THE REVIVAL OF SOUTH MEMPHIS; COMMUNITY GARDENS AS THE PATRIARCH OF URBAN RESURGENCE IN SOUTH MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE
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The Revival of South Memphis
History

Memphis, Tennessee has been an important location for markets, exchanges, travel and distribution over many decades. Before the Civil War the rich soil in Memphis contributed to its economic base. By the mid-20th Century, Memphis became one of the busiest cities in the South and the capital of the Mid-South, with the world’s largest cotton market and the world’s largest hardwood market.

Per the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Memphis currently has an unemployment rate of 10.4%, above Tennessee’s 9.6% and the nation’s 8.9% rates. Its largest employer, Federal Express, currently employs over 29,500 workers. The U.S. Government and Memphis Board of Education follow with approximately 14,860 and 14,000 employees each, respectively. Some of the other major employers include Methodist Health Systems, Shelby County and Memphis City Government, Baptist Memorial Hospital, University of Tennessee at Memphis, Shelby County Board of Education, the Tennessee State Government, and Walmart. Over the years, recession has had a major impact on big box companies. This negative impact has a domino effect and cause major downsizing and reorganization. While accommodating closing of businesses and the significant loss of jobs, the focus of Memphis is to maintain and preserve traditional small community values and not to lose their cultural foundation on what the city was built on.

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Existing Conditions

Developing and sustaining viable communities requires promotion of integrated sources that provide decent, safe, affordable housing and proper living environments. These communities survive over time by maintaining a strong sense of community that requires continuous community engagement, leadership, as well as a shared vision. The success of planning efforts depends on the support of the people, citizen interest, and key stakeholders. Planners and the local government are in a unique position to assist and provide access to resources that are available to the community.

All communities have a story; each with its own unique history, culture, demographics and citizens. Memphis has always been a community of culture, arts, music, as well as good southern cuisine! Over time, Memphis has turned into a tourist hot spot. They have adapted to the new concepts of development, as well as culture changes from a tourist standpoint BUT some of the older local communities have fallen. The presence of deteriorated housing and infrastructure otherwise known as “blight” has decreased livability and discouraged further investment. This has created a host of problems including economical, environmental and social change, including a

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loss of a sense of community. Staying on top of today’s volatile business environments, as well as the shifting marketplace, demands constant attention.

South Memphis, (Figure 1) a low income neighborhood located in Memphis, Tennessee, ranks high in poverty, high in crime, and low income. Housing stock is quite old, with homes in the area being the old shot gun style, (Figure 2) with the occasional four square home. An inventory of housing conditions indicated a continual pattern of disinvestment.

Houses have been this way since the late 1960’s. Most businesses closed along with major manufacturing companies and warehouse industries. They relocated leaving deserted commercial properties throughout the area. Along with those major business went local jobs/employment opportunities which supplied jobs to the working class neighborhood.

In the absence of these stabilizing factors, poverty, crime and lack of development, propelled the area into a continual downward spiral of decay. Many remaining residents are elderly who anxiously inform any passerby of the neighborhood

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decline. These are the people, the fabric that is needed to help rebuild and reinvest. This neighborhood is not a “bad neighborhood” but the need for reinvestment is plentiful.

Population estimate for this area is about 8104, with a total African American population of about 7837. There are approximately 101 Caucasians, 76 Hispanics, 8 Asians and the remaining as other. The median household income here is 18,331 which is significantly lower than the Memphis average of 29,431. The average house value in South Memphis is $39,400 which is significantly lower than the Memphis metro area as a whole.

South Memphis has this ongoing reputation as being an urban wasteland when actually the culture and sense of community run deep. The City of Memphis took a holistic approach and wanted to address each individual area of Memphis and it was recognized that South Memphis was in dire need mainly due to the crime and the overall aesthetics and the lacking of general commerce. Mayor Herenton, whom is the Mayor for the City of Memphis, worked closely to develop a plan called “Sustainable Shelby.” This plan originated from a core group of 130 people over a four month period that discussed, brainstormed, debated and ultimately agreed on strategies that would benefit each core area of Memphis. This plan recognizes each neighborhood along with their unique situation and offered

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revitalization strategies for each. Mayor Herenton stands behind the suggestion that a
community garden could be the next best thing for the South Memphis community. This
urban greening program would help unify the neighborhood in an attempt to make
them self-sufficient. Over time, the “Sustainable Shelby” plan has helped decrease
crime, increase the quality of the school system, and more jobs have entered the area.
Although significant effort was put forth to revitalize the area, new business is lacking
and the local dollar is still very weak. Centralized housing was also a big problem.
Concentrating the problems of poverty into compact, overcrowded environments
amplified and intensified poverty related problems.

The black outlined section in figure 3 shows the highest concentration of people
that live in poverty with rates averaging at 40% and above. The South Memphis
neighborhood lies within this area.
The purpose of this research is to help outline the objectives of the neighborhood planning process to address community issues by empowering the people, revitalizing the community and building a better economic base for South Memphis. Through a grassroots method, working with the residents, current stakeholders, and community leaders, can make this process a “catalyst” for redevelopment that is beneficial to everyone.
Critical Issues Facing the Neighborhood

The presence of vibrant, highly functioning neighborhoods is critical to Memphis becoming a world-class, 21st century city. Through continued analysis of community data and the multi-faceted process of gathering input from neighboring residents, there were many areas that encapsulate the key issues facing the neighborhood.

Most homes have deteriorated beyond repair and others need serious repair work (roof, retaining walls, porches etc.) This could be due to many reasons. The aging housing stock and low income often correlate elderly residents who may need financial assistance to upgrade or maintain their homes. The current infrastructure also needs to be addressed. Curbs, sidewalks, storm drainage, and the pavement all need to be evaluated and maintained. There are also a number of vacant lots found throughout the neighborhood. Infill development is needed; development that will fit the cultural characteristics of the community.

Land use has also caused several nonconforming problems. There are several commercial uses and industrial uses that lay within the this neighborhood. Those existing conditions could indicate to developers that the area is not worth reinvesting in. With a significant percentage of the residents with lower-level jobs skills and education, assistance from the City is needed to get a plan in place for revitalization.

Low income neighborhoods have a particular need that most thriving neighborhoods don’t. It has come to past that most private institutions and agencies have divested in the neighborhood with favor of better locations. This has resulted in a
have divested in the neighborhood with favor of better locations. This has resulted in a
downgraded cycle of deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate services and the
withdrawal of people and institutions. Those that are commonly left behind are those
who can’t move, those who are left with the inadequacies of the neighborhood. This
research reports a resourceful way to try to redevelop the South Memphis
neighborhood, while empowering the people who have a stake in the community.

The purpose of this study is to identify a plan that with, innovative methods, that
will encourage, not just City participation but neighborhood participation. It has been
proven that when people of the neighborhood are involved, the stakes of remediation
and care will enhance significantly.
Case Studies

Learning from Gal Oya’s, “Possibilities for Participatory Development and Post Newtonian Social Science” by Norman Uphoff, the people of Gal Oya were self sufficient. They didn’t need major assistance from the City but only needed guidance. The initial displays of intelligence by farmers gained unincorporated respect from the local officials and this encouraged farmer’s to put forth more means and display hidden abilities. It was documented that because the city treated them with respect, their relationship was better and so was the community of Gal Oya.

An assumption was made that drawing human potential is more important for development progress than that of technology or capital investment. I will agree that from the Survey and assessment that was taken within the South Memphis community that guidance is in order along with some capital investment to help revitalize the area.

The Bronx, New York had a different issue in the 1970’s. Unlike South Memphis and white flight, arson and neglect left entire neighborhoods packed with vacant lots, which then became magnets for dumping trash and drug dealers. Property owners also failed to pay property taxes so the City began seizing property. The Bronx was the poorest congressional district in the county during the 60’s and 70’s. Due to an unforeseen economic depression, the New York government had gone bankrupt and cut back on many services that mainly catered to the poor neighborhoods. Despite what the government was or was not doing, the community members decided to stay and fight. Residents then began to clean up land that had been vacated and began to plant

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gardens. Although the City owned the land, they allowed the community to use the land with the understanding that one day, it would be reclaimed. These gardens then became an integral part of the neighborhood.

Once again the community had taken the initiative to save their own neighborhood and South Memphis is a lot like that.
COMMUNITY GARDENS

Since the inception of cities, from individual gardens and gardens cities, to that of community gardens, it is understood that all of these are fundamentally different from any notions of gardening prior to the 1970’s. But some of the social aspects and conceptual roots of gardening date back to the 19th century and to earlier times. During the 20th century, deteriorating neighborhoods experienced an unexpected increase in abandoned buildings and open space. Community Gardens then emerged. They could provide anything from the growth and production of food, to floral displays, and herbs and spices.

There is a long history of the use of community gardens to improve psychological well being and social relations, to facilitate healing and to increase supplies of fresh foods (Francis et al. 1994, Hynes 1996, Murphy 1991, Boston Urban Gardeners 1982). During and after both World Wars, community gardens provided increased food supplies which required little to no transportation.

During the Great Depression, city lands were made available to the unemployed and impoverished by the Work Projects Administration (WPA). Nearly 5,000 gardens were cultivated in New York City through this program (Hynes 1996). During WWII, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that national health as well as personal well-being, were dependent on the consumption of fresh vegetables, which led to the Victory Gardens Program and the production of approximately 40% of the fresh vegetables consumed in the U.S. from an estimated 20 million gardens (Murphy 1991).
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Currently, the new urban garden initiatives are focused around sustainability efforts. It is also a part of the greening movement as well as beautification of our neighborhoods. Originally the United States started gardening to feed and control the poor as did those in England and in Northern Europe. Gardens took a new meaning as people were less tied to the production of food crops.

There were also other movements for the gardens such as the war movement. Men that were drafted into army, caused for severe food shortages across Europe. To deal with these shortages city dwellers planted community gardens in the vacant open spaces in their cities. As the war receded so did the gardens; all but one, the Fenway Garden. This garden fought many battles for proposals for alternative uses.

In the rapidly expanding nation of the nineteenth century, the city and images of it have drastically changed. As cities grow, they become hubs of industrial activity. The century also saw unprecedented poverty and impairment. Community gardening suggests a variety of additional benefits, for both individuals and for communities. There is evidence that community gardens benefit the psychological well-being.

Community Gardens are known to have many purposes and has been proven, in many communities, to help bridge the gap between the community, the land, and the spirit of the friendship within a shared community. Gardeners often share their crops due to the overabundance of produce. With the high cost of gasoline, communities can
help out by raising their own crops without the use of large machinery. During
Pothukuchi and Kaufman’s pioneering study on “Placing the food system on the urban
agenda: The Role of Municipal Institutions in Food Systems Planning,” they discovered
that the urban food system contributes significantly to community health and welfare.
Gardening is environmentally friendly and with people raising more crops and plants, it
helps balance out the negative effects of population and pollution.

It would seem as if community gardens would be the right sustainability tool
needed to revitalize this site. It is common that ecological restoration and community
gardening has been the host in economical development. The community garden may
support some social factor but it can’t stand alone.
The City’s Community Garden Proposal

**Neighborhood Initiatives:** Focus on decentralization of government services, improving citizen communications, assuring citizen safety, neighborhood livability, enhanced housing opportunities, and revitalization/ economic development.

The City of Memphis

The City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD) was established in 1977 to address and remedy the slum, blight, and deterioration areas located in the Memphis communities. The HCD, in conjunction with the Mayor, target specific neighborhoods and address the problems in the inner-city neighborhoods. The South Memphis community has a significant amount of blight. Blight usually turns into or is associated with crime.

Valuable green infrastructure is known to revitalize urban environments. The City of Memphis embraced this philosophy and wanted to rehab the area with the assistance of a community garden. The community garden would become the center point of redevelopment and revitalization. Open green space is often correlated with a better sense of community. The city took this holistic approach for addressing the current challenges of the neighborhood. With the influx of more abandoned housing, and shrinking inner cities, greening strategies is the next support technique to help stabilize neighborhoods. Community Gardens are geared to provide a local food source for those in need and will empower the future generation with the important knowledge of sustainability.

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The Mid-South Peace and Justice Center has partnered with Heifer International, whose goal is to help end world hunger and poverty through self-reliance and sustainability, therefore creating a program called GrowMemphis. GrowMemphis was formed to create an educational urban community garden that provides fresh healthy food for low-income areas, and empower people to develop and enhance their own communities.

That project consisted of a two-year plan that will support three initial distressed neighborhoods. Later in 2004, Mayor Herenton allocated 600,000 dollars of federal money, to begin demolishing old blighted housing along with other rundown buildings. Memphis planners then began the collaboration effort to plan for the garden with a version of old-fashioned town meetings which was a year-long process of the government seeking public opinion. There were seven committees that brainstormed, debated and discussed strategies that would have the most impact on the community.

The Environmental Health Committee is the committee that wants to establish a community garden program. The overall goal was to increase the percent of fresh, organic and locally produced produce. The products of the community gardens were to be used by the local community, sold in local farmers markets all while promoting consumption of locally produced organic produce. To make sure that the public voice was heard, a consulting firm was hired to research the public opinion. With this idea, local civic groups, businesses, and government officials sought a consensus on the future of the community and a long term plan was designed.
The plan includes addressing food and placing livestock in the gardens such as garden worms and chickens. Another goal is to allow sale of produce in local farmers markets, with the intentions of promoting an entrepreneurial frame of mind as well as community pride. This could also be an educational tool for children; to educate them on produce and healthy food alternatives. The local members of the neighborhood and surrounding communities were invited to participate in every aspect of the community garden. This includes development, training, direct gardening and community outreach. Volunteers are welcome from any age group, from early childhood to the elderly. Directors and local volunteers will help organize and provide the necessary training and assistance to make the project rewarding and productive.

There are some uncertainties with the development of the community garden within the South Memphis neighborhood. Considering the drug/crime activity and education levels of the community, I decided to do a community survey. I asked many questions concerning whether the community believes that a community garden would be the deliverance of their neighborhood.

Although I believe that in this instance a community garden alone will not revitalize this particular neighborhood, there are many other neighborhoods that community gardens have helped. Community Gardens have a track record for helping impoverished neighborhoods sustain themselves.
Survey

Just to test the City’s proposal, a quality of life survey was done to see what the people of the community actually thought about the City’s proposal or even if they knew what the proposal was about. A space for comment was also made available. The survey was completed at a local church located in the South Memphis Neighborhood. They have members that number above 600. I distributed 300 surveys amongst the present members and they completed and returned 289 of them. This survey helped me gain perspective of what the residents’ thought and their views of the neighborhood and its condition.

(Full disclosure of analysis is located on Survey Results page)

(highest response=bolded answer)

1. Does the City of Memphis communicate well with the citizens of the South Memphis community?
   Strongly Disagree – 73%

2. What factors are most important for your neighborhood?
   Housing – 35%
   Safety – 40%
   Education – 25%

3. How long have you been in your home community?
   >20yrs – 28%

4. If the right initiative came along in your community, would you have the time to volunteer?
   Yes – 63%

5. Do you think a community garden will improve the quality of life in your neighborhood?
   Yes – 51%

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Yes – 51%

6. Please assess how your community has changed over the past several years:
   Deteriorated – 59%

7. Are you satisfied with the amenities that are available in your community?
   Unsatisfied – 45%

8. If the City gave your community 5 million dollars to enhance itself, where would
   you want the funds to be distributed?
      Improving Safety – 33%
      Housing – 34%

9. For your current or most recent job, how far do you travel to work each day?
   30min – 25%

10. Gender:
    Female – 76%
    Male – 24%

11. Please identify your current age group:
    41-50 - 26%

The findings of this survey suggest that the people believe that a community
garden could help assist in other efforts but that it could not be the true remedy. When
confronted with questions of legal liability, respondents in this survey paint a conflicting
picture. Comments from respondents included that they thought were being ignored,
and that their needs were not being taken care of. They also stated that they were
unaware of any new changes that were proposed for the area. Other comments
included:
   • Overall dissatisfaction with city government (believes that the government
     has abandoned them)
• Controlling crime (why isn’t it controlled better)
• “Politicians never follow through on plans”
• Politicians: more talk than action

There are some limitations and caveats to this survey. Respondents were randomly selected and reside within the limits or within reasonable proximity to the South Memphis area. No personal information such as name, or address was taken. The survey was completely optional and respondents were told that they could stop at anytime.
The Recommended South Memphis Catalyst Plan

With consideration of the results and comments of the survey, I developed the "Catalyst Plan." The Catalyst Plan is a short term centrist plan that focuses on new development based on the existing land and public investment within the existing neighborhood. Focus is mainly on existing assets and efficient utilization of pre-existing infrastructure; all while encouraging new curb growth in fringe areas. Key characteristics of this plan would include redefining the land use, reevaluating the housing situation, focus on a transportation development, landscaping along with a community garden, involving parks and recreation and including a neighborhood watch, all of which, I believe would lead to a better self contained living network. I wanted to be able to take what the community currently has and build from it. The Catalyst Plan should almost be used like a "Tool Kit," to where different cities can adopt the plan and mold it to fit their specific needs. Every City has a Vision but not knowing how implements the vision or how to protect what the community already loves.

It is important, specifically for the members of the community, that a plan is formulated that reflects the specific needs of the community. The Catalyst Plan also fosters innovative leadership that will provide processes and frameworks that specifically compliment the South Memphis community and the needs of the residents. Although this type of neighborhood isn’t uncommon, effectively addressing the main concerns has become problematic. Using the Catalyst plan effectively, although it is short term, will allow for a long term evaluation by the City. Evaluating project costs
short term, will allow for a long term evaluation by the City. Evaluating project costs cannot always be anticipated within a year’s time. It is best to have priorities identified and participate in a planning process in order to get the appropriate attention the community needs.

This plan is also intended to provide a framework for the growth and development of the City’s peripheral urban area, South Memphis, where development is expected to occur in the foreseeable future. This could be the start of a good relationship between the City and the neighborhood. Since all problems cannot be tackled all at once, the Catalyst Plan can be put in place, based on the data driven evaluation (survey).

The Catalyst Plan begins with identifying the main aspects within the framework, to build upon. These main variables include;

- Identifying the neighborhoods demographic and cultural influences and needs.
- Foster Leadership within the community
- Establish neighborhood goals
- Identify critical/current land uses and existing conditions
- Identify assets, tools and resources of the neighborhood

These variables help set the stage for implementation. I also wanted to keep the plan feasible; didn’t want to set the goals to high or to low.

**INTRODUCTION OF THE SOUTH MEMPHIS CATALYST PLAN**

- Neighborhood Engagement/ Kick-Off Connection
  - Discuss the purpose of the meeting
At this meeting, all the stakeholders such as the residents, religious or faith leaders, district councilmen, business owners and the planners and developers would rally and discuss the overall purpose of the Catalyst Plan. Stakeholders play a key role in the execution of redevelopment. We must have their support and input in order for the plan to be successful.

- Educate our Stakeholders

The goal of Catalyst Plan is to work at the grassroots level and keep the stakeholders in the loop. The planners should bring information that pertains to land use or zoning. This information will help when facilitating discusses that involve “planning jargon” and brainstorming sessions.

SOUTH MEMPHIS NEIGHBORHOOD AND ISSUES

- Determine Planning Area

We must determine the planning area. What part of the neighborhood could house a community garden? What part of the neighborhood needs total reinvestment? We could possibly do a neighborhood tour and get input from residents and to get the overall consensus of the neighborhood. All data that would be collected could be used to better gage the neighborhood, with factors including the social aspect, the economics of the neighborhood and the culture.

- Question: How is the South Memphis Neighborhood perceived?
After completing the neighborhood tour, some relation questions should be asked. Impressions and perceptions are typically why neighborhoods improve. Stakeholders will then be able to express current concerns and complaints while pinpointing the priority areas of the neighborhood. Hopefully planners will then be able to sense possible commitment and determination and be able to build off the sense of the community wanting to change.

**SOUTH MEMPHIS GOALS/POLICIES**

- Elements of the Plan
  - Land Use
  - Housing
  - Transportation
  - Landscaping
  - Parks/Recreation/Art
  - Neighborhood Clean Up
    - Neighborhood Design Guidelines and Infill Options
    - Historic Preservation Opportunities
    - Cost and Implementation Analysis

Note: The elements of the plan can be used as a report card or a ranking system. The stakeholders can grade each element based on perception, performance and livability. These scores can be used to serve as the decisions factors for future planning and remediation.

**RECOMMENDED ACTIONS and FOLLOWTHROUGH PLAN**

- Foster Leadership within the Community
- Locate any and all local resources
- Implement a new plan for the Neighborhood
- Time Line of Progression

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Note: By the end of the process, recommendations and appraisals should transfer into an action plan.

The Catalyst Plan presents many ideas and recommendations that could be implemented in phases, at modest expense and with little administration difficulty which will help to achieve the overall goals that the City wants to accomplish. The plan’s recommendation would represent substantial progress needed to provoke change and influence a positive future for the South Memphis Community.

Implementing a priority project, such as the Catalyst Plan, takes time and requires the continued involvement of the neighborhood to sustain the effort over a long term. The purpose of this plan was to serve as a short term guide that will not only benefit the South Memphis community, but be a catalyst for any other neighborhoods or communities needing a facelift. With that knowledge, the neighborhood can achieve maximum impact from city resources and avoid major deterrents and conflicts.
Conclusion

Meeting the social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of any society is the ultimate VISION. Creating a place where all people can feel comfortable with a mix of ages, incomes, interests and lifestyles, is a common goal that all Cities, States, and Countries, share around the world.

What about a place that is green, clean, safe and healthy where daily needs can be met without use of a car? What if we could have vibrant, creative and active place that reflects the diversity of the community and the culture that has evolved over time? Can we have all of these aspects in South Memphis? The answer is... possibly. Cities can only hope to have maybe 45% percent of all of these things.

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The South Memphis community is one of the oldest communities and has had the least attention. The City's plan to incorporate a community garden is not a poor idea, but it shouldn't be the only one. The Community Garden can be used as an educational tool to help build focus on the neighborhood and bring options of open spaces, parks, greenery, creating places and spaces where people enjoy walking through... a place to pause, to enjoy, and to further beatification efforts. Memphis represents the hard work and aspirations of the many Memphians who believes that the City's best days lie ahead. The Catalyst Plan is intended to provide the City with the instruments to assist the community in its redevelopment and reinvestment efforts!
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