

DOES RACE MATTER: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY AND THE RESURGENCE OF THE CITY

M. David Lee

PRESENTED AT CNU VII: THE WEALTH OF CITIES

JUNE 5, 1999

CONGRESS
FOR THE
NEW
URBANISM

Bio: M. David Lee, FAIA is a partner with Stull and Lee, Inc. and Adjunct Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge.

I grew up on the south side of Chicago in the 50's. These were the halcyon days toward the end of a marvelous era for black people in that city. There were good blue-collar jobs in the steel mills, factories and at the Post Office; almost everybody worked. Because Chicago was and perhaps still is, the country's most segregated city, a largely positive by product of that condition was that the black ghettos of Chicago's south and west sides had an infrastructure of businesses owned or at least managed by people who actually lived in the community.

The 50's also saw the beginning of the post war, white suburban migration and as a result, it relieved some of the overcrowding of the segregated ghettos as blacks literally fought block by block, to expand in to other areas of the city. Highway construction through the inner city, fractured or destroyed whole neighborhoods. This, coupled with the replacement of lower scaled houses through urban renewal and the construction of high rise low-income apartment buildings initiated a decline in community cohesiveness and economic health which continues today not only in Chicago but in inner cities throughout the country.

The rumored death of the city may be premature thanks to several compelling trends:

The baby boomers who represent the largest demographic bulge in the country's history and to whom advertising and popular culture has been directed for the last 40 years, are now into their 50's. For many, their children have grown up and left home. Consequently, they are no longer in need of large houses and the commute from home to work grows increasingly tedious.

A second important trend is the growing influx of new immigrants in cities. Notably many of the newcomers come from cities in their countries of origin. They are comfortable with city life and actively seek the greater opportunities cities offer.

The central question for African Americans is how to take advantage of the opportunities that a second wave of redevelopment in the American city might offer. The answers I believe start with recognizing the considerable assets represented in our neighborhoods.

Location - In most cities the downtown core is still the preferred location for corporate America and the many service industries that support those corporations. Many African American neighborhoods are but a short commute to these potential employment centers.

Architecture - Many of the buildings in the inner city though neglected, are well constructed and often historically significant.

Transportation Infrastructure - Generally a system of overlapping transportation options are available and they provide at least decent access to most segments of the city and the surrounding metropolitan area.

Civic Resources - With proximity and public transportation, many inner city neighborhoods have easy access to great parks, waterfronts, universities, entertainment venues and other cultural resources.

Diversity - The city remains the most culturally diverse place in American life. Not accidentally I believe, new ideas are most frequently incubated where many cultures interface on a regular basis. Even the cyberworld is gravitating toward more urban environments, where the synergy made possible by physical proximity, uniquely facilitates new ideas, products and services.

The good news is that there are opportunities for African Americans in the changing face of the city; taking advantage of those opportunities requires forethought and effort. We need to do several things: we need to learn more about the architecture of the city and how to preserve it. Community development corporations have a major role to play in assuring that neighborhoods are culturally and economically diverse but they must also insist on good and appropriate urban design standards.

Often attempts to redevelop urban neighborhoods are resisted by fears of gentrification. This is a complex and troubling issue which should be addressed thoughtfully. Sometimes forgotten in the discussion however, is that historically when African American communities were segregated, whether by statute or de facto, the community was often economically, if not racially, diverse.

We must pursue strategies in which our neighborhoods offer choices for a wide range of economic levels and even ethnic groups, without losing their African American core populations.

Another critical strategy to increase the influence of African Americans in the revitalization of the city, is to aggressively embrace diversity. I believe it is shortsighted and counterproductive not to seek mutually beneficial alliances with other groups and in particular the new Caribbean, Latin American and Asian immigrants moving into the cities.

African Americans continue to be a major presence in the inner cities of America and we live in neighborhoods that are not without significant assets. I also believe people of color should have the opportunity to live in comfort, whether in the country, small towns, or the in the suburbs.

However what has been missing for too long in the array of choices, is the option to live in well designed, interesting and affordable city neighborhoods. That is our charge.

*M. David Lee, FAIA
Stull and Lee, Inc.
Architects and Planners
38 Chauncy Street, Suite 1100
Boston, Massachusetts 02111-2312
Phone: 617 426 0406
Fax: 617 426 2835*