

Neighborhood Power

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A citywide program to stop blight gets fairly good marks.

By David Holtzman

A decade ago, abandonment seemed the certain fate for many of Philadelphia's row house neighborhoods.

Block after block showed evidence of a declining population and high poverty rate. Sometimes, after a hard rain, weary houses would just fall down. Vacant lots took their place, becoming breeding grounds for crime. In June 1999, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission reported that the city had over 22,000 abandoned houses and 30,000 vacant lots.

As an experiment, residents of the East Kensington neighborhood crafted a beautification strategy in the late 1990s. They organized to plant trees and start community gardens, and assigned ownership of abandoned lots to nearby residents.

Over time, the results have been dramatic. "People who were planning on moving decided not to move, and businesses have been coming in," says Sandy Salzman, who directs the New Kensington Community Development Corporation. "That wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been able to improve the neighborhood's curb appeal."

The neighborhood's success attracted the attention of John Street during his successful 1999 mayoral campaign. He saw the improvements in East Kensington as a model for dealing with the problems of unsafe buildings and vacant lots all over the city. He campaigned on an anti-blight platform, which eventually led to the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative.

By the end of Street's second year in office, the city had issued \$296 million in bonds for NTI, largely to demolish unsafe buildings and assemble land for redevelopment. The city has since authorized the acquisition of more than 6,000 properties in communities throughout Philadelphia, with particular emphasis on 34 neighborhoods and three commercial corridors.

Private developers responded with proposals for new apartments and condominiums. Neighborhoods in North, West, and South Philly that hadn't seen a single new unit of housing in a generation suddenly saw new housing developments sprouting and an influx of new residents from a variety of economic backgrounds.

Initially, the city planning commission was not closely involved in this process. NTI worked with the Reinvestment Fund, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit group that finances revitalization projects, to identify neighborhoods with the weakest housing market; it used data such as housing value, turnover, occupancy, and land vacancy rates to identify their market characteristics. In 2001, when the planning commission beefed up its staff, it began a series of neighborhood planning efforts, which have helped NTI set priorities for demolition and land acquisition.

Meanwhile, NTI's development work proceeded apace. "The physical conditions in certain neighborhoods were so bad and the housing market so weak that we made the decision in those areas to try to pick up every vacant parcel we could," says Eva Gladstein, who has been NTI's director since May 2005. "So there was this citywide process and then there were the community-based plans."

Gladstein, NTI's second director, had worked closely with the initiative in her previous job as executive director of the city's empowerment zone. Earlier in her career, she cofounded the Tenants' Action Group of Philadelphia and directed the Pennsylvania Low-Income Housing Coalition.

Two neighborhoods

One of the planning commission's first community plans, prepared in coordination with NTI, was completed in April 2004 for the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood in North Philadelphia. The neighborhood, which is adjacent to Fairmount Park, had a tremendous amount of blighted housing, but it also had a good stock of grand architecture. However, it lacked a strong community development organization.

At the time of the planning process, more than 20 percent of the neighborhood's housing units were vacant and its 23,000 residents had an average income below the city as a whole.

As a result of the NTI designation, the city's historical commission conducted an inventory of neighborhood assets worth preserving and NTI partnered with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia to initiate a program to help home owners pay for historically accurate facade renovations. The initiative also worked with developers to renovate a number of larger historic structures, including the Vernon House, a 1910 apartment complex that was redeveloped to provide 68 affordable rental units for seniors and persons with special needs.

Meanwhile, NTI has moved to fill the area's vacant properties. On one block of Berks Street, 10 houses that had been vacant for years were renovated and sold to first-time home buyers at below-market-rate prices. And thanks to NTI, the neighborhood has a newly formed community development corporation.

In the Brewerytown neighborhood, just south of Strawberry Mansion, a local group, the Brewerytown Community Development Corporation, is leading the planning process,

which is now about three-quarters completed. Aazim Muhammad, the Brewerytown CDC's executive director, says he prefers this grassroots approach. "Most planning in the past had been done by the planning commission and it was always a top-down approach," he says.

The neighborhood, once filled with breweries and warehouses, is bordered by row houses, the Girard Avenue commercial corridor, and, to the west, Fairmount Park. Housing prices in the neighborhood had dropped to as low as \$25,000 in recent years. In 2003, the city condemned several warehouses that had been operating illegally as horse stables. NTI has concentrated its redevelopments in the former industrial area at the west end of the neighborhood, where developers are building mostly market-rate town houses and converting warehouses and breweries to condos.

NTI did manage to convince one developer, Pennrose Properties, to provide 61 affordable units in one of those warehouses. The developer also agreed to hire local residents and to include a computer lab in one of the new buildings for community use. NTI's involvement has had good results, Muhammed says. The new development "has not displaced anyone or caused the gentrification everyone thought was going to happen as a result of those \$300,000 houses. It has not impacted the residents in the surrounding blocks. If anything, it's had a positive impact for them," he says.

Critics

Not everyone is so enthusiastic. Listen to Lisa Segarra, a resident of Kensington, another NTI neighborhood. It's part of North Philadelphia, an area with some of the city's most concentrated poverty as well as abandonment. The Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority has used its eminent domain power to condemn 240 houses in the neighborhood and to relocate the residents.

Segarra complains that the city's reasons for condemning buildings sometimes have been unclear; in certain cases, the city would identify one building as beyond repair, leading to a domino effect. "If you only have five houses in a block, the city figures, 'That's not a stable block, so let's take it,'" she says.

Segarra is a member of the Coalition to Save Our Homes, a citywide group she and other neighborhood activists formed in 2004. Its members are working to draw attention to what Segarra calls the use of eminent domain for private gain. In her own neighborhood, she and her neighbors stopped the city from taking several buildings, she says.

NTI director Eva Gladstein notes that in the program's early years, the city was often too quick to demolish property in reaction to problems. Today, she says, it takes a more targeted, proactive approach. In the past, "they would hit the most dangerous building on the block, and maybe the one next to it," she says. "Now they will be looking at the whole area in a more planned way."

Links

Today, NTI's scope has broadened from its early focus on clearing land and building housing. That includes partnering with other city agencies to target public investments in selected corridors and to leverage private funds.

In December, for instance, the city, which has exhausted the original bond funding that made NTI possible, issued a new bond for \$150 million. Of that amount, \$65 million is dedicated to revitalizing commercial corridors as part of the ReStore Philadelphia Corridors initiative.

Another related program is GreenPlan Philadelphia, a citywide effort to create a long-term plan for acquiring and managing open space in the neighborhoods. Eva Gladstein points out that this program depends on the enhanced coordination among city agencies and community-based organizations that NTI encouraged.

David Holtzman is a freelance writer in Hillsboro, West Virginia. He is a former associate editor of Shelterforce magazine, which covers housing and community building in low-income neighborhoods.

Making Philadelphia Green

Philadelphia Green, the 36-year-old project of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society led by Blaine Bonham, is the nation's largest and most comprehensive urban greening program. Its staff works with community groups and neighborhood residents throughout the city, and partners with private and public organizations on a variety of projects, including the renowned Philadelphia Flower Show

Last year, Philadelphia Green helped to launch GreenPlan Philadelphia, the city's blueprint for sustainable open space. Data gathered in 12 public meetings are now being compiled by Philadelphia Green and will be presented to the city to be incorporated into recommendations to sustain Philadelphia for years to come.

Also last year, Philadelphia Green cleaned and greened its 100th acre of vacant land as part of its Vacant Land Stabilization Program, Green City Strategy, and the city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative. That makes 4.5 million square feet of former concrete transformed into grassy fenced lots.

A recent study showed that property values can increase as much as 25 percent when nearby property is cleaned and greened. The study, "Public Investment Strategies: How They Matter for Neighborhoods in Philadelphia," was written by Susan Wachter of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. The study showed that investments in public space can boost the economy of the entire city.

For more about Philadelphia Green and its partners, visit www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org.

J. Blaine Bonham, Jr., is the coauthor of *Old Cities/Green Cities: Communities Transform Unmanaged Land* (PAS Report 506/507), published by APA's Planning Advisory Service in 2002.

Resources

Images: Top — Old rowhouses in Brewerytown, around the corner from a redeveloping industrial area. Photo by David Holtzman. Middle — New townhouses in the Brewerytown neighborhood face an old warehouse that was converted to residential lofts. Photo by David Holtzman. Bottom — A residential zoning overlay developed by a team headed by Barton Partners of Norristown was adopted. The firm's site plan and architectural design for the planned Independence Pointe project calls for a 50-foot-wide riverfront esplanade. Image BartonPartners.

At the conference

Check the preliminary program for these sessions and mobile workshops at the 2007 National Planning Conference in Philadelphia:

April 15, 12:30-4:30: Green Space for a Sustainable City. Motorcoach tour.

April 16, 1:30-2:45: How Green Infrastructure Changes Urban Design. Session moderated by Suzanna R. Randall, Philadelphia Water Department.

April 17, 2:30-3:45: Philadelphia LANDvisions
Speakers include Joan Reilly, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and Eva Gladstein, city of Philadelphia

April 17, 1:30-5:30: Downtown Philadelphia's Public Landscapes. Walking tour led by Nancy O'Donnell, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

April 17, 1:30-5:30: Philadelphia's Changing Form: Third Street by Bike. Bicycle and walking tour led by Todd Baylson, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

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