

Thoughts on Neighborhood Planning

August 21, 1999

We all are aware of the decline of American inner cities, caused in large measure by flight of city dwellers to the suburbs, and of futile attempts to revive these blighted areas of cities by urban renewal projects. But why do our cities and suburbs deteriorate in the first place? Why is it that European cities have thrived over centuries while the general trend of American cities is to decline?

It is often forgotten, especially in Lawrence, that the basic use of cities is as a habitat for people. Without a permanent population, a city becomes, if it's lucky, only a center for a specialized use such as a manufacturing or an office center, or a university with its academic population. If it goes the way of most deteriorating cities, the city core steadily loses population and becomes a human wasteland.

It is generally recognized by urban planners that the primary unit of the city is not individual dwellings, but the neighborhood. Housing units cannot exist for long in an urban setting unless they are a part of a neighborhood area. The Federal Government recognized this when it created the Federal mortgage insurance program after World War II, requiring housing to be within the context of neighborhood planning. The Federal housing programs of the 1960s also recognized that new housing alone could not fill the need. Conserving existing housing was essential, and required preserving as well as rehabilitating existing neighborhoods. As for cities, the infrastructure and other public investments already in place and the cost of providing services and infrastructure for new additions made it uneconomical to allow housing stock to deteriorate.

How to create functional neighborhoods and stabilize them was the question, which led to the more basic issue of why neighborhood housing stock deteriorates in the first place. Obviously, houses deteriorate because the owners don't maintain them; but why don't they? Is it all due to external disincentives such as congestion, bad public policies, lack of services, social disruption and the like, or is there an independent dynamic that makes neighborhood deterioration inevitable? Age alone is not the cause; centuries-old European cities belie that idea.

Political economists Otto A. Davis and Andrew B. Whinston, who wrote about public housing policy in the 60s and 70s, argued that deterioration of housing stock is not inevitable. Discounting external factors mentioned above, an underlying individual economic decision-making system based on Game Theory—"the Prisoner's Dilemma"—is at the root of the dynamics. Concerted property maintenance by individuals within a neighborhood prevents overall housing deterioration, but the economic decisions by each to repair and maintain his own in good condition is based on his assessment of economic gain. Acting alone in isolation, each would judge that his greatest economic gain comes with doing nothing, and therefore he would allow his housing to deteriorate. When neighbors' intentions are mutually to maintain their own housing, however, everyone gains more, but their intentions must be known collectively in order to influence others' decisions. Percentage of owner-occupancy also plays an important part because, unlike rental units, investment by the owner is regained only when his housing is sold in good condition, assuming it will continue in its present use. (Predictability of neighborhood land use is critical.) This is why active and strong neighborhood associations as well as supportive, predictable public policy can forestall neighborhood deterioration. Support of formally organized neighborhood associations is an important part of Federal housing policy, aided by local departments of housing and neighborhood development which administer Community Development Block Grants and enforcement of housing codes.

Land use planning provides a framework for neighborhoods. However, if important design considerations are ignored, neighborhoods can start deteriorating almost as soon as they are built. Traffic and circulation problems, conflicts between uses, incompatible scale, aesthetic blight and overcrowding, environmental problems such as flooding and inadequate storm drainage, lack of access to conveniences and services, and too low a percentage of owner-occupancy, to name a few, all are problems that can be built into a neighborhood--and have been throughout Lawrence. Some developers in Lawrence have designed potential blight into their developments, we hope out of ignorance. An early example was the fledgling Four Seasons development where rental duplexes, improperly sited, were flooded from Brush Creek. A recent example is the Monterey PCD immediately north of 6th Street. The arrangement of incompatible housing types fronting on Eldridge Street near the intersection led to a situation in which the row of duplexes originally intended as combined owner-occupancy and rental units became student housing, resulting in inadequate parking space. This led to periodic traffic blockage on too-narrow Eldridge Street, at the time an essential collector street from the center of the neighborhood to 6th.

It seems obvious that one of the most important functions of urban land use planning is to plan to avoid problems; but the underlying causes and trends must be known in order to formulate public policy. And public policy must support good neighborhood planning. When neighborhoods have complaints they are generally justified. Certainly, private property rights should be protected, but to quote from the General Goal of our comprehensive plan, "...public welfare must prevail."

---Land Use Committee, League of Women Voters of Lawrence-Douglas Co.