

Race and Place in Lexington, Kentucky

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Introduction

The Northside community in Lexington, Kentucky offers unique terrain for exploring the relationship between culture and design in the evolution of a diverse urban neighborhood. This paper continues my investigation of the neighborhood's morphology and its surprising juxtaposition of rich and poor, small and large residential fabric. As a case study, it focuses a cross-alley now called Miller Street, flanked by a handful of small, 19th century houses that have survived to see the 21st century. Specifically, I look at 232 Miller Street—a vernacular double house—which was demolished in 1997, but not before it was documented in photographs and measured drawings.

As Lexington grew and industrialized at the turn of the century, landed gentry developed portions of their estates to accommodate the influx of newcomers from the countryside. While some were developed as picturesque “courts” of stately homes organized around landscaped parkways, alley neighborhoods, with small houses on small lots, provided affordable housing stock for the expanding labor force—mostly black freedmen released from Kentucky plantations. The evolution of Lexington's open block system illustrates a history of accommodating growth *within the city*. Originally called Scott's Row and then Scott's Alley, Miller Street is the first among a series of residential cross-alleys to appear during the years following the Civil War.

Why is 232 Miller Street important? Certainly, the original configuration and construction is far from acceptable by today's housing standards. Equally, the culture of slavery, bonded labor and segregation that inspired it is one that we would not want to reinstate. However, it may be important for three reasons. First, these structures are a clue to understanding this particular layer of Lexington history. If it is important to document our past, it is equally important to document it in all of its dimensions—social, cultural and physical.

Second, although this neighborhood is included within the Northside Historic District boundaries, the houses are far from protected. While the neighborhood association has worked for almost three years to restore the brick structure at 244 Miller Street, they also campaigned (successfully) to demolish 232/34 and are planning at least one more demolition. Miller Street raises questions about the intention and implementation of historic preservation.

Lastly, culture and environmental design (architecture, urban design, planning) are inseparable. Social patterns dictate spatial patterns and spatial relationships influence social relationships. Our built environment long outlives cultural trends and must be



Fig. 1. 232-34 Miller Street, prior to demolition in 1997

reconsidered or refitted as cultural norms change and lessons are learned.

Additionally, changes are planned for Miller Street. Understanding the origins and more importantly, the implications of this phenomenon of urban form should lead to more informed design and policy intervention on the way to neighborhood revitalization. This case study explores the “secret” life of 232 Miller Street to shed light on the contemporary and historic dynamics that shaped Miller Street and its relationship to its neighbors—physically and socially. What forces, what cultural systems were at work here? What relationships had existed between their inhabitants? How do those relationships develop and change over time? These questions form the foundation of this investigation, which is further fueled by development activity focused on this area. I ask them not for the sake of preservation, but in search of a more critical interpretation of structure, organization, efficiency and livability—in a contemporary cultural context.

Physical Evolution

The State of Virginia Legislature ratified the original Town Plat of Lexington in 1781, deeding 710 acres to the town. Upon establishing use of the land (via improvements), each settler in turn was deeded one inlot—1/2 acre parcels located along the Commons and/or Main Street—and one outlot of almost 5 acres

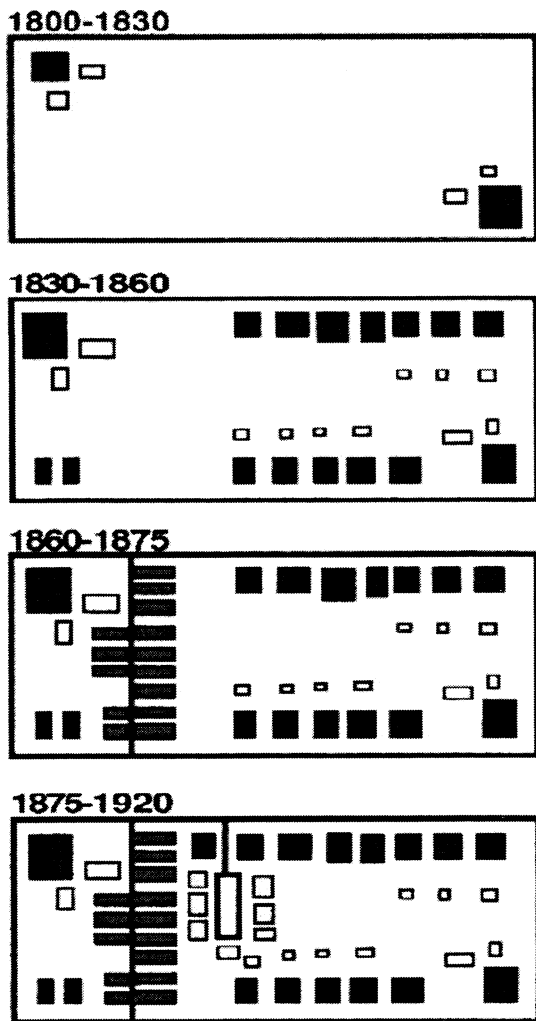


Fig. 2. Evolution of Lexington's open block system. Diagrams as developed by Dr. Carl Raitz, University of Kentucky Department of Geography.

in the remaining large-scale blocks of the town. Miller Street lies within the second such superblock north of Main Street.

Most of these superblocks measured 700 feet deep and almost 1/4 mile long. The large size accommodated a number of uses, including gentleman farms, private schools and factories for manufacturing hemp products. An 1855 map of Lexington shows the super blocks of the original plat still largely intact, but also shows Scott's Alley—the first in a system of cross alleys that were developed after the Civil War.

Now known as Miller Street, Scott's Alley was located between Second and Third Streets, immediately east of Jefferson Street in Lexington's original 3rd Ward¹. It lies just two blocks north of Main Street in downtown Lexington. The date of the first improvements is something of a mystery, but structures do appear in bird's eye perspectives dated 1857 and 1871.

Three hemp factories were located in the blocks surrounding Scott's Alley, including the Scott Hemp Factory, which was located on the other side of Third Street. Another hemp factory was built in the middle of the block that includes Scott's Alley. A ropewalk ran lengthwise down the middle of the block, intersecting at Scott's Alley.

Scott's Alley's original function may have been to provide access to the ropewalk, while maintaining unbroken frontage

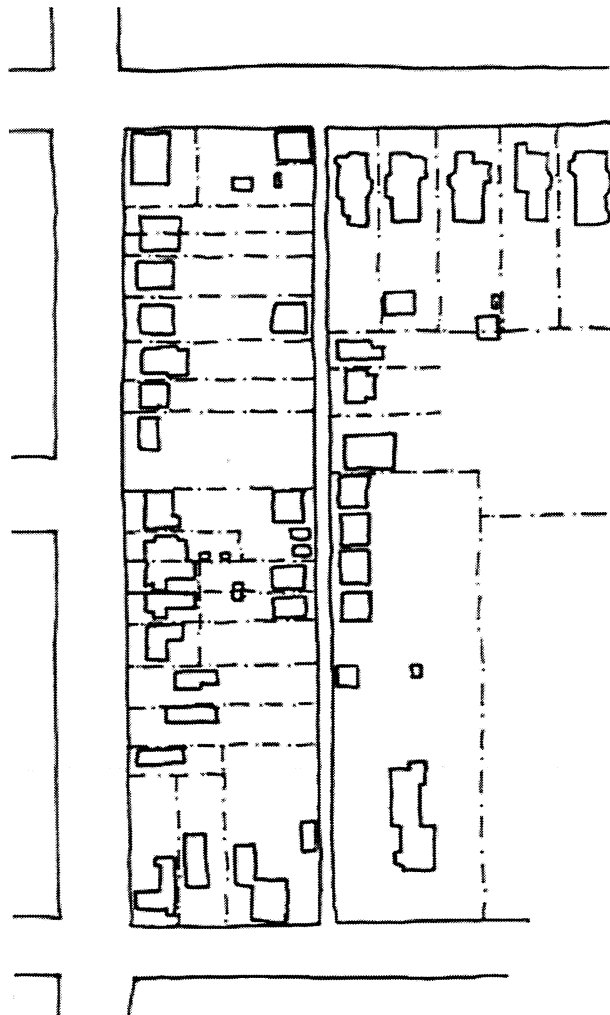


Fig. 3. Tracing from a 1907 Sanborn insurance map showing Scott's Alley

for businesses and homes on Jefferson Street (then called Locust Street). The original residents of Scott's Alley may have worked in the Scott Hemp Factory. The connection between the hemp factories and the houses built on Scott's Alley is yet to be confirmed, but the circumstances of coexistence and proximity suggest some direct relationship is probable.

By 1907, the blocks of the 3rd ward had been subdivided significantly. Sanborn insurance maps indicate that four double houses at the south end of the alley were once part of a single that fronts on 2nd Street. It was subdivided twice, and today each house sits on its own small lot. The individual lots measure a mere 30 by 60 feet today. Until after the turn of the century, however, the four Miller Street buildings are shown.

Cultural Context

Kentucky was and remains primarily an agricultural state and Lexington was the center of exchange for the state and the region. Lexington's early economy relied heavily on producing bag and rope to supply the South's cotton industry. Textile mills and hemp factories produced the bagging and rope material essential to the cotton industry farther south and throughout the "West" and bourbon distilleries supplied many towns and trav-



Fig. 4. Post-bellum infill neighborhoods of Lexington's northside community.

elers. Although its industrial position faltered with the advent of steam navigation in 1810 and the depression of 1819, Lexington held its cultural supremacy as the "Athens of the West" for years to come. "In its golden age the town boasted the most distinguished collection of intellectuals the new country had ever seen in a single city."²

The Civil War ended in 1865 and with it, the institution of slavery. Kentucky was one of the last to relinquish "the peculiar institution" and did so reluctantly. Certainly, there were detractors—Kentucky was almost equally divided between abolitionist and slave-holding sympathies. The now legendary lines of division in Kentucky split communities and even families.

The end of the Civil War brought tremendous population growth to Lexington, however. The 1870 census recorded a population of 14,800—a 55% increase in the decade that included the war (compared to a national average of 22%).³ The Black population had more than doubled, swelling to 7,100—almost 50% of the total city population, an increase from 32% in pre-war years. Life in the city changed dramatically.

In the wake of economic shifts brought by Civil War and emancipation, many large property holdings (estates) were subdivided, sold and/or developed. New streets were cut to service the new, smaller lots—primarily extending or following the original, orthogonal grid. The quality and character of the new tracts varied. They carried racial deed restrictions and some Black enclaves still carry the names of their former developer/owners—Pralltown, Goodloetown, Smithtown, etc. The white upper-middle-class was accommodated in generous court subdivi-

sions, tucked within the city's rational grid.

"Such monotonous laying out of block after block of equalized home sites was anathema to the late Victorian who was conscious of his rich cultural inheritance. Those who could afford it reacted by establishing court retreats, small sylvan settings withdrawn from thoroughfares, and providing for a few substantial residences."⁴

Other outlots were subdivided to establish small enclaves of housing for Blacks, who comprised eighty percent of the Lexington's new population in the years immediately following the Civil War. While the census increase may in part reflect the new status of Blacks (as free persons), most of this growth was the result of rural migration. Freedmen came to the city seeking employment and protection from recalcitrant Confederates. Either way, new conditions required new housing—in quantity and location, if not in quality. Victorian ethics had little effect on the design of these streets and houses. Fresh air and a natural environment were benefits reserved for the well-to-do. In fact, these Victorians went to great lengths to turn away from the meager conditions for which they also were responsible.

A well established path by 1855, Scott's Alley quickly acquired residential structures and outbuildings. The Bird's Eye View perspective from 1871 shows five small structures (probably houses) on the northeast segment and two structures on the west side of the alley. Hemp factories north and east of Scott's Alley are also shown, even though the cotton industry had already experienced a crash. When the alley was developed for residential use, it was reserved for Black residents only.

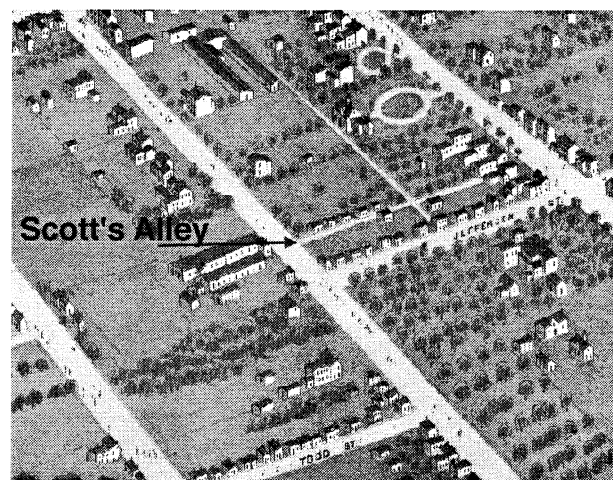


Fig. 5. A portion of the 1871 Bird's Eye View perspective, showing improvements on Scott Row.

From available records, it seems certain that 232 Miller Street and its neighbors were constructed between 1855 and 1871. City directories indicate that all occupants, until the mid-20th century, were African-American. It is not clear, however, whether

these houses were built as slave quarters. Because of location, it is probable that hemp workers were housed on Scott's Row—whether slave or free.

By 1887, 11 households occupied Scott's Alley and are listed in the city directory. John Gordon, a blacksmith, lived at number 45 (now 232 Miller Street). His neighbor, Alfred Coleman was a laborer at the Scott Hemp Factory. At the turn of the 19th century, J. Garth—noted as a “hod carrier”—moved to 232 Scott's Alley. He was followed by M. Stevenson, a laborer, before 1911. Mr. E. Johnson, a domestic worker moved here in 1912 and remained in the house through the end of the decade. T. Shenall took residence by 1923, followed by J. Butler. In 1928, the alley was renamed “Miller Street.”

The high turnover rate continued until 1940, when Ms. L. Parker moved in. The Parker family remained, in varying forms, for the next 45 years. Ms. Parker was a widow, working as a tobacco worker in 1945 and as a cook in the late 40's. Mr. O. Parker appeared in 1947, working as a laborer at the Stevens Tobacco company. In 1961, Mr. Parker purchased the house and held it until 1975

Architecture and Urban Design

Miller Street's small collection of post-Civil War houses varies little from slave quarters typically found in the city, the critical distinction being the lack of an enclosing brick wall and orientation of the houses toward the alley, instead of toward the

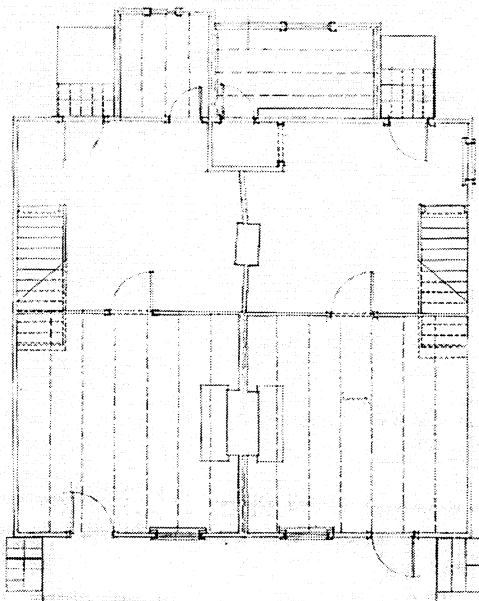


Fig. 6. Plan of 232-34 Miller Street, as prepared by University of Kentucky faculty and students in 1997.

master's yard. Additionally, evidence uncovered during demolition suggests post-bellum construction materials and methods.

The house at 232-34 Miller Street is a vernacular double-house type, typical of Miller Street, but otherwise fairly unique. Its two-bay façade and vertical division place it in the “double house” category. The term “double” conveys both form and function of these houses—each structure is 2 units wide and 2 stories high, based on a simple 2-room unit plan. The unit plans are mirrored about a common central wall. The design is typical of urban slave quarters, as described by Richard Wade in *Slavery in the Cities*:

“Because of the proximity to the main residence, slave quarters were generally much better than those found on farms or plantation. But even so they were barely adequate. The rooms were small, typically about 10 feet by 15 feet, usually without windows and poorly ventilated.”⁵

The structure of the house is a marvel of efficiency. The wood walls have no cavity. Solid vertical boards are directly sheathed with horizontal clapboards—both inside and out—with drywall (interior) and aluminum siding (exterior) added in later years. There are no posts, although stone piers support the walls and floor, which are raised about two feet above the ground. The concrete porch slab is a later addition, poured over a formwork of stacked stones.

The specific architecture is less important in this study, however, than overall form, function and placement within the neighborhood context, past and present. The organization of such structures not only proved efficient, but as John Michael Vlach explains, also served to affirm class relationships.

“Using houses as one of the primary means by which they marked their slaves as a captive people, planters managed to leave a broad signature of their intentions on the southern land-

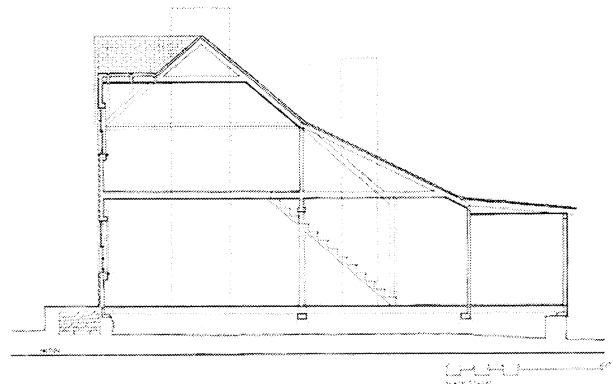


Fig. 7. Section of 232-34 Miller Street, 1997.



Fig. 8. Miller Street and surrounding properties, 1990.

scape. It is important to understand that slave quarters were only incidentally meant as residences; they were, foremost, the planters' instruments of social control."⁶

Miller Street is incredibly more dense than the surrounding neighborhood, where single houses sit on lots that vary from 50x175 (8750sf) to 100x350 (35,000sf). The parcel that includes 232/34 Miller Street is just 30x60 ft., or 1800sf. In dramatic contrast to the conditions on Miller Street, wealth is conspicuously displayed on Second and Third Streets. The end of the 19th century in Lexington saw the emergence of the romantic revival styles—Gothic and Italianate—throughout this district. The Victorian style is seen in houses large and small, along Second, Third and Broadway. While much has been written about the grand home and streets of the Northside, these histories make little mention of the system of support neighborhoods or the effect that the Civil War and subsequent emancipation had on where and how people lived. A mix of housing types within a single block was typical of slave-holding cities and grew out of a system of control as well as the particular constraints presented by the city in contrast to the country and the plantation.

"The basic housing custom in Southern cities, then, was to keep the Negroes divided; to require that slaves live with their masters or their agents; to spread the blacks throughout the town; to prevent concentration of colored people free from the control of whites. This objective was seldom directly expressed, but it was everywhere understood."⁷

Today on Miller Street

"...This [Northside] neighborhood is widely diverse in race, education, occupation, income and lifestyle. It is a vibrant and viable area of the city and contains five of Lexington's eleven historic districts. According to the Northside Small Area

Plan...the total population of the area is 4,839 persons. Of that number 1,452 persons are below the poverty level (30%). 2,681 are white (55.4%), 2,119 (43.8%) are black, and 39 (0.8%) are listed as 'other'.⁸

Miller Street is the only of the cross alleys to be included as part of the Northside Residential District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and became a local historic district in 1986. The local designation in particular subjects the properties to higher scrutiny and additional review prior to modifications of any kind, including demolition.

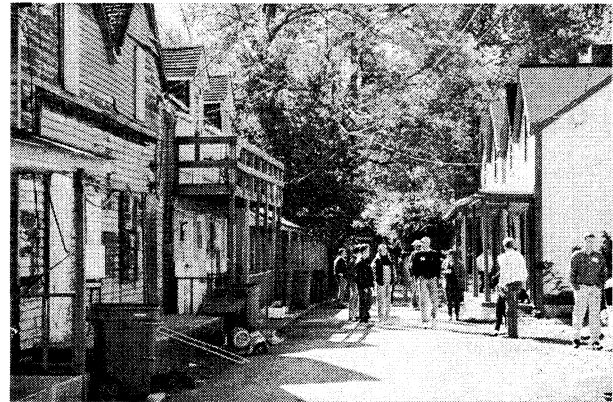


Fig. 9. A view down Miller Street, 1996.

Today, Miller Street can safely be called a marginal community. Of its nine structures, five are vacant and/or condemned. Including the now demolished house at 232 and the house at 244 being restored, three of the five are owned by the Northside Neighborhood Association. 249 Miller Street is the only owner-occupied house on the street. An early Habitat for Humanity project, its ownership has already passed to the next generation. The rest of the houses are held by notorious absentee landlords.

One owner, Mr. John Hughson, has quite a reputation in Lexington. He was arrested in 1996 for keeping a large number of dogs on a rural property elsewhere in Fayette County. The two properties Mr. Hughson owns on Miller Street were condemned by the City years ago and remain so today—although at least one person has been seen living there. Hughson also makes daily food deliveries for the street's growing population of stray cats.

Carmen lives at 228 with her son, Jamaal. She is outspoken, friendly and a bit wild. I met her within two weeks of her move—to the house next to 232-34. She told me that if she had any other choice, she would not be on Miller Street. Carmen complains of plumbing problems, cockroach infestation and problems related to the wild cat population. Like most residents on Miller Street, she pays rent weekly, for a monthly total that far exceeds the market value of the apartment.

Many low-income families are faced with this dilemma. Living day-to-day, without a substantial work or credit history, they

are unable to accumulate enough money for a conventional rental arrangement. Slumlords take advantage of the situation, charging high rent, but not requiring deposits and accepting incremental payments. Their tenants often pay as much as 50% of their incomes for housing.

The Neighborhood Association

“The Northside Neighborhood Association (NNA) is Lexington’s largest, oldest, and most active neighborhood association. Organized in 1961 in response to flight to the suburbs, wholesale demolition of historic residences and structures, squalor, and a rapidly rising violent crime rate, the NNA has served for thirty-five years as advocate, defender, innovator, promoter, and energizer for residents of the near Northside area.”⁹

The restoration/renovation of 244 Miller Street was well underway when the NNA Board of Directors turned their attention to 232 Miller Street. In the spring of 1997, a group of UK architecture students, under the direction of Professors Smyth-Pinney and deHahn, surveyed the double house and prepared measured drawings. As a result of on-site investigation in cooperation with the Kentucky Heritage Council, 232 Miller Street was declared unfit for habitation or rehabilitation. With concurrence from the Board of Architectural Review¹⁰, a demolition permit was issued and the house was torn down in the summer of 1997.

It had become clear that the time, energy and money invested in the rehabilitation of 244 Miller Street was “at risk” because of the continued decline of the rest of the street. NNA leaders discussed improvements with city officials. Proposals included burying electrical and telephone service wires, making the street one-way or closing it to traffic altogether and repaving to add curbs and gutters. The NNA was assured that public improvements might be made, once the association has control over a majority of the properties on the street.

As the restoration project at 244 was nearing completion, the NNA received the gift of another vacant house on Miller Street—number 240, next door. Strengthened by their success at 232, the association leadership moved quickly to demolish 240 Miller Street early in 1999. These two easy losses of historic fabric bring to question the objectives of the historic district, along with implications for other historic properties. Had the BOAR relaxed its criteria (or control) in the historic districts in general? Did they (and the NNA) have a change of heart regarding the real value of these particular structures?

Meanwhile, plans for Miller Street continue to occupy the NNA. Ideas generated in a 1996 charrette ranged from minor re-routing of the vehicular path, to building infill units around a new landscaped median (a la Hampton Court), to limiting traffic to pedestrians only. Julia Smyth-Pinney is designing a new infill house to replace 232 and Steve Brown is re-drafting plans

for redesign of the street. The most recent scheme, however, would not only close Miller Street to vehicular traffic from 2nd and 3rd Streets, but would eliminate pedestrian access as well—deeding the access way to adjacent property owners on Second and Third.

Conclusion—The Particularity of Place

Traditional modes of research and analysis have led us to understand and describe places by architectural highlights and statistical averages. They conjure up nostalgic and homogenous images of conditions that were actually never so, without regard to the role that the full range and its margins have in creating, supporting and reinforcing the larger picture.

A growing body of literature presents a different view—one that is positioned at the margin, looking toward the mainstream context that made it and that depends on it. Scott’s Row/Miller Street and the house (that once was) at 232/34 is part of a little-reported support system for a cultural and architectural past that continues to be celebrated, even as its social history is reviled. The architecture of that past cannot be divorced from the culture of relationships that it supports.

The most significant reason for studying the additional, sometimes dark aspects of that past is precisely because its infrastructure (streets, alleys, and yes, architecture) still survive. Certain patterns of living to which that built environment gave structure still persist—possibly supported and reinforced by that structure. The spatial distribution of race and class in Lexington today are almost identical to the pattern set by practices of the Antebellum and Reconstruction eras. Ownership has changed, employment has changed, the law has changed and the city has grown exponentially, yet social patterns of settlement and perceptions attached to certain neighborhoods appear intractable.

Historic preservation has been the most potent tool of the Northside’s revitalization, but has also been a gentrifying force. Designation of historic districts and monuments, home tours, brochures and special events have drawn renewed attention to the area—as a tourist destination and a place to live, especially for new and returning professionals.

Miller Street and its contemporaries threaten the improving image (and property values) of the Northside—partially because of the condition of their structures and also because of the socio-economic status of their occupants. No longer strictly segregated, the residents are Black, White, Hispanic and “other.” Some are unemployed, some underemployed, some with substance problems, some single, some families, some elderly, some children, some homeowners, some renters. The traits they share are limited resources and few choices.

Where is the potential, the opportunity for this place? What changes can be made, should be made, must be made? What happens to those displaced? Who makes those decisions?

Answers to these and other questions do not come easily. The processes of intervention must start with real understanding of the forces at work in a place—physical, social, economic, and

cultural. It is culture that, ultimately, makes place and place in turn represents, supports and reproduces that culture. Each place is unique, with its own particular combination of histories and dynamics—physical and cultural.

There is no one culture at work on Miller Street. There is no one history. It is a place of varied and contradictory histories—a complex place that means very different things to different people. Can place sustain all those histories and meanings? Who wins and who loses is not as important, perhaps, as why, when and how?

NOTES

- ¹ The 3rd Ward was the northern quadrant of Lexington's original grid plan.
- ² Wade, Richard, 1982, p. 77.
- ³ Source: US Bureau of the Census, 1985 middle series estimate.
- ⁴ Lancaster, Clay, 1978, p. 157.
- ⁵ Wade, 1964, p. 57.
- ⁶ Vlach, John Michael. *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p. 165.
- ⁷ Wade, 1964, p. 77-78.
- ⁸ Excerpt from a 1995 proposal for funding the rehabilitation of 244 Miller Street, titled *Characteristics of the Northside Neighborhood Association and its Miller Street Project*.
- ⁹ Excerpts from a 1995 proposal for funding the rehabilitation of 244 Miller Street, titled *Characteristics of the Northside Neighborhood Association and its Miller Street Project*.
- ¹⁰ The Board of Architectural Review (BOAR) is charged with review and approval of all proposals for alterations, additions and demolitions within Lexington's eleven historic districts.

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8. Miller Street and surrounding properties, 1990.
9. Miller Street, looking south (232-34 in foreground), Photograph by Matthew Mattone, 1997.

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