

There Goes the Neighborhood

Urban renewal fails when it neglects the root cause of deprivation, which is poverty. America's great cities are often struck by the vast areas of deprivation that abut downtowns and once-grand commercial corridors. These communities seem strangely out of place in such a prosperous country. A grim reminder of the racial, ethnic, and class divisions that persist beneath celebrations of the American dream.

Since the 1960's, such rundown neighborhoods have held a fascination. They have been the laboratories for a plethora of experiments, government demonstrations, federal policies and programs. And yet, the impact of these efforts amounting to tens of billions of dollars over decades remains mixed. Some neighborhoods can point to real improvements. But many initiatives have failed to alleviate, and in some cases have exacerbated, the deteriorating economic and social conditions in inner cities.

My thesis is simple: a true rebirth of distressed areas will only occur if we make these places neighborhoods of choice for individuals and families with a broad range of incomes, and neighborhoods of connection that are linked to metropolitan opportunities. This challenges neighborhood policies, which, under the guise of "revitalizing communities," reinforce patterns of concentrated poverty, a root cause of neighborhood distress. It demands that neighborhoods operate within the broader metropolitan "geography of opportunity", rather than the insular, fixed borders of deprived areas.

At first sight this neighborhood experience and policy appear far removed from the realities and possibilities. Neighborhoods in Youngstown are harsh and racially driven. The "safety net" has frayed, leaving working families

incapable of meeting basic needs such as healthcare and childcare. Youngstown's metropolitan economies are dispersed, leaving inner-city neighborhoods remote from the locus of economic activity. Central government after the best efforts, continues to leave most to fend for themselves.

Youngstown has much to learn from other cities in America, in part because revitalization and neighborhood policies are working out the answers to questions about deprived areas. The most advanced are trying to search out the underlying causes of weakness or evil in the community, rather than attempting isolated fixes to superficial manifestations of disinvestment.

A positive step is being implemented through YMHA's HOPE VI initiative which demolishes the worst public housing blocks and replaces them with housing that is economically integrated, less dense, better designed and integrated into the fabric of local neighborhoods and city economies. This strategy includes resources to smooth low-income

residents' access to opportunity through housing mobility and work support services. The Wick Neighbors and their Smokey Hollow Development will provide a concentration of housing products that will meet the needs of those whose incomes allow them a multitude of housing choices. The North Side Citizens' Coalition is focused on rebuilding the quality of life in the Wick Park Neighborhood through rehabilitation of Historic structures and appropriate in-fill development. One consistent theme runs through these three initiatives "It is place based". All three are focused on developing a neighborhood as a consequence of our development activities.

Local authorities in Youngstown have powerful responsibilities that impact our ability to accomplish these goals. Many local governments leverage the federal effort to develop housing and revitalize neighborhoods by investing their resources in neighborhood parks, schools and streets. Local authorities are essential for establishing systems and structures that facilitate gaining control of dilapidated property and enhancing education, law enforcement, land regulation and the ability to raise local funds. This will create an entrepreneurial culture and can lead to a natural system for using the fiscal benefits of, say, city centre revival to subsidize revitalization in a broader set of urban areas. We need a

recognition that we are on the same team. The stress of this work would be reduced once we clarify and reduce role ambiguity. Most important, neighborhood policies need to grapple with the negative social and economic implications of concentrated poverty. In the end, concentrated poverty is the underlying cause of continued disinvestment. The focus of most neighborhood efforts—dilapidated housing, deteriorating town centers, poor educational performance—remain "superficial manifestations" of these urban settlement patterns. I believe we must also focus on incentives for "urban pioneers", those persons that have a choice of living in the suburb or Youngstown. It is this basic understanding that needs to energize the neighborhood policies for Youngstown. This kind of thinking can drive a new, sustainable commitment to neighborhoods of choice and connection to true opportunity for people and places now left behind.



Talut Rasid
Executive Director

"Revitalizing
Communities"

The Mahoning Valley Historical Society

Many are familiar with the Arms Family Museum of Local History, located at 648 Wick Avenue near the YSU campus for more than 40 years. There is an organization behind this museum whose involvement in the community goes back much further in time. The Mahoning Valley Historical Society was founded in Youngstown on September 10, 1875 to preserve the history of the Mahoning Valley region. Over the years, MVHS has amassed a large and important collection of artifacts and information related to local history, from prehistoric Native Americans to the rise of the steel industry and beyond.

The first floor of the museum is preserved as the living rooms of the Arms family who resided in the house from 1905 to 1960. Local history exhibits on the second floor and lower levels of the museum tell the stories and traditions of the people that have inhabited the Mahoning Valley for more than 10,000 years. Current exhibits include one that documents Mahoning Valley wedding traditions, and an upcoming installation will commemorate the 85th anniversary of the United Way of Youngstown and Mahoning County.

The MVHS Archival Library, located behind the museum in the original Carriage House on the property, contains tens of thousands of photographs, journals, books, government and business records, maps and other documents that are available to the public. The archives collection is useful for research into family history, significant local individuals and events, origins of homes, businesses and neighborhoods and views of everyday life in the Valley. Members of the North Side Citizens' Coalition did extensive research at the MVHS Archival Library while preparing applications to create the Fifth Avenue and Wick Park Historic Districts.

The Historical Society also manages the Business and Media Archives of the Mahoning Valley collection, featuring extensive materials from WKBN Broadcasting Corporation, the Valley's first commercial broadcasting firm. The collection includes news film and video, phonograph records, photographs, business records and equipment including the first transmitter that put WKBN on the air in 1926. This collection is also available for public research.

MVHS continues to collect local materials of the past and important pieces of the present for future generations. You can be involved through visitation, volunteerism, and membership. Visit www.mahoninghistory.org or call 330-743-2589 for more information.

