

BY CHARLES GERENA

The Promised Land

You may not have heard of Soul City, a residential community developed by lawyer and civil rights activist Floyd McKissick in rural Warren County, N.C., in the late 1970s. But much has been said about it, including in a 2016 documentary, countless articles in local and national press, and in several scholarly papers. It was also the subject of an article in this magazine (see “Doing Development Differently,” *Econ Focus*, Third Quarter 2017).

Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia, a new book by Thomas Healy, presents fresh insights on the history of this unique experiment in economic development. Healy teaches constitutional law at Seton Hall University and was a reporter for the Raleigh, N.C.-based *News & Observer*; the paper’s coverage of Soul City in 1975 helped seal its fate four years later.

Soul City had broad support when McKissick unveiled his concept for a self-sustaining community developed by blacks at a press conference in 1969, but it also had its detractors from all sides of the rhetorical spectrum. Some white residents of Warren County were fearful of creating a community where black Southerners who had migrated north could return in large numbers, threatening to shift the balance of political power. Integrationists didn’t like the idea of blacks developing their own city where they would constitute the majority of the population. Progressives felt that McKissick’s plans relied too much on capitalism.

On this last issue, McKissick’s response was pointed — it was past time for black Americans to take their share of their country’s capital and wealth. “Slavery taught us *who* had leisure, *who* had freedom, *who* had dignity,” McKissick asserted at the 1969 press conference. “Not the slave,

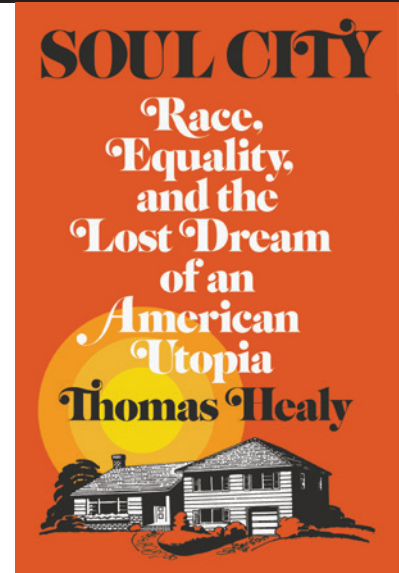
but the slave-owner. Not the sharecropper, but the landowner. Not the employee, but the capital owner.”

Providing some context for the creation of Soul City, Healy’s book delves into the details of McKissick’s life, from his early involvement in the civil rights movement to his leadership of the Congress of Racial Equality. For example, why did McKissick locate Soul City in Warren County? While the county was declining, it was within a region of North Carolina where industries like textiles and technology were growing and there was access to major highways and airports.

Also, why put so much effort into building Soul City in the middle of a former plantation, when so many black communities in urban areas were suffering? “McKissick had an answer to this question, too,” writes Healy. “In his mind, there were psychological benefits to building something new, benefits that could spark the kind of creative, unconventional thinking that had inspired the civil rights movement itself.”

Healy goes beyond previous accounts of Soul City, filling in some of the historical backdrop with a variety of characters — from Gordon Carey, a social justice activist and fledgling anarchist who became McKissick’s right hand man, to Claude Sitton, an investigative reporter who earned his stripes covering the civil rights movement and later edited the *News & Observer* newspaper that tore into Soul City’s credibility at a critical juncture in its development. But it is McKissick who takes center stage in Healy’s story of vision meeting reality, of black power meeting systemic racism, of social entrepreneurship clashing with government bureaucracy.

The book also uses the lens of McKissick’s ambitions to provide new perspectives on larger historical movements. For example, the lack of progress



SOUL CITY: RACE, EQUALITY, AND THE LOST DREAM OF AN AMERICAN UTOPIA

by Thomas Healy, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021, 448 pages

during the civil rights movement shifted efforts toward empowering blacks to control their own destinies, especially economically. McKissick recruited a leading black architectural firm to oversee Soul City’s design, while Howard University offered its support.

The book also explores the realization that a new way of organizing cities was needed. After blacks migrated from the oppression of the South to northern cities like Baltimore, Detroit, and New York, they often found themselves mired in economic hardship. Uncle Sam tried and failed to deal with urban strife; private developers tried and sometimes succeeded, particularly in the cases of Reston, Va., and Columbia, Md. — with the help of a lot of capital. (See “The Making of Reston and Columbia,” *Econ Focus*, Second/Third Quarter 2020.)

Where Reston and Columbia succeeded, Soul City failed. But that failure speaks volumes about government involvement in economic development as well as the inequalities that have become enshrined in our country’s economic system. There are lessons to be learned for future efforts to help poor and minority communities. **EF**