

## Foreword: The Substance of Things Hoped For

On the second day of class, my first semester planning professor utilized the *Amistad* video. *Amistad*, the movie, was released in American theatres in the 1990s. It was an embellished Hollywood version of the true story of the 1839 capture and release of a group of West African slaves. The underlying legal question in the movie was whether the captured slaves were the legal 'property' of the United States government, and hence, whether they were entitled to 'freedom.' As problematic as it was for me to make the connection between that movie and planning, I managed to come up with an answer to "what is property."<sup>1</sup> And, to make a long story short, it was there that I started consciously making the connections between property and planning since planning has everything to do with property and it has historically been involved with the capture and release of that property for one reason or another, legal or not. In addition, the capture of property has everything to do with human persons; therefore, planning has everything to do with human beings. It is generally my claim that there is not a move that planners make which does not intersect with the human life experience. Thus, the connections between planning, history, land, and the human condition are overwhelmingly tremendous.

Why do an oral history project on the City of Champaign's North First Street Redevelopment Program? Well, for starters, my understanding of the purpose of an oral history is to create a record of the human lived experience. In its best form, an oral history embodies the I-Thou dialectic promulgated by the German theologian Martin Buber. In its worst form, it provides information that may or may not make plain or be connected to a larger narrative or story, e.g., ahistorical document. With this project, I have attempted to begin to make the North First Street story plain. At this stage, the work that I have done is by no means complete, but it is a starting point that I hope will lead to further analysis and probing. A subsequent lack of this project is that there are some who were omitted from this report primarily due to time constraints. I would liked to have interviewed all of the business owners and obtain the perspectives of all of those significantly associated with the redevelopment and history of North First Street program including, for instance, a representative from the Police Department. However, in the final year of this independent study, I have mostly focused my attention on one North First Street business, the Jackson's. Consequently, much of what is contained in these interviews revolves around their experiences in the attempt to revitalize and renew their father's soul food restaurant, and many of the narrators accepted the invitation to be interviewed because of their involvement with the Jackson's. On the other hand, what is contained in these pages is a story about race and redevelopment. It is a chronicle, though not in order, of the people, places and events that went into the redevelopment or remaking of North First Street.

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<sup>1</sup> The final sentence of my paper read as follows: Thus, their story [the African slaves] and their inhumane treatment demands that policy makers and planner be ever mindful of *how and why* urban and regional planning is done. UP – 308, Fall 2000, The University of Illinois, Department of Urban & Regional Planning.

Though not always acknowledged, race is more often than not a critical aspect of the planning process. Here, it is critical. For about the last forty years, North First Street has been *home* to many local black businesswomen and men. In light of its decline and the City Council's willingness to "do something" about North First Street, in 1986 the first two blocks of North First Street were included in the East University Avenue Redevelopment Project Area (TIF Area). That was fourteen years ago and counting. Since then, much has happened and changed on North First Street. Rose & Taylor, for instance, have become was the first to build a newly constructed building. Their willingness to pioneer into the TIF wilderness has caused them to be joined by the Lone Star Lodge and the Jackson's. However, the road to redevelopment has not been smooth. Each summary critically reports the perceptions some have had while on this road.

Another objective of this project is to cast forth a vision of community development within the context of traditional African American communities. The interviews and the research materials utilized for this class inform this vision. Each interview revealed a particular aspect of urban planning/community development, which I tried to give voice to in the summaries. However "ordinary" as it seemed, each narrator offered a specific nuance that I was able to draw from when writing the summaries. For instance, Lawrence Jackson discussed the patience that he has developed during this process but according to him, "patience is costly." Thus, the title and essence of the Jackson's summary is called "Black Entrepreneurship: A Costly Patience." There are many fascinating stories to tell, and the narrators have provided much more than information; they have provided organic strategies and insight about the tools of urban redevelopment. This paper draws it strength from what they have freely given.

As mentioned above, each interview offers something of value. The following is a brief list of what I believe to be the central ideas raised for consideration. This list is by no means exhaustive, nor does it represent all of the views contained in the interviews, however, the list synthesizes and captures some essential elements that are carefully spelled out in the summaries. The list goes as follows:

- A roundtable approach to community development
- Drawing from the three legs of a land-grant institution: education, research and public service
- The power dynamics associated with planning for community development
- The short and long-term impacts of redevelopment
- Discrimination lending practices
- Alternative and nontraditional approaches to planning for community development
- The appropriateness of TIF funds for projects like North First Street
- The political usefulness of planning

While each of these strategies/insight is important, the most attractive one is the first bullet. During his interview, John Lee discussed the creation of a thirty-five-seat roundtable, which became the meeting place for students, community residents, activists,

and any other genuinely interested parties. John Lee described this table in conjunction with the establishment of the Community Advocacy Depot (CAD) that functioned as a quasi-planning agency. I do not think John Lee's intentions were to suggest that planning for urban redevelopment should always be done with a roundtable approach. I have read more into what he has provided. My claim, on the other hand, constructs a roundtable approach to planning for community development based on my personal professional goals to create and recreate structures that are welcoming to as many as possible. But, the fact that John Lee made reference to the CAD roundtable is significantly relevant to what I have been internally working with for well over three years. Thus, his discussion of the CAD and its purpose is particularly of interest to me. And furthermore, what interests me the most is the *symbolism* of a roundtable community planning for development and what that symbolism can imply. On the one hand, there is literature on inviting members of diverse backgrounds and interests to the table.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the issues of race, gender, and class are uncomfortable for planners and the community to address. Uncomfortability was clearly an issue raised by several narrators.

At its core, however, this project examines and explores issues of race, class and redevelopment. Perhaps the viewing of the movie *Amistad* in the first semester course stirred something in me, but in retrospect, my analysis of race, class and redevelopment has stemmed from a much deeper personal debate and/or hunch about U.S. planning. My hunch, and of course the hunch of many others is that urban planning policies, actions and inaction are significantly related to the decay and deterioration of traditional black communities. In the summaries below, I have supported this argument with writing and research by several noted planning professionals such as June Manning Thomas, Marsha Ritzdorf, Richard F. America, and Edward Blakely. I would like to have provided a more interdisciplinary analysis of North First Street, but due to time constraints it was simply not possible. Thus, this project is only a beginning. A project such as this one truly deserves further study to examine what other serious thinkers, such as Cornel West, Dean Robinson, Delores Williams, and Beverly Harrison are saying about the formation of African American communities and womanist/feminist arguments that often broaden the discourse even more.

An additional topic frequently raised throughout the interviews is the importance of having or standing in a faith tradition. As a United Methodist clergywoman this is exceptionally intriguing. For example, I was very surprised to see how the Christian faith experience has motivated certain narrators. The most surprising expression for me was the recurring theme of persons who believe or suspected that they were "called" into community development. This theme rang true for John Lee Johnson, John Severns, and Lawrence Jackson. Likewise, their interviews revealed more elements of their personal life than the others. From a research perspective, the connections between the public and private life may or may not be causally related, but it is a piece of the puzzle. From an analytical perspective however, and given my social and theological locations, this

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<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth paper urban planning and intergroup conflict in Belfast, Jerusalem, and Johannesburg see, Scott A. Bollens, "Urban Planning and Intergroup Conflict: Confronting a Fractured Public Interest," in *American Planning Association Journal*, Winter 2002, Vol. 68, No. 1, 22-42.

dimension, the overlapping of the public and the private, has motivated me to do further research about these connections. In the future, I expect to be writing on these issues.

Finally, as I was doing research for this project at the Champaign County Historical Museum, I ran across a small book entitled *In All Years: Portraits of Older Blacks in Champaign-Urbana*. This book, underwritten in 1985 by the Junior Women's League of Champaign, the Illinois Arts Council, the Illinois Humanities Council, and the Illinois State Library presented the stories of older black residents as the title suggests. In addition to the pictures, a striking aspect of this book is the general consensus that life was historically bad here for blacks. Only the preachers, tavern owners, barbers and beauty shop owners, in other words those blacks who were self-employed, seemed to have a little relief from the constant racist onslaught and the bar to basic services. Remarkably they endured in spite of their circumstances. I owe so much to them. America owes much to them because their legacy of hope makes it possible for us and future generations to work for "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."<sup>3</sup> In light of its history, planning has much to work for and consequently hope for. Unfortunately, the public record of planning is stained with error. Nevertheless, planning research should and must include this kind of qualitative research in order to measure its overall effectiveness. As mentioned above, this project is by no means complete, but it attempts to make known, and to use a common cliché, it attempts to tell "the rest of the story,"<sup>4</sup> which is still being told as North First Street redevelopment efforts continue to unfold.

In a nutshell, this story that I am constructing is about the commitment and frustrations that are a part of maintaining a memory and physical presence along Champaign's North First Street. The tension between these two factors, I believe, are the consequences of a nation-state built upon horrendous greed fueled by unaccountable capitalistic and corporate, hegemonic power. The use of oral histories in planning can and does serve as a powerful historical tool of evaluating community economic redevelopment. If done well, they give voice to the relationships of power, privilege, class, race and even gender. Thus, in the final analysis, I can only hope that I have done justice to the unfolding North First Street story. In the summaries below, I have attempted to engage what the narrators have provided in both descriptive and prescriptive ways. As somewhat of an observer to this project, I have also tried to make the connections that others did not make. I have cast a vision of community development with African American communities that takes into account race, class and particularly the historical legacy of discrimination. In conclusion, this project leads me to hope that black communities can be effectively revitalized. If this were not doable then there would be no reason for me to be a planner, indeed there would be no reason for me to be who I am today. Many have hoped for me to come this far and even further. Thus, the hope that is held out for planning is waiting to be embraced. Using organic strategies like the ones discussed in the foregoing pages, and with a change in the way that urban and regional planning is done with, in and on behalf of traditional African American communities, I believe we can see the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 11:1, New International Version.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking of Paul Harvey's radio program entitled "The Rest of the Story."

-annalise fonza  
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