

Memphis redesigned: MEMfix swarms to Crosstown

By Thomas Bailey Jr.

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Memphis' new juggernaut of creative, idealistic organizations that actually believe they can energize distressed Memphis neighborhoods, one by one, is now swarming at Crosstown.

Some of the same young groups that two years ago helped make historic Broad Avenue so cool again are now bringing to Cleveland Street their hip language, mass of volunteers, energy and friends who are artists, musicians, urban designers, planners and entrepreneurs.

A one-day event called MEMfix Cleveland Street — 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Nov. 10 — will give folks “a feel for what two blocks of really awesome urbanism is really like in their neighborhood,” said one of the organizers, Tommy Pacello of the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team.

His organization is teaming with other young change-agents like Crosstown Arts, Livable Memphis and Memphis Regional Design Center to turn two rundown blocks of Cleveland — Overton Park to Galloway — into a movie set.

Instead of a film, they're using the props of temporary bike lanes, street trees, crosswalks, benches, pop-up businesses and public art to create an experience for all who attend.

The effort is to demonstrate what Crosstown can be like with some progressive design and community building.

"All of a sudden things are blowing up in Memphis," said Elizabeth Saba, the Livable Memphis program coordinator who means by "blowing up" that grassroots changes are afoot. If MEMfix Cleveland Street sounds like "New Face For an Old Broad," it is. That similar, two-day demonstration of progressive urban design two years ago not only drew an estimated 13,000 people, it is credited with spurring \$8 million in new investment in the Broad Avenue Historic District, said Charles 'Chooch' Pickard, an architect and executive director of the Regional Design Center.

"It was the success of that project that makes us want to do this one over here," he said.

The organizers have succeeded in attracting through word of mouth and social media perhaps 100 volunteers, said Crosstown Arts program director Emily Halpern. Many of the helpers will descend on the site the week before Nov. 10 to do things like paint murals, cover a chain-link fence with art, clean up, set out planters, position benches, and turn parking lots into plazas.

The helpers are coming from places like the University of Memphis, Rhodes College, Memphis College of Art, Memphis City Beautiful, Church Health Center, Blues Rugby Club, and individuals like Lisa Hume. She's an "awesome" event programmer who's so enthusiastic about MEMfix she's been volunteering about 20 hours a week, Pacello said.

Seven divisions of the City of Memphis are helping. Memphis Light, Gas & Water Division crews have even been repainting utility poles on Cleveland.

Nearly all the neighbors, from the Cleveland Flea Market to the big Assembly Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, are getting involved.

"We're excited about it," said Eddie Sherbourn, operations overseer of the Assembly Hall, formerly Crosstown Theater. Not only will the Jehovah's Witnesses erect their own display outside for MEMfix, Sherbourn expects many of the 1,000 worshippers coming to a special Hispanic assembly that day to visit MEMfix activities during the lunch break and after the assembly.

Such community building is as important to Crosstown Arts as redeveloping the 1.5 million-square-foot Sears Crosstown building, Richardson said.

"We knew that when we started the Crosstown project, we couldn't just sit in a room and come up with a plan for the building," he said. "That would be only half of the challenge. Crosstown was no longer defined as a neighborhood. We knew we had to activate the neighborhood to bring the neighborhood back. It's why all our events are here, to say Crosstown is a place you can come and it's safe." Cleveland doesn't have the row of pretty historic buildings Broad Avenue does. Its big strength is what it's in the middle of: Midtown, Medical Center, historic neighborhoods, Downtown.

Cleveland also has more traffic than Broad, which can be a strength if the cars can be calmed down by a more pedestrian and bike-friendly street design, Pickard indicated.

Pacello punched up an area map color-coded to reflect assessed value of properties. Gray was under \$25 per square foot, with values increasing with color brightness. "We're right here," he said, pointing to a broad sweep of gray ringed by oranges and reds. "It's surrounded by value," Pacello said.

Some of the businesses and organizations coming for MEMfix aren't just pop-up; they're coming to stay.

The street's distinctive Crosstown Shops center curves with the street. Moving into vacant spaces there will be a studio of metal and woodworking artist Yvonne Bobo, the offices and gallery of Crosstown Arts, and performance space that will be shared by Visible Music School and Crosstown Arts.

Look for MEMfix to keep fine-tuning as it moves to other neighborhoods where community leaders want to make changes.

"This is a model," Pacello said. "It will be calibrated and applied in other neighborhoods."

Said Livable Memphis's Saba: "It's just neat to be able to paint a picture of how Memphis could be with an event like this."

MEMfixing Cleveland Street

Where: Two Crosstown blocks, Overton Park Avenue to Galloway

When: 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Nov. 10

What: This event is one part street festival, one part experimentation and one part a demonstration of the best practices in urban design. The goal is to show how design of public spaces, such as bike lanes and public art, can help a once thriving street can regain its vitality. See

crosstownarts.org/memfix-cleveland-street

Activities: Pop-up retail, food trucks, live music, children's area, outdoors movie at 7 p.m.

Admission: Free

Who: Organized by the Mayor's Innovation Team, Crosstown Arts, Livable Memphis, Memphis Regional Design Center.



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