

Fixing Memphis

A year after the first MEMFix event, what are the lasting effects?

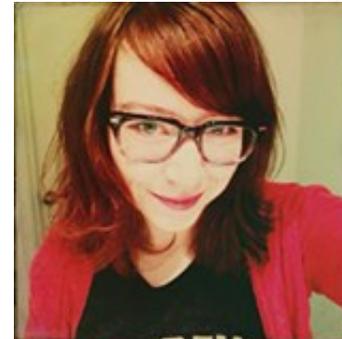
by KERRY CRAWFORD

On November 10th of last year, I got the best birthday present ever: MEMFix had turned my neighborhood, Crosstown, into a bustling, vibrant, ideal version of itself for the day.

Pop-up shops were open, bike lanes were painted on the streets, a massive parking lot had been turned into an asphalt public park with food trucks, live music, and plenty of places to hang out, and there were people — 10,000 of them, by Crosstown Arts' estimation — swarming the street.

It was the most people I had ever seen in my neighborhood. When I bought my house in the shadow of the iconic art deco Sears building four-and-a-half years ago, I never imagined that my charmingly run-down neighborhood could ever look like that. The change, though temporary, was incredible.

It was a fun party, but a year later, what lasting impact has MEMFix had on the neighborhood?



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• Kerry Crawford

"Everything is fixed now! That was the plan, right?" Crosstown Arts co-director Chris Miner joked when we met at the Crosstown Arts development office. "Seriously, though. It wasn't a silver bullet, but it did so much."

Being a silver bullet isn't the point of MEMFix. The single-day events, which are staged by the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team in partnership with community associations in the areas they serve, are designed to show the potential in a neighborhood by flooding it with short-term infrastructure improvements (like bike lanes and crosswalks), pop-up retail and special programming (think live music, food trucks, and demonstrations).

Instead, MEMFix is more of an exercise in the art of the possible, a way to shock and awe residents and business owners into thinking about what their neighborhoods could become. What comes after MEMFix — the creation of community and neighborhood plans and subsidized leases for entrepreneurs through the MemShop program — is designed to turn MEMFix's enthusiasm into lasting neighborhood growth.

A year after MEMFix, Crosstown is starting to look a little like it's booming. Last Thursday, the Land Use Control Board voted to approve the Sears building redevelopment. More than 26,000 square feet of empty storefront space on Watkins has been filled since last November, bringing an art gallery and performance space, Yvonne Bobo's studio, Visible Music College, the Amurica storefront, and the second iteration of the Hi-Tone to the neighborhood.

Not all of the new businesses sprang up after MEMFix. About 14,000 square feet had already been leased prior to the event, meaning that Crosstown had already started to turn around before the official "fix." When I asked Tommy Pacello, the project manager for the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team, about the lasting economic impact that MEMFix had on Crosstown, he admitted that it was difficult to calculate because of the other investments happening simultaneously.

So, what did MEMFix bring to the neighborhood other than new tenants? It brought a

huge dose of social capital.

"Two years ago, 80 percent of Memphians probably didn't know where Crosstown was," Crosstown Arts co-director Todd Richardson said. (I suspect that the other 20 percent likely live around the area.)

"MEMFix still comes up in conversation. It's a point of reference for people," Richardson added. "They like being able to say that they were there when the first big thing happened to the neighborhood."

As the first MEMFix event, Crosstown also served as a testing ground for the Innovation Delivery Team. One of the major lessons? "You have to walk a fine line between festival and idea prototyping," Pacello said. "It was an awesome event and it reintroduced the neighborhood to so many people, but I wish we had engaged with the neighborhood more and been more thoughtful about our programming."

It also caused Pacello and his team to question the role of city government. With Crosstown, they took an ask-forgiveness-not-permission approach to working with the city. "We kind of sprung [MEMFix Crosstown] on them. They were like, 'Maybe next time, give us a heads-up,'" Pacello said with a laugh.

Now on their third MEMFix event, Pacello's team has been able to partner with the city to bring longer-lasting infrastructure improvements to South Memphis. The improvements, which include things like expanded crosswalks, will live for a year before being reconsidered.

As for Crosstown, MEMFix made me even more excited about the redevelopment of the Sears building (slated to be finished in 2016) and all of the things that are possible for the neighborhood. Here's hoping that every future MEMFix event works as well.

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