

# **Examining the Concept of Livability in the Crosstown Community of Memphis**

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Each year magazines, organizations, and bloggers rate the most livable cities around the world. Some of these ratings are no doubt purely qualitative, based solely on personal opinion, but others are portrayed as quantitative rankings based on some type of mathematical analysis. But what does it mean for a place to be livable or to have a high degree of livability? If livability were easily defined, it would be more widely discussed and perhaps a livability index would be calculated and used as a means of comparing the quality of life in different cities. It is often easy to identify places that are not livable; it is more difficult to know the best way to change these areas into livable places. This paper will discuss the concept of livability and evaluate a place deemed unlivable in Memphis, Tennessee. The Sears Crosstown building is an abandoned and run-down 1.5 million square foot warehouse that sits within the city of Memphis. Once a prosperous area, the Crosstown neighborhood is now littered with empty storefronts and the shuttered Sears building carries with it a stigma of danger and crime. This past year the building was purchased and plans for redevelopment of the building and neighborhood have been set in place. The following research addresses the questions, what is livability and what does livability look like in the Crosstown area currently and in the future?

A review of urban scholarship shows that there is no universally accepted definition for the term livability. Some scholars such as Jacqueline de Chazel believe that “livability is undefinable” and that the idea “challenge[s] definition, because it is always morphing and changing” (de Chazel 595). There are, however, some agreed upon variables that seem to increase the livability of an area. These variables work together and against one another to ultimately produce a measurement of the quality of life in an area. Research shows that livability can be evaluated on many different levels including national, regional and local. For purposes of the Sears Crosstown building, assessing livability at the local level will be the most important.

Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995 explain how “‘Good’ living conditions are presumed to be conditions that fit human nature well; in other words, living-conditions that are ‘livable’” (Veenhoven & Ehrhardt 36). This seems quite simple and straightforward, yet there are portions of every city in this world that are deemed unlivable. The reason these variables change and evolve is because “the livability of one’s society is the degree to which collective provisions and demands fit with individual needs and capacities” (Veenhoven & Ehrhardt 36), and these variables change over time. One must be careful not to create too narrow a definition around the idea of livability and then apply this term to a generalized group of communities or societies. Just as the “needs and capacities” of a community develop over time, so too will the variables impacting livability for that area. Many areas that have been marked “unlivable” have the potential to become thriving communities; it just requires a balance of the variables that are often already present.

## **Sustainability**

The idea of livability links closely to that of sustainability. Sustainability has been defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The idea is that we can create a world today that will still be “livable” for our children and grandchildren. The term sustainability has become increasingly more popular in recent decades and is used around the world as an almost trendy way to live. Similarly, the terms “livable” and “livability” are popping up as ways to describe urban spaces, in both the names of community organizations and in ways to rate and compare cities around the world. The only significant difference between these two concepts is that, while most researchers agree on the definition of sustainability, the term livable or livability has yet to be officially defined. As a commonly used term and phrase, how long will it take before a concrete understanding of livability is produced?

### **Conceptualizing Livability: Jane Jacobs**

One important dimension of livability is brought to light by urban scholar Jane Jacobs in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs dedicates a large part of her book to explaining the importance of sidewalks in an urban space. The book critically examines the urban renewal policies of the 1950s, a time when modernist theories were dominant. Her work was very influential in shifting the way people thought about urban renewal, which was especially significant since she was a woman writing in the then male-dominated field of urban planning. Jacobs not

only offers detailed examples of sidewalks from her own residential urban community, but also compares them to those in other areas such as business or shopping districts. She argues that it's not the presence of sidewalks that makes an area safer, but it is how the sidewalks are used that makes them safe. The basis of Jacobs' argument is that "a well used city street is apt to be a safe street" with the emphasis placed on "well-used" (Jacobs 34). Jacobs makes her argument by pointing out the fact that everyone knows that a deserted or rarely used city street is likely to be unsafe. The presence of a sidewalk allows for the surveillance of the street by those who live and work there, which Jacobs believes is the best form of protection. Jacobs argues that the eyes on the street – be they resident, shopkeeper, etc. – are protecting the street solely because they are aware of what is occurring. They need not walk around with a badge or a vest to direct activity or reprimand bad behavior; their presence is simply enough.

Jacobs explains that the social structure of "sidewalk life hangs partly on what can be called self-appointed public characters...their main qualification [being] that they *are* public, that they talk to lots of different people. In this way, news travels that is of sidewalk interest" (Jacobs 68). City streets, Jacobs believes, seem to operate through a "web of reputation" (Jacobs 35). This means that the success of a street can largely be controlled by the travelling of words through gossip, praise, sanctions, etc., all of which help gauge the approval or disapproval of the street's users.

Jacobs uses numerous anecdotes of urban residents in addition to her own experiences as an urban dweller. She comments on how the presence of eyes on a

street can stop a scuffle between two people without any active intervention. When people know they are being watched or patrolled, they behave in a different manner than they would if they were alone. This web that Jacobs refers to also allows for the creation of a support system. It does not mean that a resident must be close friends with his or her neighbors; it means that a resident can count on the support of a fellow neighbor in the event that he or she should need strength in numbers. Jacobs believes that “action usually requires, to be sure, a certain self-assurance about the actor’s proprietorship of the street and the support he will get if necessary” (Jacobs 38). If you can count on your neighbor to have your back then you are more likely to right the wrongs that occur on your street.

Jacobs describes these “eyes” that watch the street as part of a checks and balances system. No one wants to watch an empty street where there is an absence of people and therefore an absence of activity. Instead people want to observe inhabited and “well used” areas where they can practice what can be described by the term “people watching.” It makes sense that people do not want to sit and stare at an empty street, much like the fact that people do not want to sit and stare at a blank TV screen. People like to watch activity and interactions, even if they personally have chosen not to take an active role in those activities. The simple “sight of people attracts still other people” (Jacobs 37). So, there are the people who watch the street and keep the street safe just by creating a known presence, and then there are the people on the street who, behave as they may, keep the watchers interested. There would be no watchers without the people on the street and there would be no safe street for people to linger upon without the protection of the

watchers. In addition, Jacobs explains that in streets that “lack natural and casual public life, it is common for residents to isolate themselves from each other to a fantastic degree” (Jacobs 65).

As safety increases with the number of eyes on the street, there are aspects that bring about more eyes. For Jacobs the “basic requisite for such surveillance is a substantial quantity of stores and other public spaces sprinkled along the sidewalks of a district; enterprises and public places that are used by evening and night must be among them especially” (Jacobs 36). A good neighborhood is not limited to only residential space, but also includes schools, grocery stores, retail stores, restaurants, etc. These spaces will draw more people into the area for various reasons.

Jacobs’ detailed and informative investigation of streets and sidewalks sheds light onto what makes an area livable. A basic idea can be drawn from her sophisticated research is that civic engagement is key to maintaining a livable neighborhood. If residents, shoppers, and business owners do not value an area, or are not invested in a space’s well-being, there is little hope for the creation of a livable space.

### **Conceptualizing Livability: Donald Appleyard**

Scholar Donald Appleyard also focuses on the potential for urban streets to become ideal livable places in his journal article *Livable Streets: Protected Neighborhoods*. Like Jacobs, Appleyard believes that “although not all neighbors wish to participate in street communities, streets should be places where communal life is possible and where it can happen if street dwellers want it to” (Appleyard 107). Appleyard discusses his neighborhood research in the context of “Woonerf,” a

Dutch concept that supposes that the street belongs to the residents (Appleyard 113). Much of this concept regards the impact of automobile traffic in residential areas. The idea is that the street is shared between vehicles and pedestrians, but “that the whole street space is usable by pedestrians...creating a residential atmosphere” (Appleyard 113). The beauty behind this concept is that the traffic control devices, be they “changes in path direction, plantings, or street furniture,” can vary with each neighborhood (Appleyard 113). The underlying objective behind the Woonerf is “to create a kind of gestalt message that the street belongs to the residents.” As obvious as it may be that the street should belong to the residents, it is a notion frequently forgotten in our automobile-dictated life. Appleyard points out that although the Woonerf allows for all space to be shared, ultimately these regulations allow “pedestrians and children [to] have greater rights to residential street space than traffic” (Appleyard 113).

One way to create a sense of livability in a community is to allow the residents to develop a sense of ownership or pride. Appleyard agrees that the “street should become in a symbolic, if not a legal, sense territory that the residents believe belongs to them, for which they have a sense of pride and responsibility” (Appleyard 108). If the residents value and take pride in the area in which they live, they are much more likely to play an active role in the daily life of the street. A neighborhood which houses residents who are unattached and uninterested is more likely to be an unlivable space.

There is, overall, a limited amount of scholarly research done on the topic of livability, both the history of, and the current multidimensionality of, the concept.

There are however, numerous organizations and initiatives that have sprung up around the idea of a livable urban space relatively recently. These organizations work today to promote livability in cities around the world. These associations have developed their own definitions of the terms livable and livability, the majority of which share common notions of how an urban space should run.

### **International Making Cities Livable**

According to International Making Cities Livable LLC, an organization that has held series of annual conferences in the United States and Europe since 1985, the phrase “livable cities” was first used in the 1980’s. The term was used to describe the quality of life and identify the characteristics of cities that make them “livable.” These characteristics include, but are not limited to, variables such as crime rates, health statistics, sanitation standards, unemployment, cost of living, and artistic and cultural opportunities. For the most part the aspects mentioned above can be measured, but it becomes sticky when IMCL attempts to assess the “improvement in the health and well-being of the people living in cities” (livablecities.org). How does one measure the well-being of an urban dweller? The mission of the IMCL conferences is to “enhance the well-being of inhabitants of cities and towns, strengthen community, improve social and physical health, and increase civic engagement by reshaping the built environment of our cities, suburbs, and towns” (livablecities.org).

IMCL asserts that the built environment of a city is strongly connected to a city’s livability, which can then influence the quality of life in that city. However, the objective of IMCL is not necessarily to measure the quality of life in cities around the



world. Gauging the quality of life of a city can be tricky because “one may live in the highest ranked city in terms of quality of living standards and still have a very bad quality of life because of unfortunate personal circumstances [illness, loneliness, etc.]” (livablecities.org). Even though quality of life is closely affected, IMCL is more interested in measuring the ‘standard of living’ in cities around the world in order to assess their livability.

To achieve the goals set in IMCL’s mission, there is a strong promotion of “True Urbanism.” According to IMCL, the principles of True Urbanism generate cities that are both “ecologically sustainable (by reducing energy consumption, emphasizing infill and reconstruction rather than development) and socially sustainable (by promoting the individual’s social, mental and physical well-being and the community’s cultural, economic and social well-being)” (livablecities.org). Again the language of “sustainability” or concern for younger generations appears in what sparked the IMCL’s quest for livable cities. They were confronted with the issue of “how do children become fully human... and what are the circumstances, the kinds of social, familial and physical environments” that produce adults? (livablecities.org). Unsettled by this question, the IMCL focused their efforts on developing a means to understand how the role of the built environment shapes children’s lives, thereby facilitating their positive health and development. This challenge, they realize, is not easily measured in economic terms, but they believe it can be understood in less concrete terms (livablecities.org). With accepting this challenge they were able to determine that,

“The built environment influences how people relate to each other, the opportunity for community to form, and the depth of our social networks. It regulates how much incidental exercise is possible through walking and biking. Buildings and streets contribute to reducing crime when buildings support eyes on the street, and shops and services put a functioning community in control of the public realm. Pattern, complexity, and harmony in the built environment can stimulate curiosity, discovery, and a sense that the world is meaningful. Beauty in nature, architecture and public places can lift spirits, raise endorphin levels, and improve physical and emotional health.”

The ideals set by Jacobs and Appleyard resonate in IMCL’s mission and understanding of livability as well as other similar organizations. Livability.com, like many other websites, rates the most livable cities in the United States so people can decide whether they want to move to or just visit a new city. The site “explores what makes small to mid-sized city great places to live, work, and visit...by examining issues such as walkability, cultural amenities, transportation, urban planning, and sustainability.”

The Livability Project, a consulting firm whose mission is to “build livable communities based on the understanding that the environment, economy, and community are all interconnected,” emphasizes that livability consists of many interrelated variables (livabilityproject.com). The combination of these variables creates a multi-dimensional scope for livability that can be applied around the world.

In looking at the various organizations discussed above, it seems that they have by default created definitions of livability. Many include a combination of environmental, economic, and social factors that contribute to a broader understanding of a specific urban space. There is also a significant emphasis placed on the promotion of health and well being within a community. So if the difficulty is not defining the term livability, why is the achievement of livability still so abstract? I believe it has largely to do with the fact that there is no formalized system by which we can measure the intangible aspects such as the well being of a community. Without a method to measure these variables, we have no means to track their success or failure. We need to develop a measurement so that the livability of an area can be determined and it can carry a significant weight in how the community is evaluated.

### **Assessing Livability Locally**

After investigating what livability meant around the world, I was curious to understand what livability mean to the Mid-South United States, and more specifically Memphis, TN. Memphis as a city has experienced substantial urban sprawl and is surrounded by enormous suburbs such as Cordoba and Collierville. The mid 1900's marked a time when city-dwellers craved space and a land to call their own. With this came the creation of suburbs outside of the city and as the population moved into newly constructed homes areas of cities were left empty and lifeless. However, recent efforts to restore abandoned buildings and neighborhoods within the city have led to the redevelopment of the old Sear Crosstown building. Although the project is still in its initial phases, issues of how to address livability

will no doubt arise quickly. The goal of my research is to simply inform others of the idea of livability and was intended to establish the baseline against which changes in livability associated with the redevelopment of the Crosstown area can be evaluated. Using a scholarly background on livability, my research was also informed through interviews with area residents, business owners, and the Crosstown redevelopment partners. As a participant observer I met with key stakeholders, walked along the Crosstown streets to speak with business owners, and researched who and what made up this unique neighborhood. My research is intended to help others evaluate the current and future livability of the Crosstown area.

Since my research is largely informed by others, I spoke with local representatives and was able to develop a further understanding of how people view livability from a Memphis perspective. During my discussions with Gayla Burks, Director of Marketing and Partnership at Crosstown Collaborative, the familiar themes of livability reappeared. Burks pointed to variables such as stagnant property rates, high unemployment, high crime rates, low quality of life, and high rates of poverty as defining an unlivable space. These are all issues that Memphis currently faces. These variables are, for the most part, tangible concepts that can be measured and addressed directly over time. Her idea of livability is more centered on the physical issues that can be quantified through statistics. When asked how she would attack these aforementioned issues she replied, "No idea is unique." Burks implied that Crosstown Collaborative plans to use ideas and efforts that have been successful in other areas of redevelopment. She explained that Crosstown

Collaborative will try as many different plans that are out there until they find the best plan of action for this specific Crosstown community.

However, when I spoke to Elizabeth Saba from Livable Memphis, her approach to the concept of livability was different. She explained that a livable neighborhood is complete with active civic engagement in addition to the fact that the area, both physically and socially, is highly valued. As a third party whose role is solely to observe, it was interesting to me to explore the different approaches two native Memphians took toward a single concept. This is a perfect example of how multidimensional the concept of livability is. Just as the definition varies from one person to the next, variables that contribute to a livable city also change. This can be clearly seen in the changes that have occurred in the Crosstown neighborhood over time. Once a thriving district, the things that once made Crosstown the vibrant meeting point are no longer present, or at least no longer present in a way that make the space livable. That said, understanding what made a space livable in the past can be beneficial when assessing what can be done to make it livable today and in the future.

### **A History of Crosstown**

Opened on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1927, the Sears, Roebuck & Co. distribution warehouse was a spectacular site for the mid-south region. Built to service an eight state area, the Crosstown Building was a hub of commercial distribution for Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Indiana, Alabama, Missouri, and Tennessee. Unlike any other building in Memphis, the structure was built in a mere 180 working days. The fact that Sears, Roebuck & Co. had chosen Memphis, TN to be

the home of their newest Catalog Order Plant and Retail Store stirred a buzz of excitement among Memphis residents.

The site chosen for the retail and distribution warehouse was though to be located “way out” from town. The area consisted of “several large fields and the site chosen by Sears was just a big patch of gullied ground with a bayou running across the back” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears, Built in '27, Was Out In Fields”). Though the site may have been outside the city in the 1920s, it was not long until the area became a booming part of the city. Situated between many different communities, the area soon evolved into a true “Crosstown” between Midtown, Downtown, South Memphis, and North Memphis.

The opening ceremony was planned weeks in advance, and Sears rolled out the red carpet for the new shoppers and workers. The board chairman of Sears described the new building as “an epoch making event in the history of Memphis” and the unveiling of the new building was described as “the most auspicious opening in the firm’s history” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears Closes Door on Crosstown Era”). The Commercial Appeal reported in anticipation how “Mayor Paine will actually throw the doors of this handsome building open to the people of Memphis. He will carry the key to the building, turn it in the lock and throw the doors open”. At the opening some “47,000 visitors streamed into the sparkling modern facility” (Commercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”). This opening ceremony revealed Memphis as the “10<sup>th</sup> city to have a full-service Sears retail store” making it only “the 14<sup>th</sup> such Sears operation in the nation” (Press-Scimitar

8.9.1983). At the peak of construction there were 2,000 men employed to work on the building, and no less than 750 men were employed at a time.

The building was built ten stories high with a tower that equaled the height of 18 stories, and contained 650,000 square feet of floor space (Commercial Appeal ). The building was divided so that the “mail stocks [would] be on the upper nine floors and on the mail floor is located the retail department store, covering an area of 53,000 square feet” (Com Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”). For the convenience of the workers, the building included a number of useful amenities such as a cafeteria, a hospital, and an emergency operating room where “Miss Ruby Bringie the graduate nurse in charge of the hospital and general health of the employees for the Memphis plant” would remain on duty all times the store was open (Commercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”). It was because this particular “retail store serve[d] one of the fasted growing cities in the south, and because 750,000 customers of the mail order store [would] be served from here the company selected men from the very top of the organization to come here” to work in Memphis (Comercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”). With that said, “less than one percent of the employees at the big plant [came] from outside the city” creating great employment opportunities within the Memphis area. As for those who held higher management positions and were brought in from other cities, they “brought their families and Memphis [was] their home. They [were] here to be a real part of the community in every way” (Comercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”). No further mention is made of these families and it is not known if they actually lived in the Crosstown Area.

As for the exterior of the structure “no expense [was] spared to make the Sears, Roebuck and Co. building in Memphis an attractive show place for the city. Landscaping [was] done under the direction of an expert landscape gardener of Memphis” (Commercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant). The new parking garage could accommodate 1,500 automobiles and included a service station. Special thought was put into the disposal of smoke and so in efforts “to avoid creating a smoke nuisance in the fine residence section in which the building is located, a breeching was built over the shipping room and [there] the smoke [was] carried by tremendous exhaust fans” (Comercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”). The massive structure was undoubtedly a thing of awe, especially at night when the “flood lighting of the tremendous tower of the building [was] so designed as to light up the tower, making it a pencil of light reaching up into the sky” (Comercial Appeal, “Mayor Turns Key Opening Sears Plant”).

The new store brought with it new ways of transportation into the Crosstown area. For the residents “who live[d] in the area, they walk[ed] [there]” and used the store often since “there [was] hardly anywhere else to shop around this area” (Mrs. Mary Foreman, Post Scimitar, “Sears Shifts to Surplus at Crosstown Location”). Those who came in from other areas of the city used the streetcars, whose “tracks were specially laid to service the area of this mammoth Catalog Order Plant and Retail Store” (Comercial Appeal, “Opening Ceremonies of Sears First Store in Memphis”). The new streetcars ran on an “extension of the Crosstown car line, [and was] laid in record time to serve the store” (Memphis Flyer, “50 Years Ago”).



Upon the opening of the building a spectator commented on the grandeur of the structure, comparing the colossal plant with the greatest of the Egyptian Pyramids, claiming the only real difference was that the Crosstown Building was “a living thing for the living, and not a tomb for the dead” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears, Built in '27, Was Out In Fields”). A living thing indeed, the Sears, Roebuck building brought great prosperity to Memphis and the Crosstown area. Dennis Heitzmann, a past president of the Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association (VECA), a neighboring grass-roots community organization, noted in 1983 that the “residential neighborhood [surrounding the Sears building] is thriving as it has never thrived before” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears Closes Door on Crosstown Era”). He also commented on how “Sears [was] an institution in the neighborhood” and that it seems to “fit VECA because so many individuals need stores like Sears to buy odds and ends for home improvements” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears Closes Door on Crosstown Era”). Heitzmann hinted at how the area has become more livable due to the positive social friction created by the coming and going of shoppers in and out of the area. He believed that “the fact that anytime you go by there and see a parking lot full of cars and people hustling in and out gives a sense of vitality to the neighborhood” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears Closes Door on Crosstown Era”). The changes that had been made, be they a sense of pride, or a safer neighborhood to walk in, had not gone unnoticed by the residents in the area.

However, on September 30, 1983, the building closed all operations at the retail store. The mail order services would remain in operation, but the sales in the retail store had begun to decline in the past few years, a trend was thought would

continue, so the retail portion of the facility was terminated. With the discontinuation of the retail came hardship for many. About 70 employees lost their jobs with the closing of the retail store. Some were able to apply for early retirement if they were over the age of 50 and had been working at Sears for over 10 years. The surrounding neighborhood residents and businesses were also affected. An article in the Commercial Appeal noted a “prediction that rang true over, that the company’s [Sears’] policy of using its buying power to under-sell the competition would hurt other local retailers” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears Closes Door on Crosstown Era”). Due to the monopoly the Sears building had on the areas’ commercial needs and prices “most commercial activity to the immediate north, south, and west declined...and a large part of the nearby strip centers that throbbed with retailing as recently as ten years ago is vacant or being used for other purposes” (Commercial Appeal, “Sears Closes Door on Crosstown Era”).

For the next eight years Sears continued the distribution operations at the warehouse. In January 1990 Sears officially closed the distribution warehouse in Memphis. Interviews and comments in local newspapers attribute the closing to the fact that business was not as successful as it had been in the past, and that the older technology in the building could not compete with modern production centers. Davis Cooley, Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce president, commented on the trend in the distribution industry at the time explaining that “older facilities [were] being collapsed all over the country and being replaced with new automated ones” (Commercial Appeal, “Distribution Push Unhurt by Closing, Officials Believe”). Plans to close the warehouse began in 1988, and by January 1990 around 600 employees

were displaced. Although some benefits were offered to those who were laid off , very few received positions at other Sears stores and many were left without jobs. Cooley commented further on the processes of modern distribution centers describing how “when you look at the new (distribution centers) coming in here, they’re all highly automated. Human hands don’t touch anything” (Commercial Appeal, “Distribution Push Unhurt by Closing, Officials Believe”). By 1990 other giant Sears centers similar to the Crosstown Building had already closed in Chicago, Boston, and Seattle, and there were plans to close distribution centers in Atlanta and Minneapolis that same year.

After the relocation or closing of the merchandise distribution center, credit processing center, Mid-South regional office, and all other Sears offices within Crosstown the building was left vacant and the more than 2,000 jobs that had once been held within the building were now gone (Crosstown Collaborative website). By 1993 the colossal building stood as “an imposing and melancholy monument to another America” (Commercial Appeal, “Team Effort”).

### **Redeveloping Crosstown**

However, a new Crosstown era is upon us, with the potential to recreate a lively and cohesive community. The redevelopment of the Sears Crosstown building has created a lot of buzz around change within the neighborhood. Developers believe that the redevelopment will “serve as an anchor and catalyst to revitalization and economic development in the surrounding Crosstown neighborhood” (crosstownmemphis.com). In addition to the goal for economic prosperity, the developers believe that the redevelopment will allow people to be

“living and working, learning and teaching, healing and growing, creating and recreating, shopping and eating, like a really great neighborhood” and that the “day-to-day creative and social ‘friction’ will integrate and elevate the mutual well-being of [future] tenants, residents, and visiting public” (crosstownmemphis.com).

As a rising senior at Rhodes College I first became interested in this area while taking an Urban Studies course. In this class we discussed the idea of a livable urban space and the many variables that define livability. It soon became clear that applying the term livability to many different cities was quite a challenge. I was forced to think about what makes a city in many different ways, addressing areas such as the physical infrastructure as well as the residents that occupy and bring life to a space. The Rhodes College campus is about one mile away from the Sears Crosstown building and the campus residents will witness first hand many of the changes that will come about through the redevelopment.

### **A Look at Crosstown Today**

The Crosstown neighborhood today is roughly rectangular about 1.5 miles in length about .5 miles wide, creating an area of about .75 square miles. The boundaries marking the neighborhood are set by Jackson Avenue to the North, Union Avenue to the South, Watkins Avenue to the East, and Interstate 240 to the West. MATA, the Memphis Area Transit Authority, runs buses on many of the main streets (Cleveland, Jackson, Poplar, Madison, Union, Jefferson) in the neighborhood and has designated eighty-four official MATA stops within the Crosstown boundaries. There are no community centers in the Crosstown neighborhood.

There are currently two bike routes established in the neighborhood. One stretches along North Parkway and the other runs up Overton Park Avenue until the street ends at North Bellevue Boulevard and the bike lane continues right up Bellevue. According to the City of Memphis Engineering Bicycle Facilities Existing and Future, there are no “Future Bike Routes” planned for the area ([www.greenlaneproject.org](http://www.greenlaneproject.org)). However, the Mid-South Regional Greenprint site, a GIS mapping page created by the University of Memphis that houses information about the Memphis and Mid-South region, there are proposed bike lanes for the neighborhood ([www.gis4.memphis.edu/greenprint/](http://www.gis4.memphis.edu/greenprint/)). The plans propose a bike lane that stretches all along Cleveland Avenue, Jefferson Avenue, and Bellevue Boulevard.

The plans for redevelopment of the building are quite ambitious due to the size of the space, and many Memphis media sources have commented on the redevelopment. Almost always in a positive way, the press sheds light onto the project, introducing the now eight contributing developers who will move into the building (ALSAC, Church Health Center, Memphis Teacher Residency, Rhodes College, Crosstown Arts, Gestalt Community Schools, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital). Sources such as the Commercial Appeal, Memphis Flyer, and Action News 5 comment on the plans to turn the now idle building into a “vertical urban village.” Each emphasizes that the redevelopment will undoubtedly be about creating a community for Memphis.

## **Crosstown Collaborative**

Much of my research has focused around the work of Crosstown Collaborative, a private group responsible for “organizing public support for the redevelopment of the historic Sears Crosstown building” (CC website). Their goal is to “remove blight and improve the infrastructure in and around the building...[and to] replace blight with good jobs, healthcare, education, and arts for all Memphians” (CC website). The organization, located on North Watkins, opened in February 2013, so in the context of this research, Crosstown Collaborative has only been established for five months. Situated right in the center of the Crosstown neighborhood, they plan to be a visible and accessible link between the community and the developers.

Throughout my research I had several valuable interactions with Gayla Burks, the Director of Marketing and Partnership at Crosstown Collaborative. Burks explained that Crosstown Collaborative makes a special effort not to prescribe what the Crosstown neighborhood needs. The objective is to create a sense of ownership by the Crosstown area residents of the entire space, not just the building. In order to do this, Crosstown Collaborative will begin by addressing the storefronts within the adjacent area. Burks explained that when Crosstown Collaborative established their office in the middle of the neighborhood, the community as a whole was a nebulous entity. Their initial efforts have focused on identifying who the people are who make up this neighborhood, and how they view the area. To get a better feel of the makeup of the area, Crosstown Collaborative has begun to host a series of events to introduce themselves to the community members.

Initially Crosstown Collaborative worked with consultants to survey the area and compile information on the small business owners in the vicinity. Next, they invited business owners to an open forum or town hall meeting, which was held in a space next to the Crosstown Collaborative building. During this town hall meeting, the Crosstown Collaborative members introduced themselves and discussed their planned involvement in the redevelopment.

The next phase of research focused on the nearby residential areas to learn more about the people who resided in this neighborhood. This research was done in preparation for an event called Crosswalk. Crosswalk was a canvassing event that included about 40 volunteers who visited approximately 700 homes. From the research information Crosstown Collaborative had gathered, residents were chosen on a very strategic basis. The residents chosen for the canvassing had to meet a specific set criteria. These criteria included information on their voting activity during the past two elections, whether or not they had submitted information on the Crosstown website, and if their place of residence was within a one mile radius of the Sears Crosstown building. The Crosswalk event occurred on Saturday April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013. During the event volunteers presented residents with “community resource bags” that included items such as key chains, pens, and cups from many of the founding partners. Included with the free paraphernalia was an invitation to attend a town hall meeting open to all residents in the area.

Two days prior to the Crosswalk event, Rhodes College student volunteers used the list of around 1,000 residents that had been chosen from the same research for a phone-canvassing event. Calls were made to tell the residents about the town

hall meeting that would be held the following week. The call was made to simply inform the resident that, at the town hall meeting, Crosstown Collaborative members were “going to be sharing some information and answering questions about how the plans [for the Sears Crosstown Building] will impact the neighborhood” (Crosstown Collaborative phone script).

The following week on Tuesday April 23, the town hall meeting was held at 5:30 in the 430 North Cleveland space. Local newspaper Memphis Flyer reported a short article on the event. The Flyer quotes Todd Richardson, project leader for the Crosstown Development Team, as he explains to the residents and business owners how “the streets around the Crosstown building were designed to be wide to accommodate Sears traffic in its heyday” and that the current plans for redevelopment are “just bringing the neighborhood’s capacity back to where it used to be” (Memphis Flyer, “Crosstown Developers Address Neighbor Concerns”). Naturally a sense of anxiety hung over the meeting and one resident questioned “how the developers would prevent gentrification that may come with rising rents and property values of existing neighborhood homes and businesses” (Memphis Flyer, “Crosstown Developers Address Neighbor Concerns”). Richardson replied that “protecting the ethnically diverse neighborhood’s population is a goal of the development team, and while he expects rent to rise a little, the team is making an effort to communicate with business and property owners in the area to ensure that they are prepared for any changes” (Memphis Flyer, “Crosstown Developers Address Neighbor Concerns”). His objectives appear well intended, however



Richardson does not provide any specific examples of how these plans will be carried out.

On Tuesday June 18, Crosstown Collaborative partnered with Accion, an organization that “provides credit and services to small businesses and entrepreneurs who do not have the access to loans,” to host a free workshop to small business owners in the Crosstown area. The event was held from 5:30-7:30 at Crosstown Collaborative’s North Cleveland location. At the clinic small business owners received free expert advice on marketing and were able to ask questions about their own business. There was a turn out of about forty small business owners at the event.

In order to host more free classes and workshops that catered specifically towards the wants and needs of the business owners, Crosstown Collaborative created a survey. A short list of questions was developed and circulated to small business owners so that Crosstown Collaborative could have a better understanding of the businesses in the area. Although they sent out about 150 surveys, the initial return was around 15 responses. In efforts to get more feedback, Gayla Burks and I walked around the neighborhood stopping in the small businesses ourselves. We introduced ourselves and asked to speak with the small business owner if he or she was available. If no one was available to talk with us, we left the survey with a stamped return envelope and encouraged the business owners to submit a quick response. To encourage participation we offered the opportunity to participate in a raffle for a 200-dollar gift card as incentive. The survey included sections titled General Information, Financial Inquiry, Improvements to your Business, and

Advertising. The concise set of questions ask the business owner to offer a little information about themselves and what needs or concerns they have in owning a business in the Crosstown area.

Tuesday July 2 was the first time Burks and I visited with the business owners, and it was quite an interesting experience. The eclectic collection of businesses on Cleveland is owned by a racially diverse group of people. In the small section we visited by foot we encountered Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, North African, and Latin American business owners and/or employees. In a few places we were presented with a language barrier so strong that we could not communicate further than introductions. More shocking than the language barrier was the cold shoulder we received from the majority of the businesses. Our routine was that we would enter the place of business and request to speak to the business owner. If he or she was not there we asked if we could leave behind the survey with a stamped and addressed envelope and a pamphlet introducing Crosstown Collaborative. In one instance the employee working did not get off his cell phone the entire time, even after we offered to wait until his call was over. He then begrudgingly accepted the survey, quickly slipping it into a messy pile of junk mail and other papers. At another business we were told that the business owner was not present yet after leaving the survey and exiting the building Ms. Burks laughed explaining that the man we had just spent ten minutes speaking to was in fact the business owner whom she had met a few weeks earlier.

We did encounter a few receptive business owners who seemed excited about the future of the area. However, for the most part we experienced a sense of

hesitation and detachment. It seemed as though the business owners were keeping an arms distance from the project and were happy to remain uninvolved. I can't help but wonder how this attitude and outlook has come about. Is it that these businesses do not want to set themselves up for disappointment? When then will they become invested in the very project that surrounds them? Will it not be until the cranes arrive and physical changes begin to be made before they accept and embrace the redevelopment?

Our second attempt to visit small business owners was slightly more positive. Although our success was similar to our one previous experience, it seemed as though the small businesses on Overton Park Avenue either knew more about the planned redevelopment or were more open to the opportunities it may bring. Unfortunately no statistics can be produced from the survey because only fifteen surveys have been completed and returned and Crosstown Collaborative needs no less than fifty to provide an accurate representation of the area. In efforts to increase the return of completed surveys, the deadline has been extended twice and I drafted an email with the link to the survey to be sent out to business owners whose email address Crosstown Collaborative has acquired.

After various meetings with Crosstown Collaborative, I was surprised to learn the lack of data that has been gathered on the events they have held in the past as well as plans for future events. Although the staff is both incredibly knowledgeable and helpful on all things Crosstown, for an outsider, the lack of organized information makes it difficult to grasp the extent of the work that Crosstown Collaborative has completed. There were no minutes from the town hall

meetings or records from the canvassing events. Although the organization was only established a few months ago, and is working through their “fact finding stage,” it seems as though it would be beneficial in the future to record more data during this initial stage of the project about their events or the reactions of the residents and business owners in the area.

They have also not yet identified the way in which they will assess changes in the neighborhood. Burks mentioned that they realize change is just around the corner. She recognized factors such as the influx of construction workers into the area during redevelopment and the impact they can have upon the local businesses. This is only one small change, however, Crosstown Collaborative must work with the developers, residents, and business owners to prepare them for this initial change and the many larger changes that will follow. It will be pertinent for Crosstown Collaborative to develop a way in which they can measure, evaluate, and track the success and failure of the inevitable changes that will occur as they make future plans for the area.

### **Livable Memphis**

I also met with Elizabeth Saba, a member of an organization called Livable Memphis. I wanted to gauge their outlook on livability in Memphis and more specifically the Crosstown Neighborhood. Livable Memphis was created in 2005 with the intent to combat urban sprawl, understanding that sprawl is neither sustainable or affordable. One of their objectives was to make the city more walkable and bikable. Today they take on projects that will help “promote a healthy and vibrant Memphis,” a Livable Memphis if you will. Yet, strangely enough, the

group does not have a standard definition for “livable,” the very term that names their organization. Saba, who has completed graduate training in urban planning, has her own idea of what livability means. In accordance with many other urban scholars, she believes there are environmental, economic, educational, and health components to livability.

Focusing mainly on the inner city area, Livable Memphis tackles blighted areas, assessing what can be done to improve the community. In the past five years Livable Memphis has created over fifty miles of bike lanes. Livable Memphis also works on projects with Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) to gauge the efficiency and quality of public transportation in Memphis. Saba explained that during the process of making a place livable, public participation is key.

Engaging the community is often times quite difficult in Memphis and can be a solid barrier in many projects. However, if the community values the work Livable Memphis is performing, the project has a much greater chance of success. In order to keep the community involved, the organization hosts a “Pizza with Planners” event once a month, every month, inviting all community members to attend. These meetings are a time to discuss what is going on in the area and get feedback from Memphis residents on how they view the various projects. Saba stated that it is difficult to get people to attend these events because, unless someone is significantly invested in a project, many people are too busy, or have more important things to do. She commented on the fact that holding the meeting right after business hours and providing free food helps increase attendance. To get word out about these meetings Livable Memphis circulates various reminders through their mailing list,

newsletters, and has an occasional listing in the newspaper. Other than that they rely heavily on news of the meetings travelling by word of mouth.

Although Livable Memphis has not worked directly with Crosstown Collaborative or specifically in the Crosstown area, Saba had quite a bit to say about the redevelopment. She noted that interaction between the private and public realm will be very important in creating a viable community. Pointing out that this is “not just a redevelopment of the building,” but in fact of the whole area, the spaces in between and around the building are equally if not more important than the building itself. Saba also commented on the “built environment” of the current Crosstown area, and the challenges it faces in its current state. She focused specifically on Cleveland Avenue, which runs North-South, merging with Watkins, and running perpendicular to North Parkway. Saba commented on the fact that Memphis is dominated by major East-West roads such as Madison, Poplar, and Union, but lacks strong North-South connections on the grid. It is true, and can be seen on any road map of Memphis, that the majority of North-South streets are much smaller or broken, frequently not lining up at the intersection of a major east-west road. Cleveland, however, holds a great deal of potential to be a vibrant North-South street, acting as an artery linking Crosstown to other Memphis communities. The physical layout of the streets in and around the intersection is very confusing and does not welcome people into the area by vehicle let alone foot. The VECA Greenline, a grass and gravel path for foot and bike traffic, ends abruptly at the intersection of North Parkway and Cleveland as well. If this junction and the Cleveland corridor can be prioritized, the surrounding area can capitalize on the

activity brought in by a simpler and more direct route from other communities into Crosstown.

Saba commented lastly that all of this is to say that the Crosstown neighborhood has the potential to be turned into a real destination, a place where residents and visitors will want to go. I think that Crosstown Collaborative could really benefit by partnering with organizations such as Livable Memphis. As such a new organization, Crosstown Collaborative can learn from the projects and experiences of Livable Memphis.

### **Comparing Crosstown with other redevelopment**

The developers of the Sears Crosstown are using the redevelopment of another Sears building as a model in these beginning stages. The Midtown Exchange, a former Sears distribution center almost identical in construction to the Crosstown building, is located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Its story is very similar to the Crosstown building, opening in 1928, one year after the Crosstown opening and closing in 1994, one year after Crosstown closed. In the beginning the Minneapolis center thrived just as Memphis did, but the 1950s proved to be a difficult time economically for the city. During the 1950s South Minneapolis witnessed a tearing up of the streetcars tracks, leaving no available public transportation in the city. With transportation difficulties and financial troubles, the Minneapolis distribution center lost shoppers and was eventually forced to close its doors. The once prosperous area suffered greatly and experienced an sharp increase in crime. By the late 1990s and early 2000s the area was known as 'Murderopolis' because of the high homicide rate. For about a decade the building remained boarded up and

vacant, and although, there was significant interest and “promises of potential buyer littered newspapers, each deal seemed to fall through”

([www.placeography.org/index.php/](http://www.placeography.org/index.php/)).

In 2003 that Ryan Companies purchased the site and shouldered the redevelopment project. A set of objectives was created for the redevelopment of the property just as objectives have been set for the redevelopment of Crosstown. Some of the key objectives include the creation of a “vital, mixed-use development that is respectful of its neighborhood, increased safety through ‘eyes on the street’, support and the reinforcement of the identity of Midtown as a place to live, work and play”

([www.midtowncommunityworks.org/exchange/prosummaryobjectives.php](http://www.midtowncommunityworks.org/exchange/prosummaryobjectives.php)).

These closely align with the Crosstown objectives, which are to create a thriving “vertical urban village, common area, shared space, exhibition space and ongoing events, and day-to-day creative and social friction”

([www.crosstownmemphis.com/](http://www.crosstownmemphis.com/)). In addition to creating these objectives, the Midtown Exchange development has produced a way in which they measure their success by focusing on four basic areas of assessment. They judge the area economically (the area must be economically viable), physically (the project [building] is not an island, but is linked to the surrounding neighborhoods), historically (unique features of the 1928 building are preserved), and culturally (positive impact on the immediate neighborhood while minimizing potential negative impacts) ([www.midtowncommunityworks.org/exchange/prosummaryobjectives.php](http://www.midtowncommunityworks.org/exchange/prosummaryobjectives.php)).



The newly developed Minneapolis building opened in June 2006, and while the site is still new to the community, the developers believe that its success will be integral to the revitalization of the neighborhood and community. This applies to the Crosstown area as well. Dick Pettingill, CEO of Minneapolis-based Allina Health, comments how “what the Sears building represented was a statement from a values and mission standpoint that [they] were committed to revitalizing not only the building, but the community.” As a mission based organization Crosstown Collaborative has a big task ahead as they too work to integrate the residents and business owners into the redevelopment.

Memphis has the opportunity to recreate a viable and prosperous community. The task of redeveloping the Crosstown area is certainly a considerable undertaking. If the people of Memphis can unite behind this movement to create a more livable community, the city as a whole will benefit. The term livability encompasses the many dimensions of the physical, social, and economic realm of a city. It is important to remember that the concept of livability is always evolving, so when addressing issues of livability it is necessary to be conscious of the urban space surrounding you. Now is the time to create a way to gauge livability both globally and locally, and the redevelopment of the Crosstown area is a perfect time for the city of Memphis.

The upcoming months will be very important in setting the tone for the redevelopment of the area. Organizations such as Crosstown Collaborative and Livable Memphis must encourage civic engagement among the residents and businesses in the area. I would suggest providing the necessary support for the

creation of a community organization run by those active in the neighborhood. The involvement of the community members will be integral to the revitalization of the neighborhood, and will impact the success of the overall project. The creation a solid relationship between the developers, the community, and Crosstown Collaborative will insure a greater success for the entire area. Active communication through neighborhood events or town halls will allow a dialogue of trust to arise. Crosstown Collaborative must make a large effort to gain the trust of the community and create a sense of equality between the neighborhood and the Crosstown Collaborative team. Creating another livable niche within the city of Memphis means increasing the quality of life or well-being of the city as a whole. Memphis may not have the best reputation, but this is the perfect opportunity to begin to put itself back on the map as a major livable city.

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