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Sandy Vista Regroups and Rebuilds

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Sandy Bottom, a six-square-block section of Birmingham's Ensley neighborhood, was once a thriving place with a strong black community. It was part of a segregated "company town" where black families lived a short walk from the Ensley business district and directly adjacent to the extensive steelworks of Tennessee Coal Industry (later part of U.S. Steel).

But the steelworks closed in 1984 and the neighborhood suffered years of disinvestment, unemployment and rising crime. Retired steelworkers moved out and their children left to pursue better prospects. Institutional apartment buildings served as public housing. By the early 1990s, only the poorest and most elderly residents remained, and the area was dominated by vacant lots and dilapidated shot-gun shacks. Buildings owned by absentee landlords became havens for drug activity and storm

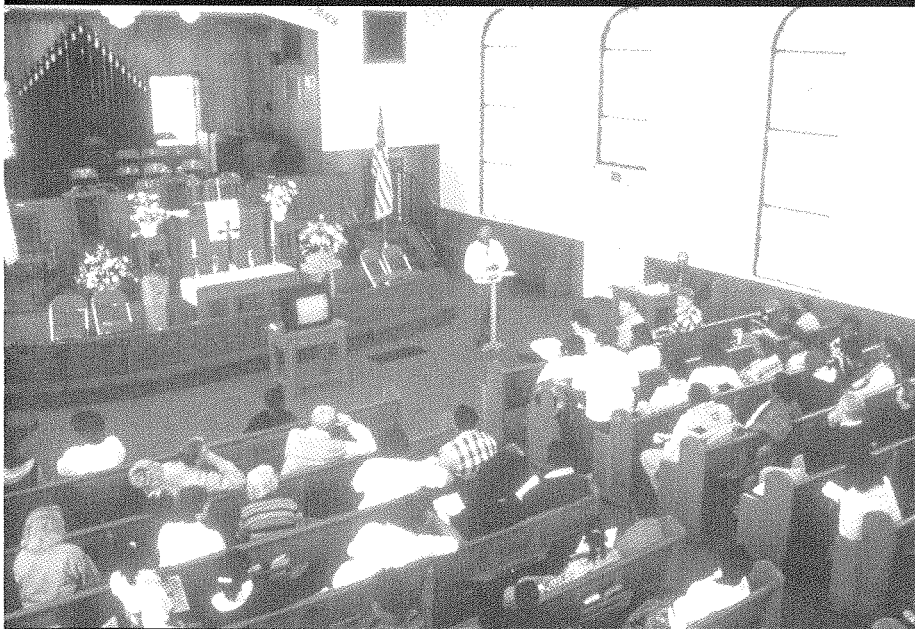
Thirty new and renovated homes fronted by airy porches and well-kept yards testify to the turnaround in the community's outlook. Residents are becoming homeowners and the neighborhood has changed its name from Sandy Bottom to Sandy Vista. With housing construction expected to be complete in 2002, the neighborhood-driven revitalization process has extended to the historic commercial district nearby.

Work began in 1990 when the Bethel-Ensley Action Task Force (BEAT), a local church-neighborhood alliance, was founded. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, whose brick building stands at the center of the neighborhood, was one of the few institutions remaining in the area. Many members of this long-established church had grown up in Sandy Bottom and were committed to reviving their childhood home. In a door-to-door survey, BEAT learned that residents considered decent housing their most urgent priority. Lacking experience in matters of housing or development, they asked Tuesday Group for help.

Tuesday Group is a non-profit organization of Birmingham architects, planners and engineers who provide low- and moderate-income neighborhoods with design services. Working in partnership with grassroots organizations, its mission is to use the planning, design and construction processes as a means of building true community.

Work began with a visioning and planning process. Between thirty and fifty volunteers from Tuesday Group, BEAT and the neighborhood met in the Bethel Church basement every Tuesday evening for more than a year. The first and most important question was "What is important to the members of this community?" The most important thing that Tuesday Group designers did at this point was to listen.

It was important for everyone involved to understand there was no quick fix. Residents need time to become comfortable with participation and decision-making. This was the first time that many had publicly expressed their concerns about the neighborhood's decline or their vision for its future. Indi-



One of the weekly community meetings held at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

drains were so inadequate that every rain brought significant flooding.

Now that is changing, thanks to a revitalization effort led by two nonprofits: a community development group known as BEAT and the volunteer design professionals of Tuesday Group.



Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

viduals began to realize the extent to which their values were shared by the larger community. Children saw their parents discuss their responsibilities and aspirations, and watched them take charge of their neighborhood's future. In the process, residents overcame fear and distrust, coming to know and recognize each other as neighbors.

Many design professionals approach this type of work on a consultation basis. They come in, blow out some ideas and leave believing they have done their part. Tuesday Group feels strongly that participants must invest themselves in a community long enough to understand its unique history, personalities, forces and resources. Only this kind of long-term commitment can result in the frank communication and trust essential to making a community design process work.

At the same time, residents with a long memory for broken promises needed immediate, tangible signs that change was underway. Events such as a clean-up day were important morale builders, attracting attention and participants from throughout the city, particularly from Birmingham's large religious community, which became a strong supporter of the effort.

During the first few months, BEAT participants and neighborhood residents identified five community goals that are still used to evaluate every design proposal. No one goal is considered any more important than the others:

- The church is the center of the community, both literally and symbolically.

- Safety, and the security it builds, is vital.
- The project must be inclusive: No one should be displaced by development, and the neighborhood should actively welcome newcomers.
- Children are important.
- Individuals must act together as a community.

These goals made it easier to evaluate the neighborhood's strengths and weaknesses and to propose development that would serve the community's best interests. Residents formed committees to explore appropriate solutions to issues like parking, street lighting, trees, setback distances, the orientation of houses and so on. Culs-de-sac were rejected in favor of retaining and strengthening the existing street grid. To encourage neighborliness, each new house would have a porch overlooking the street. Security alarms were chosen over burglar bars, which were considered inappropriate for the tone residents wanted to establish. With each decision, the residents were declaring their trust in and reliance on each other to provide security and a sense of community.

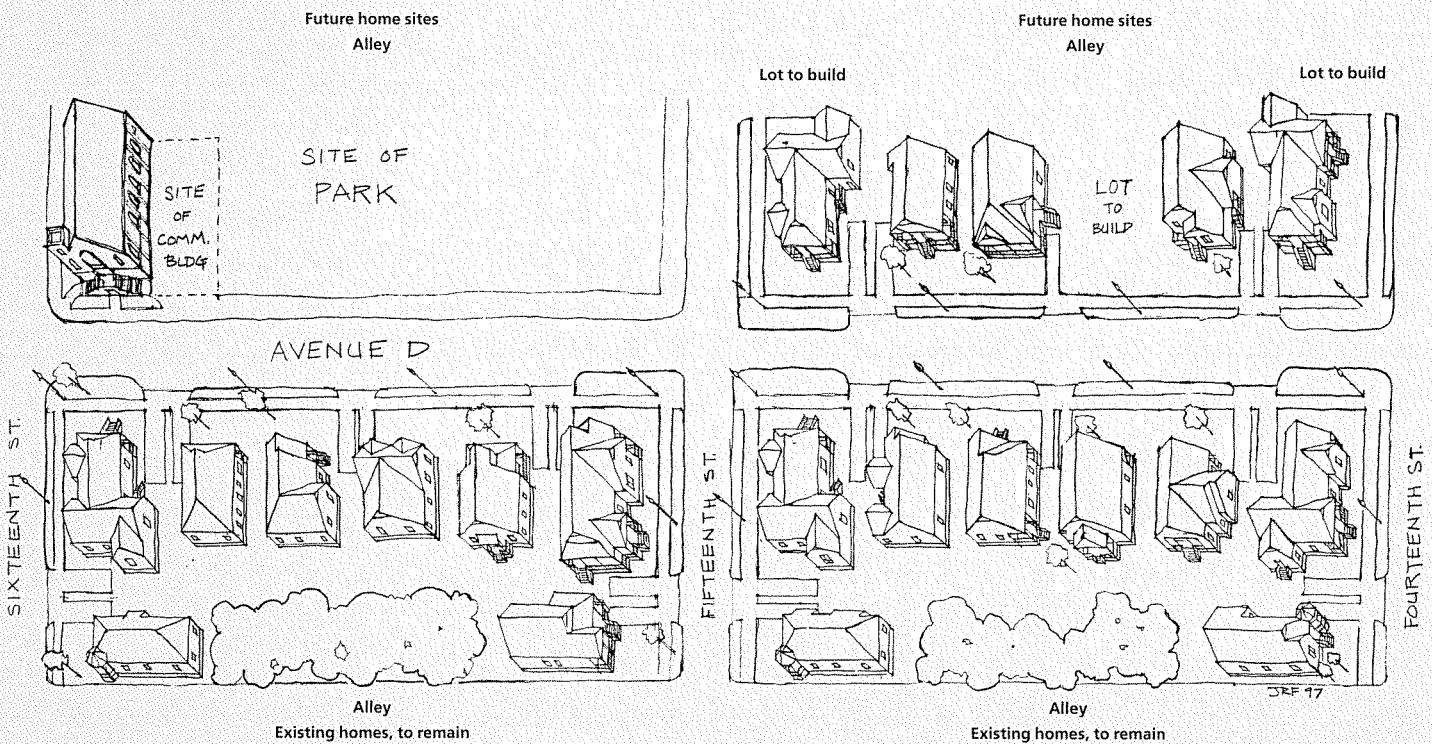
Tuesday Group's role was to organize these decisions so they followed a logical sequence. We were advising the community on how to become its own developer: we helped residents analyze the community's problems, understand specific design issues, set realistic goals and develop effective strategies. We also helped them network with other housing professionals, open doors to funding sources and negotiate with city officials and departments.

Land acquisition was an important early decision. Often groups acquire property in a scattered, piecemeal way, never putting together the critical mass necessary to make the significant, highly visible impact a revitalization effort requires in its early stages. We helped residents develop a master plan for the entire neighborhood first, then advised them on how the project could be accomplished in phases. When a single landowner effectively blocked development by holding out for an exorbitant price, the neighborhood was able to convince the city to exercise eminent domain.

With community input, the Tuesday Group developed design standards for new housing. For instance, standing-seam metal roofs were rejected because residents associated them with slave and low-income housing. Later, Tuesday Group architects worked one-on-one with each qualified homebuyer to design houses sensitive to their individual

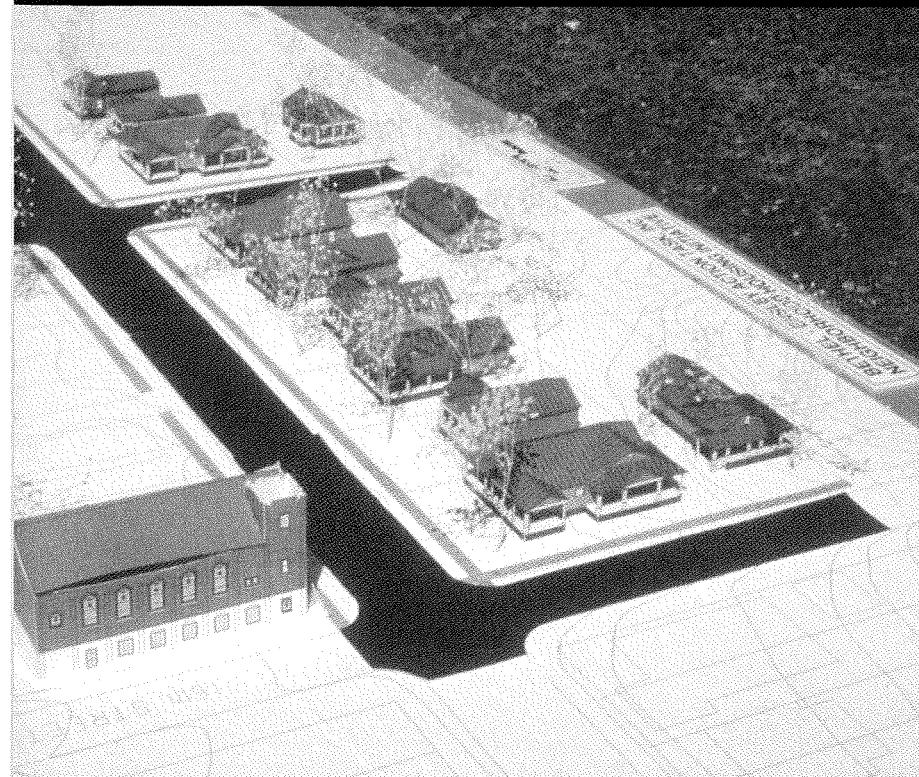
As families were moved from old to new housing, substandard buildings were torn down to make way for new development. Volunteer labor (much of it donated by local churches and corporations), discounted and donated building materials, and continuing oversight by Tuesday Group architects and engineers helped keep costs down and quality high.¹

Collective decision making took longer but did not pose a hardship. Discussion simply continued until consensus was reached. Sometimes this resulted in better solutions than professionals might have conceived on their own. For example, debate regarding housing for the elderly continued for months. A mid-rise building had been proposed, but it did not fit the neighborhood's scale or character. A resident finally suggested building rental duplexes at each corner. With porches facing two streets, the duplexes tie the neighborhood together, encouraging development to round the corners and prevent-



needs and values while staying within the parameters of affordable housing.

ing any one street address from becoming dominant. They integrate elderly residents into the fabric of the neighborhood and give them strategic positions from which to act as a natural block watch.



Tuesday Group is often approached by community groups that want it to provide a recipe for doing what was accomplished in Sandy Vista. Frequently, these groups want to focus on housing or some other highly visible aspect of the work, believing that if they only had a better physical environment the social benefits would somehow follow.

What they, and too many design professionals, fail to recognize is that the changes in Sandy Vista have their foundation in intensive, continuing community organizing. Sandy Vista's vitality depends on residents building relationships with each other, establishing a consensus about the kind of neighborhood they wish to live in and working hard—independently and collectively—to make it happen. The physical changes were not simply good choices from a menu of design options, but an outgrowth of specific community imperatives formulated by the residents themselves.

The biggest challenge and continuing struggle for every initiative Tuesday Group undertakes is convincing people to become and stay involved. In Sandy Vista, continual, basic community organizing was the responsibility of BEAT. This was combined with a "show, don't tell" approach in which patience with long-term planning was combined

with visible short-term accomplishments that demonstrated change was underway.

Every community is unique, and the methods used and solutions reached must suit the circumstances. Design solutions must be sought in the context of the other dimensions of a community's physical and social experience. This work is not a project to complete, it is a commitment to a different way to live.

Note

1. New single-family homes were subsidized in part through the use of grants from local, regional and national foundations, churches and civic groups. The city government helped by contributing land. When combined with the numerous donations of labor and materials, such cost reductions allowed low-income families to purchase homes worth approximately \$65,000 for about \$42,000. As each family assumed their new low-cost mortgage, money rejoined the revolving development fund.

Left: Proposed build-out of Sandy Vista neighborhood. Above: Examples of newly constructed and rehabilitated homes in Sandy Vista.