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Stockyard Redevelopment Organization

Preventing Urban Decay with Gardens



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The residents of West 48th Street in Cleveland's Stockyard neighborhood had a problem. A glut of vacant land and empty houses had formed an unsafe and unattractive landscape. In a pattern repeated around the city, vacant properties had become a magnet for dumping, vandalism, and other illegal activities. "It's what happens with these inner city properties," laments Art Ledger, a resident and the owner of Art's Taxidermy. "People just give up on them."

The story of West 48th Street, especially the residents' bold decision regarding two conflicting risks, may hold lessons for other neighborhoods that people are tempted to give up on.

Upheaval in Cleveland

The effects of industrial decline and foreclosure are ubiquitous in Cleveland. They are felt particularly acutely in the Stockyard neighborhood, where nearly 400 homes in a 2-square-mile area sit vacant and 300 empty lots await new use. The numbers represent 13 percent of residential parcels and guarantee an empty house on every block.

First developed in the 1890s, the area grew quickly with the success of the Cleveland Union Stockyards Company and the founding of several local breweries. Thousands of workers' cottages like the ones that populate West 48th Street were built for the immigrants who flooded the area seeking employment. But industry peaked in the 1940s. By 1968 the Stockyards had closed, and the neighborhood was left without its largest employer. The decline in employment precipitated a decline in demand for—and quality of—housing.

The recent foreclosure crisis wreaked further havoc on Stockyard's already fragile housing market, pushing properties to the edge of the modest economic plateau they previously occupied. Eventually, many properties were simply abandoned by the individuals or financial institutions that owned them. Nearly all were vandalized by thieves seeking copper and aluminum for sale to the scrap dealers that had come to occupy the former Stockyard processing plants. Literally and figuratively stripped of worth, abandoned, and neglected, the houses in Stockyard become unsalvageable.

Addressing Vacant Land

In Cleveland, if the neighbors are lucky, a house is torn down by the city and the street is relieved of an eyesore. However, the path to demolition involves tortuous legal maneuvers that may take years. First, potentially correctable health and building code violations are cited, and an attempt is made to issue the citations to the owner. Often the attempts to bring the owner into housing court are unsuccessful. Then the city will take on such tasks as cutting grass and boarding windows, simultaneously sending the owner a bill for services provided. After continued neglect by the owner and a hefty tax bill, the city will begin preparations for condemnation and eventual demolition. If the tax burden on the now empty parcel exceeds the value of that property, the parcel may be claimed by the city's Land Bank, a receptacle for neglected lots that revert to city ownership.

In certain areas of the city, Land Bank lots and other vacant lots have been useful tools in the production of market-rate housing. The city may grant vacant land to community development corporations or sell it to them cheaply. The CDCs then work with developers to produce new homes. Through much of the 1990s and the early part of this decade, that was Cleveland's chief means of housing production in neighborhoods where demand was strong. And to a large extent, the process worked.

However, for the Stockyard Redevelopment Organization (SRO), the approach proved ineffective. It is challenging to produce and sell new housing in a neighborhood where the median sales price for a single-family home was $13,334 in 2008. In fact, there were homes in Stockyard selling for $1,500 as recently as summer 2009. The neighborhood faced an increasing supply of empty parcels and no viable plans for redevelopment. With such circumstances in mind, the SRO leaders and the community decided new strategies and tactics were needed.

In 2007 they undertook an effort to update the Stockyard neighborhood plan. Included in the plan were land-reutilization recommendations compiled with the assis-

tance of Kent State University's Urban Design Center. Options included decreasing neighborhood density by combining vacant properties with adjacent occupied parcels; creating pocket-parks within the fabric of the neighborhood; and creating community garden space, where local residents could grow produce for their households. It was up to the community and SRO to experiment with and implement the ideas.

Doing a Lot with a Little

In August 2008, Ledger and his wife, Kathy Oberst, rallied the neighborhood around the issue of vacant properties. With help from SRO, they formed the West 48th Street Block Club. The club's mission was to counteract the negative influences of vacant houses and to utilize the empty lots. The group quickly grew in size and momentum and, by coordinating more efficiently with local government, was able to have many of the most troublesome vacant structures brought down. However, demolition created more empty lots and a greater urgency to utilize the land and prevent properties from becoming a further detriment to the community.

Through a series of Block Club meetings and consultation with SRO staff, the club decided that creating vegetable gardens would serve the neighborhood best. However, few of the vacant parcels on West 48th were city-owned Land Bank lots, eligible for funds and program support. Most were still enmeshed in a legal maze involving the private owners. Residents faced the prospect of having to wait years before these lots could be utilized.

Having already waited a long time for the derelict houses to come down, Block Club members were now watching the lots sit neglected and become sites for illegal dumping and other criminal activity. The members had no intention of sitting still while the city caught up on its paperwork. Unable to obtain permission or to be denied it, members of the Block Club and SRO staffers decided to go ahead with gardening projects.[1] Gardening on what was technically private property was risky, but allowing the lots to sit empty seemed riskier. Doing nothing was not a viable option.

The Block Club gathered its own resources and started to assign plots to individual residents. Having decided to assist the gardeners, SRO provided staff time and supplied tools and the use of court-assigned community service workers. Eventually the residents of West 48th Street were able to begin four gardens on private vacant land.[2] An additional garden was started on two city Land Bank lots.

Once overgrown and strewn with trash, this abandoned lot is now a community gathering space. Photograph: Stockyard Redevelopment Organization.

The plan garnered wide community support. As ward councilman Joseph Santiago said, "I think it's a great idea. It reduces maintenance costs for the city and provides food for residents."

The gardens have had a visible effect on West 48th Street. Reutilization of the lots has improved their appearance and removed a number of former safety risks. The lots have become not only a valuable food resource but also a wellspring of pride. They have united the neighborhood in a single cause, becoming a visible symbol of the neighborhood's collective power. "We've done a lot with a little," says one club member.

"It's Progress"

The method employed by the West 48th Street Block Club is not the only model that has been utilized in the Stockyard neighborhood, nor the only one that has worked. A short list of other successes includes gardens that have been placed on city Land Bank parcels with grants and other financial assistance; a collaborative effort between SRO and the Ohio State University Extension to conduct *phyto-remediation* (using different types of plant life to cleanse soil) on lots with soil contamination; and a plan that calls for a neglected urban street and adjacent vacant parcels to be developed into a viable green space and corridor. The activities of the West 48th Street Block Club stand out from these other plans, however, because members realized that they had to decide which risk was bigger and then knowingly make use of abandoned private land.

While no one would claim that merely planting gardens will save a neighborhood, in an area hit by multiple foreclosures every little bit helps. As Art Ledger says, "It's progress. You're going to have things that go backwards, too. But we're ready."

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Endnotes

1 We made sure that the lots were in fact abandoned to the point of being essentially without owners. In each case we sent several letters to the name and address listed and never heard back.

2 The lots will most likely never revert to private ownership. The tax delinquencies far exceed their value and most are nonbuildable under modern housing code. They will eventually be taken by the city in exchange for the back taxes. After that, gardeners could be granted permission to garden, but that process can easily take two years.