of the Triangle Noir Plan, prompted public housing tenants living in these two complexes to ask Father Tim Sullivan, Pastor of Saint Patrick Catholic Church, for assistance. Fr. Sullivan responded by inviting faculty from the University of Memphis Department of City and Regional Planning to work with these tenants and their neighbors to produce a redevelopment plan that would accommodate the land use needs of the city's expanding CBD without displacing the neighborhood's low-income residents.

In spite of the strong community support that the *Preliminary Planning Framework for A More Vibrant, Sustainable, and Just Vance Avenue Neighborhood* received from public housing tenants, neighborhood residents, local institutional leaders, and elected officials, MHA pursued and received one of HUD's last HOPE VI Grants to relocate approximately 450 low-income families living in Cleaborn Homes, demolish the complex, and redevelop the former site as a mixed-use, mixed-income district – a process that subsequently faltered when the city's chosen developer failed to secure the financing needed to complete the project.

An Unexpected Invitation

It came, therefore, as quite a surprise when MHA invited Fr. Sullivan, organizer of the Vance Avenue Collaborative, the grassroots organization established to oppose the city's Triangle Noir Plan, and their University partners, to work with them in preparing a HUD Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant application. The primary purpose of this newly initiated federal program was to provide local communities with "troubled" public housing complexes the opportunity to devise comprehensive transformation plans to enhance the quality of life for those living in and around these developments.

Aware of MHA's long-standing goal of replacing its traditional public housing complexes with scattered site Section 8 units, neighborhood residents and their University partners were reluctant to participate in the Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant process which they feared would be little more than citizen participation "performance art." However, after securing repeated public assurances regarding the open and dem-

ocratic nature of the proposed Vance Avenue Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant process from MHA's Executive Director and the Mayor, the Vance Avenue Collaborative and its University allies agreed to collaborate with the city on this proposal. Several months later, U.S. Representative Stephen Cohen announced that Memphis has been chosen as one of sixteen cities to receive a \$250,000 Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant, to be matched with \$250,000 in municipal funds, from an applicant pool of nearly one hundred twenty cities.

The City Shows Its Cards

Within weeks of receiving the grant, MHA mobilized a small army of experienced planning, development and design consultants, including University of Memphis faculty, to collect and analyze the data needed for a revitalization plan aimed at addressing the educational achievement, business/job generation, affordable housing development and service delivery challenges confronting the Vance Avenue community. After working with local stakeholders to collect and analyze a wide range of data related to these issues, University researchers systematically polled local residents, businesspersons and institutional leaders regarding their preferred revitalization strategies. While doing so, they specifically asked these and other stakeholders what they felt should be done about Foote Homes.

While this highly consultative planning process was taking place in the neighborhood, MHA and the Office of the Mayor were quietly preparing a Choice Neighborhood Implementation Grant Application using data generated by the project to justify the demolition, clearance and mixed-use redevelopment recommendations contained in the city's previously published Triangle Noir Plan. When city officials ran into a hailstorm of community opposition to this effort from those participating in the planning process taking place in the Vance Neighborhood and local taxpayer groups concerned about the redevelopment plan's price tag, they quietly shelved their "early application" initiative.

When University faculty staffing the Choice Neighborhood Planning Grants' community meetings process asked stakeholders to share their opinions regarding the neighborhood's future including Foote

Homes, city officials strongly objected, arguing against the need to query stakeholders on these questions which many residents viewed as the central policy issues facing the community.

When a majority of local stakeholders, at a well-attended community meeting organized to explore these issues, stated their strong support for preserving and improving Foote Homes city housing officials became incensed! When a representative sample of neighborhood residents voiced similar pro-Foote Homes opinions during a follow-up survey conducted by the University, city officials notified the University of Memphis that their services – as the city’s research consultants – were no longer needed. In addition, they took down the public website containing the data and reports generated by the project; disbanded the project’s Citizen Advisory Board; and informed residents that the period of citizen input was over.

Residents Produce Their Own Plan

The University of Memphis faculty

viewed their “termination without cause” as the result of their repeated efforts to provide those most directly affected by the Choice Neighborhood Plan with a significant voice in its development. After receiving their termination letter from MHA, the University faculty approached the leaders of the nearly two-dozen community organizations that had participated in the Vance Avenue Choice Neighborhood planning process to ask them if they would like them to complete the plan that more than 1,000 local residents had helped shape. All but two of the tenant organizations, homeowners groups, social service agencies, business associations, and churches involved in the Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant supported the idea of finishing a plan that would preserve and improve Foote Homes while making land available for the expansion of the city’s Central Business District.

During the next several months, University faculty worked with local stakeholders to complete the Vance Avenue Community Transformation Plan that was

endorsed by the majority of the neighborhood’s organized groups. The Vance Avenue Collaborative subsequently secured the support of two influential Councilpersons, who agreed to hold public hearings on the resident-generated plan before the City Council’s Planning Sub-Committee. When this body unanimously endorsed a resolution supporting the residents’ preservation plan for Foote Homes and the surrounding neighborhood, the stage was set for the first public debate of the city’s economic development and public housing policies in decades. In the months following their Planning Sub-Committee victory, the Vance Avenue Collaborative and their University allies collected petitions, organizational endorsements and editorial board statements in support of their plan. They also mobilized dozens of Vance Avenue stakeholders to attend City Council meetings at which the Planning Sub-Committee’s resolution endorsing their plan was scheduled to be debated, only to have this item removed from the City Council’s agenda at the last minute without explanation.



FROM LEFT

Vance Avenue Collaborative Members at Prayer Vigil Prior to Marching to City Hall. *Photo: Vance Avenue Collaborative Staff*

Vance Avenue Collaborative Members Address City Council. *Photo: Vance Avenue Collaborative Staff*

Foote Homes. *Photo: Ken Reardon*

A Grassroots Campaign

While waiting for the City Council to provide them with an opportunity to argue their case for redevelopment without displacement, the Vance Avenue Collaborative secured the support of the region's two most important preservation groups to have Foote Homes designated a National Historic Landmark by the State Historic Commission for the pivotal role its residents played in the Memphis Freedom Struggle. The Vance Avenue Collaborative also initiated communication with the HUD Secretary.

They informed him of the MHA's abandonment of the participatory planning process that had been one of the hallmarks of its successful Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant Application in favor of implementing a 1950s-style urban renewal plan that would displace and disadvantage many of the city's poorest public housing tenants. The Collaborative provided the Secretary's Office with copies of their plan, as well as local press clippings documenting the City Council's refusal to hold a meeting

to debate the pros and cons of the MHA's and Vance Avenue Collaborative's "competing" Choice Neighborhood plans.

A Temporary Reprieve

Frustrated by what appeared to be the city's refusal to consider the merits of the resident-generated plan, a senior HUD official pressed the Mayor to meet with the Collaborative. After showing up 90 minutes late for this meeting, former Mayor A.C. Wharton informed the group that he would be unable to speak with them. Shamed into sitting down for fifteen minutes with local residents and leaders who had waited for months to meet with him, the Mayor reluctantly agreed to review the competing MHA and resident-generated Choice Neighborhood plans and to get back in touch with them prior to making a final decision on the project.

A month later, without notice, Mayor Wharton endorsed MHA's clearance-oriented plan. Meanwhile, the Vance Avenue Collaborative and their allies had persuaded the

City of Memphis/Shelby County Community Renewal Agency to "table" MHA's Tax Increment Finance Proposal for funding the "local share" of their \$110 million Choice Neighborhood Implementation Grant Application. Local officials were subsequently shocked when HUD chose not to include MHA's Vance Avenue Choice Neighborhood Implementation Project on their list of 2013 grantees.

In the months following this victory, the Vance Avenue Collaborative went through a number of changes. First, many of its members who had lived in Cleaborn Homes were relocated to other parts of the city, county and region, significantly reducing the organization's membership. Second, Father Tim Sullivan, the Collaborative's founder and frequent spokesperson, was reassigned by his religious order to a new parish in Canada. Third, many of the Collaborative's most active members became deeply involved in the organization's successful effort to transform a retired city bus into a mobile food store serving neighborhoods without full-service grocery stores. These developments,



FROM LEFT

Green Machine Mobile Food Market participates in NBA Cares Week at the FedEx Forum. *Photo: Ken Reardon*

Vance Avenue on the March. *Graphic: Laura Saija, University of Memphis*

Mother and daughter shop on the Green Machine Mobile Market. *Photo: Ken Reardon*

along with the stress and fatigue experienced by Foote Homes residents, who had organized for more than five years to oppose MHA's efforts to displace them, left the Collaborative with few resources to oppose the city's 2015 Choice Neighborhood Implementation Grant Application. In September of 2015, HUD announced its decision to fund MHA's Choice Neighborhood Implementation Grant, paving the way for the displacement of Foote Homes' 400 families and demolition of the complex that offered low-income Memphians their best affordable housing option in Downtown Memphis.

Some Lessons Learned

Residents seeking to preserve and improve existing public housing complexes offering high quality shelter to low-income families using HUD's Choice Neighborhood Program face an uphill battle! Despite the efforts of policymakers who crafted the Choice Neighborhood Program, in part, to address the shortcomings of the HOPE VI Program, this program continues to privilege the financial interests of Local Housing Authorities (LHAs) over their low-income tenants and neighbors. Local Housing Authorities' decisions to pursue Choice Neighborhood funding to replace traditional public housing with mixed-income developments are strongly driven and influenced by two factors: the declining financial health of these agencies and the desires of powerful real estate interests to acquire valuable land adjacent to expanding downtowns at public expense. Effective opposition to such policies requires a combination of skillful community organization by public housing tenants and their allies and participatory action research by University trained professionals.

Throughout the Save Foote Homes Campaign, the VAC was able to generate strong empirical evidence documenting the high quality of the existing built environment, strong social bonds among tenants and residents' deep desire to remain in public housing. This research also produced planning strategies that challenged MHA's "cookie-cutter" approach to the redevelopment of the area. Among the signature project's featured in the resident plan was the "daylighting" of an urban waterway that frequently flooded; the development of a Civil Rights Trail highlighting the role Foote Homes residents including Benjamin Hooks, Mavis Staples

and Rufus Thomas played in the Memphis Freedom Struggle; and the full exploitation of Section 3 to maximize the number of local jobs produced by the project.

While such participatory planning often plays a central role in supporting local citizen empowerment efforts, the "glue" that enabled the Vance community to resist MHA's ongoing demolition efforts was its grassroots organizing. Foote Homes' tenants success in challenging MHA's displacement and gentrification plans was especially noteworthy given the loss of power of so many of the urban institutions that have been traditional supporters of public housing, including: labor unions, inner city churches, Civil Rights organizations and human service agencies. Unions membership has been devastated by deindustrialization and outsourcing. Inner city churches and Civil Rights organizations have seen many of their members move to the suburbs. Most human services organizations have become dependent upon large donors who, with few exceptions, appear unwilling to support the advocacy effort of grassroots groups. Finally, the number of University faculty willing to undertake engaged scholarship projects in support of the empowerment efforts of low-income communities appear to be in short supply. While many faculty seem willing to contribute to urban planning and development projects supported by a broad consensus of citizen, business, government and media organizations, far fewer faculty appear ready to contribute to the advocacy planning efforts of the poor when these challenge the unexamined racism and classism embodied in elite generated plans.

As we submit this article, plans are underway to move the residents of Foote Homes out of Memphis' last public housing project. The Vance Avenue Collaborative and their University allies did not succeed in preserving this important source of affordable housing in Downtown Memphis. They did succeed in generating an all-to-infrequent public debate in the American South regarding "who benefits" from municipally funded economic and community development, a debate being energetically pursued as local development interests, the City of Memphis, Shelby County and citizen organizations consider alternative strategies for the redevelopment of the historic 168-acre Memphis Fairgrounds Park – one of the largest publicly owned sites in any Southern city.

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