THE FORMATION OF PLACE BASED IDENTITIES IN GENTRIFIED EAST NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

by Brent Adam Eysenbach

Place-based identities can have a determining effect on redevelopment trends in gentrifying neighborhoods. Beyond traditional considerations of rent-gaps and capital opportunities, the pace, people, and perceptions of a gentrifying neighborhood determine the way a place is framed and understood by gentrifiers themselves. This paper looks at East Nashville as an illustration of how gentrification can influence the development of a place-based identity. Beginning in the mid-1970s East Nashville slowly emerged as a neighborhood for potentially significant revitalization. Popular media now considers this neighborhood to be in league with New York’s East Village, with regard to its new young, hip, bohemian residents. The question remains as to how this unique identity will shape future patterns of development. How will the identity that formed from the hybrid of bohemian authenticity and gentrifying elitism sustain itself? Will the residents and issues that sparked the revitalization remain relevant as the neighborhood continues to develop?
Table of Contents

Table of Contents............................................................................ ii
List of Table.................................................................................... iv
List of Photos................................................................................... v
List of Maps..................................................................................... vi
Dedication......................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgements.......................................................................... viii

Chapter One: The Context of East Nashville, Tennessee................. 1
1.1 The important Issues in East Nashville........................................ 1
1.2 A Prototypical Urban Neighborhood............................................. 2
1.3 “Hipsters and hoopties”................................................................. 4
1.4 Research Questions........................................................................ 6
1.5 Summary of Chapters.................................................................. 7

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework................................................... 9
2.1 Introduction to Conceptual Framework........................................... 9
2.2 Gentrification: Disparate Theories, Similar Outcomes............... 11
2.3 Identity..................................................................................... 14
2.4 Community.............................................................................. 17
2.5 Conclusion to Conceptual Framework.......................................... 19

Chapter 3: Methods.......................................................................... 21
3.1 Introduction to methods............................................................... 21
3.2 In-depth Interviews...................................................................... 21
3.3 Discourse Analysis...................................................................... 25
3.4 Observation............................................................................... 27
3.5 Conclusion to methods............................................................... 27

Chapter 4: Analyzing Identity in East Nashville......................... 29
4.1 Introduction............................................................................... 29
4.2 Gentrification Narratives: One size does not fit all.................. 29
4.3 Identifying the Identity............................................................... 35
4.4 Intensification of identities
   4.4.1 Signs and symbols
   4.4.2 Buy East…guilt of going West
   4.4.3 Festivals
4.5 Competition between identity ideals
   4.5.1 Neighborhood associations
   4.5.2 New-comers and old-timers
   4.5.3 Spectrum of gentrifiers
   4.5.4 East Nashville’s *Other Half*
4.6 Conclusion to Data Analysis and Results

Chapter 5: Conclusion
5.1 Systems of longevity
5.2 Is there enough space to grow?
5.3 Who is the maintenance of identity dependent upon?

6. References
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1</th>
<th>Interview Sample</th>
<th>22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
List of Photos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Capitol Hill Slum</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Tennessee Housing Project (for whites only)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>East Nashville street scene</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Historic East End Neighborhood Sign</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Historic Edgefield Street Signs &amp; Neighborhood Sign</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Lockeland Springs Historic Neighborhood Sign</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Yazoo Brewing Company ‘37206’ T-Shirt Design</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Martins Corner ‘37206 Building’ Sign</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Five Points Wall Mural</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>12th Street South &amp; Forrest Street Fence Mural</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Riverside Village Community Mural</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Tomato Arts Fest advertisement</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>East End Market, Throwing Tomatoes</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>East End Market, Demolished</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>Hot Chicken Festival</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>Inglewood Cherry Blossom Festival</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Maps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map 1</th>
<th>Historic East Nashville</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

For Sarah
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Chapter One: East Nashville

1.1 The important issues

East Nashville is a collection of neighborhoods with an identity crisis. It struggles to situate itself amidst the different aspects of its past. East Nashville emerged as a budding Industrial Revolution suburb in the Nineteenth Century, experienced significant turbulence during its checkered middle years, and is reinventing itself as a chic urban neighborhood in the Twenty-First Century. Diversity amongst residential demographics, business types, and available housing are emblematic of the latest incarnation of East Nashville. The convergence of this diversity in such a dense area results in varying opinions as to the character and make-up of the neighborhood. In short, a mix of amenities exists to accommodate the lifestyles of the different populations that live in East Nashville. Examples include century old Victorian mansions to project-based housing complexes, organic green grocers to corner bodegas, fine dining restaurants to hole-in-the-wall fried chicken shacks. The coming together of the urban poor with a new generation of the middle-class is happening all over the country. A major issue is how to integrate the two cultures that have been separated for so long.

Future development trends have becomes a recurring issue within the communities of East Nashville. When defining a generalized spectrum of neighborhood sentiments, one sees a large gray area framed by its extremes. Interviews I conducted reveal that a segment of the population prefers the removal of the stereotypical amenities associated with low income populations in order to make way for new up-scale services. Conversely, attitudes of some lower income residents reflect a feeling that the newcomers are encroaching upon the neighborhood which they have called home for many decades. This thesis supports the idea that a vast majority of East Nashville residents likely fall into varying shades of gray that comprise the middle of the spectrum. These people tend to embrace diversity and enjoy the eclectic mix of options that East Nashville provides while still interested in forming the community into a place amenable to their personal ideals. My primary mode for uncovering trends in neighborhood development was interviews with residents. These interviews focused on development through the context of varying place-based identities associated with East Nashville. Focusing on these place-based identities allowed me to trace a number of narratives that describe the early stages of gentrification up through the present.
The term identity will be used throughout this thesis so a definition is in order. Identity can be defined in a number of ways. In simple terms identity is the condition of what a thing is. I later establish some methods by which one can ascertain how identity is constructed. This thesis traces the rise of gentrification within East Nashville through the unique identities of the gentrifiers who continue to settle the neighborhoods. Through careful analysis of in-depth interviews I detail the predominant identities, how residents express those identities, how the identities compete, and ultimately the durability of those identities within the community. Finally, this thesis looks at the link between the character of the community and its impact on the future development of East Nashville.

1.2 A Prototypical Urban Neighborhood

Founded in 1779, Nashville sits on the banks of the Cumberland River. During the Nineteenth Century, its geographic location as a river port made it an important industrial city. Many of Nashville’s elites moved to the bluffs above the eastern bank of the Cumberland during the late 1800s. The area that became known as East Nashville originally consisted of the Edgefield neighborhood, farms, and vast tracts of pasture land moving further away from the city. Map 1 illustrates the proximity of the Historic East Nashville neighborhoods to the Cumberland River and the central business district.
During the first half of the Twentieth Century the built environment of East Nashville expanded further east into the adjacent farmland, giving rise to new neighborhoods such as East End, Lockeland Springs and eventually Inglewood, Nashville’s first suburb. A white middle-class demographic occupied these neighborhoods in the mostly segregated South of the mid-1900s. Project based housing built in Edgefield during the Urban Renewal process of the 1950s and 1960s housed people who were displaced from the downtown Capitol Hill slum.

In conjuncture with this building project, Interstate 24 emerged on the east side of the Cumberland River which cut off the once affluent East Nashville from the downtown core. The remaining middle-class soon left for the burgeoning suburbs. The vacated properties gradually changed ownership to lower-income minority residents. I interviewed Helen¹, a long term resident who was born in East Nashville, described the changes in terms of the effect on the landscape. She said; “They put the projects there…and there were beautiful mansions that they took down just for that. Wherever you stick the projects the property value does not go up” (original emphasis). This firsthand account of neighborhood transformation highlights the process that occurred in many other American cities of that era. Urban Renewal isolated poor and minority residents of the city which in turn lead to neighborhood decline and crime (Massey and Denton, 1993; Barlow, 2003). East Nashville was considered an undesirable part of the city for much of the 1970s and 1980s. This attitude was expressed by the middle-class residents that recently left. This perception fueled by the poor condition of the housing stock, crime, and lack of amenities in some ways still persists today.

¹ Pseudonyms are used in this thesis to protect the anonymity of my interview subjects.
Beginning in the mid-1970s, a few middle-class families moved back into East Nashville. As I describe in further detail later, these urban pioneers arrived back to a neighborhood rampant with crime and neglected housing stock (Kreyling, 2006). In the 1990s, a greater middle class interest in East Nashville reemerged. This renewed interest in the area had all the indicators of gentrification (Smith, 1982).

Many see the Spring of 1998 as a turning point in the revitalization of East Nashville (Kreyling, 1999a). A deadly tornado tore through Nashville and caused damaged to an estimated 300 homes in East Nashville alone. In addition, the tornado uprooted hundreds and toppled over telephone and electricity poles (NOAA, 2009). The damage was too extensive for some people; they simply sold or abandoned their homes and moved on. For others, the massive influx of insurance money and the focused city clean-up effort provided the catalyst needed for continued, if not enhanced, revitalization efforts. Over the next decade, the gentrification process took hold and changed the landscape of East Nashville.

1.3 “Hipsters and hoopties”

Over the past thirty-five years, and more dramatically within the last decade, East Nashville has undergone some significant social, economic, and cultural changes. These changes have influenced the way that residents and the larger community view the area. Evidence shows that residents, business owners, and developers promote and reproduce these changes in an attempt to enhance the image of East Nashville. I use the tornado and the subsequent development as a point of departure for studying perceptions of East Nashville and how it influences place-based identities. Gentrification as a process is at the heart of East Nashville’s recent development. Additionally, many of the place-based identities I will detail have strong gentrifying tendencies at their core. These gentrifying tendencies are highlighted by East Nashville’s seeming resilience during the recent economic crisis. Housing prices continue to soar in old-guard neighborhoods such as Edgefield, Lockeland Springs, and East End. The desire to name East Nashville as home resulted in many newcomers seeking comparable homes at affordable rates in adjacent neighborhoods such as Cleveland Park, Greenwood, and Maxwell. Just ten years ago these neighborhoods were not even on the radar of many East Nashville residents because of lingering problems associated with urban blight. I point to this strong desire to live in East Nashville as an indicator of place-based attachment; the side effect of which is the
continued expansion of gentrification. This thesis traces the narratives of some people who find East Nashville such an attractive place to live and why.

One idea that has gained popularity lately is that East Nashville is a place for young people to live and socialize. I explore in later chapters the emergence and durability of this popularization; but for now I illustrate at least one of the discourses that prevail in East Nashville. This discourse highlights the perceived character of the neighborhood as it continues to grow and gain popularity. The increased trendiness in the website of Historic East Nashville’s Merchant Association (HENMA) advertises this idea on their webpage:

Historic East Nashville has been coined by Budget Travel Magazine as “Nashville’s version of New York’s East Village”. Always growing, thriving, eclectic, historic and hip, East Nashville has become one of the city’s most-desired areas to live and work (HENMA, para.2).

Jack Silverman, a contributor to The Nashville Scene, a weekly entertainment newspaper, wrote a poetic introduction juxtaposing images of the ‘old’, grittier East Nashville with those of the ‘new’ neighborhood. In doing so the columnist reinforces the idea that East Nashville changed for the better in some way, but clings to the vestiges of its recent past as a form of credibility derived from living in a rough and tumble urban neighborhood. He wrote, “…[M]y beloved neighborhood, East Nashville – that fabled haven of hipsters and hoopties, crepe pans and crack pipes, tomatoes, tornados and bagels and Glocks…” (Silverman, 2009, para. 1). Silverman’s sentiments at once capture the fabled and infamous aspects of the area while alluding to the new beginnings in his imagery of the 1998 tornado and the tomato, a reference to the wildly popular Tomato Arts Festival (later detailed in this thesis).

A 2006 article in Tennessee Living acknowledges the storied past but goes on to indicate a return to an ideal of a bygone era. The author wrote, “This neighborhood [East Nashville], once thought of as an eyesore of Music City, has risen. East Nashville is back to how things used to be” (Bruce, 2006, p.3). Three years later Southern Living was again singing the praises of East Nashville. In an article titled “The South’s Best Comeback Neighborhoods” the magazine
lists a series of “...neighborhoods that were once down on their luck but are now re-surring with community pride” (Perry, 2010, p.1). The section about East Nashville states; “After 10-plus years of a slow and steady rise, the neighborhood has managed to keep is eclectic, artsy vibe while welcoming a diverse mix of newcomers” (Perry, 2010, p.11).

In addition to advertising East Nashville as a ‘comeback’ neighborhood the article alludes to the idea that a mix of people calls this place home. Perry’s accompanying photo does not necessarily portray the mix to which the article alludes – white couples, a young child and dog visually convey a sense of the imagined (to some) neighborhood ideal. This photo illustrates the idea of family values and shared community space in the neighborhood, even though the article proclaims and almost embraces the “eclectic” and “artsy” vibe present in the area.

These few examples from articles written about East Nashville highlight a discourse which produces a certain character dominant in the neighborhood. Throughout this thesis, I use this idea of a dominant neighborhood identity to understand the process of gentrification within East Nashville.

1.4 Research Questions

My primary research question is: How does the development of a place-based identity unfold through the process of gentrification in East Nashville, Tennessee? I investigate more fully how the spatial politics of identity is enacted by East Nashville gentrifiers at the neighborhood scale. Three sub-questions further contextualize my primary inquiry.

1) What socio-economic forces are at work in transforming East Nashville? From interpreting information gathered during extensive interviews, I gleaned from residents that gentrification is an ongoing process in East Nashville. Furthermore, in the process of analyzing the interviews I determined what type of gentrification is occurring; that is to say whether the gentrifiers taking up residence are urban pioneers, regentrifiers/financifiers, or parent-gentrifiers (Smith, 1996; Lees, 2000; Hankins, 2007). Understanding the dynamics of gentrification helped to provide a further contextual base for understanding the variety of identities present in the neighborhood. I analyze this by uncovering the motivations of the gentrifying residents I interviewed to determine how they identify themselves.

2) How do the neighborhood identities of East Nashville influence redevelopment trends? The concepts of neighborhood and community are the starting point for understanding this question. Knowing the differences and some similarities of those two ideas is key to unlocking
the boundaries or extent of what residents imagine to be East Nashville. Neighborhood tends to be a fixed location that has a set of specified boundaries. Community on the other hand is “a group of people who share common culture, values, and/or interests, based on social identity and/or territory…” (Martin, 2009a, p.103). In East Nashville, ambiguity exists as to the exact extent of what constitutes a neighborhood and community. In some sense the deployment of both concepts by East Nashvillians is scalar in nature. Tony, an East Nashville resident I interviewed, remarked, “People from the Eastside can speak the Eastside lingo. They know the different neighborhoods and what it means when someone says they’re from the Edgefield neighborhood as opposed to the Cleveland neighborhood. It seems likes the rest of the city just lumps this whole area together as East Nashville.” This comment highlights the conceptual differences people in Nashville hold about their section of the city. I accomplish this task by uncovering the dominant place-based identities in East Nashville and looking for the influence of them on the landscape.

3) How will the place-based identities that formed from the socio-economic changes in the neighborhood sustain themselves? Gentrification is not just about housing but also about changes in amenities and lifestyle (Smith, 2002). I use this question to derive an understanding of how the process of gentrification changes not only the physical nature of a neighborhood but also how it changes the way a neighborhood is perceived. Following Mark Purcell’s (2001) argument that home owner activism is spatially motivated; it stands to reason that home owners take action in a neighborhood that does not match their vision of the “suburban ideal”. The concept of the suburban ideal as analyzed through the frame of gentrification demonstrates how a homeowner content in his/her own domain will expand beyond the confines of his/her house and seek to reshape his/her block, neighborhood, or community. The politics and activities of gentrified neighborhood associations demonstrate how residents take an active role in the development and maintenance of their neighborhood identity by seeking to produce a physical and cultural landscape that matches their suburban ideal. I investigate this phenomenon by interviewing active members of the community about their perceptions of East Nashville.

1.5 Summary of Chapter

The original intent of this thesis was to uncover and analyze a unitary neighborhood identity that could, in general terms, describe East Nashville and its residents as a whole. A persistent challenge throughout the course of my research was establishing meaningful contacts
with East Nashville’s minority and low-income communities. As a result the thoughts and opinions of the minority and low-income communities are conspicuously absent from this thesis. However, these communities represent a significant population within the East Nashville neighborhoods my research focused on and it is necessary to get some sense of that community to provide context to this research as a whole. In the absence of that data I rely on comments made during interviews with my mainly white middle-class interview subjects to get a sense of how they see the low-income and minority populations in East Nashville.

In Chapter 2, I examine the concepts of gentrification, identity and community. I look at the academic literature to draw connections between these separate, but related, ideas. This literature constitutes the theoretical support of my thesis. The thread woven between these three concepts forms the basis of my data analysis. Chapter 3 demonstrates the methods I used to collect data. I primarily employed in-depth interviews with residents and local leaders to uncover a narrative about East Nashville. Additionally, I used discourse analysis to understand the meaning of various signs, symbols, news articles, and more. The combination of these two methods allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of East Nashville as a place and also within the broader context of Nashville as a city. In Chapter 4, I use the narratives of the in-depth interviews to interpret the stories of East Nashvillians. The literature from Chapter 2 supports and highlights key aspects of the interviews. Similarly, I rely on the literature to help uncover the covert meanings of various discourses within Nashville, and more specifically East Nashville. Chapter 5 focuses on my assessment of East Nashville’s revitalization and growing / changing neighborhood identities. I elucidate the idea of neighborhood identity as a fleeting idea. I suggest there are much larger issues around which neighborhoods can rally; and in that process of unity, truly find the sense of community they seek. I contribute to the literature of gentrification and neighborhood identity in a way that redirects focus from the present to the long-term durability of neighborhoods.
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction to Conceptual Framework

Over the past 10 years East Nashville experienced a “rebound” from a community that was “down on its luck” to one that is “re-surging with community pride” (Perry, 2010, p.1). The social and economic upgrades throughout East Nashville’s neighborhoods are evidence of this rebound. Recent media accounts and information gathered from my interview subjects suggests this socio-economic rebound can be classified as gentrification. I use the assertion that East Nashville is gentrifying as a jumping off point for my research to determine the effects of gentrification on the character or identity of the neighborhoods.

In order to unpack the complexities of how gentrification affects place-based identity I have to ask some important questions to help formulate a path to my research. As an overarching objective I seek to determine how the development of place-based identity unfolds through the process of gentrification in East Nashville, Tennessee. Breaking this question down into two sub-questions further focuses my research on the root aspects the issue: what socio-economic forces are at work in transforming East Nashville? and how do the place-based identities of East Nashville influence redevelopment trends? Finally, to guide my understanding of the data I collected and develop some generalizations I seek to answer the question: Will the place-based identities that formed, in part, around a ‘grassroots’ redevelopment effort sustain themselves? I use quotations around the word grassroots because of the ambiguity of its meaning. The term implies that a movement is created and driven by a community. Grassroots also implies that the movement developed spontaneously as opposed to being created within the context of traditional power structures. In my interviews with East Nashville’s urban pioneers the term grassroots was often used when describing their earlier efforts of redevelopment. Upon taking a step back however, it can be argued that the redevelopment efforts of the urban pioneers took place within the context of power and money in a dilapidated community; thus running counter to the definition of grassroots. For the purpose of this thesis I continue to use the term for sake of continuity and authenticity to my research subjects original intentions.

To arrive at an understanding of these topics I first looked to the literatures of gentrification, identity and community. Separately these areas describe East Nashville quite well. Rehabilitation of neglected housing stock in the wake of Urban Renewal provides evidence of gentrification -- gentrification being defined as the upgrading of lower-income housing stock
by the middle-class often resulting in the displacement of the former occupants. From my personal experience I have seen a variety of outward identity expressions as diverse as the people who call East Nashville home. Finally, community emerges in the either genuine or imagined cooperation evident among some East Nashville citizens. However, the territory I explore sits at the intersection and along the seams of these literatures. Understanding these geographic concepts and how they relate to each provides a better understanding of socio-economic conditions within the East Nashville.

With regard to gentrification, I focus primarily on the two dominant theories in the field. Production-side theory focuses on the land and capital investment and broadly considers that a piece of land producing below the desired market rate will ultimately be bought and sold for progressively high values until it reaches its full potential (Smith, 1987). Conversely, the consumption-side theory favors the socio-cultural motivations of the gentrifiers above that of land value (Ley, 1994). It claims that the arc of gentrification in any neighborhood more closely correlates with the development of particular amenities. Examining the process of gentrification in East Nashville through the lens of two primary competing theories Smith (1987) and Ley (1994) uncovered the complex nature of the residents in terms of their relationship with their neighborhood. I consider it necessary for a neighborhood to have both low but steadily increasing land values as well as features that are attractive to the migrating middle-class in order for it to successfully gentrify. The first condition was satisfied in part by a housing boom in the early-2000s and the previous state of neglected in the neighborhood. These conditions provided an abundance of inexpensive housing stock at the same time capital was readily available to purchase and renovate the distressed housing.

In East Nashville I identified two emergent subjects that satisfy the second condition of a gentrifying neighborhood. The first is the unique neighborhood identity of East Nashville. Multiple media sources describe the neighborhood identity as eclectic and artsy. Later in this thesis, I solidify the reported neighborhood vibe by describing some new amenities and features of East Nashville. Using the idea of materialization of discourse (Schein, 1997) helps in interpreting the development of particular amenities. The cliché “if you build it; they will come” I reinterpret to mean “if you build it [according to the dominant community character]; they [those seeking tailored amenities] will come. In this sense start-up businesses provide the mode for neighborhood identity to be produced, consumed, and reproduced further reinforcing the
dominant discourse in the area. A similar emergent subject that attracts people to East Nashville is the sense or provision of a community. For now I employ the term community in its colloquial sense; later on I will explore the deeper theoretical meanings of community. As noted earlier there was a sense of nostalgia to which newcomers seem attracted. This nostalgia seems to refer back to a romanticized suburban ideal (Purcell, 2001) wherein everyone in the neighborhood knew each other’s names and where early evening walks or a stop in at the local diner would lead to happen chance conversations with friendly neighbors. Understanding that desire helps to inform and guide this thesis.

2.2 Gentrification: Disparate Theories, Similar Outcomes

Ruth Glass first used the term gentrification in a British context in the mid-1960’s to describe the rehabilitation of rundown housing stock by the ‘gentry’ in working-class neighborhoods (Glass, 1964). In 1960s Britain the gentry represented the highest ranking class of propertied individuals below nobility. Today gentrification is “middle-class settlement in renovated or redeveloped properties in older, inner-city districts formerly occupied by lower-income populations” (Ley, 2009, p.273). Over the decades the term blossomed as a particularly rich source of theoretical debate within urban areas. The concept of gentrification is open to a host of interpretations and meanings. Proponents of gentrification point to the reinvestment in inner-city as a positive force. Conversely the redevelopment of devalued city neighborhoods often results in the displacement of low-income persons. This fundamental difference often pits developers against poverty advocates in a binary argument over redevelopment of city neighborhoods. Redevelopment can however exist without the negative side effects associated with gentrification. One idea proposes a distinction that emphasizes community involvement in redevelopment decision. “Gentrification privileges the interests of new residents over those of existing ones.” while, “Equitable community development, in contrast, focuses on development that, as its first priority, enhances the capabilities of existing residents and local institutions (Diskin and Dutton, 2006, p.2). An examination of various theories of gentrification demonstrates the multiple variances of gentrification.

A number of theories explain the gentrification process as it unfolds and the effects it has on the populations where it exists. Gentrification as a process of uneven development focuses on an analysis of labor and capital and how those forces interacted with the landscape leading to the displacement of the underclass as the middle-class seek housing in closer proximity to work
(Smith, 1982). The production-side theory examines the exchange value of property in inner cities. When the exchange value of a parcel of land exceeds the use value; it is bought, developed and resold at a higher price. This process is at the heart of the economic theory (Smith, 1987). In an effort to insert some human agency into the economic model gentrification was explained in terms of a revanchist process (Smith, 1996). This not only recognized that under-utilized properties in the inner-cities were ripe for developers seeking to gentrify neighborhoods; but went a step further and assessed policies enacted by the city and elites as punishment for the underclass who occupy the vestiges of that prime housing stock. The revanchist policies included not only the displacement of the underclass as the gentrifiers moved in but also a host of punitive social controls enacted by the police and government. It is in this revanchist idea that the winner/loser dichotomy of gentrification is most clearly seen.

The opposing argument to the economic theory is one that relies on the social factors of the gentrifying class. Gentrification occurs as a result of premium amenities associated with living in the central core, such as employment, arts and leisure, and transit (Ley, 1994). This theory of gentrification focuses more so on the motivations of people rather than the economic forces at play. The shift in housing preferences can be attributed to a couple of causes. As the baby boom generation came of home buying age a greater demand for housing welled up causing a move back to the city for affordable and convenient housing. The economic restructuring of the economy, more specifically a shift from manufacturing to services, caused a large increase in the creation of high paying service sector jobs and a new middle-class was born (Zukin, 1989). This new middle class had money and thus a choice in deciding where to live thereby introducing cultural preference into the redevelopment of neighborhoods. In defense of the economic model Smith is quick to point out though the consumption, or social, based theory of gentrification was made possible the heightened economic activity.

Regardless of the circumstances in which gentrification occurs it continues to be viewed as both a favorable and as a negative process. This divide in thinking over the redevelopment of land and the displacement of a population creates a winner/loser binary (Diskin and Dutton, 2006; Wyly and Hammel, 2004). Often the winners are the middle-class that develops property on the cheap and the losers are the lower-income former residents that become displaced. At times the lower-income populations can mount a resistance, but in the end many believe that the
Gentrifiers will win out (Newman and Wyly, 2005). As time has marched forward and gentrification has continued, the idea of winners and loser has become a bit more problematic.

Gentrification has occurred in numerous waves over the years (Hackworth and Smith, 2001). Hackworth’s three-wave concept focuses specifically on the involvement of the government in the process of gentrification with regard to neo-liberal development policies. It can, however, be applied in basic terms by the types of people associated with each wave. The first wave of gentrifiers were pioneers moving from the suburbs back to the city rehabilitating shabby housing stock at very affordable rates. The second wave of gentrifiers moved into already rehabilitated areas for the neighborhood based amenities. The third wave is unconstrained due to a lack of government regulation in the housing market and therefore occupies housing at will leading to the continuation of the winner and loser effect. Continuing with the metaphor that gentrification happens in waves it is safe to assume that there will be subsequent waves beyond what has been identified. The question that remains to be answered is who are the gentrifiers of East Nashville, what type of gentrification is occurring, and what does that mean for the area. To answer this question I turn to other debates within the gentrification literature.

A recent development in the literature has pointed to the idea of gentrifiers having children (Hankins, 2007). Previously gentrifiers were thought of to be middle-class and single; if not single, then definitely childless. These childless gentrifiers of past years are having children, or re-gentrifiers are moving in to neighborhoods with families already in tow. Parent-gentrifiers are finding that the amenities, namely inner-city public schools, are not adequate. As such these parent-gentrifiers are faced with the prospect of sending their children to private schools or trying to create or reshape the school that formerly serviced the neighborhood they live in. A significant obstacle faced by parent-gentrifiers -- and it is one that is perhaps indicative of the underlying feeling of many gentrifiers – is the city school board often does not agree with the school district boundaries envisioned by the parents. The concept of having neatly organized neighborhood boundaries that line up with school districts highlights how many gentrifiers envision self-contained units in which they, or their children, don’t necessary have to interact with lower-income residents of non-gentrified adjacent neighborhoods. My research briefly touches on the issues involving schools and gentrifiers, but it does confirm Hankins’ theory and identifies it as a force at work in East Nashville. This aspect of gentrification is important to this
thesis because it demonstrates another sign of the type gentrification and where in the process East Nashville lies.

In my study of East Nashville I have discovered a mix of gentrification types. In the earlier years of gentrification in East Nashville, during the 1970s and 1980s, a contingent of urban pioneers bought homes at a very affordable price and settled in the neighborhood. More recently, though, in the 1990s and 2000s, young middle-class people have moved into the neighborhoods of East Nashville because of its trendy vibe and rapidly burgeoning commercial base. Moreover, gentrifiers moving into a neighborhood are complex actors that often are motivated by multiple gentrifying forces, even though these forces contradict each other at times. An example of this is a person interested in the monetary benefits of the rent gap theory; but does not support local school initiatives, a measure that would undoubtedly increase property values. This demonstrates that, like human complexity, there is not one particular theory or answer to look to in determining why or how a neighborhood gentrifies.

2.3 Identity

The production of place-based identities in East Nashville’s bound up in the process of gentrification. The place-based identities are closely associated with the East Nashville and its neighborhoods; therefore, a definition of neighborhood is in order. Martin (2003) notes that neighborhood is a bounded space that exists geographically. Neighborhood differs from community in that community is a collection of like-minded people that exist to support each other. Community can exist as a bounded space of a neighborhood but more often than not community is boundless or at least expanding beyond the borders of a geographically delimited neighborhood. Neighborhood identity has evolved from the idea of neighborhood typologies and therefore is the combination of physical and social features of territories within urban areas (Martin, 2009b).

Understanding how place-based identities develop requires knowing the two critical aspects of the phrase: place and identity. The first part, place, is fairly straight forward. In the case of this thesis the place is East Nashville and its neighborhoods. The second part, the creation of identity, is a bit more difficult to understand. A few rules easily allow one to breakdown the concept of identity and analyze how an identity is constructed.

1. Identities are not natural, but social creations
2. Identities are defined through difference
3. Identities are never neutral
4. Identities are created amidst contexts of power
5. Identities are imposed, not chosen
6. Identities are fluid and dynamic
7. The politics of identity are everywhere

These rules provide insight about how an identity is created. Combining the words neighborhood and identity back together starts to develop a sense of how people developed such a strong affinity with East Nashville that is begins to affect their identity.

In any given area, there is a discourse common to the residents of a neighborhood about what the neighborhood should be or should look like. This discourse could be considered the character or identity of a neighborhood. The materialization of this discourse (Schein, 1997) is imposed on the landscape of the neighborhood through various codified practices of zoning and historic preservation overlays, neighborhood institutions creating value sets, and finally signs and symbols which are outward expressions of community beliefs. The result is that the discourse previous held in words and beliefs by the residents is manifested in a physical way on the landscape. These materialized discourses then go on to develop a sense of belonging in the minds and hearts of residents through the land and landscape (Schein, 2009). Some residents that find the materialized discourse amenable are comfortable in the neighborhood, others who do not feel they simply do not belong. The concept that Schein deploys here is that the physical nature of the land and landscape provide very distinct cues to people who know how to read them. Markers set in place on the landscape can be both overt and covert signals to indicate what type of person belongs (Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 2003; Schein, 2009). This applies to my research in East Nashville. An example of this type of marking the landscape can be found in the multitude of neighborhood signs that are placed throughout East Nashville. A simple test to quickly identify an East Nashvillian from someone who is not from that side of town is to ask what neighborhood they live in. A person who simple lives in Nashville will broadly refer to that particular area of the city as East Nashville; whereas a person from who lives in East Nashville has a far more specific geography. An East Nashvillain can name and mentally place a dozen distinct neighborhoods and associate a host of socio-economic attributes to each. The reason for this is the predominance of neighborhood markers on the landscape. They indicate to a person when they are transitioning from one neighborhood to the next.

Above all else homeowners are motivated by the politics of space (Purcell, 2001). As a result of this homeowners organize themselves to create and produce the types of spaces that
they think are ideal. For Purcell, homeowners are motivated by a “suburban ideal” that is exceedingly difficult to achieve. The suburban ideal refers to a very specific notion of what a neighborhood should look like and the type of people who should reside there. When homeowners recognized a mismatch between their imagined suburban ideal and the actual material spaces and people surrounding them they are dissatisfied and seek to transform the space. They accomplish this by organizing and engaging in the political system as a method to effect this change. Taking the suburban ideal a step further and imposing a scalar concept on it is helpful in understanding the progression of gentrification through a neighborhood. When the suburban ideal is used in conjuncture with the process of gentrification this it becomes an ideology that expands forth from a private residence. As re-gentrifiers move into to already rehabilitated housing they have nothing to do except expand their suburban ideal beyond the limits of their home, their block, their neighborhood, and into the public spaces adjacent to their neighborhoods. It is at this intersection I believe that the forces behind the socio-economic change in East Nashville continue to transform the area into their suburban ideal. Herein lays the crux of my research question: How sustainable is identity as a neighborhood continues to gentrify? At this point I argue the unique identity that attracted many gentrifying homeowners to East Nashville will ultimately change. This begs the question then that is the change produced by changing culture over time of the original gentrifiers or the changing demographics of new comers to the neighborhood.

Another way neighborhood identity is asserted on the landscape is through the use of neighborhood associations. During the boom in the development of suburbia many fledgling new communities banded together in community organizations in order to enhance political leverage in their new towns and villages. These organizations morphed into chartered organizations that had codified rules binding homeowners within their jurisdiction to a particular set of rules regarding their homes. When the urban pioneers began moving back to the city during the 1970s they brought with them these neighborhood / community based organizations and the knowledge of the potential power they could wield. Ellickson (1998) notes these “new institutions for old neighborhoods” can be employed to enable collective action on the part of inner-city property owners. Over the past 30 years these neighborhood associations have thrived in gentrifying East Nashville neighborhoods. In the case of East Nashville these neighborhood organizations serve a variety of roles from providing a provision of community for neighbors to
being a driving political force that successfully lobbied for historic and conservation overlays thus preserving their neighborhoods in a static state. The point here is that these gentrifiers are using institutional knowledge gained from decades living in the suburbs to alter inner-city core neighborhoods. In many cases, as I will later highlight, these new institutions either willingly or benignly neglected to include long term residents. The literature about gentrification and neighborhood identity can be pulled together to reveal areas in which new research can be pursued.

2.4 Community

Community as a social theory is a very rich field of study. The term *community* however is not so easy to pin down. Community is defined as a “social network of interacting individuals, usually concentrated in a defined territory” (Johnston, 2000, p.101). At face value this definition appears to be straightforward but from a geographically perspective it is fraught with ambiguity and complications, specifically regarding power and control. The first half of the definition *a social network of interacting individuals* implies there are a group of people who are included in the network but also a group that is excluded. The logical question is what is the relationship between those involved and those not involved? The instances of inclusion or exclusion also hint at an ideal of scale. A person may belong to a community of individuals at a macro scale but at smaller micro scales that larger community may splinter into several smaller communities. It also raises the question of what is the goal of the social network? Does the group aim to merely exist, and continue to exist, or is there a motive to advance their position. The second half of the definition *concentrated in a defined territory* brings in the geographical component of the definition. When a social network of individuals is acting in a defined space that group is likely exerting some type of control over that space. When the two halves of the definition are brought back together in the deconstructed form it portrays a group of like minded individuals with aspects of membership acting to achieve their goal in physical space that may be contested. By examining these peculiarities of the term community, I define the sense of community or communities that are present in East Nashville. Ultimately this informs how the gentrifiers who have taken up residence in East Nashville interact to form social networks and how the products of their interactions help to shape the neighborhood.

Imagined communities are a constructed concept; an example is a nation. Members of a nation feel bonded to one another even though all the members will never know everyone within
their community (Anderson, 1991). Additionally, within an imagined community inequality likely exists between the members but is disregarded as importance is placed on the community not the differences. The scalar nature of imagined communities is clearly evident. Anderson uses the nation as his basis of explanation but the concept can easily be applied to a local phenomenon. An example is a person living in New York City. That person might call themselves a New Yorker as would millions of other who live in the city. However, beyond simply living in a geographic extent these New Yorker’s share an imagined sense of what living in the New York should be; furthermore that imagined sense of community manifests in cultural expressions of that community. This example is most closely associated with the definition Rose (1990, p. 426) uses “a group of people bounded together by some kind of belief stemming from particular historical and geographical circumstances in their own solidarity.” East Nashville, and its component neighborhoods, is another example that fit this criterion. Many residents of East Nashville focus on the geographic place they inhabit as a means to identify with the community. To satisfy the historical circumstance one needs only to look to the dominant shaping force in the area today. East Nashville’s hip and trendy neighborhood character is produced by the young upwardly mobile gentrifiers who now live in the area and is reproduced by everyone who participates in the imagined East Nashville community.

This dominant group has succeeded in asserting their values for a number of reason foremost of which is their ability to organize. Beginning with the founding of the Historic Edgefield Neighborhood Association in 1975 this group of gentrifiers bound together in a community focused on advancing their values of what a neighborhood should be. Since then there have been dozens of similar neighborhood associations, business groups, and civic groups that promote the ideal East Nashville. It cannot be forgotten however that when groups organize there is a change in the power dynamics the area which result in altered social relations (Martin, 2002). Currently the dominant group in East Nashville is the gentrifiers. Prior to the beginning of the gentrification process East Nashville was regarded as a low income crime area. The changing power dynamics coupled with ever increasing number of new adherents to the imagined East Nashville community have segmented the population into those that are involved in the growth of the new East Nashville and those that have been relegated to be left behind.

The concept of communal identities is another area of study within the broader context of community scholarship. It is closely related to concepts identity that were previously outline
with the difference lying in the addition of the communal aspect. Much as identity is not neutral, communal identities exist through the process of negation. An easy way to understand this is if a community asserts their identity as A, that community is not B. This type of identity relies on the relationship to another community that is different (England, 2011, p. 97). Furthermore communal identities that are created in this fashion are unstable and require each other to continue existing. If one community was to cease to exist the other could continue to be.

An effect of this type of construction is that communal identities tend to ignore the minor differences within the community in favor of maintaining the ideal notion of the community. Therefore it stands that the ‘ideal of community’ is intolerant of differences (Young, 1990). If the minor differences were to be brought to the forefront they would be forced out of the community. In the end this interpretation of community is about inclusion and exclusion. People who are a part of the community and on the inside and those people that are left out; either to remain as individuals or form a community of their own. In East Nashville communal identity is manifested as the real subsets of the larger imagined community. Smaller groups bind together to create communities within the larger community. Examples of this are the East Nashville Community Action Network that looks after stray animals, the Historic East Nashville Merchants Association that promotes business ventures in the 5 Points commercial district, or the Friends Shelby Park; and there are many more. All of these groups are working to promote and improve East Nashville in their own way; but not all are universally accepted as being beneficial.

2.5 Conclusion to Conceptual Framework

In the sections above I analyzed the geographic literature regarding gentrification, neighborhood identity, and community. I stated earlier in this chapter that East Nashville could be sufficiently described by any of the individual bodies of literature. I also argued that the primary forces shaping the future of development in East Nashville are unique neighborhood identities and provisions of community. Currently both the prevailing neighborhood identity and dominate community groups are led by the recent influx of gentrifying residents that have moved into the area over the last 35 years. It is because this combination of power and control that make East Nashville an ideal location to study the development of neighborhood identity through the lens of gentrification processes.

Rapid development, increased media exposure, and observations led me to the examination of the interconnected nature of gentrification and neighborhood identity. My study
builds on the literature of gentrification by examining the experiences of East Nashville residents, business owner, and other stakeholders and how they imagine and understand their neighborhood. Using the literature I have previously described as context I explore the narratives of the residents in order to understand how their representation of East Nashville reflect a trend in the broader development scheme of the area. Furthermore, I explore whether there is a balance between a person’s individual motivations and their desire to help in the continued development of East Nashville.
Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Introduction to Methods

Qualitative methods are ideally suited for research in human geography (Dunn, 2000; Crang, 2002; Flowerdew and Martin, 2005). Many researchers have employed a variety of qualitative methods to develop and accomplish a research agenda. The success of their research can be attributed to the depth, quality and relevance of data that qualitative methods produce. Qualitative methods are traditionally viewed as going beyond the numbers because they uncover individual and collective experiences. These experiences articulate the depth of human interaction with the physical spaces around them. The use of qualitative methods provided an in-depth glance at how East Nashvillians understood their community. I primarily employed interviews, discourse analysis, and observation to further my understanding of the area and fulfill my research agenda.

3.2 In-Depth Interviews

Interviews comprise the bulk of the data I collected. The data I gathered during my interviews was the primary source of information I used to for answering my overall research question. Conducting interviews provided me an opportunity to access subject matter experts within the community, investigate the contemporary history of local area, and uncover some of the causative reasons behind the formation of the East Nashville landscapes. Accomplishing these objectives provided further insight into the interrelated forces of gentrification and place-based identity within East Nashville.

The sample population interviewed for my research is comprised of stake holders from East Nashville and subject matter experts with knowledge directly related to the study area. Additionally, I sampled a broad range of residents that spanned a residency time period of forty years. I developed this sample due to the necessity to gain specific information about the area and tap into a group of people that were well connected and representative of the neighborhood at large.
Table 3.1: Interview Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Subject</th>
<th>Interview Purpose</th>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Nashville Planners</td>
<td>Official knowledge on the development of community character in East Nashville.</td>
<td>Minority elements that were not involved in the public process are not represented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville Police</td>
<td>Varying perspective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Association Leaders</td>
<td>Highly involved in the neighborhood. Well informed about issues important to member residents.</td>
<td>Does not account for opinions of non-member residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Association Leaders</td>
<td>Involved in the larger community not specifically linked to a bounded neighborhood. Provides insight into overarching issues.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Association Leaders</td>
<td>Actively involved in promoting East Nashville businesses.</td>
<td>Business associations are not representative of all East Nashville businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Owners</td>
<td>Vested interest in the continued development of East Nashville</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developers</td>
<td>Investing capital resources in the neighborhood. Insight into the design and marketing of new buildings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Residents</td>
<td>Provide independent information about the neighborhood.</td>
<td>Individuals have many and varied motivations that need to be analyzed and resolved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The decision to interview key stakeholders was intentional. Stakeholders have a high level of involvement in their community and are well informed on a multitude of relevant subjects related to their area (Logan and Rabrenovic, 1990). Boyd (2008) chose to interview members of neighborhood associations in order to get an in-depth look at neighborhood organization formed. A stakeholder heavy sample provides other benefits as well. Stakeholders can provide a tremendous amount of accurate background and technical data on any given topic.
Additionally, the interview process goes quickly because the researcher does not have to explain or provide detailed background to the questions being asked.

A concern with interviewing only stakeholders lies, ironically, in its potential benefits. Recruiting only expert opinions misses an entire segment of the population that is not actively involved in the study area; but who may still have worthwhile contributions. One of the goals of qualitative methods is to give the subject a voice. Interviewing only experts can bias the data. I was able to overcome this potential bias in two ways. First, the majority of my sample interviewees were residents of the community. In this sense interview subjects occupy a dual role; that of an expert with a professional opinion and a neighborhood resident with potentially different opinions and motivations. Secondly, many of the subjects I interviewed were elected representatives of portions of the neighborhood at different times and at different levels. Their status as a representative demonstrated a certain amount of trust and confidence bestowed from the community at large. In many cases these elected took the idea of democratic representation quite literally, voting based on district consensus, when it came to making policy decisions. Having interviewed key stakeholders the data I collected provided sufficient context and background about the entire research area. An additional benefit of interviewing stakeholders was that it allowed me to corroborate particular responses with other stakeholder responses. Additionally, having the in-depth knowledge provided by stakeholders will allow me to determine if there are gaps in the information and adjust my methods in order to fill those gaps.

Another recruitment method I used was to casually approach a subject while in public places within my study area. Doucet (2009) approached people in public spaces to ask about their views of gentrification. While this recruitment method had mixed success with regard to the response rate, Doucet states that most people were receptive to the brief interview. I employed this recruitment method in order to get broaden my sample base with some non-stakeholder subjects. This method worked best in public eateries such as a coffee shop or pizza restaurant. Generally, I would strike up a conversation while waiting in line and see if it netted any information. On multiple occasions the respondent was too busy at the moment but agreed to meet at a later time for a more in-depth interview. Another, location that proved to be a good place to meet local resident was Shelby Park. The people I approached in the park were often there for some leisure and were able to spare a bit of their time for an interview. The drawback to the concept of random encounters is that it can be biased as a result of a number of factors.

23
The time of day, type of encounter, and location, and other factors can adversely affect the ‘randomness’. I was able to temper this potential bias by using information gleaned during casual conversation as background context for the semi-structured interviews I conducted.

Developing a recruitment strategy was just the first step in designing my research method. When considering semi-structured interviews the type of questions and how those questions are asked is an important factor. Longhurst (2006) describes various types of interviews ranging from structured to unstructured. In the middle lies the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to have a fixed set of questions or themes prepared with the goal to elicit some quick information and open up a dialog.

I did not collect the demographic data of my respondents. As such I do not have specific demographic markers to describe my sample set. My decision to not collect demographic data was deliberate. I chose to focus on the individual experiences and observations of the interview subjects as opposed to trying to understand the contextual nature of their responses based on age, race, gender, etc. In looking back at the generalized nature of my respondents I have noticed some unquantifiable discrepancies. To begin with all the people that I interviewed are white. Secondly, all of the interview subjects at least appeared to be middle to upper-middle class. These factors are two obvious biases that have to be considered in the analysis of this research. Regardless of the bias it is necessary to understand the perspective that I have gathered in East Nashville is important to understanding the process of gentrification and the development of a neighborhood identity. I conducted 28 individual interviews with a wide range of people from Nashville. The age of my respondents ranged from early twenties to late seventies. Though there were some differences in economic backgrounds all were solidly middle class.

Once a dialog or conversation was underway I let the interview follow a natural course; at times pausing to ask a follow-up question or seek clarification. Apart from the themes or questions asked during an interview the physical conduct of the interview also important. Choosing an appropriate location can be critical for making the respondent feel comfortable (Elwood and Martin, 2000). Location also imparts a certain power dynamic. As a researcher it is important to consider positionality when conducting an interview. Power neutral locations are ideal, but in the absence of such a location I deferred the final decision to the interview subject. An example of this was rather than meeting at the local library, which seemed a bit stuffy and formal; I chose to meet a respondent at a local park. The selection of this location provided a
level of comfort and feeling of security so that the interviewee was able to open up (be less guarded) and speak more freely about the topic. Letting the interviewee select the time and location ensured that the interview process was not burdensome. It is also important for me as a researcher to respect other people’s time.

During the process of conducting interviews I let the interview subject guide the conversation. This process allowed the interview subject to disclose his/her thoughts and opinions that they held as important. Additionally, this style of interviewing allowed me to more easily build a rapport with the interview subject. In order to stay on topic during the interviewee led conversations I did adhere to a basic set of themes and questions. Some of the themes and questions I asked are listed below in no particular order. The list is not however exhaustive but it is representative of the ideas important to this research. During the more than 48 hours of interviews I conducted there were hundreds of questions that I tailored specifically to individual interview subjects and particular conversations.

- How long have you lived or worked in East Nashville?
- Why did you decide to locate here?
- Are you a member of a neighborhood or community association?
- Do you have children? Have you made any decision about their schooling?
- How would describe East Nashville? Is there a particular vibe or energy?
- Is that vibe marketed? Nurtured? Changing?
- Is that vibe sustainable?
- Do you participate in neighborhood events?
- Do you have any safety concerns about the area?
- Are there enough services and amenities in East Nashville?
- Which types are missing?
- What are the long term goals of your organization?
- What do you see as the biggest issue in East Nashville?

Working through six questions approximately every 30 minutes is about the standard pace for interviewing (Dunn, 2000). Initially I used this calculation to determine the length of time needed for interviews. After conducting a few interviews though the semi-structured nature of the interviews gave way to a more conversational format wherein time was not strictly monitored.

3.3 Discourse Analysis

Attempting research neighborhood identity can be a laborious proposition. Neighborhood identity is both a discrete set of ideas and a fleeting notion of reality. For most people neighborhood identity is something that is very real to them but also cannot be easily
verbalized. This concept is similar to the argument that culture is more of an ideology that a specific thing (Mitchell, 1995b). In order to uncover what I perceive to be a strong neighborhood identity in East Nashville I utilized discourse analysis. Discourse is “the representations and practices of a particular social group; a specific constellation of knowledge and practices through which a way of life is given material expression” (Doel, 2003, p.507). Thus analysis of a discourse will provide insight into a social group and the way in which words and symbols create a “material expression.”

Intertextuality refers to the way that the meaning of an individual text or image is not isolated; rather it is influenced by the meanings of other images (Rose, 2001). By collecting and interpreting a multitude of symbols, words, and texts from and relating to East Nashville I was able to demonstrate that one or more neighborhood identities were being promoted. Subsequently, these identities were employed to assert claims on space throughout East Nashville. Sorting through the mass of visual information was a bit daunting. Following a number of strategies (Rose, 2001, p. 158) the analysis of the information I gathered in Nashville was broken down and made more streamline. Those strategies are:

1. Look at your sources with fresh eyes.
2. Immerse yourself in the sources.
3. Identify key themes in your sources.
4. Examine their effects of truth.
5. Pay attention to their complexity and contradictions.
6. Look for the invisible and well as the visible.
7. Pay attention to details.

Additionally, discourse can be intentionally produced through images and text. As Rose (2001) notes, following a Foucaultian understanding of discourse is useful for investigating the institutional exercise of power through embedded visual images and texts. With regard to what kinds of sources to look for Rose (2001) notes that discourse can be articulated through a huge range of images, texts, and practices.

East Nashville is resplendent with symbols and words that represent the area to a larger public. This representation sometimes takes the form of overt advertising and reporting such as the website budgettravel.com which claims that the area is Nashville’s version of New York’s East Village; clearly a sympathetic analogy to conjure images of a hip and artsy area. Other indicators are more subtle, such as the use of neighborhood specific street signs, signs marking the edges of bounded neighborhoods, and even bumper stickers that tout “It’s all good in the
hood!” An analysis of these types of symbols offered some insight into the branding of East Nashville by various groups.

3.4 Observation

Observation is the final method that I used during the conduct of my research. Observation is important for counting, complementing, and contextualizing (Kearns, 2000). These areas fill in the gaps that may be left by other qualitative methods. Bearing witness to the processes, proceedings, and practices occurring throughout the study area provided subtle nuance to the data gathered during interviews (Whyte, 1980). Additionally, observation provided a check to substantiate information gathered.

Observation is inherently biased. The interpretation of an observation is influenced by the observers own prejudice, knowledge, and emotions. During my research I let interview response guide my observations. I sought out to view myself what others had mentioned during an interview. Ultimately I came to the conclusion that the inherit bias of my personal observations was informative to my thesis. A method to incorporate observations into my findings and deal with the bias is to be truthful about the nature of the observation. That means when I report on a particular observation or use it as evidence of a broader claim I will state that my observation is not necessarily indicative of a wide opinion. However, an aggregate of opinions about the same observation could lend credibility to the understanding of that particular observation.

3.5 Conclusion to methods

The time that I spent living in East Nashville piqued my interest in understanding the often unnoticed forces at play in the revitalization of neighborhoods. Even without having the vocabulary and knowledge of a geographer, I could sense that there were forces working to combat the long-standing image of East Nashville; an image that was dominated by words such as ghetto, crime, dirty, and unsafe to name a few. During my studies I gained the insight that where there is a struggle over the discourse or image of an area there are usually exaggerated truths on both sides of the debate. These struggles ultimately unfold in the public spaces of an area as those on either side of the argument seek space to represent their ideals and values (Mitchell, 1995). With a variety of gentrifying neighborhoods (and home owners) as the agents and East Nashville as the landscape, I hope to uncover how neighborhood identity is produced
and sustained in a diverse and eclectic community. In turn how does the changing neighborhood ideal (Purcell, 2001) serve to reinforces the progress of gentrification (Smith, 2002).
Chapter 4: Analyzing Neighborhood Identity in East Nashville

4.1 Introduction

The conceptual questions I outlined in Chapter 2 permeate the following narratives from residents of East Nashville. These narratives provide a glimpse into the complex nature of the neighborhood identity / community character and the way in which it is formed and maintained in the context of a gentrifying urban neighborhood. My analysis bridges a gap between the wealth of gentrification literature (Smith, 1982, 1987, 1996; Ley, 1994; Lees, 2000; Hankins, 2007) and the literature about community and identity (Purcell, 2001; Martin, 2003; Fraser, 2004). It draws the two together in a cultural geographic sense and examines in more detail how thoughts and opinions are not only materialized on a neighborhood landscape but also in the imagination of those members of the coinciding community. It is important to understand that not all of the issues and incidents I discuss below effect all East Nashvillians. Rather, each person I interviewed had a unique story and perspective about their surroundings. Collectively, though, there are some emergent themes that run through all their experiences. It is these themes that I will highlight in order to develop a generalized sense of East Nashville’s community character in light of the gentrification style redevelopment trends.

4.2 Gentrification: One size does not fit all

Earlier in this thesis I asked the question what socio-economic forces are at work in transforming East Nashville? I went on to describe the various theories that scholars have proposed throughout the years. The primary theories being an economic based model (Smith, 1987) and a social/cultural based model (Ley, 1994). In addition, some niche types of gentrification have been studied, such as re-gentrifiers, parent-gentrifiers, and gentrification survivors (Lees, 2000; Hankins, 2007; Doucet, 2009). The following excerpts from interviews I conducted will affirm these long-standing models. More than that, they will highlight an inadequacy within the literature which overlooks that often an individual’s motivation to relocate to a gentrifying neighborhood rely on unique combinations of all of these aspects of gentrification.

The story of gentrification in East Nashville can be told in three distinct parts. The beginnings of gentrification can be traced to the first urban pioneers moving in during the mid-1970s. Christine Kreyling an urban pioneer in Edgefield reflects on her perception of the area.
Urban renewal had hit East Nashville hard, leveling houses and delivering public housing superblocks that bracketed Edgefield. The concentration of poverty bred crime that leached into the adjacent neighborhoods. The construction of the interstate between the neighborhood and downtown added a third wall to those of the projects. Zoning encouraged the carving up of the remaining homes into small rental units and the building of new multifamily units, many of them shoddy. Simple services like street light repair and garbage pickup were problematic. It was as if government was saying that East Nashville was where the working and welfare classes would live—and everyone else would avoid. (Kreyling, 2006)

There were some people that saw East Nashville as a diamond in the rough. The story of Charlie Williams, a fixture within the ‘new’ East Nashville community, was an urban pioneer to the area and would go onto become an staunch advocate for East Nashville’s revitalization.

Christine writes about him in a memoriam opinion editorial. Her sentiment not only reflect the type of person that would find urban pioneering rewarding but also hints at the gritty nature of East Nashville in those “early days”.

In 1976, the neighborhood of Edgefield in East Nashville was territory that only an urban pioneer could love. That’s where Charlie Williams came in. Williams had come to the neighborhood to investigate the physical circumstances of a stabbing he was lawyering[sic]. ‘I was amazed by two things: the great buildings and the old people, who lived in fear, locked in their houses,’ he recalled in 1999. (Kreyling, 2006)

After that initial visit Charlie moved his family into Edgefield. Christine quotes Charlie as remembering, “In the first two-and-a-half years I lived in Edgefield, I spent more time on the neighborhood than on my law practice.” In the process of working on his new neighborhood he critical in the establishment of Nashville’s first historic preservation overlay 1978. This moment has become come to be regarded as Edgefield’s turning point. The inception of this historic overlay is precisely the materialization of discourse (Schein, 1997). Charlie, the lead advocate, with the support of his neighbors took the first step in saving the neighborhood in which they lived from continued decay and neglect.

This earliest stage of gentrification in East Nashville can be associated more closely with the economic theory (Smith, 1987). Charlie Williams and his family bought their 4000 square foot, 19th Century, four bedroom, three bath Queen Anne style house situated on a quarter acre for $9,000 in 1976. Adjusted for inflation in 2011 the sum is still a paltry $35,000. Granted the property needed some major renovation but for urban pioneers that was part of the contract moving into East Nashville. Today the property is worth in excess of $600,000.
These urban pioneers got something more that the historic and architecturally significant homes, they got a community. Christine quotes Jan Bushing, a 14 year member of the Planning Commission and advocate for Hillsboro-West End\(^2\) saying, “We weren’t trying to gentrify...but to stabilize. That meant you got Fannie Mae to guarantee loans that covered the cost of rehab, but it also meant that if old Mrs. McGillicuddy needed her grass cut, you cut hers after you cut yours.” (Kreyling, 2006). Jan’s comments indicate that rehabilitation of housing stock for profit was not the only motivation for settling in these blighted areas within Nashville. The desire to build a community that helped each other out, whether by cutting grass or otherwise, was the primary goal. Christine echoes this trait in Chris. She says about him, “His larger purpose was to make a neighborhood where the strong protected the weak, where all had standing. For him a neighborhood was a social compact.” (ibid). For these urban pioneers the idea of building a community was a return to their childhood; a return to the suburban ideal in which they grew up (Purcell, 2001). Chris was raised in Nashville only a few miles from the Edgfield neighborhood for which he so vehemently fought.

In these early days of urban pioneering and neighborhood stabilization not many people were paying attention to the consequences that their efforts had. In some regard they cared only for what they believed was the ideal neighborhood. If someone was not on board or resisted the changed they were merely seen as an obstacle to overcome.

The second stage of the gentrification of East Nashville can be categorized by the long slow continuing turnover of low-income and neglected properties. It occurred from the early-1980s until 1998. During this nearly twenty year period the gentrifiers continued to find East Nashville and settle there. Christine Kreyling and her husband Michael moved to East Nashville from New Orleans in 1985. These self-professed “addicts of urban living and old architecture” (Krelying, 2009) found East Nashville perfectly suited to their lifestyle. Christine wrote, “When I moved to Nashville’s East End [neighborhood]...my new neighborhood was a checkerboard of yuppie renovations, blue-collar cottages, and slumlord sleaze” (Kreiling, 1999a).

East Nashville straddles the line between suburban and urban, a unique quirk that appeals to a broad range of people. The area is close to the downtown; the Five Points commercial hub

\(^2\) Hillsboro-West End is the west side version of East Nashville. In the mid-1970s it was in a similar state of disrepair as Edgefield. In the intervening years Hillsboro has far out-stripped East Nashville in growth and redevelopment due in part to its location near Vanderbilt and Belmont Universities.
is less than two miles from the central business district. At the same time, East Nashville is geographically isolated from the rest of the city by the Cumberland River and Interstate 24. The simultaneous isolation and proximity to downtown has created a mix of desirable urban amenities in a suburban setting. Lana, an East Nashville resident since 1995, describes it as a, “very small town feel, people know everybody and know your business.”

This period of gentrification in East Nashville can also be marked by the state of education. The schools that served East Nashville were, in the opinion of some gentrifying residents, severely lacking. Jamie summarized the sentiments of many of my respondents when he said, “East Nashville was a great place to live, until your children came of school age. Then the only decision was to either move south [to the wealthier suburbs of Nashville] or spend the money on private schools.” “The situation was,” Lana noted, “these schools were perceived to not be meeting the demand of the growing demographic.” In East Nashville that growing demographic was white, middle-class, college educated people who had grown up with above average educational opportunities and wanted the same for their children. This point is key to understanding why this second stage was so long. For a number of gentrifiers East Nashville was not a viable long term option due to the lack of neighborhood educational opportunities.

A turning point came in the early 2000s when the local Lockeland Springs elementary school was tapped to become a new design center. The design center is a pedagogical concept that uses a specific emphasis as a method of teaching. The new Lockeland Elementary Design Center was focuses on the use of literature as a teaching method. Additionally, the school was designated a magnet school and a lottery was implemented so that student could be drawn from the larger community. Beyond the simple change in branding Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools reached out to the community for input on the new school. Lana remembers being on the search committee for the new principle; “It was great, we didn’t make the final decision, but we gave our input and we were heard.” Lockeland Elementary Design Center was a huge success and after just a couple of years of its opening the lottery was maxed out and children even in its geographic priority zone could not win a seat in the school. The resounding success the school ushered in even more schools. In a similar move, the area middle and high schools reorganized in 2004 under the literature design center principles and the East Magnet pathway.

\[3\] In this section I wish to highlight an important aspect of home ownership without getting caught up in a debate over public and private education.
was completed. Even charter schools saw East Nashville as a burgeoning opportunity. East Academy opened its doors in 2001 for the purpose of providing top notch college preparation for K-8 students. The school’s primary enrollment was focused on economically disadvantaged students. The school shut down for the beginning of the 2010 school year as a result of financial insolvency.

The effects of the educational reorganization in East Nashville prompted many of the recent gentrifiers to stay in the neighborhood when their children were old enough to attend school. Aaron, a Lockeland Springs resident since 2002 stated, “I’m disappointed that East Academy closed, but...there is Lockeland [Elementary] Design Center and I have heard good things about East Magnet schools changing; so I am not really that worried about it. I feel like we’ve found the right neighborhood and it would be very hard to leave it.” As it seems to be the case for East Nashville, there continues to be a persistent divide between the newer residents (gentrifiers) and the long-term residents (lower-income). Lana indicated this with her reflection on a point of tension. She says, “I think there is still lingering resentment on the part of other elementary schools in the neighborhood. For years, white, middle and upper-middle class people sent their kids to private schools and now they apply for the lottery and if they get in they send their kids to Lockeland [Elementary Design Center] but they will not go to Waner or Ross or some of these other schools.” It is clear that these sentiments reflect the fact that gentrification in East Nashville is not complete. The gentrifiers have not fully staked their claim in the area as evidenced, in part, by their reluctance to attend all of the local schools.

The third and current stage of gentrification began in 1998. In April that year a tornado swept through the downtown and jumped over the river to wreak havoc on East Nashville. The initial reaction was despair. The patchwork of urban pioneering neighbors that fought and worked hard to make East Nashville home “felt there was little left in the glands for another sweat equity situation” (Kreyling, 1999b, p. 2). At first insurance companies were slow to pay out claims on storm damage. Kreyling writes that Charlie Williams remarked, “The adjustor had no earthly idea how to adjust for a house not built to contemporary standards” (ibid). Worse still it was feared that many of the elderly long-term residents did not have enough insurance to cover the cost of repairs. The money slowly started to trickle in and blue tarps gave way to to the sound of banging hammers as storm damage was repaired. Assisted by the American Institute of
Architects residents used their insurance money to not only repair damage but also to rehab their houses (ibid).

In addition to the money came visitors from other parts of the city. Christine Kreyling writes that the Cumberland River as a “psychological barrier” was broken. Kreyling recalled in her writing that, “West-siders who came to help -- or just to look around -- discovered an urban neighborhood with a small-town feel. After 20 years of slow reclamation and minimal outside investment, East Nashville was cool.” (Kreyling, 2009, para. 4). She further explains how the neighborhood rode the wave of this newfound popularity “a battle-hardened crew of neighborhood residents were ready to turn the disaster into a great leap forward.” (ibid). A nonprofit group called ReDiscover East! was formed “by and for East Nashville residents, businesses, and institutions,” the goal is “to preserve the authentic character of East Nashville and enhance the quality of life for all of its citizens” (www.rediscovereast.org, para. 1). In the decade following tornado more and more people began view East Nashville as a desirable place to live. As people settled in the area and businesses started to spring up catering to the demands of a young urban chic crowd. Bongo Java became the place for a caffeine fix, The Family Wash turned an abandoned laundry mat into a happening night spot for live music and pub food, and the Five Points area saw an influx of nightlife and the bars and restaurants to go with it.

During this post-tornado heyday property values started to creep up. Conor and his wife bought a home in 1999. In the ensuing decade their home tripled in value and their tax assessment has jumped fifty percent. Conor recalls, “I could literally see the gentrification taking place in real time. An elderly person would sell, the house would get renovated, and then resell. Then a few months later the surrounding properties would do it too. You could really track it block by block.” When asked about the typical winner/loser dichotomy seen in gentrifying neighborhoods Conor said, “It all happened to quick. There really wasn’t enough time for anyone to organize or resist the move. The only thing slowing it down now is the housing recession; but even still it has already passed through our block and is going on [two streets over].”

Developers were getting in on the action too. New three to five story luxury condos were built on some of the long standing vacant lots. The 37206 building took the place of a blighted factory. Martin’s Corners was installed as a quasi-New Urbanism project. After nearly 75 years
of decline East Nashville was making progressively stronger headway as the diverse and vibrant community some sought it to be.

The story of gentrification in East Nashville is in one sense a historical chronology of physical neighborhood change. The cultural change in the neighborhood is the underlying story that accompanies the arc of gentrification. During the course of the neighborhood physically changing a shift also occurred in the general character of the neighborhood. In the mind of the general public and media the perception of East Nashville changed from a place of crime, poverty, and the associated stigmas to that of a vibrant, hip, and popular place to live and socialize.

4.3 Identifying the identity

Understanding personal identity requires addressing a wide range of loosely connected questions such as: Who am I? What does it takes to be a person? et. cetera. (Olsen, 2010, para.1). Addressing these questions in the context of the seven rules of identity creates a complexity that is difficult to unravel. The complexity derives from the inability to assign a single brand to a person. Ultimately though, the different aspects of an identity are boiled down to their essential elements, and one is left with the best approximation. In the case of a neighborhood the complexity of assigning a unified identity can be even more difficult. A neighborhood is a collection of people that have over the years have formed individual identities and ideas of what their surrounding environment should be. As such attempting to cobble together a generalized community character or neighborhood identity from a myriad of diverse residents is even more challenging. Therefore the identity of a neighborhood must be an expression of compromise between all members of the particular community, either explicitly or implicitly agree upon. Additionally, within a single community there may not be just one single unified identity dominant to a place. That is the case with East Nashville where there are multiple identities that have surfaced over the course of time. In the following paragraphs I highlight the current neighborhood-wide identities that have taken hold in East Nashville in recent years and continue to gain popularity in drawing people to the area. The following identities are not exhaustive of the many that are present and are quite crudely generalized. For the purpose of this research, however, these are the primary identities that my interviews subjects conveyed to me as being important to understanding the nature of East Nashville.
Hippie / Bohemian

Bohemianism is defined as the practice of an unconventional lifestyle involving musical, artistic, or literary pursuits. The term, often shortened to bohemian, describes a free living artistic type. Living unconventionally is used to indicate a dismissal of the norms of any given time. In terms of Twentieth Century bohemian’s it often implies living in low income areas in order to survive within their means. The term bohemian and its link to an unconventional lifestyle do not explicitly imply a link to criminal activity. In East Nashville the bohemian identity can be traced back to before the neighborhood began gentrifying. East Nashville was in a state of disrepair and neglect following the Urban Renewal of the 1950s and 1960s. Housing was plentiful and rent inexpensive making the area an ideal place for struggling artists of all types to settle down and create their art while living within their means. As more and more bohemians moved to the area the community of artists took root further expanding the diverse demographic of the area. The artist community integrated with the gentrifiers over the years and became part of what East Nashville is known for.

Yuppie / New Money

The yuppie influence in East Nashville is a result of the gentrification process of the neighborhood. The term ‘yuppie’ is short for the phrase ‘young urban professional’. It is used to describe upper-middle class group of individuals in their twenties or thirties who live and work in urban centers. As East Nashville continued to redevelop it became a desirable place to live due to its proximity to the downtown core, low but rising housing costs, and suburban like feel in the neighborhood. The term yuppie often has a negative connotation derived from the popular idea that yuppies aspire to wealth and material accumulation. In a political context yuppies are stereo-typed as ‘fair-weather’ politicos; supporting a party when it is most favorable to them and not owing allegiance to one particular party. For the purposes of this research I depart from the specific political framing of a yuppie except for the understanding that, as a group, they are an affluent and viable constituency when motivated by desires for personal gain. This point will be important later when I discuss the formation of community organizations in East Nashville. For now, I simply highlight the concept that East Nashville yuppies fit the description (gender aside) assigned by Victor David Hansen of the National Review. He states; “For the yuppie male, a well-paying job in law, finance, academia, or consulting in a cultural hub, hip fashion, cool appearance, studied poise, elite education, proper recreation and fitness, and general proximity to
liberal-thinking elites, especially of the more rarefied sort in the arts, are the mark of a real man.” (Hansen, 2010, para.4). This description conjures an image of the cultural class David Ley referred to in his alternative explanation of gentrification (Ley, 1986).

Hipsters

Hipsters are probably the most challenging identity distinction to describe. The word hipster found its way into every description of East Nashville’s residents as given by my interview subjects. In order to understand the contemporary hipster phenomenon I look to recent discussions on the topic (Lloyd, 2006; Greif, 2010; Zukin, 2011). Just as yuppies are stereotypically thought to desire material accumulation; a hipster ultimately desires to attain authenticity (Greif, 2010). Grief explains that the authenticity to which a hipster seeks can be in film, food, music or any other subject area and is often achieved by claiming a priori knowledge of the said subject matter. An example would be someone who is first to sample the new haute cuisine. “Pride comes from knowing, and deciding, what’s cool in advance of the rest of the world” (Greif, 2010, p. 2). Authenticity being subjective leads to fractures within the sub-culture and competitiveness to become the most authentic. Paradoxical to its own self, the worst insult to a hipster would be to call them a hipster. This contradiction is because stereotype of a hipster runs counter to what a hipster is trying to achieve, authenticity.

Hipster identity transfers to the physical landscape by way of the newcomers to urban neighborhoods. “Declining neighborhoods that are reborn as either gentrified or hipster districts reflect an initial choice by men and women to move to, or remain in, the city, which is often interpreted as a lifestyle choice though it is also a response to opportunities for work and access to social and cultural networks” (Zukin, 2011, p.163). Lloyd’s argument helps understand the identity on an individual level and how it transfers to gentrified neighborhoods. Furthermore, a gentrified neighborhood that emerges as an artists’ and hipsters’ district reflects the importance of new retailers who contribute to reshaping the local character. “By catering to their own community, these newcomers develop a new place identity” (ibid). The diversity of who can be categorized as a hipster and for what subject they are hip to serves to emphasize the vagueness yet specificity this identity group represents. In addition the social and economic impact of an area being known as a hipster district influences the redevelopment of a neighborhood. Finally, the idea of achieving a level authenticity lends itself very well to the cultural landscape of East Nashville. The quasi urban/sub-urban physical make-up of the area allows people to straddle the
line between being a truly authentic city dweller and someone who can retreat to the familiarity of a suburban neighborhood when necessary.

**Poor, Working-class and Minority**

Lingering aspect of East Nashville’s history are the poor and minority members of the community. In 1939 the James Cayce Housing Projects were built on the corner of Shelby Ave and South 5th Street. Following the white flight of the middle class from East Nashville around the 1950s poorer minorities took up residence in the inexpensive and subsidized housing stock. While poor is not necessarily an identity distinction one would willingly take on, it is a part of East Nashville’s community character as both a current entity and a jumping off point for the gentrification of the past decades. The working-class character in its current manifestation has been subsumed by the gentrifiers. In the most flagrant of uses a boutique gift store made up and sold bumper stickers with the ZIP code of East Nashville and slogans some of which mocked gritty nature of the area. Some examples of these slogans include: “37206: We’ll steal your heart and your lawnmower”, “37206: Over the river and through the hood”, or “37206: The eastside...we finally got our piece of the pie”, the last slogan being a reference to the television show The Jeffersons. Often these bumper stickers would be plastered to an expensive car parked in front of a renovated home and image equally reflective of the sarcasm implied in the message. The true working-class and poor residents and in some cases the early middle-class gentrifiers are vanishing from East Nashville. Connor states, “It’s harder and harder to find affordable [housing] areas within Historic East Nashville.” The co-option of the blue collar aesthetic for the purpose of authenticity will remain as a trophy of sorts for the gentrifying class as a reminder of the redevelopment efforts in East Nashville.

**Homosexual**

Gay can be in its own right a major identity touchstone. It can also be just one part of an individual’s identity combined with any of the previously listed identity groups. My inclusion of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual (GLBT) identity as part of East Nashville’s identity is due to many of my interview respondents citing East Nashville as a gay friendly area of the city. Hillsboro Village and 12 South are other areas in Nashville that are considered gay friendly but East Nashville is the most prominent. Its prominence as a gay friendly neighborhood comes from being known as a diverse and welcoming community which is in turn derived from its residents. Some of the diversity in East Nashville was already in place when is began
gentrifying in the mid-1970s. Karen, a 30 years resident of East Nashville, said; “[My husband] and I specifically settled here in East Nashville because it was such a diverse community. We wanted to raise our children around a variety of people and lifestyles. At that time [1970s] in the south it was hard to find such a place.” The acceptance of alternative lifestyles as the neighborhood continued to redevelop gained East Nashville the reputation as a welcoming place to all. The Lipstick Lounge in East Nashville originally opened as a lesbian bar but soon became regarded as a popular neighborhood hangout. In 2010 CitySearch named the Lipstick Lounge as the Nashville’s Best Neighborhood Bar. The bars current philosophy, “The Lipstick Lounge is Nashville's destination bar for humans of all persuasions to get together, share good times, have fun and spread joy” (thelipsticklounge.com) reflects GLBT friendliness and acceptance within the community.

Ted, a newer resident to East Nashville and a private practice physician, used the word ‘funky’ to describe East Nashville. He said ‘funky’ associated with the “hipsters…the people with tattoos and skinny jeans; they give it the ‘funky’ vibe. There are actually a lot more normal people [though].” Ted describes himself as nerd. He says he is not an artist and does not have any facial piercings; but concedes there is a segment of the population that fits that image. He describes those people almost as caricatures; they stick out and just so happen to live and socialize in East Nashville. Interestingly, his self description as a nerd sets him apart from image of a young ‘yuppie’ physician.

Ted further elaborates by saying that “Funky is code word for liberal. It’s definitely left-leaning to completely sideways left. Funky...hidden in there is that this is also the gay community. Funky might also be a codeword for intelligent, without sounding full of ourselves. I think there are some smart people over here. I have definitely met some people that have challenged my way of thinking…and it’s pretty cool.” The litany of descriptions Ted makes can be categorized as well-educated, well-informed, and on average, younger. This cultural demographic is similar to what Ley (1996) describes in his description of the gentrifying middle-class. Ted’s remarks and use of the word funky are in no way meant to be disparaging, he simply uses funky, as many other respondents did, because there is not a singular way to describe the character of East Nashville.
4.4 Manifestation / Intensification of identities

Referring back to the seven rules of identity helps uncover how particular identity distinctions rise to the surface. The idea that identities are not natural but a social creation implies that information about identities must be conveyed through social interactions. In East Nashville the social interactions occurred in a number of ways. During the course of my research I found three primary ways in which information about the community character of East Nashville was conveyed to its residents and the broader public.

4.4.1 Signs and symbols

Public spaces have long been used as a venue for people to express personal ideas or seek representation (Mitchell, 2003). As an extension of this idea residents of neighborhoods often identify those neighborhood boundaries with custom gateway plaques, unique street signs, and other types of markers. Additionally, commercial centers reinforce the identity of its surrounding neighborhood through use of similar design aesthetics. The use of signage transcends simply identifying the geographic extent of a neighborhood, when considered in the context continued gentrification, and informs residents and visitors about the character of the place. In East Nashville there are a variety of visual cues that reinforce the community character of the area.

To begin with the distinction between the different neighborhoods is important to understanding the social landscape of East Nashville. In Chapter 1, I noted how residents of East Nashville are keenly aware of the different neighborhoods and the variety of meanings associated with those different neighborhoods. For example, a person who lives in Historic Edgefield is likely to be wealthier than someone in Lockeland Springs; although that distinction is losing credence as Lockeland Springs home prices continue to soar. Neighborhood associations erected signs throughout East Nashville as each of the smaller neighborhoods began to gentrify. This was a method for these groups to take ownership of their particular neighborhood and separate it out from the anonymous mass of East Nashville. In so doing the associations were able to both isolate their neighborhoods from the stigma of East Nashville’s reputation and promote the neighborhood as a separate entity. It is common now for real estate listings to post the particular neighborhood rather than using the generic East Nashville moniker.
Nashville has a peculiar phenomenon associated with its various postal ZIP codes. Many people across the city use their ZIP code to identify where they live but also as a means to express information about their social status and proclivities. Most frequently these ZIP code expressions can be found plastered to the bumper of a car. T-shirts, hats, and even tattoos are other places that I have seen area ZIP codes displayed. Perhaps this kitsch phenomenon sprang forth from the TV show Beverly Hills: 90210 in which the ZIP code was synonymous with wealth, fame, and power. Similarly, East Nashville’s 37206 ZIP code has come to be associated with the various identity distinctions that I defined earlier. Local businesses have picked up on the phenomenon as a way to promote their business and attract the segment of the population that would readily identify with the meanings associated with 37206.

One example is Yazoo Brewing Company, Nashville’s hometown microbrewery. At the 2011 Hot Chicken Festival Yazoo unveiled a new t-shirt design that simply displayed ‘37206’ with the ‘7’ replaced for their corporate logo. This merchandising appeals directly to the East Nashville consumer that wants to show off where they are from while simultaneously displaying their support for the local microbrewery. Niel, a Yazoo employee, remarked about the choice of graphic. He said; “37206 is where the festival was and...there is a certain sense of pride that 37206 residence [residents] have about where they live. Not saying other parts of Nashville doesn’t have pride it’s just very different [sic]”. The 37206 building is another example of business capitalizing on the popularity of the ZIP code phenomenon. The 37206 building is the second phase of the Martin’s Corner New Urbanism project in the East End neighborhood. The developer’s stated goal, among other things, is to “bring a sense of history and restoration to the neighborhood” (martincorner.com, para.1). The developer’s tapped into the ZIP code craze by naming the new condo building 37206. The 37206 buildings 20 residential units are sold thus
supporting the desire for people to live in a building that epitomizes East Nashville and is located just two blocks away from Five Points, the commercial center of the East Nashville’s life style.

Finally, East Nashville has a number of murals that reinforce the ideals of the community character currently in vogue. These murals are public and graphic representations of what the community, or some members of the community, finds to be acceptable and appropriate. These murals guide the viewer’s perception of East Nashville. The Five Points commercial district is home to East Nashville’s largest mural; it measures 20 feet tall by 90 feet long. This mural was painted in 2002 during the beginning phases of the intense period of gentrification following the 1998 tornado. The mural is geographic in nature and the five circular panels on the bottom locate East Nashville within the galaxy. The larger panels that comprise the bulk of the mural depict the city of Nashville as seen from that particular point. The large panels show bucolic tree-lined streets where the rooftops and steeples of historic homes and churches poke through the greenery. The downtown city center and Titans football stadium are represented but appear to be in the distant background. The mural is representative of the suburban ideal that the recent gentrifiers are striving to achieve while maintaining a close proximity to the downtown.
A short distance away from this impressive mural is a smaller, folksier mural painted on the fence of a house. This mural is more simplistic in nature but still conveys strong sense of the community character on multiple levels. First of all the mere existence of the mural supports the artistic vibe of the community. Secondly, the subject matter is something that all East Nashvillians would be familiar with, the tomato. The message simple states “august = tomato”. This alludes to the massively popular Tomato Arts Festival that takes place every August and has come to be representative of the various identities within East Nashville. The other image in this mural shows an image of a dog frolicking around with a tomato in its mouth. In the dog friendly culture of East Nashville this is another image that many in the area would be familiar with. Drawing a link to another visual indicator within my research is the popularity of a bumper sticker created by Allegria Gifts, a local boutique shop, featuring the 37206 ZIP code with a message that read, “Where everyone knows your dog’s name.”

A third notable mural has recently been completed in the Riverside Village commercial area of the Inglewood neighborhood. Inglewood is a bit further afield than East Nashville proper and is considered to be Nashville’s first suburb. Inglewood’s role in the gentrification in East Nashville centers on the inexpensive housing stock and the neighborhood’s suburban nature. As Historic East Nashville’s neighborhoods gentrified and the housing prices soared many hopeful residents found an affordable home in Inglewood. At the heart of the Inglewood neighborhood is the Riverside Village. During the past five years Riverside Village has started to redevelop with the addition of new shops and restaurants. Andee Rudloff, a muralist, educator, and active
community member, designed and painted a mural on the side of a plain white furniture store with the help of local residents. Andee states on her website that “murals can communicate more than one viewpoint or perspective” (chichair.com). The Riverside Village Community Mural does exactly that. The mural displays many images that tie into the community character associated with East Nashville. A few of the stand out motifs include: an artists’ palette, a guitar, a group of children's’ alphabet blocks, a stack of school books, suburban homes, the downtown skyline, and finally the omnipresent tomato. These images represent some of East Nashville’s main identity distinctions such as: the artistic community, the parent-gentrifiers, and the hipsters.

These murals and the other visual cues strewn across East Nashville’s landscape serve as a reminder of what is valued and important within the the current community character or neighborhood identity.

4.4.2 Buy East…guilt of going West

Supporting local businesses or at least the local franchise of a business is a religion in East Nashville. A number of respondents actually reported a vague sense of guilt when crossing the river to do business on the west side. Aaron, a newer but highly active East Nashville resident, recalled a minor confrontation he had shortly after arriving in town. He said, “If you talk about going to eat in a restaurant across town people look at you like ‘why didn’t you just go over to…[he leaves the statement open-ended]. What’s wrong with you to cross the river?’” This sense of guilt was reported by a number of my respondents who also in stated their friends felt the same way. This loose sense of guilt did not stop any of the people I interviewed from
enjoying the rest of the city though. Nor did it prevent them from having acquaintances across town.

When I pressed the issue about trying as best as possible to stay exclusively to East Nashville I was informed about a mental fatigue many experience from having to constantly defend or support East Nashville. Beth, a newcomer to East Nashville, said; “I’d meet someone and they asked me where I live. I’d say East Nashville and they would give me this look like they were sorry for me; kind of like ‘I don’t know what to say...but that doesn’t sound like fun’”. Mark, a civic leader in the East Nashville, explained, “This type of attitude, the ‘feeling sorry for East Nashville’ is still a holdover from the rougher days when it was kind of a dangerous place over here.”

Ultimately, the booster-ism for East Nashville by its residents comes from the feeling that they need to prove themselves to the rest of the city. Conor, stated that “East Nashville has for a long time felt like they were being crapped upon by the city.” He goes on to explain that in the minds of many East Nashville resident everything good happens on the west side of town and all the junk is sent to the east side. Paula, a life-long East Nashvillian, echoed this comment and listed a number of slights that in her mind were indicative of the issue. She listed; “Vanderbilt...west side, the projects...east side, the interstate highway...east side, the half-way houses...east side. We just always seem to get the trash they [the city] can’t figure out where to put.”

In the end the persistent booster-ism and chip on their shoulder may have a slightly negative effect on the way East Nashville portrays itself to the rest of the city. Aaron summed it up nicely when he said, “It’s like East Nashville doesn’t want the rest of the city to help them; but they want to be recognized for how great they are and so there is this chip on the shoulder about, Hey look we did this ourselves and Hey look we are a vibrant community and We don’t need you BUT please come shop here and please come recognize how great we are [sic].”. Aaron continues by saying, “There a sense of not being hip enough for East Nashville and being labeled as an outsider. It has the potential to make people feel uncomfortable about coming over here.” Aaron laughs as he thinks about an upcoming city-wide contest in weekend paper called The Nashville Scene. The contest is called The Best of Nashville. He says, “I know that East Nashville is going to win in every category because we all vote and promote each other and encourage each other to vote. If you were in another part of town you might get annoyed about
hearing how great it is all the time.” While people in other parts of the city might get annoyed by the incessant promotion for East Nashvillians it is a part of their identity and how they connect to their neighborhood.

4.4.3 Festivals

Large scale street fairs have become an important way for communities to come together, socialize, and solidify or affirm the way they want to represent themselves to the broader community. The Tomato Art Fest was founded by Meg and Bret MacFadyen, owners of East Nashville’s Art and Invention Gallery. In 2004, the gallery hosted an art show celebrating the tomato in late summer, and planned a few neighborhood events to promote the show. The Tomato Art Fest proved so popular that it immediately turned into an annual, signature event for the hip, urban neighborhood of East Nashville (tomatoartfest.com/about).

Some interesting quirks about the Tomato Art Festival hint at the eclectic nature of East Nashville. Deconstructing the slogan, “The Tomato...a uniter, not a divider -- Bringing together fruits and vegetables”, highlights the diversity East Nashville prides itself on. The usage of the terms ‘fruits and vegetables’ insinuates a coming together of the homosexual and straight communities.

When used in combination with the title slogan ‘a uniter, not a divider’ it gives a sense that the tomato can be a common touchstone by which anyone can associate with. Secondly, some of the activities within the Tomato Art Festival highlight the various identity distinctions.
within East Nashville. The bohemian/artistic identity is represented in the art, live music, and poetry contests. The hipster identity is represented in the bicycle decoration contest and the variety of food and drink competitions. The yuppies find the child friendly activities sale or artwork satisfying. Finally, the gay friendly image of East Nashville is represented in the King and Queen costume contest that often finds contestant showing up dressed in drag. All of these activities provide an outlet to showcase and reinforce the identity distinctions which have made East Nashville so popular and helped in its continued redevelopment.

In 2005 during the second annual Tomato Arts Festival a opportunity presented itself for the community to have some harmless yet significant fun. The East End Market was a cold beer store in the heart of the gentrifying neighborhood that was “notorious for crime, drugs, prostitution, and drinking all around” (Boerner, 2005). Whitney Kemper a local developer bought the market with the intention of tearing it down to make way for a new condo development. The organizers of the Tomato Arts Festival were looking for a place to throw tomatoes and Kemper offered the neighborhood eyesore up as a prime target. Kemper and the organizers maintained it was “a neighborhood celebration”, however an analysis of the events reveals a deeper meaning in the tomato toss. At the time the Tomato Arts Fest was the only East Nashville street fair that promoted the new community character. The East End Market represented the old ‘crime, drugs and prostitution’ image of East Nashville.

By physically throwing tomatoes, a representation of the new community, at the vestiges of the old East Nashville the new residents reinforced their claim on the neighborhood and reasserted the new character of the area. Over the years the popularity of the Tomato Arts Fest has only increased. In 2010 the festival drew a reported 18,000 people (tomatoartsfest.com).
With the massive success of the Tomato Arts Fest other festivals have started in East Nashville. In 2006 the Music City Hot Chicken Festival is hosted in East Park. Even though hot chicken is a city wide delicacy East Nashville won the right to host the festival which draws an estimated 15,000 people. East Nashville capitalizes on the massive crowd by offering specials to attract that crowd into the local businesses. Many residents plan garage sales for that day. The combined effect has the advantage of showcasing the neighborhood and local businesses to visitors venturing across the river.

Inglewood’s 1st Annual Cherry Blossom Festival in 2011 was another opportunity for the city to venture further into East Nashville. The Cherry Blossom festival is centered on Riverside Village, Inglewood’s redeveloping commercial core. The event has all the earmarks of other festivals: food, entertainment, and activities. The organizers of the Cherry Blossom Festival also hope to use the event to spur on continued redevelopment in the area. The festival website states, “The festival's theme builds on the rich symbolism of the Cherry Blossom in Japanese culture, the herald of spring, new life and the transience of life. Proceeds from the festival will be used to restore the median of historic Riverside Drive with continued plantings of the beautiful Yoshino Cherry trees and landscaping reminiscent of the National Cemetery Road (Riverside Dr.) dedication in 1933. These trees will reestablish the beautiful drive to the beauty it once was.” The underlying desire to restore the neighborhood to a historical ideal is a recurring theme in many gentrification narratives. The Cherry Blossom Festival serves to highlight that festival format is a viable forum to assert the ideals of the gentrifying class on a neighborhood.
4.5 Competition between identity ideals

I have previously outlined a variety of identity distinctions that my interview subjects reported as being central to understanding East Nashville’s community character. These identity distinctions represent a broad swath of East Nashville’s community and as a result the different identity distinctions also represent, to some degree, different idealistic viewpoints with regard to politics, religion, etc. It is not the focus of this thesis to determine the cultural inclination of various identity groups. Instead, this section examines and explains some of the interactions between these identity groups as each vie for increased significance and more influence as East Nashville continues to redevelop.

I focus on the competitive aspect of these interactions stems because of the suburban ideal concept (Purcell, 2001). Leaving the ‘suburban’ part of the concept and delving further into the ‘ideal’ aspect reveals that a group will attempt to change their surroundings based on their own ideals. In Purcell’s case it was the study of a group seeking a suburban ideal. In the case of the various East Nashville identity groups the ideal may be quite different. For example, the hipster community may reject suburban ideals in lieu of fast-paced, trendy, urban lifestyle. The Hippie/Bohemian community may seek an ideal that is open to expression and free living. The result of the different ideals and the resulting changes to the neighborhood landscape can become a point of friction between different groups. Resolution of these differences comes either from a dominant group imposing their ideal on the rest or compromise between groups. The issue that is problematic with this scenario is the level of representation of the many by the few, especially when the few are attempting to represent an identity ideal that is inherently vague to begin with. In the following sections I highlight a few scenarios in which the representations of particular ideals are at odds with others in the community.

4.5.1 Neighborhood associations

Since the arrival of the urban pioneers in the mid-1970s East Nashville has had a tradition of community organizing. One urban pioneer resident said, “East Nashville’s mantra is organize, organize, organize!” This fervor for collecting neighborhood residents was born of the difficulties the early pioneers had in challenging the city for services and representation. Individually the early residents held no sway with the city council but as a group their collective shout was recognized.
Neighborhood associations, like many other organizations, have issues achieving universal representation. Neighborhood associations in the early days of East Nashville’s gentrification were groups of like minded individuals using their collective power to force change in the neighborhood. I discuss later in further detail the role of neighborhood associations in the redevelopment and future growth of East Nashville. Identifying potential members to join the neighborhood association should be easy due to the geographic nature of the organization; but in East Nashville such a clean distinction is not the case. The Historic Edgefield, Incorporated (HEI) was the first neighborhood association established in East Nashville. The HEI website states that as a result of their initial success the group expanded their chartered boundaries at the request of neighbors to include two streets at the periphery of the association’s borders. This conscious inclusion of particular areas highlights that HEI was not only concerned with the geography of their borders but also who got to be a part of HEI; otherwise those added streets would have been included in the original historic zoning.

The residents that were not a part of HEI and did not support the groups work is the counterpoint to HEI’s creation. The HEI website points out that it successfully lobbied for the first residential down-zoning in Nashville which changed the usage density of Historic Edgefield and effectively reduced the number of multi-family dwellings. Putting aside for a moment the condition of the multifamily homes; it is unlikely that a resident or owner of such a property would have supported an effort that ultimately saw them evicted or their rental income slashed. This earliest instance of neighborhood organization demonstrates that a neighborhood association in name does not necessarily represent the unified ideals its geographic neighborhood in practice.

The lessons of organizing learned by the early urban pioneers have been passed down to the new generations of gentrifiers. Jeff, a newer resident of Lockeland Springs, stated; “I liked the idea of that the neighborhood I was moving to had an association. I made me feel that there were at least other people out there that cared about the direction of the neighborhood.” Whether it is sense of security or assurance that other people are invested in the neighborhood the concept of a neighborhood association is one that caught on very easily in East Nashville. During the rapid gentrification phase of the early 2000s neighborhood associations have been popping up all over East Nashville. As of 2011 there were at least 10 separate neighborhood associations chartered with two more that I knew of in the works.
4.5.2 Newcomers and Old-timers

New generations of gentrifiers means different ideals. This is not to say that in broad terms the collective group of gentrifiers doesn’t seek neighborhood development and other improvements in very generic terms. It means rather, as Karen stated; “A different focus within the community.” She continued by saying, “When we first moved in our primary focus was on absentee landlords, prostitution, drugs, and so on. Now that we worked to clean that up the newer kids aren’t as concerned with it anymore. They are looking for a new restaurant or bar to move in here [East Nashville].” This shift in thinking represents a change in understanding East Nashville as a place. Once it was a dangerous place, now it is considered by many as an upcoming place.

Another type of newcomer to the area spoke about seeking stability in her neighborhood. At first Connie quipped that, “No one I know is actually from East Nashville.” Connie is in her mid-twenties and just bought a home in what is vaguely known as Shelby Hills. Shelby Hills clings to the bluffs above the Cumberland River just south of Shelby Avenue. The area does not officially have a neighborhood name or neighborhood association and is characterized by smaller houses and a blue collar population. This area had yet to fully experience the effects of gentrification occurring just a block away. Connie stated that she would like to see a neighborhood organization form for Shelby Hills, but sympathize for the long time residents that are anxious such an organization would only hasten them getting squeezed out. Connie, a self professed do-gooder, said she would love to see a neighborhood association spring up for the area that “focused on keeping the current residents in their homes.” When I pressed her about the statement she acknowledged that at least in her mind, “…the other neighborhood associations seem like they’re all about fancy homes and social status.” Connie’s sentiments reflect a newer shift in understanding healthy neighborhoods require a diverse population with a variety of income levels.

4.5.3 Spectrum of Gentrifiers

If one considers any or all of the identity distinctions I have describe as a gentrifier then there are obvious differences as to the vision of future development of East Nashville. The ultimate vision that a gentrifying parent of three might seek to achieve is vastly different from a young twenty-something hipster.
I have previously spoken about Lana, a pre-tornado resident and mother of three. During the interview Lana spoke in great length about the state of the schools and education system that serves East Nashville. Her enthusiasm for ensuring great schools become a fixture of East Nashville’s landscape demonstrates a particular ideal about the development of the neighborhood. While Lana still supports many of the things that has helped East Nashville become a developing neighborhood in the past decade she clearly values education and sees it as a means to create further family oriented stability within the area.

Another respondent, Alexa, stands in contrast to Lana’s stated ideals. Alexa is a young-professional just starting out teaching in the public school system. Her public school teachers’ salary restricts her from being categorized as a yuppie, and she doesn’t consider herself a hipster. Alexa views herself more as just young and having fun. Alexa stated that she likes shopping at the small boutique stores in East Nashville and going to the restaurants and bars but; “East Nashville doesn’t have everything I need.” She went on to say that having a Target or something similar nearby would be great. Alexa’s statements highlight that for her, and others in her demographic, amenities are valued the most. While a big box store is counter to East Nashville’s current locally owned culture it represents an image of what could be; a conveniently located and inexhaustible variety of consumer products.

A final example of that highlights the differences between various gentrifiers comes from Ted. He recalled an anecdote told by a fellow business owner who has owned a repair garage in East Nashville since 1980. This man explained to Ted that he has seen the neighborhood go through progressive waves of interest and investment as well as periods of decline. Ted espouses on this statement by saying, “If you were to ask these people [old-timers] if East Nashville was a ‘funky’ neighborhood they would probably look at you like ‘what the hell are you talking about?’ They have no idea what you’re talking about; and that, even, is kind of cool.” This excerpt highlights the continuous changing nature of gentrifiers. For a person who is on the fringe of the neighborhood development a dominant identity may simply be the passing fashion.

4.5.4 East Nashville’s Other Half

Throughout this chapter I have described in detail some of East Nashville’s place-based identities by tracing the narratives of the white middle-class residents that embody them. While these rich narratives describe a vibrant and emerging community it does not completely describe East Nashville. There is a significant minority and low-income / blue-collar population in the
neighborhoods as well that has not been represented. Throughout my field research I struggled to make meaningful contacts in those communities. As a result I have not presented a unified neighborhood identity. In the absence of interviews with these residents I have turned to the material gathered from my primary interview subjects. By reviewing those interviews I determined a perceived cultural difference is the primary divide between these two communities.

Howard has lived in East Nashville almost all of his 65 years with the exception of a brief absence when he was in the military. He has seen firsthand many of the changes I have previously described. The guiding theme during my interview with Howard was change which ultimately led to discussion about how or why that change happened. It is from this point I will highlight Howard’s opinion of his other neighbors. Howard lives in the Shelby Hills neighborhood; a neighborhood that has seen limited gentrification and is considered a blue collar enclave within East Nashville. During a conversation about the difference in housing types across East Nashville Howard stated, “My pappy [father] never had a lot of money when we were growing up but we took care of our yard and stuff. Some of these people nowadays just let weeds take over and trash pile up.” He continued by saying, “I’m not one to call Codes [code enforcement] at the smallest thing but some of the people around me are really bringing the neighborhood down. There is drug dealing and burglary…even my house has been broken into twice. These are things that just can’t be overlooked.” It is clear from his statements that Howard makes a connection between dilapidated properties and the economic and social health of a neighborhood. When asked if he knew these neighbors he said, “I don’t know these people, it seems like we travel in different worlds.” This last statement highlights the gap between perception and reality. Since Howard doesn’t know his neighbors personally he can only substitute his own prejudice for actual fact with regard to maintenance of their houses, yards, cars, etc.

The James A. Cayce Homes is another example of the cultural gap present in East Nashville. For many of the residents that I spoke to this housing project sits as both a literal and figurative divide in the community. The Cayce Homes sit fenced in on the edge of East Nashville between the downtown and the rest of the neighborhood. Shelby Avenue, one of the area’s main thoroughfares, dissects the Cayce Homes and many residents drive through the area daily. David, an East End resident, describes the trip. His sentiments were echoed by many of the residents I interviewed.
You come over the bridge from downtown and you’re in this tunnel of wrought iron fencing. The buildings behind are so close together it even makes me feel uncomfortable. You rarely see anyone outside except for the groups of young black men walking in the middle of the street or hanging out on the corner. Then there is always that group of people waiting on the bus at the corner. I’m always happy when I don’t get stuck at that light.

This excerpt exemplifies how the residents I interviewed see the James Cayce Homes and the people who live as a world apart from their own. There are some inroads between the two communities. The Martha O’Brien Center is a youth center that offers a number of volunteer opportunities but beyond that there is not much connection.

John is an Edgefield resident who’s made a career in representing East Nashville, including the James Cayce Homes. Part of his job is to build relationships and represent East Nashvillians. When I asked him about the James Cayce Homes John sighed and described his challenges in representing the area. John said; “People want to get involved there but they work all day and then come home to take care of the family. Either that or they are just too exhausted to come out a public meeting in the evening.” He continued by saying; “There is also a strongly held mistrust in the public process. They don’t want to waste their time because they think the politicians are just going to do whatever they want anyway.” The trust issues that John described are almost cliché in politics and participatory planning. When I asked if he ever tried to bridge that gap he replied talked about the leader of the Cayce Homes community association. John recalls; “They elected this guy to represent them. He is supposedly a religious man but I have heard he is a philanderer. From my own experience with him it seems like he cares more about his own benefit than trying to help the community he represents.” John’s comments highlight the mistrust between the middle-class and the minority / low-income communities. Additionally, even rehashing hearsay gossip about a community leader is indicative suspicion and deeper issues.

These are just two examples of conversations I had throughout my field research. In general terms the attitude many of the white middle-class residents have about their minority and low-income neighbors is uncertainty fortified with stereotypical prejudices. “Gunshots, shouting, and police helicopters” is how Karen replied when asked about the Cayce Homes. These attitudes coupled with a sense of resentment over the long hard years spent revitalizing East Nashville and the continuing struggle to maintain the neighborhood have created a gulf that is for the moment too wide to overcome. One of the main themes expressed amongst all the
placed-based identities is an affinity towards diverse living. The difference between the professed ideal versus the lived reality is ironic when analyzed in the context of these place-based identities.

4.6 Conclusion to Data Analysis and Results

This thesis has provided an exploration into the intricacies of neighborhood identity using East Nashville as a case study location. I contribute to the understanding of gentrification processes by drawing a link between the redevelopment of an area and its unique neighborhood identity or community character. The narratives of the East Nashville residents I interviewed prove that there is a particular identity, in fact a few dominant identities, operating in East Nashville. The experiences told to me by the residents of East Nashville have answered my primary and secondary research questions.

*What socio-economic forces are at work in transforming East Nashville?*

The nature of the development in East Nashville follows the classic archetype for gentrification. Abandoned by a wealthy population, left neglected, ravaged by crime, and stricken with poverty; East Nashville was rediscovered by an ever increasing group of middle-class people. Slowly, over the course of three decades, the neighborhoods redeveloped and stabilized offering an inviting place to settle. East Nashville diverges from the classical gentrification story at this point due to a few unique aspects. Following a disastrous tornado East Nashville experienced a relatively short yet intensive period of gentrification. This period brought about rapid increase in housing costs, large turnover in neighborhood residency, and addition of many new amenities. Secondly, an influx of different types of people moving in, especially during the intensive period, changed parts of the community character and solidified others creating a unique neighborhood identity. The interaction of the old and new, or reinvented identities couple with an influx of new money laid the foundation for East Nashville to experience a tremendous surge in redevelopment. This combination of social and economic factors continues to shape development in East Nashville.

*How do the place-based identities of East Nashville influence redevelopment trends?*

Upon further investigation into the various identities within East Nashville it is clear that development follows trends in the current community character. This statement seems obvious enough; cater the amenities of an area to its population. I have discussed different identity distinctions in this thesis; each one with a set of ideals it is trying to manifest on East Nashville’s
landscape. Whether a street festival, a new restaurant, luxury condominiums, or a mural on the side of a fence these dominant identities have influenced recent development and enhancements throughout the area. Not only do these new additions to the neighborhood provide for an esthetically pleasing and inviting place to live they serve as a daily reminder of what makes East Nashville the place it currently is. Initially I thought I would find one overarching theme that would define East Nashville; instead I found a place that thrives on diversity.

Will the identity that formed around a redevelopment effort sustain itself?

East Nashville’s eclectic mix of people living, working, and socializing is what makes the area such a vibrant community; a community in which one knows they will be able to find a niche, and if not they will be accepted for who they are. This fabric of acceptance relies on two fundamental aspects of East Nashville’s character. First, the concept of a community of neighbors is most important. Recalling that a community is a group of like minded individuals it is important the residents of East Nashville maintain the collective cooperation and compromise that has become the norm over the past decades. In striving to create an even broader sense of community the gentrifying residents of East Nashville should strive to include all their neighbors as well. This can only enhance the diversity of opinions within the community and ultimately create more equitable and closer knit neighborhoods. Secondly, East Nashville must actively work to promote and sustain the diversity of identities and demographic difference within its borders. East Nashville’s strong sense of community character comes from the variety of identities that reside there. If one particular identity distinction becomes too dominant the balance which makes East Nashville unique will be upset resulting in a mono-culture of sorts.

I have demonstrated that East Nashville is an area that has experienced the effects of gentrification. The new settlers to East Nashville brought with them, and continue to do so, personal identities. Particular identity distinctions rise to the top and lend themselves to the development of a tangible vibe that emerges as the neighborhood identity of East Nashville. Over time the place-based identities have left a mark on the area’s landscape, in the form of new amenities. East Nashville’s unique neighborhood identity continues to attract new people to the area. Gentrification continues to march through the peripheral neighborhoods of East Nashville even after thirty-five years of intermittent redevelopment. I have uncovered through this thesis a cycle involving gentrification and neighborhood identity. Gentrification creates a unique neighborhood identity; the community character attracts new gentrifying residents, and
continued gentrification reinforces the unique neighborhood identity. The challenge for East Nashville is to recognize that its unique neighborhood identity plays an important role in the future development of the area. Residents, developers, city planners, and other stakeholders must develop strategies that will incorporate or sustain the unique aspects of East Nashville’s identity while achieving their development goals. I suggest in the next chapter some means by which development can occur while preserving East Nashville’s neighborhood identity.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Systems of longevity

East Nashville’s distinct identities will have to develop strategies to promote or reinforce their place within the overall neighborhood identity in order to ensure their individual longevity. The process to achieve this longevity will vary between each identity. In keeping with East Nashville’s history any strategy adopted will have to fit with the vibe of the neighborhood, be community orientated, and offer some benefit back to the neighborhood.

Historic Edgefield, Inc. (HEI), East Nashville’s earliest neighborhood association, formed in 1975. The group proclaims to “be a vital and integral force in bringing about change and positive growth in East Nashville, in addition to celebrating and preserving our unique historic heritage” (historicedgefield.org). HEI started out by working to create a historic district within the city of Nashville in which growth and redevelopment followed specific zoning codes, building practices, other guidelines. Beyond a building code the concept of a historic overlay “…includes ideas, ideals, institutions, regulations, and preservation: a disciplining discourse encompassing the local landscape and its residents.” (Schein, 1997, p. 672).

A select group of gentrifiers can assert their will and ideals on the neighborhood both physically and mentally through the imposition of strict development standards and procedures. The physical manifestation is the built environment that essentially freezes the neighborhood at a certain point in time. Future development is dictated by a set of codes that must be obeyed and can only be changed through the granting of a variance by a committee of historical zoning commissioners. Mentally, the mindsets within the historically zoned portions of the neighborhoods follow a similarly disciplined strategy. Any person wishing to reside in the historically zoned areas must conform to the established rules and adopt a preservationist attitude. The combination of these factors creates a structural regime which ensures the future stability of the historic neighborhood along with a self-nominated, perpetual group of residents that will bear the torch.

The artistic community is another group that seeks to create a more firm foundation for future growth. East Nashville fixtures Bret and Meg McFadyen are owners of the Art and Invention Gallery and also founders of the Tomato Arts Festival. The couple has recently launched The Five Points Collaborative, a small business incubator in the heart of East Nashville. This project is definitively a business move however the envisioned occupants of the
small modular buildings are “small gift boutiques and art-types shops.” (Duncan, 2011, p. 3). The intended nature of the incubator businesses accomplishes a two-fold mission. The first is that the new retail spaces will attract new visitors and more money to the Five Point area further enhancing its image throughout the city. Certain areas throughout the city have carved specialized business niches. For example 8th Avenue South is known for its antique shops and Hillsboro Village has second-hand book stores. The Five Points Collaborative will reinforce the image of East Nashville as an artistic haven.

If other distinct identity groups want to grow and continue to exert their place within the East Nashville community they will have to develop techniques and strategies to ensure their future longevity. Examples of these may include music venues, public parks, iconographic images, or more culture/identity specific businesses.

5.2 Is there enough space to grow?

East Nashville’s physical borders dictate the extent to which the neighborhoods can expand. These finite boundaries do not preclude future growth. It means that planners and residents will have to come together to envision new strategies that support continued growth. Conor addresses this issue by thinking of a neighborhood as having a lifecycle. In speaking about East Nashville he says, “The neighborhood has priced itself and only people who can afford $300,000 or higher can move in.” This price range is at odds with the commercial development in the area. New businesses, restaurants, and other amenities serve the entire population but clearly cater to a younger demographics style and tastes. The recent development clearly indicates that East Nashville wants to bring a certain market demographic to the area but the residential housing options are not capturing that group and keeping them in the neighborhood. Residential density is a solution proposed by Conor and echoed by many of my other respondents.

The concept of increased residential density has many opponents in East Nashville. Conor notes how, “The same people that were a positive catalyst, that have been fighting to preserve and improve this neighborhood are extremely weary and fight against those types of condo projects in this neighborhood…” This backlash can be attributed to the fears of the urban pioneers. Many pioneers see increased residential density as attracting lower income people and crime to the neighborhood. This mixture is exactly the problem the early gentrifiers fought against. Single family zoned land which is protected by historic and conservation overlays were
the victory the pioneers sought. Conor sees a completely single family zoned neighborhood as a death warrant. He says, “It essentially means your neighborhood will not grow; and if it cannot grow it will die.”

While Conor’s statement may be a bit dramatic it highlights need for balance and compromise within the neighborhood in order to achieve continued growth. A number of respondents spoke of a ‘remember when’ type of strategy to break open the density debate. This strategy simply implores people to remember when they were first starting out and the type of property they could afford. It has had some limited success with the development of the Martins Corners, Fifth and Main, and Walden condominium developments. Ultimately a portion of East Nashville’s future growth will be dependent upon a life cycle oriented housing strategy. East Nashville must offer a variety of options that can welcome a newcomer into an apartment or condo, settle them in a starter home, accommodate an expanding family, and see them through downsizing as empty-nesters.

5.3 Upon who is the maintenance of identity dependent?

It is highly unlikely that East Nashville’s the current neighborhood identity or community character will remain unchanged. Everyone that I spoke with during my research noted there has been some type of change since they originally moved in. The longer the respondent had lived in the neighborhood the more profound the change seemed to them. This is because neighborhoods are living things that grow and change over time. East Nashville’s history attests to this fact. The area has gone from an upper class Victorian Era bedroom community to a neglected inner city neighborhood to an up-and-coming urban district. That being said it is possible the change in East Nashville’s current identity can be minimized.

Ultimately the character of the neighborhood is contingent upon its residents. It has been demonstrated over the past few years that the diversity of character that makes East Nashville unique is also what makes it an attractive place to live and socialize. The maintenance of this unique neighborhood identity is dependent upon the residents of East Nashville upholding a few key elements. First, the multiplicity of identity distinctions is good for future durability. It will mean that there is something for everyone. Second, having different identity distinctions in the area will reduce the chance that any one will become more prevalent and squeeze out the others. Finally, there has to be an outlet for the identities to express themselves. If there is no place or thing by which an identity can represent itself it will likely fall by the wayside. These
expressions are dependent upon the support of residents through patron-ship of businesses, attendance at festivals, or even compromise during community planning events.

East Nashville has a bright future. The residents have proven that in the face of adversary, either man-made or natural, they will come together and help each other out. They have demonstrated their devotion to the area through their tireless efforts to promote local businesses and establish their community as a vibrant part of the City of Nashville. Lana stated, “People have moved in and they have different expectations about what a neighborhood should be. We are still changing!” Her words sum up the heart of my thesis. East Nashville is still changing and the course change takes will be dependent upon the East Nashvillians.
6. References


