Surviving Success: Neighborhood Identity & Gentrification

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Fig. 1. Westside neighborhood, Kansas City, Missouri, 2005.

"[The Westside] is a community that has withstood flooding, crime . . . and dissection by public thoroughfares . . . . Through it all, it has persevered as a viable neighborhood, primarily because it is made up of stubborn individuals who don't respond well to insensitive change. Now we face an onslaught of developers . . . profiteering at the expense of ensconced residents." [1]

-- Rita Valenciano, Westside resident and community advocate

[10⁵] The City
Kansas City, Missouri[2]

The recipe for disaster in American cities has been composed of the same ingredients in nearly every case: white flight, the clumsy insertion of highways and interstates, and the construction of multi-family residential projects.

The recipe for urban renewal, a term that's become nearly synonymous with the less welcome term "gentrification", also appears to be ubiquitous: tight-knit ethnic communities and freedom-seeking artists stabilize a neighborhood, followed shortly thereafter by insensitive developers and higher-income/lesser-engaged residents.[3]

Not everyone has a taste for this particular recipe. The gentrification of depressed neighborhoods has typically created a sense of territorial intrusion on the part of long-term residents—original families and artists alike. Usually this is due to economic differences between the long-term residents and new residents, exacerbated by racial and cultural differences. Regardless of cause, the effect of this shift in neighborhood demographic is usually economic prosperity—the double-edged sword of urban renewal. Improved urban neighborhoods (less crime, more culture, and shorter commutes)[4] mean higher property values, which in turn mean higher property taxes—particularly painful for the long-term residents who can ill-afford them. Improved properties also tend to frown upon unimproved properties—again, usually occupied by those who can't afford to improve them.

The final stage in this process, then, is the displacement of the long-term residents and the loss of cultural identity and individuality. These residents, who have raised families, stabilized properties and seen the neighborhood through difficult times, are not allowed to enjoy the new benefits of the community they've worked so hard to hold together. But is it possible to get the positive effects of neighborhood revitalization without the negative effects attributed to gentrification?

The Westside urban neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri is a potential case-in-point. A longtime home to an active Latino community and a hardy group of artists and architects, the neighborhood has recently struggled with—and possibly even come to terms with—the price of popularity.

[**10**[3]] The Neighborhood Inside the City
The Westside, Kansas City, Missouri.

The birthdate of Kansas City's "Westside" neighborhood (1830-1840's) was very nearly the same as the city itself. The city's second oldest neighborhood, it was established when the parcels it occupied were deeded by the government to William Gillis and Louis Bartelot. The land they took possession of sat on a high ridge overlooking what was developing into a bustling downtown (to the east) and the muddy and malodorous Kansas City stockyards (to the west). Thanks to its high elevation, the neighborhood had sweeping views of the horizon, and some protection from the river floods that plagued adjacent parts of the city.

By 1894, the area had become known as "Irish Hill", predominately composed of the Irish immigrants who worked in the city's neighboring stockyards and lived in humble clapboard "workingman's" houses.[5] The Irish immigrants, however, were soon joined by Scandinavian, Swedish, German and English arrivals. The neighborhood was well-connected to the rest of the city by a system of trolleys, and acted as a stopping point for workers coming up from the stockyards into the city proper. As a result, it boasted several active commercial streets with a variety of trades and markets.

Due to its prime location, the neighborhood was appealing to an unusually wide range of social and economic classes. A number of the neighborhood's residents were among the city's elite—real estate and lumber barons, brokers and judges, even a mayor. Some were attracted to the elevated topography of the hill, and the subsequent views, some to its easy access and mix of trade, while others were simply immigrants who had "struck it rich" and elected to build grander homes in the neighborhood they had grown accustomed to. This type of neighborhood loyalty was to become a trademark of the Westside throughout its life. (An architectural by-product of this economic and cultural diversity was a vibrant mix of architectural styles, from standard clapboard shotguns to simple Queen Anne cottages to brick and stone mansions.)[6]

By the early 1900's, the neighborhood's diversity faced the first challenge created by success. The burgeoning stockyards just below the hill, filled with cattle cars, holding pens and slaughter-houses, created a stench that made the neighborhood no longer attractive to those who had the financial means to leave it. Most of the wealthier residents departed for what was then the nearby countryside, establishing a new neighborhood using the popular and more upscale moniker of "Hyde Park". At the same time, the need for more stockyard workers attracted more immigrants, who consequently needed housing—specifically, Mexicans fleeing the revolution of 1910.[7] As the neighborhood population swelled and the median income dropped, the obvious, convenient and architecturally unfortunate answer was to divide the now-vacant mansions up into apartments.

Throughout the first four decades of the century, the neighborhood continued to grow in density. Its location was central, and the rents were cheap. Although automobiles were now becoming common, most of residents could not afford them, but could make use of the numerous trolley cars to reach their jobs downtown or in the stockyards. By the 1940's, the population was nearly 22,000.[8] Although the high density and typically low-income status of the residents resulted too often in less-than-ideal living conditions, the neighborhood was thought of as thriving, with a healthy mix of residential and commercial uses. Because of the continued influx of Mexicans, the neighborhood was also developing a strong Latino identity and sense of community.

Inevitably, the thriving downtown combined with the growth of the suburbs created a need for faster, less-congested routes to and from these destinations. As with most American cities, the answer was to carve a series of highways to the city core, demolishing wide swaths through inner-city residential neighborhoods. Once again, the city's commercial success was to ride roughshod over the health of its urban residential neighborhoods. Two major interstate projects, one running north-south and the other east-west, created an "L" which effectively severed the neighborhood's connection to Kansas City's downtown proper. Block after block of homes was demolished to make room for the highways, displacing over a thousand residents.[9] In an effort to replace homes displaced by city planners and other homes deemed uninhabitable, the city built a series of multi-family housing projects in the Westside. In little more than a decade, the neighborhood was transformed from a vibrant community to an isolated island, difficult to access or to monitor, with increasing crime from gangs formed within the projects.

By 1971, the neighborhood population had plummeted to only 5,000 residents—down from 22,000 in 1948.[10] Businesses were abandoned and shuttered; poverty and crime were prevalent. The misplaced priorities of city planners, and misguided notions about urban design, put the Westside on its deathbed. Many American urban neighborhoods had reached this point at just about the same time—the point at which they simply gave up, or they decided to fight.

The Westside decided to fight.

> "In the 1970's, a Housing and Urban Development official said the Westside was nonviable, and the best thing to do was tear it down. [But] the neighborhood people decided to invest. HUD didn't see the community. We don't have a large number of people in the Westside, but it's a unified group. At the drop of a hat, this neighborhood can bring together four or five hundred people. It's an extended family."[11]
>
> –Tony Salazar, Executive Director
> Kansas City Neighborhood Alliance (1984)

DESIGNING FOR COMMUNITY

Throughout the late 1970's and early 1980's, the neighborhood's residents slowly began to take the design for its future into their own hands. The Westside Housing Organization (WHO) was formed, a not-for-profit community development corporation composed primarily of neighborhood residents. The organization was developed with a significant focus on the Latino community, who by this time had established a strong community identity with many Latino-owned businesses, especially a row of popular restaurants. Festivals and parades also brought attention to the rich cultural heritage of the neighborhood. WHO began to develop new low-income single-family and multi-family homes throughout the neighborhood, a large senior-citizen housing complex, education and assistance in the procurement of mortgages for low-income residents, and a tool lending shop for locals to perform their own home repair. Their efforts stabilized and enhanced the vitality and cultural identity of the neighborhood.

At about the same time, several Kansas City residents with ties to the art and design community pursued loans, purchased, and began renovating Westside properties—primarily for occupation by themselves, other artists and independent businesses. This new infusion of residents added another dimension to the neighborhood, and helped create a positive reputation for the Westside among Kansas City's creative community.

The Latino community and the artistic community, while coexisting peacefully and interacting informally, developed a more "formal" union in 1986 with the establishment of the Latino Cultural Arts Division. A new iteration of a Kansas City charitable organization begun in 1890, the Latino Cultural Arts Division is made up of the Mattie Rhodes Art Center and Art Gallery.[12] It was created as an outreach and social service program for residents of the West Side community, designed to promote both the visual arts and self-esteem. The program is not only a welcome supplement to the city's beleaguered school arts program, it also forges an interesting and appropriate connection between the Latino and the artistic residents of the neighborhood. Neighborhood artists regularly teach classes at the Art Center, and the Art Gallery hosts shows of local art, often themed and timed to coincide with Latino festivals, such as Azteca's Cinco de Mayo Parade and Festival, Fiesta in the Heartland at Crown Center, Fiesta Hispana, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), and Día de

los Niños (Day of the Child). The program has proven to be an invaluable tool in uniting the two most significant portions of the neighborhood's population.

In the 1990's, a series of storefronts along a previously derelict commercial street were renovated by a pair of Westside residents and design/build contractors, Kathy Marchant and Michael Martin. They also started a vegetarian restaurant in one of the storefronts, with an adjacent city garden where part of the food served was grown. The other storefronts also gradually filled, and now contain other locally-owned, design-conscious businesses: two additional restaurants, an artisan bakery, a hair salon, a music recording studio, a used bookstore, a specialty grocery and a graphic designer's office.

> "The first thing I did was take the bars off the windows. People who didn't live here thought I was crazy. They said they'd be broken out by week's end. There's been no problem. If you want a neighborhood to be safe, make it look like a safe neighborhood. If people feel proud of a place, they'll take care of it."[13]
>
> –Kathy Marchant, *Westside resident and business owner*

Throughout the decade, the neighborhood continued to foster the arts community. In 1998, an abandoned former yeast factory on the neighborhood's primary commercial street was renovated by longtime Kansas City residents Steven and Susan Hill, ceramicist and fiber artist. Dubbed Red Star Studios, the building now houses a gallery, individual artist's studios, and a ceramics classroom. The classes attract not only local residents, but individuals throughout Kansas City, bringing additional attention and interest to the Westside.

Shortly thereafter, an adjacent row of shuttered storefronts were renovated for use as rental lofts, studios and galleries for individual artists. All the galleries are part of the larger Kansas City "First Fridays" events (a monthly gallery opening night initiated by an adjacent neighborhood known as The Crossroads) which connects the arts scene throughout the urban core, and brings many visitors (and revenue) to the Westside. This cross-pollination of the arts between urban neighborhoods only serves to reinforce their importance in the vitality of these formerly blighted areas.

After having enjoyed nearly thirty years of consistent neighborhood improvement, the Westside suffered the first significant ill-effect of gentrification in 2003. Although the neighborhood association had been proactive in encouraging new building that served all the residents, such as a recently-completed youth center and a branch public library, it hadn't yet dealt with the concepts of private developers and "luxury condominiums".

DESIGNING FOR DOLLARS

Taking advantage of antiquated zoning and a neighborhood association that had historically been welcoming to new tenants, a developer acquired nearly a dozen single-family lots, on which all homes were subsequently demolished for the construction of a 24-unit high-end condominium development. The four-story contiguous building was built to street edge, and arranged around a gated automobile courtyard. Its street relationship, monolithic massing, height and materials are at odds with the neighborhood—in addition to blocking city views for many long-term residents. While the overall design was similar to the generic condominium developments in cities across the United States, it could not have had less in common with the Westside.

The condominium project galvanized the Westside neighborhood association into petitioning the city to downzone the neighborhood to single-family and duplex use only. Their efforts were rewarded in January 2006 with the city's approval of the zoning change, only narrowly preventing a second condominium development (which, ironically, would have blocked views from the first condo development).[14]

Fig. 2. Rendering of Condominum Development

Fig. 3. Properties adjacent development, typical of those throughout the neighborhood

> "Downzoning helps preserve our neighborhood against big-box condo development. [We have] a single-family . . . walkable, sustainable, close-knit community-oriented kind of neighborhood. That's what other cities are [building] now . . . our community got it right in 1876."[15]
>
> --Barbara Bailey, *Westside resident*

Although the original condominium development continues to be a sore point with many long-term residents, it served the purpose of reminding the residents how critical their input and action is in the design of the community and its structures.

Meanwhile, the Westside continues to attract its fair share of the city's design energy, with a series of new single-family homes and live-work studios being built on vacant lots, by private owners. Among them are an architect, an architectural historian, a decorative ironworker, a photographer and a graphic design partnership. Although the projects have a mix of architectural styles and materials, their overall scale and street relationship contributes positively to the neighborhood, recalling the stylistic mix afforded by the first pioneering occupants of the neighborhood over a hundred years before.

[10^{-2}] The Designer inside the Building inside the Neighborhood inside the City

The role of the practitioner

There are two interwoven themes that can be derived from these two stories: the engagement of the individual, and the engagement of the built environment, in the greater context of a neighborhood. This engagement, reflecting an interest in understanding, respecting, and responding to cultural and built context, is vital in allowing cities to maintain their past, while incorporating the future.

In the case of the Westside neighborhood, the neighborhood association (a "collective" individual) is working to design its own future, in the form of financial assistance to residents and public policy in development. It is not design in the traditional bricks-and-mortar sense, but it is nevertheless a shaping of the environment and a preservation of identity. Likewise, those who play the more traditional role of design architect have the opportunity to create structures that become vital links between the past and the present.

Ultimately, success in maintaining uniqueness in the face of cultural homogenization rests in the recognition that *anyone* who is motivated to make a conscious alteration to their neighborhood plays the part of "designer", and in some way affects the larger system of the neighborhood and the city. Someone who creates, commissions, rehabilitates, builds or in any way influences a structure, a landscape, a streetscape, a new business, a public work of art, even *attitudes* is, in fact, a contributor to design. These efforts cannot rest solely in the hands of a traditional architect, nor can the architect work exclusively with internal ideals, devoid of contextual response. Plurality in society requires plurality in contribution.

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Endnotes

1. Valenciano, Rita. "Respect West Side resolve." Kansas City Star, 8 January 2005, p. B6.

2. The titles of the four major sections of this paper make reference to Powers of Ten, the film made by the Eames' office in 1977, and the "nesting" and scale concepts studied within it.

3. Deutsche, Rosalyn and Cara Gendel Ryan. "The Fine Art of Gentrification." October, Vol. 31. Winter, 1984, p. 93.

4. Cole, David B. "Artists and Urban Development." Geographical Review, Vol. 77, No. 4. October, 1987, pp.391-407.

5. De Angelo, Dory. What about Kansas City? Kansas City: Two Lane Press, 1995, p. 40.

6. Heos, p. 28.

7. DeAngelo, p. 40.

8. City Development Department of Kansas City, Missouri, Comprehensive Plan: Westside Planning Area, 1971, p.16.

9. Comprehensive Plan: Westside Planning Area, p.16.

10. Heos, p. 29.

11. Wilding, Jennifer. "The Westside." Kansas City Magazine, December 1984, p. 44.

12. The Mattie Rhodes Society was founded in 1894 as a memorial to Kansas City native mattie Florence Rhodes.

13. From personal interview by author.

14. Arce, Joe and Curtis Urness. "Westside residents hold the line on high-rises." Hispanic News, 4 January 2006, p. 1.

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Fig. 1. Aerial photo of Westside neighborhood, Kansas City, MO. Google Maps, 2005.

Fig. 2. Rendering of Summit At Sixteenth condominium development, provided by sales office.

Fig. 3. Photo of typical Westside neighborhood fabric, adjacent the new condominium project, by author, 2007.