

Why Blacks Want to Leave the City

A Position Paper

JoeLouis Mattox

There is no doubt about it, a great number of blacks want to leave the city. Before I say why, let me tell you this:

Everyone knows that more city people live in apartments than in single family homes. However, the "dream house" of most Americans, both black and white, is a single family home.

The average cost of a single family home in a nice neighborhood is around \$40,000, with a down payment of \$2,000 (Kansas City area). This being the case, can people (especially young couples) who are tired of renting afford to buy a single family home?

The 1978 November issue of *Apartment Life* says, "*Yes, You Can Own Your Dream House—and not leave the city, and not go broke, and not take big risks, and not settle for a cracker box, and not be the lone pioneer on the block. The answer is rehabbing (rehabilitation),*

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"We've come a long way. . .

As recently as the late 1960's, rehabbing had no place in the nation's vocabulary. Urban renewal, a euphemism for bulldozing the old and building from scratch, was the conventional wisdom for making our cities livable again. And even by the early 1970's, you were a loner, a frontiersman, if you said, 'Restore, don't replace.'

Today the trailbreaker has become a settler, not the odd man out, but part of a community of strong-spirited, determined people who have taken the old houses in the city and made them homes.

Most cities have hundreds of old homes that need to be rehabbed into dream houses. But is there a market for older homes, and do urban residents like living in the city?

In older white neighborhoods such as Hyde Park and Westport in Kansas City, there is a strong market for older homes. However, in older black neighborhoods like the 12th-18th and Vine district, and the Santa Fe area, there is little demand for older homes. Old homes are not dream houses for most blacks. Some of my friends say this:

—I don't want to buy and fix-up an ole house, because I lived in one all my life.

—An old house means high utility bills—water pipes are rusty and corroded, the wiring is bad, and the old time furnaces are gas guzzlers.

—A lot of older homes have easement drive-ways and this causes problems with neighbors.

—Only rich whites can afford to buy and live in a landmark.

—My furniture and things won't go with an old house.

If you exclude the black side of town, the Back-To-The-City movement would seem to indicate that the age of nostalgia is causing a lot of people to fall in love with the city and stay put. Not necessarily so.

A recent Gallup poll of urban residents, a collaborative project of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation of Flint, Michigan and the Kettering Foundation, found that 36 percent of city residents desire to leave their current environments. The poll also found a tremendous base of support for the city, particularly at the neighborhood level. According to the poll, the principal reason that city residents want to leave is the lack of amenities and perceived deterioration in the quality of urban life brought about by high crime rates, overcrowding, uncleanliness, poor housing, and pollution. When asked to describe the ideal neighborhood, respondents said it would include friendly people, good housing, a quiet atmosphere, cleanliness and low crime.

Those desiring to move were more likely to be younger and/or from the upper socioeconomic groups. Forty-nine percent of those between the ages of 18 and 34, and 40 percent of those with a college education indicated they would like to move, compared to the 36 percent of the total urban population wanting to leave.

I wondered if the figures in the survey represented a lot of whites who wanted to leave the city or did the survey also speak for blacks.

Do blacks want to leave the city, and if so, why?

To get an answer to this question, I shared the findings of the Kettering survey with several black real estate brokers and asked them if the 36

percent figure was higher or lower for the large number of blacks who want to leave the city? They told me this:

1. The findings in the Kettering survey speak for a lot of blacks.

2. Almost 50 percent of the urban black population, especially those between the ages of 25-40 and with family annual incomes over \$16,000, want to leave the city. It's hard to sell these blacks older homes in the inner city. Middle income blacks are looking for dream homes in the suburbs. Here are some of the reasons 'upward mobility' blacks want to leave the city:

—Black-on-black crime. People are afraid to leave home to go to church, the store, and even to work. Houses get robbed, women can get raped and nobody sees nothing. Most of the homes in the inner city look like jail houses—they have bars on every window and door.

—Too many unemployed youth—they steal for a living.

—Inferior schools—kids can't learn nothing.

—Prices for consumer goods and services are cheaper in the suburbs.

—Limited selection of consumer goods and services. Most of the shopping centers, first-run movies and bowling alleys and neighborhood shops have fled the inner-city.

—Poor municipal services. Weeds on vacant lots don't get cut. Trash people do a half job picking-up trash. Streets don't get repaired.

—The good jobs have moved to the suburbs. Commuting long distances back and forth to work costs money and makes getting to work on time "a pain."

—Redlining. It's difficult to get a loan to buy, build or fix-up a house in the inner city.

—Not enough people take pride in their neighborhood. A lot of streets look like hell and nobody cares.

—Many low-income people, especially the elderly, can't afford to keep-up their property and because of this well maintained homes are devalued.

—No hope for many areas. The city or the

federal government doesn't have enough money to save some neighborhoods.

—Abandoned buildings. Nothing is done about junk cars, run-down houses and vacant dangerous buildings.

A great number of blacks don't "love" their neighborhoods. Why? Some people I know say:

—*I have no roots to the area. I wasn't born and raised around here; my church is across town. All my friends have moved out and I don't trust my neighbor's children or any of their friends.*

—*My neighborhood is a bad place—everybody says so. The police say it's a high crime area. City Hall labels it a poverty-program district—all the people living around here are on welfare, low-income, poor, and down and out. Insurance companies have written off the area. Taxis won't come or go here. Delivery men and repair people rush in and rush out.*

—*You can't 'love' something that looks like hell. I am ashamed of my neighborhood. Unkempt lawns, stoves and refrigerators out on the porch, broken-down cars and rugs in the front yard, window screens and storm doors hanging off the house, and dirty streets (due in part to oil slicks and untied trash bags) make my block look bad.*

—*You can't 'love' and be afraid of a place at the same time. Crime in my part of town is out of hand: The streets aren't safe. People around here will come right up in your yard and steal your mail and newspapers. You have to nail down everything and can't leave nothing in your car. I want to take a vacation—no way; they would steal me blind if I went around the block.*

—*Continuous problems with bad kids. Welfare mothers won't control their kids. They let them play in the street, sit on your car, break windshields, and steal hubcaps. You try to talk sense to a 10-year-old in this neighborhood, and you get cursed out. People on my block don't raise their kids, they just let them grow-up.*

—*Can't get along with inconsiderate neighbors.*

—*All my friends, and all the good decent people*

have moved.

—*It was never the place I really wanted to live.*

—*Public agencies don't care about the area—their buildings look as bad and are as poorly maintained as those of people on welfare.*

—*Nobody loves the area, why should I?*

Question: How do we get blacks to like old houses? The answer is black preservationists will have to double their efforts to get inner-city residents to realize that old houses are goldmines, and that they should participate in the preservation of sites, buildings and objects significant in American history and culture.

In order to get inner-city residents to love their old house, black preservationists will need a lot of help from white preservationists. Very few blacks know preservation's three R's, which are restore, rehabilitate, recycle. . . or refinish, refurbish, reconstruct, remodel, renovate, revitalize, reproduce, replace, reclaim, rejuvenate, repair, reuse, rebuild, recreate, redesign, repair, retrieve, renew, revive, rework, refit, retrofit, rehouse, redevelop, relocate, remember, revamp, remake, reinvest, reopen, replicate and rezone.

Question: How do you get blacks to want to stay in the city and love their neighborhoods? The answer is a comprehensive "Save the Cities" urban policy and program which will improve both the quality of the environment of the nation's communities and the lives of their residents.

If cities are to remain our major centers of commerce and culture and nice places to live, and not become poor people's reservations on the plains, we will need realistic urban policies and *adequately funded* programs which:

- Deal with unemployment and crime—there is a connection.
- Strengthen neighborhood programs that stimulate pride for the place where you live.
- Help schools provide quality education.
- Curb redlining.
- Improve municipal services.
- Revitalize downtowns as well as the corner and strip shopping areas in the inner-city.
- Make inner-city housing available for mod-

erate income blacks—\$1 houses for upper income blacks would be a good program. (The \$1 house for low-income people program is failing).

- Give tax-breaks to big businesses, encouraging them to stay and relocate in the inner-city.

Think about this: Blacks may want to stay if

black leaders, and especially black real estate people, echo the words of Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who says, "Land and property in the inner-city and ghetto are the richest turfs in this nation. Many individuals and interests outside of the area are seeking that land and property. Don't abandon it."

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