A Design Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture of North Dakota State University

By:

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This thesis investigates the value of beneficial context on a neighborhood in blight and how to transform a neighborhood that has faced decline into a place that harbors community and can be a place of pride for a city. Innovative approaches are taken to achieve this result, some changing the typology of the land use to benefit the community in an aesthetic, as well as an economic way. This thesis is intended to be viewed in an interactive format. This format can be experienced at the website www.joshuamckinney.com.
Problem Statement

How can areas of blight take advantage of abandoned land to benefit the surrounding urban fabric?

Project Typology

The use of infrastructure as well as abandoned land to create amenities that will harbor community.
Claim:

Blighted areas within American cities are often the product of a greater social problem. Racial tension, economic stratification, and other factors lead to the cores of many cities to be forgotten, left to rot. To rebuild these areas means to reinvent them, knowing that it will never be as it used to be, and celebrating that fact. Using what the neighborhood already has, along with the implementation of intelligent design decisions can make these areas vibrant again.

The Actors:

Residents
Developers
Municipal Entities
The Action:

Reinvest social and economic capital into a blighted neighborhood by creating spaces that generate a positive image for what is happening in the neighborhood.

The object (acted upon):

City and Residents

Manner of Action:

Reinvent and Reinvest the way infrastructure is used, or is proposed to be reused to create amenities that benefit the neighborhood.
The Civil Rights Movement in the US left many cities in the US more segregated than they were during the preceding century of slavery. Migration of whites to the suburbs left the core neighborhoods of the city to decay.

These neighborhoods in many cases possess some of the most historical housing stock in the urban fabric, and most are situated within walking distance to the downtown core.

This being said they are a great opportunity for the repopulation of urban cores from the suburbs given the recent de-suburbanization and a future where residents will not want to drive far distances into work given energy prices.

That being said, in their current condition these neighborhoods become a haven for criminals, and prevent any investment in rehabilitation due to the danger and difficulty in making a profit due to those concerns.
While driving through St. Louis I saw a neighborhood devastated by disinvestment and abandonment to the point that there were several complete blocks where houses were razed. The area felt unsafe, although just blocks from the downtown core.

Upon further analysis there were several reasons that made the neighborhood the way it was. Racially motivated real estate practices coupled with suburbanization were the obvious culprits, but nearly every major metropolitan area in the south has experienced similar social phenomena.

The difference with St. Louis is in the very structure of the city. It is structured as a city county, which is to say the city is itself a county. Any suburbanization outside the city resides in different counties, making the city itself poor due to lack of tax funding.

This situation intrigues me, how can a city, and in particular a blighted neighborhood pull itself out of disinvestment when it lacks the funding mechanism to do so? How can private funding be leveraged to provide the most for the current residents as well as the expected infill of successful development?

How can we REINVEST in the future?
The users of this design would be the existing residents, as well as visitors from around the community if successful. New residential and retail as well as commercial development would allow for this use.

The current residents of this neighborhood are quite poor. Post design these people would still be there, along with a good mix of incomes and racial and age mixes in the makeup of the residential dwellers.
The Saint Louis Place Neighborhood is not the only area of disinvestment in the city of St. Louis, but it represents a paradox- it is the most disinvested area, but also represents potentially the most undervalued land in the city.
A Plan for Proceeding

Extensive research will be done on several scales in order to find solutions to these problems. It is important to talk to all of the “players” that could have an impact on the neighborhoods. Residents, developers, and municipal entities all offer a tremendous wealth of knowledge.

A Plan for Documenting the Design Process

Documentation of the design process is important for the usefulness of the thesis document for future students. The documentation plan will be as follows:

1) Save all images and text read in a digital format as to be disseminated later in disk form.

2) To organize the digital files the files will be organized both by the month they are viewed/worked on, as well as organized categorically.
Previous Studio Experience

Second Year

Fall Semester- Catherine Wiley (2006)
   1) Roosevelt Park- Fargo, ND
   2) Ideal Landscape
   3) Westside Elementary Design- West Fargo, ND

Spring Semester- Mark Lindquist (2007)
   1) Mahnomen Hospital Healing Landscape- Mahnomen, MN
   2) Valley City Campus Masterplan- Valley City, ND
   3) Nathan Phillips Square- Toronto, Ontario

Third Year

Fall Semester- Stevie Famulari (2007)
   1) Cooperstown Park Design- Cooperstown, ND
   2) Ice Sculpture Installation Project- Fargo, ND

Spring Semester- Kathleen Pepple (2008)
   1) Farmers Market Siting and Feasibility Study- Fargo, ND
   2) NDSU “Triangle” Neighborhood Masterplan- Fargo, ND
   3) Jefferson Park Water Retention Design- Fargo, ND
Previous Studio Experience (Continued)

Fourth Year
Fall Semester- Mark Lindquist (2008)

1) Denny Triangle Masterplan- Seattle, WA
2) Terry Plaza- Seattle, WA

Spring Semester- Stevie Famulari (2009)

1) Klai Hall Phytoremediation- Fargo, ND
2) Superfund Phytoremediation- Leadville, CO

Fifth Year
Fall Semester- Catherine Wiley (2009)

1) Regent Masterplan- Regent, ND
2) Red River Water Conservation Project- Fargo, ND
Case Studies

Flint Infrastructure Shrinking Effort
Flint, MI
Flint, Michigan was once an automobile manufacturing center, and a thriving blue collar community. The city has lost 80,000 residents since 1960. While the city was serving only half of its original residents, the infrastructure meant to support and foster a growing city instead had a stranglehold on the city budget.

The money that could have been going towards programs to support the city’s residents find new jobs, or even go towards job creation centers was instead going to plow, clean, and replace roads that served little purpose.

The city of Flint, led by Daniel Kildee, worked to shrink the serviceable area of the city by such measures as to demolish homes on the street in order to save money. The program not only worked to save money, but the crime rate in the city dropped my as much as 71% in some areas. Housing prices have also risen, and plan are in place to responsibly develop the areas if a growth model ever returns to Flint.

Flint, once considered the poster child for deindustrialization, is now known for coming up with innovative ways to begin to solve the city’s problems.
Case Studies

Pittsburgh Urban Renewal
Pittsburgh, PA
Urban Renewal has a certain connotation to it. The term, while well intentioned, evokes images of razing structures with reckless abandon, and inserting an alien layer into the urban fabric in its wake.

The roots of this connotation are based on one of the first large scale urban renewal projects in the US in the 1950’s. R.K. Mellon, a rich financier, financially influenced the city of Pittsburgh to undertake an urban renewal program. At the time, the city was one of the dirtiest and economically depressed cities in the country.

The project is considered a success today, but was met with opposition at the time of its implementation.

The downtown core also called the “Golden Triangle” by some, is considered the crown jewel of the renewal effort, while neighborhoods like East Liberty were considered casualties of the effort which demolished nearly 1,200 homes in the name of urban renewal.

Seemingly the problem in neighborhoods like East Liberty was the model of urban renewal that was used did not take into account the reverberations, both socially and economically in an area that varied drastically from that of the downtown business core.
Case Studies

Baltimore Harbor
Baltimore, MD
Much Like St. Louis, Baltimore was a major population center, in the top 10 in population in the US, in the 1950’s. Inner City racial composition also transformed towards African Americans.

But Baltimore’s renewal was more of an economic challenge than a social problem. The inner harbor on Chesapeake Bay became obsolete due to deeper ports further down the bay and also to the preference of other east coast ports by shipping companies. This exodus left nearly 2 million square feet of vacant loft and warehouse space near the center of the downtown area (Hula 1990).

The major player in the development of this area was not the municipality itself however, it was a collection of business owners. It is important to note that development did not come quickly, if face it took nearly 20 years for the first redevelopment to occur.

The actual revival that Baltimore is known for was made possible due to the public private partnerships that were offered from the city to developers in the form of below market loans, land write-downs, sale lease-back agreements and property tax abatements.
Case Studies

Melbourne Expansion of CBD
Melbourne, Australia
A project is underway in Melbourne to expand the Central Business District to the waterfront while rehabilitating the abandoned shipping infrastructure that currently populates the space.

Often the direction of any expansion of a city’s CBD can be shaped by public financing incentives and ends up benefiting the city much more if the land goes from being owned by a land redevelopment corporation owned by taxpayers to private investment due to the expansion of the tax base and building future worth.
Research Summary

The four case studies shown above provide a framework for the project in St. Louis. The studies in Melbourne, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore represent cities that were in a growth model and used that momentum to improve areas of their cities by different ways.

The Flint case study was much more applicable to the St. Louis neighborhood site in that infrastructure exists that serves abandoned land.

The challenge for me as a designer is to use the shrinking model that Flint has developed, while encouraging expansion in other areas of the neighborhood that are more likely to develop due to their beneficial context.
City of St. Louis

The City of St. Louis was founded by the French in 1673 as a Fort and trading post. The adjacent Mississippi River linked St. Louis to the rest of the world, and due to an area of rapids to the north of the city, it became the furthest inland port in the US.

Reconstruction after the Civil War brought tens of thousands of newly freed slaves to the city, where they were met with housing segregation laws.

White flight in post WWII is a well documented phenomena. The lack of housing in urban areas due to several factors including the urbanization of the American people and the baby boom was a huge element in the suburbanization of American cities. Perhaps an under documented happening however, is the activity of the real estate agents, bankers, and private property owners, that expedited the process of suburbanization and created the ghettos found in most major American metropolitan areas.
Historical Context  North St. Louis

North St. Louis was a white collar neighborhood up until the early 20th century. Industrialization of the area made it an ideal place for blue collar workers to live and work.

The Irish were the first foreign group to call the area home and work in several industries including livestock and brewing. The Polish were soon to follow and were soon followed by the blacks.

Since the Great Depression and post WWII days this neighborhood has been predominantly black, while the southern part of the city is mostly white.

Pruitt-Igoe housing project was built in North St. Louis and was one of the biggest failures of urban revitalization ever. It is noted in text today as a failed attempt at socially engineering the problem of poverty out of a city.
The St. Louis Place Neighborhood was at one time an affluent part of the city. The housing stock was some of the best in the city and some of it still remains.

The Neighborhood currently has large swaths of open land due to urban revitalization programs installed by President Johnson.

Many residents will say that the neighborhood and even the city was beginning to turn around from its decline until President Reagan repealed the funding for revitalizing cities.
Thesis Personal Goals

- Continue to visualize design concepts in an innovative way by using a variety of mediums including 3ds Max and Photoshop

- Learn Adobe Flash to create interactive visualizations.

- Overcome professor bias and possibly be recognized for the quality of my work
- A project typology that is well defined
- A complete thesis project
- Further development of personal interview skills
- A project completed at a high quality
- Develop an Interactive thesis presentation format that allows for people to understand the intent of my thesis far better than a static document.
- To be able to show people this document for years to come and the forethought and relevance will still be apparent.
Site Analysis: Context

Jeff Vander Lou

Old North St. Louis

Downtown Core
Site Analysis: Spatial Inventory

Former Pruitt-Igoe Site

Abandoned
Site Analysis: Open Land
Open land in the neighborhood can be viewed as a double edged sword. On one instance the open land could attract large scale developers to reinvest in a large project to rehabilitate the area. On the other hand the open land leads to a perception of abandonment and danger.

A balance needed to be struck that could make the amount of open land work for the citizens of the neighborhood as well as the city as a whole.
Site Analysis: Perception

St. Louis Place

High Crime

Low Crime
As previously mentioned the open land that occupies a large portion of the neighborhood currently allows perceptions of abandonment and danger to persist. The map to the right shows that the perception of danger is just that, a perception. The context surrounding the neighborhood is actually much more dangerous.
The Intersection of St. Louis Ave. and Florissant Ave. is slated to have a light rail station as part of the Metro expansion. This could be vital to the creation of transit oriented development in that area.
Currently there are no methods of wayfinding being used in thesis area. Frankly it is probably better that they don’t know where they are. However as this area develops, an identity should be developed in tandem, in essence a brand should be made for the neighborhood.
Instead of blocking off streets with sewer pots, community gardens function to do the same thing, while creating inviting places to congregate along a retention channel created by infrastructure modification.
Infrastructure Reuse

This retention canal serves to link spaces via a pedestrian corridor. This canal could be a catalyst for residential construction and foster neighborhood building.
The idea of prioritizing spaces is a large theme in this thesis. The idea is to consolidate resources into spaces where any investment would have the most impact. These spaces allow hierarchy of importance to be placed within the neighborhood and designation of what is public and what is private.
Adding to the existing context is a way to maximize the benefit of any investment. Consolidating density and existing structures will help to expand any benefit that is gained from investment.
Creation of flea markets and farmers markets are good ways to get people to the neighborhood. The more people are aware of the proximity to the CBD and good housing stock, the more likely they would be to either invest directly in the area or simply spend money at the markets or retail shops.
Open Land Reuse

The proposed land use for much of the abandoned land in the neighborhood is a pecan farm. Pecans are a native tree to the area and can create a lot of financial gain to the neighborhood. The tree also produces a great backdrop and context to any surrounding development.
The proposed Pecan Farm would allow for insulation from the feeling of abandonment due to the visual space the trees occupy. This contextual barrier would possibly give way to residential and commercial development opportunities.
Acknowledgements

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“The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The leader adjusts the sails.”

-John Maxwell