

Glenville: The Citizens's Key Role in Neighborhood Planning

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When city planners, architects and urban designers begin a neighborhood study, they start with an "existing conditions" analysis. Besides reviewing statistical data and reports, they tour and photograph the study area, looking for typical indicators of neighborhood deterioration or health.

For visually-oriented design professionals and bottom-line market researchers, the images and impressions gained in this reconnaissance can profoundly affect the final product, fixing their attitudes and coloring their recommendations. A 1990 study in Cleveland's Glenville neighborhood highlights the dangers of allowing "outside experts" to rely too heavily on limited, early impressions.

In the study, market analysts and planners were hired for a limited scope: to identify retail uses likely to succeed, and to recommend physical improvements that would bolster retail investment along the East 105th Street corridor.

The "existing conditions" tour of the 20-block-long study area presented a depressing view of Glenville: sidewalks strewn with trash and litter; high, barbed-wire fences ringing business

properties; storefronts vacant; street trees spindly or broken off; clusters of young men loitering on corners; vacant lots filled with weeds and junk cars. The image of decay was oddly intensified by the grandeur and architectural quality of the street's older religious structures and remaining commercial buildings.

Market statistics gave little indication that new businesses would be supported by the community, and despite scattered examples of reinvestment--a new church annex, two mid-rise apartment towers, one rehabilitated storefront--East 105th Street presented a powerful negative image of the entire Glenville neighborhood.

Luckily, the planners went beyond first impressions. They toured beyond study area boundaries into residential streets where well-kept houses, manicured lawns, children playing in front yards, and coordinated, owner-installed lighting all spoke of neighborhood health and cooperative efforts.

In-depth interviews of business and civic leaders disclosed that one store owner, at his own expense, had rehabilitated six apartments above his shop, and another had "adopted" a vacant lot, planting lawn and flowers. Interviews also highlighted other key resources: competent development agency personnel and intelligent, energetic political leaders. Finally, lively brainstorming sessions with residents showed their tremendous commitment to the neighborhood, real willingness to support quality local businesses, and unquenchable pride in Glenville.

This highly interactive citizen participation process gave planners invaluable information on Glenville's self-image, and allowed them to project higher levels of potential for the street than would have been justified by physical reconnaissance and "numbers crunching" alone. The Glenville experience offers neighborhood leaders a reminder to insist on planning processes that balance outside expertise with neighborhood expertise.