For decades now local governments across America have been hesitant to target neighborhood and housing resources into the types of communities that are most common in a city: the middle neighborhood. These are areas that are stuck between vibrancy and disinvestment but with enough strategic public investment, the tide could change. Memphis is in a position to lead the country on middle neighborhood interventions and this brief will outline what that could look like and what that would mean for all Memphians.

**WHY MIDDLE NEIGHBORHOODS?**

In the decades following World War II, when many of Memphis’ urban core neighborhoods were growing rapidly there was a much different economic context. Most importantly, a higher percentage of city residents were earning at middle income levels. As figure 1 shows, since 1970 Memphis, like peer cities St. Louis and Milwaukee, has lost families who make up the 80-120% of Area Median Income bracket. This loss is particularly felt in neighborhoods closest to Memphis’ urban core and it is within this new economic reality that city leadership needs to operate.

In our peers, also lie our allies. Memphis is in a similar situation to other post-industrial American cities, and certainly is not the only city confronting this challenge. There is a larger middle neighborhoods movement afoot, taking place across the country. In 2016, Paul Brophy edited and authored a compilation of articles entitled *On The Edge: America’s Middle Neighborhoods*. The articles lay a framework for how legacy cities are addressing overwhelming needs

![Family Income Change 1970 - 2013](image)

**FIGURE 1 | American Community Survey 2013—2017**

in a resource limited environment. The key is to focus public revitalization dollars in areas of the city where private market activities are in reach.

**WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?**

The growing awareness of middle neighborhoods and their subsequent endangerment in urban housing markets across the country is leading to various levels of action. Before outlining the nuances of a middle neighborhood strategy for Memphis, we must apply a very important lesson from the few cities which have implemented similar strategies: it is not easy and it takes time. Difficult decisions will be required. Commitment and focus to a target geography or geographies can oftentimes do more harm than good.

So what are the components of a meaningful commitment to strengthen our neighborhoods on the edge of disinvestment and viability? Arguably the most important aspect of any real estate related question is location. The following page shows the results of a Housing Market Segmentation Analysis which is the most widely used tool for identifying potential middle neighborhoods to strengthen and prioritize their revitalization.
working on the Tipping Point Neighborhood Initiative, the Memphis-Shelby County Office of Planning and Development has baked in middle neighborhood ideals into their proposed Memphis 3.0 plan, and the Blight Elimination Steering Team has had multiple middle neighborhood related action items.

2. The American Assembly’s Middle Neighborhoods Community of Practice is a national working group made up of community leaders and practitioners working to implement middle neighborhood preservation strategies. Stay in touch with this group’s work and join if you can.

3. The Memphis Property Hub is the foundation of a data-driven approach to community revitalization in Memphis. Sign up, learn the program and find the middle neighborhoods near you!

There are many ways advocates can plug-in, reach out to info@npimemphis.org for more information.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Austin Harrison has been in the community development field for over five years. He holds a B.A. from Mercer University and an M.P.A. from the University of Memphis. Harrison currently serves as the Program Manager for Neighborhood Preservation, Inc., a Memphis based non-profit working to remove the systemic barriers to revitalizing neighborhoods.

References


