Urban Renewal and Food Insecurity in Asheville's Southside Neighborhood

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Asheville, North Carolina is well known as a city brimming with fantastic restaurants and local food. Yet in this land of seeming plenty many of its citizens experience food insecurity. A neighborhood named Southside, just south of Asheville's downtown is an area where contradiction is lived out by residents. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines food insecurity as: "[a] situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active healthy life" (FAO 2002). In the United States today food insecurity can manifest in a multitude of ways, one way food insecurity is experienced is by living in a "food desert." According to the USDA a food desert is

> a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store…Low access to a healthy food retail outlet is defined as more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store in urban areas and as more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store in rural areas (USDA).

The City of Asheville is home to nine food deserts according to the USDA. The Southside community lives within the confines of a food desert. The closest grocery store to the center of the neighborhood is a Harris Teeter in north Asheville, about 1.8 miles away (Google Maps 2015). The closest Ingles grocery store (an affordable Asheville-based grocery chain) is two and

a half miles from the center of Southside in west and east Asheville respectively and is a thirty minute ride one way using public transportation(Google Maps 2015). This is despite the fact that there are eleven Ingles (Ingles 2015) within the city that is home to 87,882 people (U.S Census Bureau 2014). Ironically, further south of Southside one will find the Biltmore, Biltmore Village and Biltmore Forest. This is a wealthy part of town where one can find affordable grocery stores like Ingles and Walmart and more expensive groceries like Earthfare and Fresh Market (Google Maps 2015). Thus, Southside's food insecurity is surrounded on all sides by areas of food security. It is clear that in Asheville there is a significant inconsistency in the development of neighborhoods with regard to establishing food security for communities. Food access issues have a lot to do with physical proximity, but also are often complicated with issues of race, class and history. Southside, also known as 'South Slope' and in urban renewal terms 'East Riverside,' was home to a primarily African-American population in the era of segregation in the South. Since the age of legal racial segregation Southside has under gone several cycles of dramatic change through numerous institutionalized policies of community destruction. **Southside is a neighborhood where businesses, schools, streets and houses that once were have now vanished following desegregation and urban renewal creating the circumstance to allow a neighborhood that was once food secure to now be a food desert.**

Southside covers about 400 acres of land (Crossroads 2010:11). Its northern border is Hillard St, its western border is the French Broad River, its eastern border is Biltmore Ave and Asheville High School and Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College mark its southern border (see appendix A). The neighborhood is characterized by rolling hills dotted with houses and apartments of all sizes and colors from bold to subtle. Southside is home to the Asheville Middle School, the YWCA, Green Opportunities (a non-profit focused on providing

environmentally sustainable job training in the culinary arts and construction), the Dr. Wesley Grant Sr. Southside Center (a City of Asheville recreation center), a gas station/convenience store, a laundromat and four different public housing apartments. The 400 acres of land once housed many grocery stores throughout the decades, yet today it is home to none.

This study of Southside's experiences of food security and insecurity was conducted with the use of almost a century's worth of Asheville City Directories, owned by the UNC Asheville Special Collections. Each city directory includes a section in which every street is listed and each residential and business address is listed subsequently. This study focused on seven main thoroughfares, all in Southside: Asheland Ave, Clingman Ave, Depot St, South French Broad Ave, Livingston St, McDowell St, and Southside Ave. From 1915 to 2013 the amount of grocery stores and restaurants found on each previously mentioned street was tallied every five years.

To better understand the history of Southside's experience of both food security and insecurity, the neighborhood's history can be broken up in to three eras of significance: Segregation (post-reconstruction-1960's), Desegregation and Urban Renewal (1960's-1980's) and Post Urban Renewal (1980's-present day). These eras do not have definitive beginning and end dates for it is rare that an area will experience a concrete moment of transition, rather they fade into one another as policies and people's lives slowly change.

According to Priscilla Ndiaye, a former resident of Southside and present day researcher of the area, in the era of legal segregation Southside was a central place of Black-owned business and residence in Asheville (Ndiaye 2010:11). This was also readily apparent in the Asheville City Directories, where the seven main thoroughfares of this study contained lists of a wide variety of businesses; restaurants, groceries, laundromats, barber shops, and beauty parlors.

(Miller 1915-58). In 1927, the first African American hospital in Western North Carolina was moved from west Asheville and rebuilt on Clingman Avenue in Southside (Hilton). A booklet published by the hospital writes,

> The hospital is prepared to care for all the colored work in the city and county. The Mission Hospital is the only white institution in the city having colored wards. To be consistent in our aims and institutional life, we feel that the Blue Ridge Hospital is the logical place for all Negroes needing hospital treatment in the city and county. As a rule the colored nurse is better qualified by nature to minister to her own race; with her there can be no thought of prejudice (Hilton).

The hospital satisfied a desperate need for quality facilities in an era where African Americans in Asheville were denied access to quality medical facilities. The neighborhood was home to Livingston Elementary and South French Broad High School; both were segregated Black schools.

This era of Segregation in Southside was found clearly illustrated in the decades of City Directories. From 1915 to 1952 the city directories used symbols like (*) or (c) to denote people of color. The introduction to this part of the directory would begin with an explanation like "*Star before names generally means that such persons are colored" (Miller 1915). Later the explanation would expand to "(*) Purpose of star (*) in front of name is to denote colored person or firm, but we assume no responsibility for its wrong use, errors often creep in" (Miller 1929). This practice's purpose was never explained and came to an end with no explanation in 1953. This entirely problematic and racist custom allowed for the collection of an interesting data set, illustrated in the graph found in the appendix (B). As one can see there is a significant disparity

between the amount of grocery stores owned by African Americans and Whites in this predominantly African-American neighborhood, which by 1966 was 98% Black (Inside East Riverside 1966:i). Black-owned grocery stores never reached above four stores at one time in this study, while White-owned groceries reached as high as nineteen in 1930. The highest concentration of grocery stores in Southside was also in 1930, there were twenty-three within the neighborhood's borders. In 1935, it is clear that the Great Depression hit Black-owned grocery store owners harder, than White store owners as the amount of Black-owned groceries drop from four to one. While White-owned groceries dropped as well, the significance can be found in the percentages, as Black-owned groceries dropped from twenty one percent of all grocery stores in Southside to just six percent, White-owned groceries climb from eighty-three percent to ninety-four percent of all Southside groceries. However, after 1935 numbers climb and by 1950, the last year in this data set, the numbers of Black-owned groceries return to their peak number of four and make up thirty-three percent of the total amount of grocery stores in Southside.

In 1965, city wide desegregation of schools began. In Asheville the burden of desegregation was placed on the Black community, every African American institution of learning was closed, and students were bussed to schools that were originally White in the segregation era (UNCA Center for Diversity 5). In Southside this meant Livingston St Elementary was closed and South French Broad High was eventually changed into the Asheville Middle School that remains today. When the High School was originally desegregated Asheville High still celebrated the achievements of the school when it was exclusively White with no mention of the achievements of Stephens-Lee High School or South French Broad High School (the segregated Black high schools). Few Stephens-Lee/South French Broad teachers were hired to teach at Asheville High, and as a result, Black students lost the strong role models they once

had in the classroom. The erasure of prominence and loss of sense of history and pride created a student body festering with anger. This anger and dissatisfaction subsequently sparked two race riots in Asheville, North Carolina. First, on September 29, 1969 black students walked out in protest of the problems mentioned above (UNCA Center for Diversity 7). The police were called and in the midst of the chaos, damage was inflicted on the building. The school was shut down for a week and a citywide curfew was established in response to the race riot. Secondly, on October 18, 1972 a race riot broke out over an interracial couple. Eight students were hospitalized in the fight between black and white students (With All Deliberate Speed 7).

The era of Desegregation and Urban Renewal was a time of great upheaval for the residents of Southside and the broader African American community of Asheville. The neighborhood was influx as old institutions were closed and new were opened, homes were torn down and public housing was built, streets were closed and then significantly altered. In 1970, Asheville began to carry out, now infamous, urban renewal projects around the city. Southside became the site of the East Riverside Project, the largest urban renewal project in the city and the entire southeast (Ndiaye 2010:11). According to Dr. Mindi Fullilove, a professor of public health and clinical psychiatry, the phrase "urban renewal" came out of the Housing Act of 1949, and in the Housing Act of 1954 "urban renewal" became an official project of the United States government (Fullilove 2005:57). Cities all over the United States were tasked with pinpointing areas of "blight," and then creating "revitalizing" plans for such areas that coincided "post-war progress" to be approved and then funded by the federal government (Fullilove 2005:58). According to Fullilove, these urban renewal tasks of defining blight and creating new plans most often fell in the laps of wealthy white men and often, if not exclusively, blight was found in the traditionally African American neighborhoods in these cities across the country (Fullilove

2005:60). Cities then used eminent domain to acquire land, tear down homes and rebuild the area anew without the people who had called it home and made community there for decades. This is all true of Asheville's history with urban renewal. While Asheville began its urban renewal projects decades after some cities, the effects to the neighborhoods and communities were no less disastrous.

In the midst of city wide desegregation, the urban renewal project for Southside was being planned. The process involved the establishment of the City East Riverside Urban Renewal Project Housing Authority office, at 299 South French Broad Asheville, and creating a strategy of community outreach. The Redevelopment Commission of the City of Asheville asked this office to complete a survey based community study of Southside involving every household in the neighborhood that was willing to participate. This study found that in 1966, 4,000 people lived in 1,300 houses (Inside East Riverside 1966: i). Southside was home to 7 % of Asheville's population, 13% of city's low-income families, and half of Asheville's Black population (Inside East Riverside 1966: i). There was a rate of 58 % home ownership among the residents of the neighborhood, which the study noted was high for the demographics of the population compared to the same demographic make-up found in the rest of the city and region (Inside East Riverside 1966: 17). The study touched on many subjects: health, income and employment, patterns of daily life, and attitudes towards: housing, the neighborhood and urban renewal. The survey found that 85% of people shopped at super markets outside of the neighborhood, and that "More than a third [paid] taxi fares to get themselves and grocery bundles home from the supermarkets" (Inside East Riverside 1966:12). One of the last recommendations the study specifies is that a super market needs to be built in the neighborhood as part of the urban renewal project because

there is a clear preference among residents for shopping at super markets (Inside East Riverside 1966: 78).

Rather tragically the study reported, "Although a majority of the structures in the area have been classed as blighted and community facilities are obviously deficient, two out of three people who live here like the neighborhood 'fine,' and only one in ten dislikes it" (Inside East Riverside 1966: 14). And that "In leaving East Riverside, respondents feel they would miss people most…" (Inside East Riverside 1966:16). This makes clear that sense of community was important to the residents of Southside in 1966. Never the less the East Riverside Urban Renewal project was carried out in full and a community was altered forever. Despite finding that residents were dissatisfied with public housing this was the City's displacement plan. Urban Renewal built four public housing buildings and despite a call to address food access issues, no super markets were built. Instead, between 1970 and the middle of the urban renewal project in 1975 the amount of groceries in Southside dropped from seven to zero. And as one can see in the graph found in the Appendix (C), the groceries never returned to the area.

The East Riverside urban renewal project tore down hundreds of homes and businesses, and displaced thousands of people (Ndiaye 2010:11). Urban renewal can be observed in the city directories as one sees more and more vacancies listed and entire streets being closed as the whole neighborhood was redeveloped. Amidst the transition of Southside one can imagine businesses being closed as properties were acquired by the city using eminent domain. But why then, did so many never return? Firstly, the community study of 1966 makes clear that at least half of Southside residents were to be displaced (1966: v). Being displaced can result in a number of entirely new realities for people. Dr. Mindi Fullilove, created the term 'root shock' for this experience, specific to her studies of urban renewal. According to Fullilove, "Root shock

is the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem" (Fullilove 2005:11). Dr. Sarah Judson, a professor of history, further notes that "it [root shock] results in a rupturing of individual and communal identity" (Judson 2010:2). The residents of Southside lost all kinds of social and economic capital. This of course is the kind of capital that is required to establish and build a new local business like a grocery store.

Along with the loss of capital, urban renewal created new and very physical limitations to the establishment of new businesses in Southside. This is most readily apparent when looking at Southside Avenue. Southside Ave was originally the only thoroughfare to cross in diagonal form the neighborhood entirely (this is illustrated in the map found in appendix D) and thus was a major business thoroughfare. Throughout the years of 1915 to 1970, Southside Ave was consistently home to the highest concentration of grocery stores found among the streets involved in this study. One can see this made visually apparent in the graph found in appendix (E), Southside was home to about half of the grocery stores found in the neighborhood nearly every year. This came to end with urban renewal.

The East Riverside project significantly altered Southside Ave (see comparison in Appendix F). After urban renewal Southside Ave no longer crosses the neighborhood entirely and only exists as a third of its original length. Thus the advantages of access to businesses provided by the thoroughfare crossing the entire neighborhood have been lost. So not only did residents loose cultural and economic capital because of the redevelopment of Southside, they also lost physical space that was important to the creation and success of local businesses that satisfied the needs of daily activity.

The Post-Urban Renewal era is one marked by food insecurity and gentrification. According to this study there has not been a grocery store in the neighborhood for forty years. The only food access point today is a convenience mart named Green's, which sells mostly processed food items. While the amount of grocery stores in the neighborhood has consistently stayed at zero, the amount of restaurants is on the rise. This rise of restaurant numbers is thanks to only two streets, Depot St and Clingman Ave. These two streets have been an entry point for gentrification in the neighborhood. Today this part of Southside is known as the River Arts District, but pre-urban renewal it was a manufacturing center in Asheville. The River Arts District of today is a central location in the City's art scene. As galleries and studios started popping up in the address listings in the city directories, so did cafes, nice restaurants and a music venue. While some might say this is a significant improvement of an unused space, others reasonably criticize the development of this part of the area for lacking in integration with the historic Southside community.

Today if one were to walk from Depot St to South French Broad Ave one would likely feel as though they were entering a neighborhood entirely different from the area they were coming from despite the fact that they were originally seen as part of the same community. For one would be leaving behind art galleries and restaurants selling twenty dollar specialty pizza and enter a highly residential area speckled with public housing apartments, non-profits and a middle school. So while there are more restaurants they are not necessarily economically accessible or culturally appealing to all the residents living closest to them.

Southside has had a long history complicated with major issues of race and class. These complications have significantly affected Southside's residents' experience of food security and insecurity. The neighborhood became a food desert in the midst of the East Riverside urban

renewal project and has been one ever since. These findings implicate several things about the past and future of urban planning and urban communities. Firstly, this research supports the need for more community oriented and community specific urban (re)development plans. Secondly, this study is evidence of the importance of including food security as an area that needs to be addressed in all urban planning projects. Thirdly, this research implicates the need for more significant community integration among longtime residents and recent gentrifiers; without this effort Southside will only lose more and more of its roots and thus the integrity that has made so many people care for the area for years.

This study of Southside, urban renewal and food insecurity will continue as the author will focus on more ethnographic efforts within Southside. This will consist of interviews with residents (new and old) and collecting the neighborhood's histories, stories, and voices. This process will focus upon exploring Southside residents' sense of place within the neighborhoods history and their relationships to food as it relates to living in a food desert. The information garnered from this process will allow for a more full understanding of intersectional experiences of the past and present of Southside.

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