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Original
Thomas Healy, Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia / Del Nibletto, M.. - In: ARDETH. - ISSN 2532-6457. - (2021).

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2980737 since: 2024-08-28T07:20:17Z

Publisher:
Rosenberg & Sellier

Published
DOI:

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26 November 2026

Ardeth
A magazine on the power of the project

9 | 2021
Race

Thomas Healy, *Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia*

Marco Del Nibletto

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ardeth/2786
ISSN: 2611-934X

Publisher
Rosenberg & Sellier

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 December 2021
Number of pages: 160-161
ISSN: 2532-6457

Electronic reference
Marco Del Nibletto, "Thomas Healy, *Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia*", *Ardeth* [Online], 9 | 2021, Online since 01 December 2022, connection on 10 January 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ardeth/2786

This text was automatically generated on 10 January 2023.

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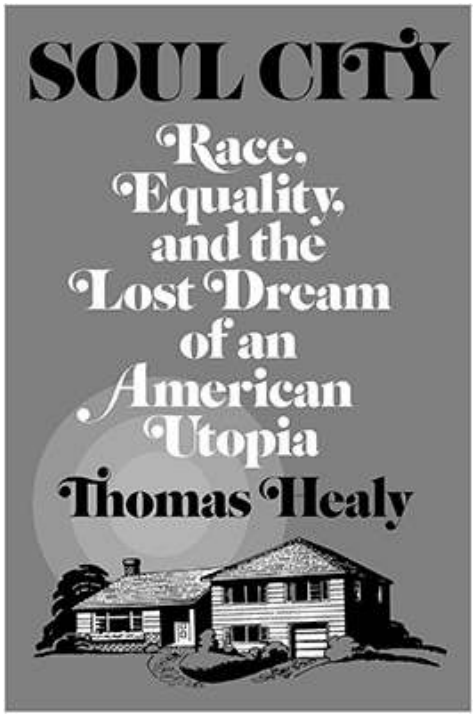

1 Is it possible to build a city starting from scratch? Thomas Healy in Soul City tells how Floyd McKissick tries to fulfill his dream in Warren County, one of the poorest areas of North Carolina, left behind by industrialization and urbanization.

2 McKissick was a prominent civil rights leader for the CORE group, focused on the financial independence of black people as a way to obtain racial progress. So, to support his dream of economic equality, he started the Soul City project, a model for Black economic empowerment and a response to the urban crisis, hoping to reverse the exodus of people from southern regions to overcrowded slums. With a poignant narrative, the book traces the forces that led the project to its downfall employing extensive use of historical references. The notes evidence the intrinsic difficulties of the mission, exacerbated by the underlying racism of the 1970s in the US.

3 As a lawyer from Durham, McKissick lacked experience and knowledge related to urbanism but, most of all, missed the resource to build a city. Facing the challenge to obtain private funding for his utopian dream in the years of energy crises, the project was primarily financed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a program that supported the construction of 13 new cities. In this situation, the project faced the slow pace of bureaucracy. The lack of buoyant progress was owed to a series of catch-22 situations (for example, the conditions to unlock grants for construction of infrastructure were related to density population, but these amenities were needed to attract people and industries and repay the found given to the project) and harsh scrutiny for the only city in the program promoted by a black man.

4 Moreover, with its peculiarity, Soul City attracted attention from the media, set to expose every possible government malfeasance and became a symbol of fighting for demagogic politicians. Some justified concerns were argued about Soul City. Civil fighters defined it as a step back to segregation, losing ages of victories in the civil fights, and criticized the promoted capitalistic model, for leaving behind people most in need.

5 McKissick responds to these critics defining Soul city as a place “where black people welcome white people as equals” and promoting the distribution of economic resources as a tool to achieve equality. The topic of allocation of power was one of the main purposes of Soul City: the promotion of a community of self-determination and individuals controlling their destinies, offering a chance to well-educated black women and men to show their abilities in a world that deprives them of opportunities.

6 The city was planned in a territory historically related to the Ku Klux Klan, facing the vigilant supervision of white officials and worried local communities, afraid to lose electoral dominance. Racial hostility, however, was passed by regional solutions adopted by the city, offering economic and structural benefits to the surrounding areas.

7 Despite overcoming technical challenges (like managing cash flows, building a social landscape for the city, and defining his urban design) the project fell short of its goals. The HUD final decision pointed out a series of problems that had hindered the city's success, but one stood out: the city's name. Soul City was defined as "too black", making it too difficult to attract industries, highlighting once more how economic power and sheer discrimination influenced the McKissick dream.

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