

Nobody Home

The Rise of Vacancy

Part IV -- Larimer

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Perhaps it's the nearly 750 empty lots and vacant homes in disrepair, the buckling pavement, shuttered businesses and other visible evidence of years of disinvestment that makes the idea of turning Pittsburgh's Larimer neighborhood into a showcase of economic and environmental sustainability seem wildly ambitious.

Yet, if the redevelopment plans that percolated from the residents themselves are realized, Larimer will be reborn as a green, downsized urban neighborhood, and the vacant lots and abandoned houses that have blighted its streets for decades will have played an important role.

In southwestern Pennsylvania, across the state and the nation, leveraging vacant properties to introduce gardens, trees, urban farms and acres of open green space to densely developed, blighted neighborhoods is a concept that is gaining interest.

But it's Larimer, one of Pittsburgh's poorest and most challenged neighborhoods, that has developed one of the region's most extensive visions for turning high vacancy rates into environmental assets in the hope of reducing blight, raising the quality of life and attracting investment.

Malik Bankston only had to look as far as Summerset at Frick Park in the city's Squirrel Hill neighborhood to find evidence that such ambitions can be realized. The upscale residential development, where home prices exceed \$650,000, was built on a desolate brownfield atop 20 million tons of slag, an end-stage waste product of steel production. Part of the transformation involved cleaning up the once-sewage-tainted Nine Mile Run watershed.

"I thought that if the wherewithal exists to create a vibrant, stable community on a mountain of slag, then there is no reason that we can't come together and reinvent a neighborhood like Larimer," said Bankston, executive director of the Kingsley Center, a community organization that is part of a consortium of residents and others who put their

vision for the neighborhood in the form of a comprehensive plan they are now working with the city to implement.

Nearly 42 percent of the lots and buildings in Larimer are vacant, giving the neighborhood plenty to work with. Larimer is not alone. In just about every community where there is vacant property, the number of empty lots far outnumbers the number of empty houses. And cities and counties end up razing many of the vacant, tax-delinquent houses they take possession of, creating even more empty lots.

At the same time, one characteristic shared by many places where vacancy rates are high is a shortage of open green space that can be used to improve neighborhood aesthetics. That is often the case in dense urban communities, such as Larimer, where open space accounts for less than 1 percent of the neighborhood, according to the city Department of Planning data.

“Vacant properties offer unique reclamation opportunities, and interest in neighborhood greening strategies is increasing significantly,” said Frederick Thieman, executive director of the Buhl Foundation. The foundation’s support for innovative land use concepts dates to Chatham Village in the 1930s, which integrated brick townhouses, garden courts, terraces and parks in what is considered one of the finest American examples of Garden City planning.

Evidence of heightened interest in greening vacant properties is found throughout the region. The nonprofit GTECH was started five years ago as a Carnegie Mellon University H. John Heinz III College project to farm an urban brownfield. Today, its projects include reclaiming vacant lots with sunflower gardens and working with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and other partners involved in advancing the Seeding Prosperity And Revitalizing Corridors (SPARC) strategy for creating green corridors linking urban neighborhoods.

In Pittsburgh, the city’s Green Up Pittsburgh program helps volunteers turn vacant lots into side yards, gardens, urban farms, tree parks and other useful green spaces. During its first four years, the program helped green more than 120 vacant lots. That is less than 1 percent of the 14,000 vacant lots found throughout the city. But the city’s strategy for dealing with vacant property is still developing. And the use of open space is one of the first issues being addressed in deliberations to develop the city’s first-ever comprehensive plan.

Elsewhere, a similar approach is taken in Genesee County, Mich. where the local land bank recruits community groups to beautify and help maintain more than 600 vacant properties in its inventory with projects such as tree plantings and making flowerbeds and community vegetable gardens.

Beyond aesthetics

The idea of greening vacant property is about more than improving neighborhood aesthetics.

Researchers at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania report that the value of houses surrounding vacant lots that have been turned into gardens, parks or other green amenities rise by as much as 30 percent.

And Carnegie Mellon researchers found that being located close to Pittsburgh's urban parks significantly boosts the value of a house. The size of the park and a home's proximity to it matter when it comes to the "green premium" reflected in the sales price.

For the most part, houses within 2,000 feet of parks large or small sell for much more than homes farther away, according to the study commissioned by the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority. They found, for instance, that the sale price of a house located 1,000-1,400 feet from a park that is 30-acres or larger would be expected to be more than \$39,000 higher than what a comparable house located 2,500-3,000 feet away from the same park would sell for.

Vacant properties also offer an opportunity to improve stormwater management. At the most basic level, lots of soil and grass and other low-maintenance vegetation are able to absorb storm water, unlike asphalt, which diverts all of it to storm drains and the region's overtaxed sewers. Vacant lots also show promise as inexpensive sites for innovative strategies, such as rain gardens, plant-filled depressions that draw runoff from roofs, driveways, parking lots and other impervious surfaces and allow it to soak into the ground.

Southwestern Pennsylvania is desperate for ways to reduce the pressure on antiquated sewers that overflow into the region's rivers when rainwater combines with sewage and overwhelm the system. The overflows raise health concerns that have been serious enough to close the Allegheny, Monongahela, Ohio and Youghiogheny rivers to boating and general recreation anywhere from 24 to 90 days a season since 1995, according to Allegheny County Health Department data. And it's a problem the region is under court order to fix, at a cost estimated at \$3 billion to \$10 billion for Allegheny County communities alone.

Greening Larimer

The greening movement in Larimer began with a few small-scale projects on vacant lots that introduced ideas such as community gardens and urban farming. The projects attracted interest, and residents organized a community "green team" to carry out similar projects. Eventually, the notion of transforming Larimer into a green community as a means of urban renewal took hold.

A key part of the Larimer plan is to reclaim its western border as open green space for athletic fields, hiking and bike trails and acres of park – something that is considered possible only because of the neighborhood's high rate of vacant property. Relatively few

residents will need to be relocated. All but a few hundred of the 2,000 or more houses that once stood on the site of the proposed Larimer Park are either vacant or they have been demolished and now stand as empty lots.

“The level of disruption is far less,” says Bankston. “So when we are having this conversation and only have to account for 238 occupied units, it’s something we can get our arms around.”

The park is one of several edges that the neighborhood plans to build from, including its border with East Liberty. Just inside that border is Bakery Square, where an abandoned Nabisco factory was acquired by the city and renovated to accommodate retail shops, several University of Pittsburgh offices and the new headquarters of Google Pittsburgh.

Plans call for downsizing the neighborhood’s residential core to something better suited to its smaller population. Larimer’s population has fallen more than 85 percent since the 1940s, when it was a robust city neighborhood that nearly 14,000 people called home.

The high rate of vacant property that followed decline today allows neighborhood planners to pursue a “checkerboard green” strategy to envelope existing houses with playgrounds, parks, side yards, rain gardens, urban farms and greenways that once were empty, overgrown lots.

The hope is that such steps will improve the quality of life, give the neighborhood more appeal and raise property values – all of which have suffered for years. The incomes of nearly 29 percent of Larimer residents fall below federal poverty levels. And in 2008, the median sales price for a house in Larimer was \$10,000, far less than the citywide median sale price of \$75,000.

How much of Larimer’s plan will become reality is remains to be seen. The likelihood that government agencies will be increasingly tightfisted as cities and states deal with fiscal crises makes raising money more challenging. On the other hand, hundreds of vacant properties have already been acquired through city treasurer’s sale with help from the URA. Support is also flowing from other directions. GTECH and its partners in SPARC, for example, have adopted greening the Larimer Park corridor as a priority project.

And then there are the residents, their leaders and organizations, who’ve so far have been able to work together and seem clear about what they want, no matter how ambitious it might be. “Neighborhoods like Larimer might be on the cutting edge of urban land reclamation,” said Rob Stephany, URA director. “They want to take control of the land. They’ve come up with a vision. They’re working with local nonprofits to repurpose that land. And it’s bringing a level of energy to Larimer that hasn’t seen in a long time.”

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