Re-Thinking Neighborhood Revitalization

Presentation to Faculty and Students off the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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I want to give you a new way of thinking about neighborhoods and neighborhood planning
We’re not asking the right questions....

Neighborhood revitalization is not just about fixing problems...It’s about making positive changes.
My Background

NHS of Chicago
Commissioner of Housing
Consultant
  • Battle Creek
  • Milwaukee
  • Neighborhood Marketing Program
  • HUD Choice Neighborhoods
My biases

- Physical change
- Neighborhood pride
- Trust among neighbors/ Collective Efficacy
- Listening to people and understanding what they mean
- Understanding the market to influence the market
- Keeping things simple and focused
Let’s start with a big question
What do we do when we revitalize neighborhoods?
We Restore Neighborhood Confidence
We influence the decisions of neighbors and other stakeholders toward neighborhood improvement.
We reposition the neighborhood as a place of choice
Why is this so hard?
We focus too much on programs and not enough on outcomes and strategies...we’re not sure what we want so we take what we get....

We aren’t intentional enough about changing the market and the image of the neighborhood...

We don’t go deep enough into understanding the neighborhood psychology and the underlying narrative on place...
• We don’t build on strengths ...too invested in a language of deficiency that only accentuates the negatives of communities

• We don’t know how to implement...we inform but we don’t persuade...

• We see neighborhoods as isolated entities with histories that begin with us
The good news is that this can be fixed.....

So what do we need to do differently?
So what do we need to do differently?
• Greater focus on neighborhood change outcomes and not just programs....

• Better alignment of strategies to outcomes...

• Do things people can see and understand that tells them the neighborhood will get better...

• Build around strengths;
• Turn around symbols of decline;

• Incent rather than subsidize;

• Create a new story for the neighborhood and get people to believe it.
What is a Healthy Neighborhood?
A Healthy Neighborhood is a place where:

It makes economic and emotional sense for people to invest time, energy, and money...and

Where neighbors can successfully manage day to day issues.
So what are the things planners can do to make neighborhood planning work better?
Re-think the Existing Approach

• Problem focused
• Program driven
• Comprehensive becomes silo-driven
• Misunderstanding of housing
• Devalues physical changes
Do this instead......

• Understand how neighborhoods work as markets and social systems
• Listen and observe
• Look at context...how the neighborhood competes
• Know more about the investor class and how it operates
• Look at the decisions being made by neighbors and other stakeholders and how to influence them
Focus on these outcomes:

Image
Market
Physical conditions
Neighborhood management
• Go deeper than community meetings

• Develop quick prototypes….fail quickly…or not

• Think like an entrepreneur
“Designing and Directing Neighborhood Change Efforts: How to Be More Intentional and Effective”

HUD Choice Neighborhoods Website