

LEXINGTON'S EAST END

A CHANGING NEIGHBORHOOD

BY BAILEY VANDIVER
PHOTOS BY ARDEN BARNES

A prostitute using the bathroom to wash up. A millionaire and his kids drinking smoothies. A man asking if he can clean the windows to make a couple bucks. A council member sitting in the corner.

These could have been the customers in Wild Fig Books and Coffee “on any given day,” said former owner and current UK English professor Crystal Wilkinson.

That scene in Wild Fig is like a microcosm of the community that surrounds the bookstore: the East End of Lexington.

When Lexington's black population increased after the Civil War, many settled in the East End, which was then the outskirts of the city. Now it is just north and east of downtown Lexington.

Like its people and its buildings, the East End's boundaries have changed over time. Today, the East End is

generally thought to be framed by Midland Avenue, North Broadway, Main Street and Loudon Avenue.

“It's a neighborhood where extremes exist,” said Griffin VanMeter, a developer and business owner in the East End and North Limestone communities.

It's a place where a family can buy a house for the first time after living in substandard housing for 20 years. But it's also a place where an escaped dog eats a cat in front of VanMeter's kids, he said.

“I think that unfortunately the East End tends to get sort of homogenized,” said Kris Nonn, executive director of North Limestone Community Development Corporation (NoLi CDC). “East End is much more complicated than that.”

There are million-dollar houses, and half-million-dollar houses, and houses without plumbing, and people

sleeping in their cars. “There's no consistency to it,” Nonn said.

“It's a beautiful place because there's so much going on and it's all so different,” Nonn said.

“It really is a peaceful community,” said Mizari Suárez, who has rented on Chestnut Street for three years and is in the process of buying a home. “And it's also a community that worries about things, like gun violence, that are constantly happening in the East End.”

That tends to be the perception of East End, said Suárez and other residents: It is a place of crime, and it is a place with residents who don't care.

Until 60 years ago, streets in the East End like De-weese and Third were centers of economy and culture. But when downtown expansion began to infringe on the East End, many people fled the area.

The population of the East End declined from the 1960s through 2000, the year of the last available census information about the area. Then, the East End was comprised of 387 acres and 3,940 residents.

In 2009, the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government considered these demographics in its East End Small Area Plan, a collection of goals meant to drive development in the neighborhood.

Eleven years later, the East End has certainly changed. Liquor stores have become bakeries. Shotgun houses have been refurbished and painted bright colors. Bookstores have opened and closed and opened again. Black residents have moved— or been pushed out— and white residents have moved in.

This has happened, is happening, and will likely continue to happen. The question is how much revitalizes



Lights shine off a row of houses on Ohio Street in the East End of Lexington, Kentucky, on Monday, March 2, 2020.

the neighborhood, and how much gentrifies it.

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In 2000, East End was 72 percent black, 26 percent white, and 5 percent Hispanic or Latino.

But the racial composition has been changing, said Mike Wilson, a black man and reverend who has lived in the East End for most of his life. Now he lives on the corner of Wilson Street and Elm Tree Lane.

A black man local to the area used to own the three shotgun houses past Wilson's house, but he sold them to an investor for \$20,000 a piece.

Now, the colorful houses— one with red siding and a blue door, another with blue siding and a red door—are all home to white families. They sold for more than \$100,000 each.

Wilson said he knew people of color who were interested in purchasing the houses, but he's not sure if they had the opportunity. But others have even less of a chance.

"You're displacing persons who have basically relied on this affordable housing area for a place to live," Wilson said.

Spiking up prices makes the housing inaccessible for some in the area, which can force them out.

With his siblings, Wilson owns another house, a shotgun on Dakota Street. It was his dad's property, and he's held on to it for the 28 years since he died.

He had occasionally rented it out, but after 28 years of paying taxes on it, he decided to sell in 2017. He chose a developer he knew, a black man in the neighborhood, and was in the process of reaching a deal.

Then he ran into "a brick wall." He found out that one of his siblings had a federal tax loan debt on the house, which made selling more difficult. He and the developer

paused their plans.

In April 2019, Wilson received a code enforcement notice about the Dakota Street house.

Soon after, requests to purchase the house began arriving via post card, sometimes two a month.

These come from developers who are trying to get property for cheap, Wilson said.

Somehow, Wilson thinks, these developers find out that property owners have been sent code enforcement notices and may be facing fines if the issues are not addressed. If these issues are too much for the property owner, money from a quick sale to a developer might seem like the best option.

"It's almost like code enforcement was being used as a vehicle to put this pressure on these persons," said Wilson, who is a former council member for District 1, which includes the East End.

Current District 1 Councilman James Brown, who is black, has even received one of these post cards at his house, he said.

He has heard community members' concerns that code enforcement is being weaponized, he said. Some people fear that developers specifically call code enforcement on them in order to turn up the pressure.

"Whether or not it's happening or not happening, there's a perception that it's happening," Brown said. "So I think we have to make sure that's not the case, and investigate the incidents where it's happened to make sure that's not the case."

"We" is the Task Force on Neighborhoods in Transition, a city task force aiming to "protect vulnerable residents from the consequences of neighborhood redevelopment and transformation."

Brown is the chair of the task force, which was created in May 2018 by Lexington Vice Mayor Steve Kay, who is white. The group has been holding monthly meetings, which include feedback from the public, to discuss the issues facing the East End specifically.

Most of the neighborhoods likely to see gentrification are located in District 1, Brown said, which made this an issue he "decided to own and to spearhead."

Not calling it the "Gentrification Task Force" was deliberate, Brown said.

"It just has a negative connotation," he said. "There's no way around it, and people start expressing their thoughts and what they're seeing in a negative tone, so it's hard to have a progressive conversation out of it."

The task force aims to have several recommendations ready to present this spring, Brown said.

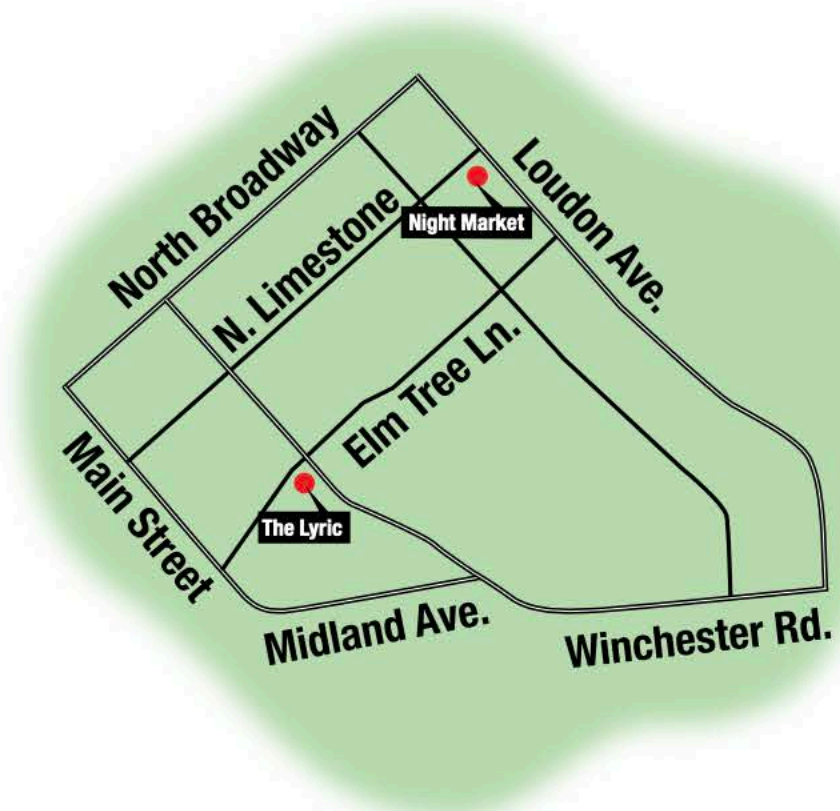
One of the main focuses is affordable housing. The city already has an affordable housing fund, but it isn't a



Patrons of the Night Market buy food from vendors in Lexington, Kentucky, on Sept. 6, 2019.

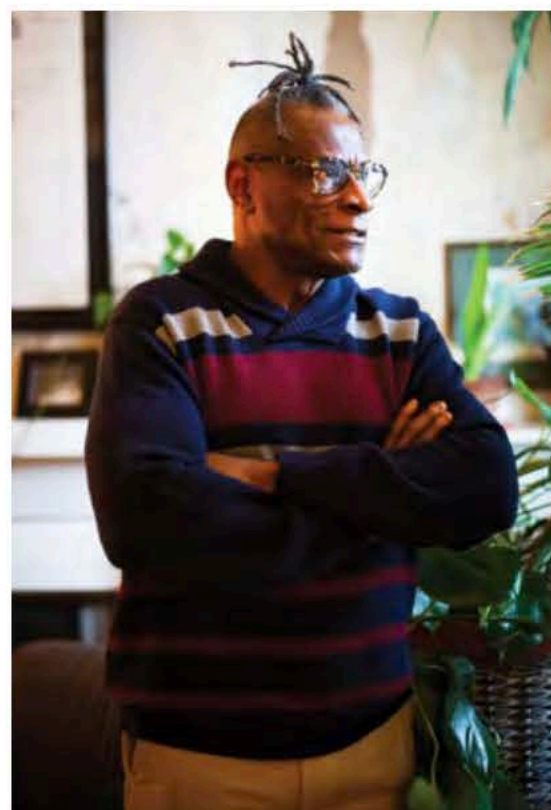


A mural reads 'The Future is Bright!' on Elm Street in Lexington, Kentucky, on Sunday, Feb. 2, 2020.





Lamar Hogan, 13, and Lashon Hogan, 16, sit and laugh on a playground on Eastern Avenue, with the Lexington Herald-Leader building in the background, on Sunday, Feb. 2, 2020, in Lexington, Kentucky.



LEFT: Thomas Tolliver stands in his home on Third Street in Lexington, Kentucky, on Feb. 6, 2020.



RIGHT: Mike Wilson stands in front of his home on Wilson Street in Lexington, Kentucky, on Monday, Feb. 17, 2020.

trust fund because there is no dedicated funding source.

"Yet it has been steady for the last few years since it's been created, it's always that opportunity for it to get tinkered with based off the city's budget," he said.

Brown and the task force are proposing a permanent funding source to make it "something that we can depend on and continues to increase as the need for affordable housing increases."

Another recommendation concerns changes to code enforcement.

"We want the job that they do to be consistent throughout the city," Brown said. "What we need to recognize or understand is not everybody is of the same means, so there may be different paths to get to the same goal based off of what code enforcement is trying to do."

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Sweeping the sidewalks and the driveway is part of a typical morning routine in Mexico.

Mizari Suárez, who is Latina, said she doesn't remember much from her childhood in Mexico, but she does remember this.

Over three years ago, when she was looking for a place to live, her friend told her to look at his new place in the East End. "You'll fall in love with it," he said.

When she drove up to his house, he was sweeping the driveway.

"That, to me, was just like, oh man, yeah," Suárez said. "This is going to be like home."

She moved into that house on Chestnut Street as a renter, and she did fall in love with it— and the East End. About a year ago, she moved into the next house over on Chestnut Street, but she still held a special affection for that first house.

So when the opportunity to purchase it came up, she said "why not?"

"I knew when I first moved into that house that I wanted to be there forever," Suárez said.

Suárez and her two-and-a-half-year-old dog Sasha will soon move back into that house. They often take walks around the neighborhood, Suárez said, which allows her to see and know her community.

Many people view the East End as full of trash, Suárez said, but her friend is not the only one who sweeps. One

of her neighbors across the street picks up trash and sweeps every day when he gets home from work.

"I've realized for him it's like a sense of ownership of his community," Suárez said, "and a sense of like, okay, I'm taking back what people say about the East End."

Poet, artist and UK English professor Frank X Walker just moved into the East End, on Goodloe Street, and he often walks the street to pick up garbage. Sometimes it's thrown by non-residents who don't care whether McDonald's bags and beer bottles are on the street.

"I think also what happens in communities like this is that when there are so many people renting, there's not a sense of ownership in the community," said Walker, who is black.

That's the benefit of homeownership, Walker said. But many people are not ready for homeownership, Councilman Brown said, and renting is not a problem as long as landlords and renters are committed to safe and affordable housing.

Suárez said she was lucky because when she was renting, her landlord was her friend, and he wasn't predatory.

"We understand the awful landlords and the developers that come in places like the East End, and that's not really what he's trying to do or I'm trying to do," Suárez said. "We're really just trying to build a sense of community between us."

Her street does have this community, she said— although she can tell that people have moved because last summer included fewer barbecues and gatherings than the one before.

But each summer on Chestnut Street brings beautiful, tall sunflowers, and last summer, Suárez started a new project: a garden in her front yard.

She planted tomato seeds and watched them grow.

"And one day, I was out there, and there was a big, beautiful red tomato that I was just ready to eat on a mozzarella sandwich," she said.

But a woman whom Suárez had never seen before walked up and offered to pay her for the tomato.

"In my mind, I was like, obviously I don't want to give you my tomato because I've been looking forward to it," she said. "But it hit me that this was probably the only thing that she could afford."

So Suárez gave the tomato to the woman for free, and she came back several times for more. No tomato ever looked as good to Suárez as that first one did, but she took that as a sign from "whatever you believe in" that she was meant to give away tomatoes.

"People talk about what can we do for the East End, what can we do?" Suárez said. "It's little things like that."



Mizari Suárez and her dog Sasha sit in front of her home on Chestnut Street in Lexington, Kentucky, on Thursday, Feb. 21, 2020.



Griffin VanMeter holds his daughter Smith, 2, in the Kentucky retail store on Bryan Avenue on Feb. 17, 2020, in Lexington, Kentucky.

It's a food insecure area, Suárez said, so resources should be going to things like access to food, in addition to mental health specialists and social workers.

"It is a historically very under-resourced neighborhood," said Griffin VanMeter, who has brought his personal resources to the area in a variety of ways. "There are a lot of social [and] economic issues that are a result of that."

One place that aims to be a provider of resources for the community is Wild Fig Books. When Crystal Wilkinson and her partner Ron Davis, who are black, decided

to sell the business in 2018, a group came together as a worker-cooperative to purchase it.

The Wild Fig was always operating like a community center more than a business, Wilkinson said, but she thinks the co-op model has taken it even further in the direction of being "a service to the community."

People have been able to come to the Wild Fig for books, or for good food, or for free condoms.

They can also gather there and find a safe space.

But at the end of February, Wild Fig had to close in the East End. Sarah Williams, who is black, is one of the worker-owners. She said this is due to a breakdown in communication and agreement with Griffin VanMeter, who is one of the owners of the building as part of Frontier Highway, a company that rents out commercial and residential spaces.

It was VanMeter, who is white, who first invited Wilkinson and Davis to bring the Wild Fig to North Limestone years ago, and VanMeter loaned \$25,000 to the worker-cooperative to purchase the business. Discussions between VanMeter and the co-op over the last year or so had included promising options for the co-op to eventually purchase the building, Williams said.

"He never followed through on making that a reality," Williams said during a Feb. 16 community meeting at the Wild Fig, despite recent talks about avenues for the



A man walks down North Limestone toward Wild Fig Books and Coffee on Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Lexington, Kentucky.

Wild Fig co-op to purchase the building this year.

Williams said that once she realized that there was no option to buy the building or have the lease extended, the Wild Fig needed to move out of that space.

In a Feb. 25 statement, Wild Fig worker-owners said the bookstore received a large donation from the community so it can reopen in another location, but the details have not yet been finalized.

Williams has often called the Wild Fig a "sacred space" for the community.

Tina Durbin, a Wild Fig worker-owner, said she first walked in to the bookstore five years ago because she had realized "we as white people have to learn more about being white, and what that means, and how we can help break down the barriers for people of color."

"This space allows me to teach myself," she said. "Knowledge is through power, and we know... that it comes through books, but it also comes through community and conversation... all of which happens right here."

Suárez, who is also a Wild Fig worker-owner, said what happened to the Wild Fig is gentrification doing "its awful thing."

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In the 25 years that Thomas Tolliver has lived in his

red house on Third Street, the lightbulb in the foyer has never needed to be replaced.

The light hangs from the ceiling, encased in an intricate glass chandelier that Tolliver describes as a bee hive. It sheds light on the wall just inside Tolliver's house, where he has pinned photos and pamphlets and a type-written letter, all of which showcase black history.

Much of the decorations relate to Dr. T. T. Wendell, a black doctor whose family owned the house for much of the 20th century.

Tolliver, who is black, has a lot of respect for Wendell because he kept pieces of history rather than throwing them away.

"It's good for black history," Tolliver said.

Tolliver describes himself as an East End activist, but he also acknowledges that his opinions differ from many others with whom he shares a neighborhood. Rather than stopping change in the neighborhood, he wants "preservation amid change." For example, he believes East End history can be told without its buildings, so saving old, rundown buildings isn't necessary.

But what really sets him apart is his views toward gentrification.

"Bring it on," he says.

It's not that he doesn't care about protecting vulnera-



A woman pushes a shopping cart through Duncan Park in Lexington, Kentucky, on Sunday, Feb. 2, 2020.

ble long-term residents of the East End.

"I just don't want them to be so strict in protecting that in their effort to protect people, they effectively build a wall around the neighborhood," Tolliver said.

What Tolliver wants is good neighbors, and if that means a white family lives in a refurbished house next door to him, then so be it. He would prefer that to the two boarded-up, neglected houses that are currently beside him, he said.

"If some developer came and fixed those houses up and turned them into \$200,000 houses and sold them to some white person, you know what I would do to that developer?" Tolliver said. "I'd send him a fruit basket at Christmastime."

Black people who can spend that much on a house are not buying in the East End anyway, in Tolliver's view.

"They don't want to come back to this," Tolliver said. "White people, because of the attractiveness of downtown living, white people will come here."

Samantha Johnson of NoLi CDC, who is black, expressed a similar sentiment: "White people are so ready to move into the neighborhood that we've been trying to get out of our whole entire life."

So Tolliver welcomes white residents into the neighborhood; in fact, he views it as diversifying an area that is historically mostly black.

Just down the street from Tolliver's house is what he views as a perfect addition to the neighborhood: Martine's Pastries, a bakery that moved to the neighborhood nearly two years ago.

Owners Martine and Jim Holzman, who are white, moved to the East End in the right way, Tolliver said—they got to know people even before their move.

The Holzmans had been looking for a new space; their location on Industry Road had become too small. When they first began looking at this space in the East End, the neighborhood reminded Martine Holzman of her hometown in France, a small village where "everybody knows everybody."

"And when you have a new person coming in, everybody wants to know that new person, and either they fit in or they don't," Holzman said. "We knew that we wanted to be welcome, but we didn't know how."

Vice Mayor Steve Kay and his wife Rona Roberts invited the Holzmans to their home for a meeting with some East End leaders, including Tolliver. At that meeting and others, the Holzmans asked questions and received "some great advice."

"We wanted to understand what are the needs, is it the right move for us—it was before we even moved here," Holzman said. "Is it the right choice, what is the neighborhood needing, are we the right fit?"

The Holzmans decided they were, and after 17 months of renovation on a building that used to be a liquor store, Martine's opened in the East End with triple the space it had at its old location.

Plus a wider customer base, Holzman said. Their old customers followed them, and they became more accessible to people who may not have been able to visit on Industry Road. And the move brought them nearly two miles closer to employee Gambino August, an East End resident who had been walking to work at the Industry Road location for a few years. Now he lives just a few blocks from Martine's.

The East End is undergoing some drastic changes, but in some ways, it is circling back to its history.

The street behind Martine's is called Flads, and Holzman said she learned that was the name of a German-French bakery that used to be right next door to what is now Martine's.

"So I don't think it was very far to what the community was prior—what it's kind of, maybe being again," Holzman said.

From Holzman's perspective, Martine's has been welcomed with open arms, but not every business, organization or developer has integrated so seamlessly into the East End.

Other organizations and people get the label "gentrification" more often, such as the NoLi CDC, a nonprofit organization with a goal of equitable community development in the North End of Lexington.

"Protesters have been very vocal about the harsh truths," said Samantha Johnson.

When Johnson was hired by the NoLi CDC in 2016, she was the first person of color and first woman on staff. Since then, she and the NoLi CDC have gone through "a tough learning process."

Johnson directs the Night Market, a monthly street festival that takes place around the Kentucky for Kentucky store on Bryan Avenue, which is owned by Griffin VanMeter. Around the time that Johnson started, the Night Market was being called #WhiteMarket on Facebook.

"It came from every angle," Johnson said, including white people. Many saw the Night Market as a group of white vendors setting up in a historically minority space. Since then, Johnson has worked on "cultivating all the different ways that we should include diversity," and she said it has diversified, in both vendors and attendees, but there's more that can be done.

This job has been difficult, Johnson said, in large part because she felt "extremely misunderstood by the black community." Being from Versailles rather than from the East End "feels offensive" to some, she said, and some

in the community might consider her a sell-out.

The first time Johnson met VanMeter, who was one of the founders of NoLi CDC in 2013 and just rotated off the board last January, he said, "I am a gentrifier."

VanMeter had been involved in the area—which he typically brands as the North Side instead of East End—since 2005, getting involved with Stella's Deli and eventually moving to the area.

"I just started to think, could I have impact on the neighborhood?" VanMeter said.

So in 2007 and 2008, he "started really small"—being involved with the neighborhood association, writing grants to fund improvements, trying to save historic buildings.

It wasn't until he started the NoLi CDC that VanMeter realized that he was a gentrifier, he said.

"In his view, 'I didn't even realize that's what I was doing, and now this is me owning that, and admitting it, and being honest about it. Not me bragging about it,'" Johnson said of VanMeter's calling himself a gentrifier.

"What I was really doing was trying to make the neighborhood more—kind of remake it in my own image," VanMeter said. Then he realized that's a "skewed perspective."

It's been a learning process, VanMeter said, and while he is very proud of much of his work in the area, he said he regrets not having "a broader engagement earlier on in all of that work."

VanMeter said he realized the importance of having direction from long-term neighbors, because even if he thinks something is a good idea for everybody, it's still coming from him and is probably best for him.

"All tides lift the boat," VanMeter tends to think, but Kris Nonn has said before, "But only if everybody has a boat."

Nonn, who is white, has been at the NoLi CDC since 2014 and became executive director in 2018. He said it has been difficult to have a goal in your heart—community development—and see others interpret it as gentrification.

One of NoLi's projects was purchasing several old houses on York Street and renovating them, which didn't go quite as planned—the purpose was to help historic



Councilman James Brown on Monday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Lexington, Kentucky.



Frank X Walker holds his son, Kumasi, almost 2 years old, in his studio attached to his home in the Artists' Village in the East End on Jan. 28, 2020, Lexington, Kentucky

residents of the community, but the people who bought the refurbished houses did not look like historic residents.

"[Activists] cry foul," Nonn said, "and in large part I agree, but you can either complain about something or you can try to come up with solutions.

"When people say, 'Oh you're gentrifying the neighborhood,' I feel like the process that we've employed has been very community-led, in a way that is much more empowering and informative to our neighbors than anything anybody else is doing."

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The big, colorful painting that hangs on the wall of Frank X Walker's daughter's bedroom is in its third East End home.

Walker, in his newly finished home in what is becoming the Artists' Village, is in his fourth.

He and his family are the "guinea pig" in the Artists' Village project, a communal space where artists live and have studio space. Or, at least, it will be communal—right now it's just them and a couple houses under construction.

The village aims to offer affordable living and working spaces to artists whose income may be low—when he was younger, Walker said he understood how the "starving artist cliché" could be a reality.

When all the houses are finished—each with a studio out back or under the home, depending on size—they will form an open market area where artists can share and sell work. And the artists plan to host free art classes for kids in the community to learn a variety of art forms.

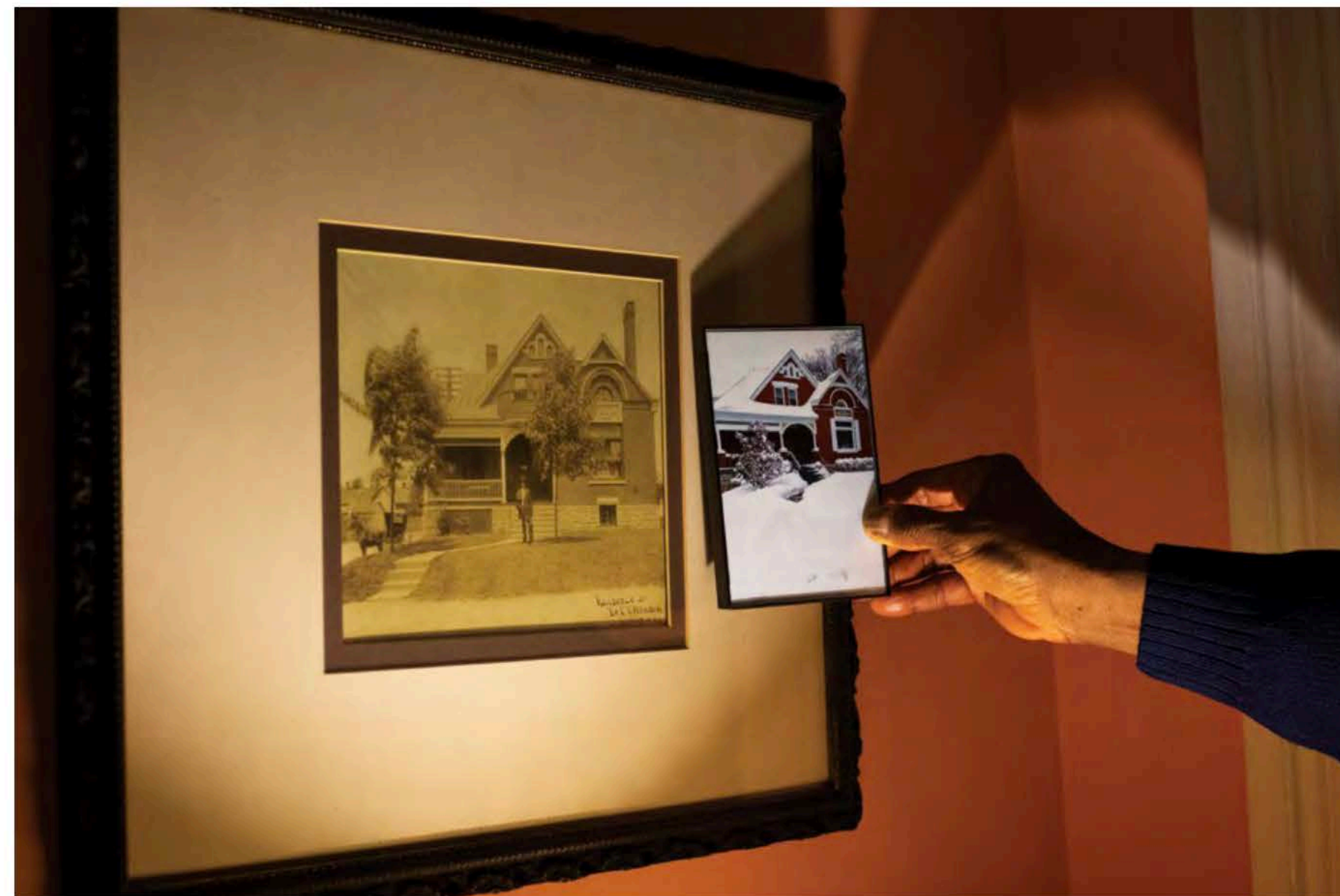
As neighborhoods like the East End change, art seems to be one avenue for preserving history and culture. Even when he wasn't living in the East End, Walker was sometimes creating art in the East End—like when he was director of the Governor's School for the Arts, hosted at Transylvania University. GSA artists had made it a habit of leaving community murals wherever their program was, and there is still a mural in Duncan Park that they painted more than 10 years ago.

It's the gathering of stories that is important in places like this, Crystal Wilkinson said.

"Collect the stories and have them displayed somehow so it's never forgotten," she said.

As a poet and visual artist, Walker is leaving a permanent mark on the East End—in addition to his house, the first he has owned that he saw from a hole in the ground to a finished structure.

Murals dot the area, and when The Met—a retail and housing development at the corner of Third Street and Midland Avenue—opens, Walker's poetry will be on the



Thomas Tolliver holds a recent photo of his home on Third Street in Lexington, Kentucky, on Feb. 6, 2020, next to a photograph taken in 1920, when the house was inhabited by Dr. T. T. Wendell, who moved into the home in 1906 or 1907.

sidewalk.

He's been asked to write a poem about the East End for that; he said it's still "fermenting" in his mind. The history is so broad, he said, that it's hard to take on.

"To be able to ride a bicycle over that, embedded in the sidewalk, or seen on the side of the building, would be nice," Walker said.

It will be another way to brand the East End, like the circular logos that dot the edge of some of the East End's street signs.

It's an area that has been pulling Walker in for decades. He was a UK undergraduate student the first time he lived in the East End, on Sixth Street.

Every day, when he walked or biked home, he'd speak to a friendly woman on the corner. Once he overcame his Danville-native naiveté, he said, he realized that woman was a prostitute.

Back then, people would tell Walker that they couldn't come visit the East End at night.

"People always would go, you live where?" Walker said.

Now it's the opposite, he said.

Everybody wants to drop in the East End to see the new house.

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It's not about stopping the change, Councilman James Brown said. That's not the Task Force on Neighborhoods in Transition's goal.

"It's not a brick wall to try to stop redevelopment or revitalization, but to kind of see how we can protect those that are negatively impacted," Brown said. "Because that train has already started down the track, it ain't like we're going to try to stop it, try to put it back in the bottle."

The task force may be disbanded, Brown said, but one of its recommendations will be for the city to task someone with "continuing these conversations."

"These maps are going to change," Brown said. "So it needs to be somebody that is continuing to watch the process and put in the focus where the focus needs to be."

The maps change, the people change, the businesses change. That seems, to some degree, inevitable. But some core, or soul, or spirit of the East End has survived for decades.

And that soul is what they—the council member, the man in the house on the corner, the bookstore owner, the tomato grower, the poet—are all trying to protect. •