



# Old Money, New Nashville

## A Tale of Changing Wealth in Music City

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### ABSTRACT

The City of Nashville has grown rapidly in the past decade, bringing with it increased opportunity for the city, but also growing pains via displacement, gentrification, and congestion. This paper grapples with the dilemmas we have as planners when working in a place that we love and balancing nostalgia with desire for improvements in our communities.

Nashville rose phoenix-like from a flood in 2010 that took out much of its downtown riverfront, caused more than \$2 billion in private property damage, and \$120 million in public infrastructure damage.<sup>1</sup> This created new opportunities for investment in the downtown and Broadway area (Nashville's Las Vegas Strip), a street that toes the bounds between public and private. Most days of the week it is filled with bachelorette parties and musicians who moved to the city to pursue dreams of fame. Nashville is sprawling, hilly, and diverse. It is both a tourist destination and the Athens of the South, the home of Vanderbilt and Fisk Universities. To an aspiring planner, Nashville is the lover that would be perfect if only you could fix them just a little bit. You see the potential for musicians, researchers, entrepreneurs, and activists to thrive if only you could get your hands on some taxpayer dollars. The city has incredible community pride, resilience, diversity – and in this moment in history – wealth. Nashville's old wealth is concentrated in the Southern suburbs of Brentwood, Franklin, and Williamson County. Its new wealth is epitomized by the rapid development that has taken place on either side of the Cumberland River: on the tourist-studded Lower Broadway, or the formerly artsy and 'dangerous' (now-gentrified) East Nashville.

Part of the challenge for planners in Nashville stems from Tennessee's regressive income tax structure, which further exacerbates the divide between rich and poor in the city. Tennessee lacks a broad-based income tax and instead relies on higher sales taxes – the second-highest combined state and local sales tax rate in the nation – for state funding.<sup>2,3</sup> Tennessee provides \$2.5 billion annually in tax incentives to businesses, the fourth-highest business tax incentive rate in the nation.<sup>4</sup> Yet both Nashville and the State of Tennessee struggle to maintain balanced budgets and fund government operations. According to a 2018 report from the Sycamore Institute, for each dollar spent

by the state government, \$0.36 comes from federal funding. In 2017, Tennessee relied more heavily on federal revenue than all but four other states: Michigan, New Mexico, Mississippi, and Montana.<sup>5</sup> In early 2019, Nashville's Department of Finance issued a memo asking City departments to maintain their 2018 funding levels.<sup>6</sup> I can foresee a future in which the coming of Amazon further strains the city's already fiscally struggling infrastructure.

A second issue is less unique to Tennessee. Nashville is the urban capital of a largely rural state, a blue dot in a red sea. Despite the pull of population, the needs of the rest of the state and even suburban Davidson County make it difficult for the City government to pass measures to support the city's core. Unlike the Bay Area or the Denver Metro Region, Nashville lacks the regional cohesion between the business community and municipalities to push for a strong agenda of sustainable urban growth, mass transit, a more equitable tax system, affordable housing, or climate change resiliency. Lack of regional unity is highlighted in the debate around the failed May 2018 initiative to levy taxes to pay for an ambitious new transit system. A downtown automobile dealer (aided by the Koch Brothers) was the main opponent to the transportation levy, but the conflicting priorities of urban, suburban, and rural voters contributed substantially to the levy's failure. The vote fell (as was somewhat expected) along suburban and urban lines. Many progressives opposed the plan, fearing that it could serve to further gentrification and displacement.<sup>7</sup>

Nashville has heard this song and dance before. In 2014, a plan to unite East Nashville with the western part of the city via bus rapid transit failed. The same downtown automobile dealer opposed the plan. Residents of North Nashville, a traditionally African American and low-income neighborhood that – like the rest of the city – is now rapidly gentrifying, opposed the plan on the grounds that it did not address

the transit needs in their neighborhood. Finally, there was a contingent of wealthy West Nashville residents who didn't want lower-income "burger flippers" from East Nashville to access their community (it was a different time in Nashville's development; the East Nashville "burger flippers" have been replaced by social media influencers and tech bros).<sup>8</sup>



Figure 1: Mural of Downtown Nashville (Wikimedia Commons, 2011).

In October, I attended a Brentwood Zoning Board of Appeals meeting. Brentwood is a suburb of Nashville with approximately 41,524 people.<sup>9</sup> Brentwood is home to many country stars (allegedly), a bevy of malls, the birthplace of Ke\$ha, and a lot of wealthy people (the median household income is \$151,722).<sup>10, 11</sup> Having heard rumors about the size of the public library and the beauty of the municipality's civic buildings, I wanted to see for myself how the one-percent lives.

Brentwood City Hall is attractive but lacked the crystal chandeliers and hardwood floors of my imagination, nor did it feature the champagne toast or a cheese board of my fantasy. As far as civic buildings go, this one was unremarkable. Brentwood's money was clearly not going towards building government offices. Contrasted with the shiny new condos in East Nashville or the office buildings on Music Row, Brentwood's wealth has manifested in the destruction of backyards to construct oversized pool houses. The planning board was made up

of a selection of old, probably wealthy, white men. The lack of diversity was unsurprising, considering that 86.7 percent of the population in Brentwood is white.<sup>12</sup> On the agenda for discussion were proposals for two pool houses (one of which was almost the size of my three-bedroom ranch house in another Nashville suburb) and a barn. Twenty-five minutes and three Accessory Structure Request approvals later, the meeting was over.

The meeting was free of controversy and, frankly, a bit boring. Little consideration was given to the impact of proposed projects beyond the line of sight of the neighbors. Importantly, the property owners were all affluent enough that they could hire architects and contractors to make sure that the building designs were up to code and that construction would be done in ways that would not contaminate drinking water or overload the power grid. Entering a zoning board meeting and being confident that your project will pass with flying colors is a luxury not afforded to all Nashvillians. For the pool houses, the zoning board meeting almost felt like a formality, an official handshake and stamp of approval for buildings that there was never any doubt would be constructed. The whole meeting felt very removed from the rapid growth and change in the 'New' Nashville.



Figure 2: Downtown Nashville (Wikimedia Commons, 2016).

The type of money in Nashville feels manic, unsustainable, and threatening to the way of life of my musician and artist friends, my friends of color, my friends who are activists and public servants, and to my own future as a planner in the city. As a planner, you know that the city could benefit from property tax dollars and that increasing density in Nashville could help maintain affordability and sustainability in this auto-centric town. With the mismatch between community needs and development priorities, every single-family home in a historically black neighborhood destroyed to turn into two \$250,000 tall, skinny condos is a personal affront. The pool houses and accessory barns discussed in the Brentwood planning meeting feel far removed from the type of development going on 30 minutes up the road.

When I drive through Nashville, I am always struck by how quickly it changes. Former gas stations become the skeletons of condos. Bobby's Idle Hour, a dive bar on Music Row where you would hear songs from old men that could make you weep, is slated to close next week. Bobby's will be replaced by an upscale office building designed to house music industry businesses, the Nashville equivalent of a subdivision named after the natural feature that it replaced.<sup>13</sup> Pangea, the hippie store in Hillsboro Village where my coffee shop co-workers and I spent our tips on turquoise jewelry and postcards, announced that it was closing in early January. I would not be shocked if it were replaced by a boutique catering to wealthy 20-year-old white Vanderbilt students, or a bank.

Change in Brentwood seems to occur at a more glacial pace, and the reluctance to change funding structures, invest in transit, or address the growing economic divide feels like a holdover from the old money, old guard of power in Nashville. The city still has a bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general and the KKK's first Grand Wizard in the state capital. Despite the hard work by

activist groups and protests that eventually led to attempts by former Governor Bill Haslam to remove the statue, it remains.<sup>14</sup> You can dress the city up with Amazon, bachelorette parties, and coworking spaces, but you can't change Nashville's history.

When I visit my friends in Nashville, whether I'm seeing my friend who bought a house when she was 25 with a VA loan and an associate's degree (the kind of story about upward mobility and the American Dream that I did not believe existed post-Baby Boom), or visiting the craftsman-style house another friend shares in East Nashville with four musicians in their late 30s, I feel a nostalgia for the Nashville that existed when they moved there. That Nashville was cheaper and allegedly more fun, devoid of the types of issues that, upon hearing what you do for a living, make people exclaim, "we could sure use some urban planning around here!"

This is the same nostalgia I hear about the Denver of the early 2010s, the Ann Arbor of the 1970s, or the Austin that everyone strives to keep weird. I am often dismissive when my friends who grew up in Nashville or have lived there several decades complain about the changes they have seen in their time in the city. My friend who played pedal steel guitar for Hank Williams III waxes poetic about the house he rented for \$400 off Music Row in the early 2000s. Another friend joked with me that Nashville, like Austin, Denver, Ann Arbor, or any other 'hip' and rapidly gentrifying town, was always better 10 years ago. This kind of attitude irks me: after all, 10 years ago, I would not have lived there! The constant cycle of music business hopefuls, artists, and locals is part of what makes the city so culturally rich. Yet with every change to my neighborhood, I feel the same sort of anger and sadness reflected in my older friends.

As a planner, one must balance personal nostalgia with one's duty to help the most vulnerable in the city. But in the

United States, one's hands are also tied by developers and the need to follow the money and potential taxpayer dollars. As one Nashville planner shared, it does no good to throw the baby out with the bathwater – Nashville can have a nice public transit system, beautiful office buildings, affordable housing, and dive bars.

The challenge for urban planners in the 'new' Nashville rides on the ability to balance the urban and suburban interests with limited funding and statewide support while avoiding becoming a pawn of capitalism. The 'new' Nashville – a southern business hub and future home to Amazon's new "Operations Center of Excellence" – may not hold space for the nostalgia of my music friends.<sup>15</sup> I can only hope that it continues to hold space for them. By the same token, would Nashville hold the same appeal if it were not Music City? The anxiety shared by my friends and

me is not simply about rising rents; we worry that new industry will continue to push out so much of what makes Nashville special. Yet as a planner, I cannot stick my head in the sand and request a NIMBY-ed 'old' Nashville stagnation for the city. To a certain extent, planners must accept that there will be new development, and do what they can to attempt to bridge the gap between what is being built and the needs of the community. With or without my blessing, the city will continue to change, whether it is at the rapid pace of 'new' Nashville development or the slow pace of the 'old' wealth growth in Brentwood. Music hopefuls from all over the country continue to flock to Music City in hopes of becoming the next Hank Williams, Tim McGraw, or Taylor Swift. The wrecking ball hits Bobby's Idle Hour, and a family is pushed further into the suburbs. Through it all, the Cumberland River flows. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Janney Lockman grew up in West Virginia. After attending Oberlin College, she lived in Colorado and Nashville, where she worked in jobs from technical writing to bartending and tour managing prior to attending University of Michigan's Master of Urban and Regional Planning program. Her planning interests lie in rural economic development, transportation equity, and planning interventions for the opioid epidemic.*

## ENDNOTES

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