

the Liberator

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THE TALE OF TWO CITIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH BO MCCARVER

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Written by: Frances Molina

I met with Bo McCarver on a muggy Tuesday afternoon at the Fannie Mae Conservatory, a renovated neighborhood monument and the epicenter of community activity for the Blackland Community Development Corporation (Blackland CDC). After a brief, cordial introduction we began. He started with the question that I had addressed to him in our email correspondence.

Did he believe the University of Texas was an active participant in the gentrification of the Eastside? No. Had that always been the case? No, not always.

McCarver treated me to the entire saga. Although the University of Texas has always had a considerable presence in the city of Austin, it did not start to assert itself on the Eastside until the 1980s. A housing boom in the early '80s served as the primary motivator for UT's eastward expansion. Fearing the valuable land might be snatched by other urban developers, UT's administration quickly made their move on the largely residential area. They argued for eminent domain and administration even went so far as to use the

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- o Kristi Kamesch racist, segregationist, and wildly outdated [Austin 1928 City Master Plan](#) to justify their annexation of the Eastside territory (the same plan that relegated and displaced African-American and Latinos from west to east Austin and institutionalized the segregation presently experienced in the city).

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As the University began its sixth annexation, panicked residents who were frightened by the rising taxes in the neighborhood, sold their houses to the University. Those who stayed to protest the rising taxes and the University's illegitimate claims to Eastside land formed the Blackland Community Development Corporation in 1983. The association battled legally with UT for 12 years before a settlement could be reached. The University, pressured by the newly elected Texas governor Ann Richards, ended its encroachment and signed a letter of agreement with the Blackland CDC. A common border was established at Leone St and both parties agreed not to trespass east or west respectively.

The year 1992 heralded an era of peace and mutuality. Moving forward, the University made efforts to establish positive relations with the Blackland CDC, donating a fully eco-efficient unit of housing to the neighborhood as well as more than one-thousand hours of volunteer labor from UT students for household renovation and community maintenance.

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Bo McCarver has remained through it all, along with many of the original neighborhood residents and the initial founders of the Blackland CDC. Recently, he reports, the problem of gentrification is on the more insidiously small scale. As chic restaurants and quirky eateries begin to crop up along the Eastside, pushing out local businesses and demolishing historic housing, upscale realtors and developers are making moves in the area as well.

“Would you like to see the tale of two cities?” McCarver asked at that point.

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We walked about a block from the conservatory to the end of the street where Bo said there was a “physical display of gentrification” I might be interested in seeing. He wasn’t exaggerating. The two houses, at the end of E. 22nd and Poquito St., couldn’t have been more different.

The older house had been donated by the University and refurbished into a duplex, with a bright yellow paintjob, a healthy lawn, and a wraparound porch. A sign on the lawn read “The Johnson House: Affordable Housing by the Blackland Community Development Corporation”. The newer house, unoccupied and still on the market, was a gray boxy structure with a yard of gravel and a four foot fence surrounding the perimeter. As we stood on the lawn of the Johnson House and stared at the empty modern structure across the street, McCarver seemed deeply upset. “This house, and whoever moves into it, will create a social hole in the community.” He paused to wave at a cyclist who passed down Poquito St. “Look at that fence – that was made to keep people out. None of the people on this street are going to get to know their new neighbors”.

The striking contrast





between the two houses really spoke volumes to the exclusionary changes that constantly threatened to overtake the community. New, ritzy houses like the one I had seen meant rising taxes and eventually, even more new upscale developments crowding into the neighborhood. McCarver recognized that this was more than a community-based issue. The only way for Eastside residents to find some kind of solution for the seemingly inevitable tide of economic and cultural change was to impact state and city policies. McCarver explained to me that while inclusionary zoning requires that all new developments include a certain percentage of affordable housing, this is difficult to accomplish in Texas. Realtors looking to make generous profits are backed by a conservative legislature that seems reluctant or even uninterested in addressing the issue.

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Despite the mounting challenges that face the Eastside and its residents, Bo McCarver seems resolute. He's confident that the University of Texas will uphold its agreement with the Blackland CDC. As for fending off high-end developers eager for land in the area, the most many residents of the neighborhood can do is protest their steadily rising taxes to the city.

I arrived at my interview with a number of assumptions about the University's relationship with Austin's eastside: that UT was perniciously plotting for Eastside land, turning older residents out on the streets to build tennis courts and parking lots for stadium games. I left with most if not all of my assumptions refuted. It is easy to look at the problems of gentrification and economic exclusion on the Eastside, and the parties involved, as black and white, good and bad. However, my conversation with Bo McCarver helped me to

realize the complexity of these difficult situations. Despite its lack of sensationalism, the story of the Blackland CDC and the Eastside deserves the continuous and conscious consideration of the ever-expanding population at the University of Texas and in the city of Austin.

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