

In A Broke And Crumbling City, This Woman Is Building An Urban Paradise

The school shut down and the streetlights were hauled away, but Shu Harris has a plan for her neighborhood to flourish.

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DETROIT — In a neighborhood that has lost its school, library, streetlights, many businesses and a huge chunk of its population, one woman is transforming her half-abandoned block into a community hub, where there are books to borrow, people playing in the park and lights on in the darkness.

Shamayim “Shu” Harris lives in a house on Avalon Street in Highland Park, a small city surrounded by Detroit. Blighted and broke, Highland Park faces challenges similar to Detroit’s, but lacks the public attention and private investment that has boosted Detroit in recent years.

Residents have left Highland Park in droves over several decades, and nearly half of those who remain are under the poverty line. On Harris’ block, there are more vacant lots and abandoned houses than occupied homes.

She plans to change that with Avalon Village, a community-led development that she envisions taking over the vacant lots and abandoned houses on the block that her group has secured for the project.

“In my mind, I said, I just wanna create a town, like a village. A space that has all of” the amenities the neighborhood lacks, Harris said. “The goal is to just occupy everything that’s vacant and make it beautiful, and make it useful.” **In the first phase of construction, the group will rehab and open the Homework House, with after-school tutoring and other youth programs.** Next door, they’re putting in tennis, volleyball and basketball courts.

Next to Harris’ house, a couple of shipping containers will be converted into the Goddess Marketplace, where women with small businesses can set up shop for cheap.

Harris and her partners started a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign last month to raise \$242,000 for the first phase of construction. The campaign, which ends Thursday morning, needed about \$50,000 to reach its goal and receive the pledged donations as of Tuesday.

If the fundraiser is successful, the group expects to complete the first stage of the project in early fall.

In the next few years, they want to build a wellness center and greenhouses that will supply produce for residents and for a cafe.

Harris' "eco-village" will use green infrastructure, including a rain barrel water-collection system and geothermal heating. Building sustainability is environmentally friendly, but Harris said it's also more affordable and makes the project more self-sufficient in a city where you can't take the basics for granted.

"The water's being cut off, the lights are being snatched up ... but we still deserve, as a community, a quality living situation," Harris said.

She is working on lighting with Soulardarity, a nonprofit that began installing collectively owned solar streetlights in Highland Park after the existing lights were repossessed because the city owed millions to the utility. Avalon has one solar streetlight and is slated to get more.

Harris' partners and supporters include musician Alex Ebert of Edward Sharpe & the Magnetic Zeros, who donated \$100,000 through his nonprofit, and a group of welders she met at a bar, who volunteered to help build the Goddess Marketplace.

Plans for Avalon Village solidified in the spring, but Harris has been treating her block as a community space since she moved there from nearby eight years ago, a few months after her 2-year-old son's death.

In 2007, Jakobi Ra was playing outside, holding his older brother Chinyelu's hand and preparing to cross the street. A speeding car struck the toddler and killed him.

After Harris moved into her new place on Avalon Street, she got to work clearing trash and old mattresses from the lot next door so she could turn it into a neighborhood park named after her son. Now, Jakobi Ra Park is a gathering place, a venue for events like the annual reggae concert, and an anchor of Avalon Village.

Chinyelu, 19, was 10 when his brother was killed.

"He remembers [the crash], but he's over there helping to build the Homework House and stuff now," Harris said. "It's kind of like a healing thing for him."

Chinyelu and his peers are invested in their work at Avalon Village, challenging the expectations that a group of African-American teenage boys is "up to no good," Harris said.

Instead, "we have children who are actually building neighborhoods," she said.

"All I care about is how we, as our community, how we are going to uplift ourselves and empower ourselves," Harris added. "We're just doing what we

need to do, just to make things better for ourselves.”