

Nobody Home

The Rise of Vacancy

Part V -- Homewood

By Jeffery Fraser

PittsburghTODAY.org

It's been 27 years since Elwin Green came to live in Homewood. He has seen the local high school and the neighborhood Carnegie Library branch renovated, the Afro American Music Institute move in, and a new YMCA, YWCA and community college campus open their doors. Each has added texture to the neighborhood and the lives of its residents. And each is surrounded by evidence of disinvestment and decline that such redevelopment has been unable to reverse.

The house directly across Race Street from Green's house is vacant. The house next to that vacant house is also vacant. Next to that vacant house is a vacant lot. On Green's side of the street, the house beside his is occupied, but a vacant house flanks it. And next to that vacant house is another vacant lot.

High vacancy rates are indications of neighborhood distress. And dense swaths of vacant buildings and lots are found in pockets throughout Pittsburgh, southwestern Pennsylvania and the state, eroding home values, discouraging investment, and imposing health and safety risks.

"It's just plain ugly to a degree that it sucks life out of your soul when you are surrounded by it," said Green, a former *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter, whose neighborhood blog appears on Homewood Nation, the community website he created.

"But what might be the most dangerous aspect of vacant and abandoned property is that it can be easy to get used to – that it becomes part of the background of your life that you don't notice anymore. So, a lot of us wind up accepting as normal stuff that should never be normal."

Few communities are beset by a concentration of vacant properties as severe as that found in his Homewood neighborhood, where nearly 44 percent of the land parcels are empty lots – double the citywide rate, according to data reported in a recent study by the University of Pittsburgh's University Center for Urban and Social Research. [The 2010 U.S. Census reports nearly 28 percent of the neighborhood's housing as vacant.](#)

Dealing with such high vacancy rates is one of many challenges several organizations face as they try to jump start the dysfunctional housing market, raise children's academic outcomes and improve the quality of life in the neighborhood that captains of industry Andrew Carnegie and George Westinghouse and jazz composer Billy Strayhorn once called home.

### 'Bottom of the bottom'

Homewood grew rapidly after it was connected by streetcar to downtown Pittsburgh and surrounding neighborhoods in the 1890s and the houses built during that expansion make up much of the housing stock that remains today. In fact, the average age of a house in Homewood dates from around 1920.

Major changes swept through many city neighborhoods after World War II, and Homewood was no exception. The rise of the suburbs and other factors drained the neighborhood of people, retail businesses, jobs, wealth and vibrancy.

Its population fell 79 percent to fewer than 6,500 residents between 1940 and 2010, with the sharpest period of decline occurring over the past 10 years. Crime and poverty rose to heights seen in few other neighborhoods, as did the rate of vacant and abandoned property.

The housing market in Homewood steadily eroded to the point where today equity is more a concept than reality for most homeowners. Allegheny County Office of Property Assessments data show that 87 percent of the homes sold in 2009 sold for less than \$10,000.

To get a better picture of home values, University of Pittsburgh researchers eliminated from consideration sales under \$500, reasoning that a good number of them might be "love and trust" transfers within families rather than standard home sales. By their calculations, the average sales price of a home in Homewood in 2009 was \$9,060 and the median price was \$4,325.

For homeowners, the news gets worse. Their homes are often assessed at values much higher than what they sell for. In 2009, the average property tax bill in Homewood was \$935, based on the average assessed value of nearly \$31,800, which is more than three times higher than the average sale price in the neighborhood. But when taxes were calculated based on the prices that homes sold for, the average tax bill was only \$271, according to the Pitt study.

More than 57 percent of the property in Homewood is tax delinquent, and more than half of those owe at least five years worth of back taxes to the city and school district. Pitt researchers also report that most of the tax delinquent properties are "underwater," that is, the back taxes and penalties owed are greater than the market value of the property.

Such conditions discourage home improvements and contribute to long-term vacancy, abandonment and blight. Empty houses are a particular problem in Homewood. [The latest U.S. Census found that more than 1,000 houses and apartments are vacant.](#) And [more than 90](#) percent of the [vacant](#) houses in the neighborhood remain vacant for at least one year.

“When you look at the housing market, everything is below the city standards,” said Sabina Deitrick, Ph.D., co-director of the Urban and Regional Analysis Program at Pitt’s University Center for Social and Urban Research. “Supply exceeds demand. Buyers are often not people who want to live in the neighborhood. They are absentee owners. Vacancy is high. There is widespread abandonment, huge amounts of disinvestment and nothing gets filled in.

“If you want to rate housing markets, this is the bottom of the bottom.”

The toll vacant property takes on neighborhoods such as Homewood is not confined to lower housing values, and people who live there appear to understand that. Abandoned houses and lots ranked second only to crime as the biggest concerns of 1,000 Homewood residents surveyed last year by Operation Better Block, a neighborhood nonprofit.

“People intuitively understand the relationship between those issues,” said John Wallace, Ph.D., associate professor of social work and the Philip Halen Chair in Community Health and Social Justice at the University of Pittsburgh.

## **Blight takes a toll**

Homewood isn’t lacking in amenities that families, in particular, find attractive. The library that Andrew Carnegie built in the neighborhood is still open and in good repair. There is an elementary school, middle school and high school, as well as an Allegheny County Community College campus. “I don’t know of many other places where a parent can educate their children through the first two years of college without them having to leave the neighborhood – or having to take a bus,” said Green.

But vacant property and blight is taking the shine off such assets.

The Helen S. Faison Arts Academy, Pittsburgh’s newest elementary school, was built with the hope it would help kindle the revitalization of Homewood. With its modern red brick and glass facade, innovative interior design and grassy five-acre campus, it’s clearly a community asset – but one that is crowded by blight.

Across from the school’s Tioga Street entrance is a pair of vacant, two-story houses of aging brick. While they appear structurally sound, useless rain gutters droop from the roofs and weeds choke the yards. First floor windows are boarded with city-installed plywood, but broken-out upstairs windows invite weather, and birds and other wildlife inside.

Directly east across Dunfermline Street are a couple empty, trash-strewn lots and the ruins of a cement block building with an uprooted toilet lying exposed in a doorway. Two blocks north, an entire block of abandoned row houses dominates Formosa Way, a grim corridor that years ago earned the reputation as one of the city's most notorious crime havens.

It's that environment that Dr. Wallace wants Homewood's children to avoid as much as possible. For at least two years, he has planned the Homewood Children's Village, an initiative to improve the academic outcomes and well-being of neighborhood children. The village is based on a model used in New York City's Harlem neighborhood that concentrates educational support and social services around children from "cradle to college."

Organizers of the Homewood project immediately started assessing the conditions of the property around neighborhood schools as a first step of mapping routes that allow children to bypass vacant houses and lots.

"The village itself is primarily focused on programs for kids and education," Dr. Wallace said. "But we have to address these property-related issues. That's part of their environment. There's stress associated with knowing that drugs and other activities often go on in abandoned buildings. We don't want kids to be afraid to walk their street to get to school."

Psychologists say there are good reasons to be concerned about children who are constantly exposed to things that frighten them, such as vacant houses and lots, or the drug trade and other crime often associated with them. Chronic fear – even if that fear is only rooted in stories a child might have heard – can trigger a traumatic response that is often difficult to detect.

"A lot of people don't understand what is happening with children who hear about assaults or murders, or hear gunshots at night," said Christopher Peterson, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and associate professor of psychology at Pennsylvania State University. "Adults might think children are tolerating it pretty well – they're not hollering, not screaming, they're still going to school. But what is happening is that they are becoming numbed to it.

"When they get numb and avoidant to the point where they can't function, that's when they can have difficulties to the point where they can't concentrate or they can't relate to their friends or they start withdrawing into their home. It can profoundly affect children's development. They don't become adaptive or adjusted to it. They become scarred by it."

Figuring out what to fix first is academic, experts say. Decades of experience suggest that neighborhood revitalization that focuses on one risk at a time is ripe for failure. Two decades ago in Homewood, redevelopment that focused on restoring the business climate

failed largely because of a sharp increase in crime, particularly violent crime, in and around the business corridor.

“Don’t think of it as a linear process – that if we do this, this will happen,” said Dr. Deitrick. “It’s not going to be that way. Things have to happen simultaneously.”

### ‘This can work’

The idea behind the Homewood Children’s Village is to take a holistic approach toward giving children a more promising future and breaking the cycle of poverty and violence in the neighborhood, where the incomes of 35 percent of the residents fall below federal poverty levels and crime rates are consistently higher than citywide averages. The Harlem Children’s Zone, on which it is based, built a network of in-school, after-school, social service, community-building and health programs, including adult mentors, asthma care and classes for expectant mothers.

Meanwhile, several organizations are trying to stimulate the housing market in Homewood, raise property values and attract investment as ways of creating a healthier, more sustainable neighborhood – something that if they succeed would rank as one of Pittsburgh’s finest hours.

Bridging the Busway is a community-driven planning project that has residents, nonprofits and professionals, such as the architectural consulting firm, Studio for Spatial Practice, looking for ways to capitalize on the commuting convenience of the East Busway, which separates Homewood from North Point Breeze. Improvements along the busway corridor, they reason, would better position Homewood to draw from the strength of its more affluent neighbor, where poverty and crime rates are much lower than citywide averages and the median sales price of a North Point Breeze home is more than \$102,000 – about 25 times higher than Homewood’s.

The two vacant houses across from the Faison elementary school are now in the possession of the city and are among those that Operation Better Block and others are planning to rehab and sell in that part of the neighborhood, where they are trying to grow a small, but healthy housing market that they hope will kindle a wider recovery.

Behind the school and only blocks from the East Busway, the nonprofit, Building United of Southwestern Pennsylvania bought 45 blighted former subsidized housing units from the federal government. In their place, the nonprofit built 10 three-bedroom houses, each with 2.5 baths, a fenced-in back yard and detached garage. The houses were priced at \$128,000 with a \$50,000 “soft” second mortgage through the Urban Redevelopment Authority that essentially lowered the price of the house by that amount for buyers who live there for at least 10 years.

The houses sold. Another four houses are under construction and already have buyers. And the nonprofit plans to build 14 more houses and rehab two others in the same Braddock Avenue- Susquehanna Street block cluster.

“We’re selling them as fast as we can build them,” said Rev. Samuel Ware, executive director of Building United of Southwestern Pennsylvania. “We want this to be an anchor so we can say, ‘Look, this works. People are willing to buy in this neighborhood.’”

Elsewhere in Homewood, a neighborhood group, the Rosedale Block Cluster is continuing to “green” vacant lots with gardens, a practice it began more than a decade ago. It also operates its own landscaping company and trains local youths to do that kind of work. In May, the city gave the nonprofit Homewood-Brushton Community Coalition Organization money to hire an economic development specialist to advance its revitalization efforts.

And there are signs the blight-weary neighborhood is moving more aggressively against vacant properties and those responsible for them. Operation Better Block recently received financial support from The Heinz Endowments to explore with Housing Authority of Pennsylvania consultants ways of using new, more powerful legal tools to combat vacant and abandoned properties.

Of particular interest is the state’s conservatorship law, which could allow the nonprofit to force a neglectful property owner to improve a blighted property or face having it taken over by a court-appointed conservator. The conservator would rehabilitate the building or tear it down, then offer it back to the owner for the cost of the work, or sell it under court supervision to someone else. “We’re not interested in using it against people who are struggling and need help,” said Jerome Jackson, executive director of Operation Better Block. “But I don’t have a problem using it against someone who has been sitting on a property for 10 years and hasn’t done anything with it. This is about our neighborhood.”

#