Urban Renewal Redux? Asheville’s Urban Planning Approach, Then and Now

Abstract & Problem Statement
The East Riverside neighborhood in Asheville is a relatively poor, largely African American neighborhood. During the urban renewal program in the 1960s and 1970s, the area bore the brunt of renewal projects that removed existing homes to make way for new public housing and “modern” infrastructure and amenities. While the city’s rhetoric and policy documents asserted that these changes were designed to improve the neighborhood and living conditions of residents, there was little real involvement by the community themselves in the planning process, and residents continue to harbor a deep mistrust of the local government and urban planning projects.

Recently, the City of Asheville received a planning grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. They are in the early stages of a major redevelopment project in this same East Riverside neighborhood. While the city has acknowledged the sensitive nature of this project, and intends to proceed using mechanisms to ensure that the mistakes made in earlier years not repeated, it is not clear whether their actions will match their rhetoric of community inclusion. It is the intent of this research study to follow their efforts to examine how this project achieves these goals.

The specific research questions asked include

1) How has the city’s approach to planning changed in the past 30 years?
2) How well is the city integrating the needs of current residents while balancing economic and environmental redevelopment?
3) How is the city approaching issues of gentrification and displacement?
4) What steps might the city take to ease the burden this process may have on current residents?

Specific Goals of the Project
The main goal of this project is to identify the extent to which evolving urban theory and planning approaches have been infused into practical planning implementation at the local level. We are working with the Asheville Design Center, a local non-profit that has a strong reputation with both the city of Asheville as well as within the East Riverside neighborhood. Our hope is to bring greater attention to how the needs of the neighborhood residents are and are not being addressed through the planning process, and eventually produce a plan for the city to use to prevent and mitigate gentrification as a result of their revitalization efforts.

Broader Significance and Implications
The broader application of this project lies in its investigation of the evolution of how local governments approach communities of color and deal with issues of segregation, opportunity, and neighborhood revitalization amidst controversial urban planning initiatives.
This project falls squarely in line with scholarship on urban economic and social history. The results of this research will be of interest to scholars of urban and planning history, gentrification, and race relations. However, it is unique in that it follows a project from inception to implementation — thus it is not merely a historical study, but an ongoing analysis that could change the nature of the city’s outreach plans and potentially improves the outcomes for communities of color.