



The Promises and Realities of Data-Driven Community Development

Lessons from Memphis, Tennessee

Austin Harrison

Tennessee nonprofit Innovate Memphis has spent nearly a decade designing the Memphis Property Hub, a public data platform for community development corporations (CDCs). Austin Harrison asks if this is a replicable way to democratize neighborhood- and property-level data, so as to level the playing field between community organizers and well-resourced state and market actors, and bring community organizing back to the fore of urban CDCs' activities.

Over the past decade, city governments and non-profits have argued for harnessing the power of “big data” to make cities “smarter,” often in the guise of increasing effectiveness and efficiency. In every city or town that buys into this idea, what constitutes “smart” looks different. “Smart-city” efforts range from developing phone apps that help residents request a recycle bin to using crime data to target police presence. Regrettably, the latter can result in the over-policing of communities of color, reinforcing the realities of organized state abandonment or the idea that the state seeks to solve complex social challenges with the police state (Gilmore 2008). “Innovation” is applied to governmental priorities, where the sole state priority in many disinvested urban communities of color is policing. This has led to proprietors of the smart-city movement, such as New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, leveraging big data to support stop-and-frisk policing (Denvir 2019).

The use of crime data also points to the realities of smart-city programs and initiatives, well documented in criticisms over the last couple of decades (Clark 2020). There are neoliberal overtones in the idea of leveraging the power of the private sector to supposedly improve the lives of urban residents. Firms like Google, IBM, and Amazon are often directly or indirectly involved in smart-city efforts, hoping to bring Silicon Valley problem-solving to Main Street. These performative efforts can do more harm than good and often distract from creating not smart cities but smarter citizens, which some argue is the more equitable promise of open data (Shelton and Lodato 2019).

In the context of the smart-city movement, Memphis is an interesting case study because the city participated in the first cohort of the Bloomberg Foundation’s “Mayor’s Innovation Teams” in 2012, which allowed the former New York mayor to continue growing the data-driven smart-city movement, but through his philanthropic vehicle instead of City Hall. The foundation selected an initial pilot cohort of cities to launch these Mayor’s Innovation Teams (Wharton 2014). However, unlike in other cities, the mayor at the time, A. C. Wharton, thought the best way to sustain the effort in Memphis, particularly given his rocky relationship with City Council, was to create a 501(c)(3) organization called Innovate Memphis (IM).¹ IM remained the exception in the Bloomberg program through a series of additional “i-team” investments. The decision to launch the nonprofit created legal separation from City Hall, but most funding still came in the form of “Innovation Projects.” Here, the mayor would set a priority and, during budget season, City Council would often fund it. But in the near-decade following its creation, IM is now predominantly funded by philanthropy and project revenue. In 2019, IM launched their neighborhood indicators work,

¹ Website: <https://innovatememphis.com>.

freeing them up to prioritize the needs of the smart citizen through partnerships and services for CDCs and community-based organizations (CBOs). One of their most popular services is the Memphis Property Hub.² It was designed to help CDCs better understand their neighborhoods in the wake of the foreclosure crisis by aggregating and distributing property data in an easy-to-use way while providing critical, free technical assistance and training regularly to CDCs.

Memphis community-development exceptionalism

It is an open question whether most Memphis CDCs and CBOs are led by citizens and residents of the area where they work. But the lack of professionalization in the relatively nascent community development field in Memphis is an opportunity. Out of the more than 30 different CDCs legally active, many are led by current or former residents; community-development “professionals” are still relatively scarce in the Memphis area.

Given the primarily Northeastern origins of early CDCs and CBOs, Memphis did not have its first CDC until the late 1990s. Therefore, Memphis CDCs have been pushed towards the “bricks-and-sticks” side of development and away from the “rocking-the-boat” organizing tactics emblematic of earlier 1960s and ’70s CDCs. Yet, given the centralization of knowledge, expertise, and access to capital, only a handful of Memphis’s 30+ CDCs have ever completed even one brick-and-mortar development project. Still, the funding continues to prioritize “capital-D” development, creating a CDC ecology with very few CDCs having full-time staff. Most are resident-led and act much like a neighborhood association, and less like professional developers. This more nascent, less professionalized community-development sector is an opportunity to prioritize organizing and activism in conjunction with IM’s rejuvenated interest in smart citizens over smart cities.

What data-driven community development looks like

Memphis is a majority-Black city of 633,104 residents.³ It was hit hard by the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis, with as many as one in four single-family homes experiencing a foreclosure proceeding from 2000 to 2007 (Betts 2007). By 2012, when Memphis established Innovate Memphis, CDCs were still grappling with the crisis and the nearly 20,000 vacant properties it left concentrated in predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods (which make up most of the city’s neighborhoods) (Harrison 2020). When the newly elected mayor, Jim Strickland, sought to understand the extent of vacant and abandoned property in 2015, CDCs and neighborhood associations—active in these hardest-hit communities—proved vital in attracting over 100 residents who were compensated to conduct a citywide windshield survey.

Innovate Memphis, in partnership with the city’s Department of Neighborhood Improvement, used the Bluff City Snapshot, modeled after Detroit’s Motor City Mapping initiative, to serve as the foundation for a larger geospatial property and neighborhood-level database, the Memphis Property Hub. From its inception, the Property Hub’s key audience was CDC leaders and partners instead of government and real-estate developers. There were three reasons for this decision. First, Innovate Memphis and partners recognized that local CDCs and CBOs were at the forefront of mitigating impacts of foreclosures and abandoned properties, for which the data was aggregated and collected. Second, local data providers would only share granular information with assurance that it would be shared exclusively with nonprofits or academic partners. Third, the Property Hub quickly formed a working relationship with Memphis’s for-profit real-estate data provider in order to access some hard-to-obtain data sources such as foreclosures, evictions, and sale prices. The two groups had very different audiences.

² Website: <https://innovatememphis.com/data>.

³ Source: United States Census Bureau, 2020. The wider Memphis metropolitan area has a population of 1,337,779.

Focusing on the citizen and not the city had its challenges; the biggest was making a data tool useful to the masses and not just data scientists or analysts. This challenge was and is a moving target for Innovate Memphis and other similar efforts. But consistent training, technical assistance, engagement, and resident-driven iterations have fueled an evolution of the platform from a large flat table to an interactive mapping platform accessible from both a laptop and a smartphone. Moreover, it requires creating pre-made maps, dashboards, automated reports and the like to minimize the manual effort needed to have a widely usable tool. This required years of attending community meetings and speaking with neighborhood association leaders and CDC leaders to come up with a list of the same questions residents were asking of them, such as “Who owns X property?” or “What properties can we acquire from the County Land Bank?” or “Who are the serial evictors and where do they own property?”. Today, IM centers the Property Hub tool around these frequently asked questions and produces automated “neighborhood reports” that summarize this information in an easy-to-use format.

Memphis is not unique in seeking to leverage the power of open data for the public good. In fact, there is an entire network of similar groups convened by the Urban Institute called the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), as well as groups like PolicyMap out of The Reinvestment Fund. However, Memphis is unique in its prioritization and foregrounding of a CDC user base that has since expanded to make space for other forms of community organizing, such as CBOs and neighborhood associations. Putting CDCs, CBOs, and the like at the center of the smart-citizen movement has resulted in numerous success stories.

During Covid, as the public’s awareness of the potential eviction crisis rose, a group of local housing activists created the city’s first Tenants’ Union. At their first press conference, organizers cited staggering eviction statistics from before and during Covid as their impetus for founding the organization. The new union also began using geocoded eviction-filing data to determine in which complexes and neighborhoods they would prioritize outreach, organizing, and tenant education. In addition, Innovate Memphis incorporated a parcel-level eviction count in the Property Hub that allowed for the Memphis Tenants’ Union and other housing advocates to connect eviction filings to property owners and calculate serial filers. Armed with these data, MTU was able to capitalize on the increased attention on evictions to grow the organization, forge strategic partnerships, and track eviction rates at the property level. This has been particularly useful as Memphis housers have kept a close eye on the rollout of Emergency Rental Assistance and the impact those funds are having on eviction rates.

Around the same time, JUICE Orange Mound, a CBO in Orange Mound, Memphis’ oldest Black neighborhood, rallied their community around public data in their bottom-up planning initiative Mound Up.⁴ The CBO conducted its own property survey using IM’s platform to get their own data that could complement and update the existing information. These data, combined with many other publicly available datasets, including neighborhood reports, were used by resident leaders to highlight neighborhood inequities and attract new support from other residents. JUICE Orange Mound commissioned a Mound Up public art project comparing their key neighborhood indicators with wealthier adjacent neighborhoods. As a part of the planning process, JUICE worked with Memphis-based Rhodes College to conduct qualitative surveys of residents in the community. Surveys were presented alongside the neighborhood report. One longtime resident said afterwards, “I’ve been trying for decades to figure out what was really going on in my community and now I finally know.”

A replicable model?

While the Memphis Tenants’ Union and JUICE Orange Mound were launching these efforts in Memphis during 2020, the entire country was reminded how effective broad, sustained organizing

⁴ Website: www.moundup.org.

can be at the polls and in the streets. This raises the question of whether a CDC-/CBO-centric open-data strategy is a good way to, first, recenter organizing and power building in the CDC/CBO field and, second, emphasize the concerns of smart citizens and residents over those of the governing regime and civic hierarchy.

NNIP could provide a fertile ground for replication, as groups across the country are already finding other ways to develop citizen-facing tools. As mentioned previously, finding a solid network of CDCs/CBOs that have built the trust and agency of a specific community can be challenging work. There are certainly challenges to navigate, and every city is different. Still, hopefully this serves as a thought-provoking start and prompts the broader CDC/CBO field to re-examine ways public data access can drive coalition and power building at the hyper-local level.

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