

Honors Distinction Project Proposal

Title: ReVITALize

THESIS

Urban revitalization of inner city or low-income neighborhoods requires a level of social responsibility to successfully create a new metropolitan environment while being careful not to displace current residents. This social responsibility can be achieved by applying principles of New Urbanism that would create a mixed-income, densely populated urban neighborhood, and creating multiple housing strategies that incorporate the everyday living needs of residents.

ABSTRACT

Neighborhood gentrification is defined as a phenomenon in which low-cost, physically deteriorated neighborhoods undergo renovation and an increase in property values, along with an influx of wealthier residents who may displace the prior residents. Gentrification, at its core, is a detrimental symptom of neighborhood revitalization. In an age where progressive design movements, such as New Urbanism, look for a response or a solution to urban sprawl, inner city neighborhoods provide prime real estate for residents looking to return to a metropolitan lifestyle. Neighborhood revitalization plans look to clean up these neighborhoods, making them more appealing and safe for a wave of middle-class residents on the move. While some neighborhood revitalization plans intend to accommodate mixed-income residents, revitalization efforts can lead to the displacement of native residents as they can no longer afford the taxes of their inflated property values. My interest lies in the social responsibility of architecture and urban design that, when overlooked, results in gentrification disguised as neighborhood revitalization. These findings beg the question:

Can neighborhood revitalization provide both low-income, native residents with modern, architecturally appealing housing solutions while creating viable options for a middle-class wave of residents on the move?

The site for this design project is a neighborhood of Akron, OH called Highland Square, an eclectic, historic neighborhood located several miles from downtown along the neighborhood's main thoroughfare West Market Street. Highland Square has seen a recent phase of neighborhood revitalization that proved more detrimental than beneficial, with the recent closures of local restaurants and the failure to lease commercial space. My interest lies in creating a neighborhood revitalization plan that would increase the density of the neighborhood by providing viable housing options for residents with a range of incomes. The main goal of the project is to examine and redesign housing typologies as they are relevant to the site revitalization while applying principles of New Urbanism as well as design principles already set forth by the Highland Square Development Association. I intend to design multiple housing solutions that can be duplicated on and adapted to different blocks of the site. In addition to designing housing approaches, I plan to design a mixed-use and mixed-income building to address the community needs of housing, parking, and retail.

INTENTIONS AND GOALS

Neighborhood gentrification is defined as a phenomenon in which low-cost, physically deteriorated neighborhoods undergo renovation and an increase in property values, along with an influx of wealthier residents who may displace the prior residents. Gentrification has become a common event in U.S. cities over the past several decades, becoming a good catalyst of urban renewal, stimulating the real estate market, and even helping to rid a neighborhood of crime and gangs. Although there are endless reasons why gentrification is a positive thing, there are many

critiques of gentrification. The major social consequence of gentrification is the increase in property values that comes from renovation or the new construction of commercial centers makes it nearly impossible for low-income and often-African American residents to continue to pay for their homes. Although gentrification has its pros and cons, it often on the surface appears beneficial to the community, but has come at a great cost to the original residents now forced to relocate from homes they have occupied for years.

Gentrification, at its core, is a detrimental symptom of neighborhood revival. It is one way a reaction against urban sprawl. Residents no longer want to move away from the city; rather they want to live in safe, pedestrian-oriented urban neighborhoods. This is one explanation for why low income residents in inner city neighborhoods are often subject to a gentrification process. This begs the question: Are the benefits of neighborhood revitalization in the form of gentrification worth the price of displacement that they cause for local residents? Can urban revitalization provide both low-income, native residents with better housing solutions and a pleasant neighborhood environment while creating viable options for a middle-class wave of residents on the move?

New Urbanism, an urban design movement that has gained popularity in the last 20 years, has begun to answer these questions. New Urbanism is first and foremost a reaction to urban sprawl. Urban sprawl is the process of cities expanding into rural areas just outside of the major urban center which results in the creation of suburbs. Urban sprawl is characterized by single-family home developments, strip malls, and large shopping centers, and has been facilitated by the automobile. New Urbanism looks to resolve the issue of sprawl by concentrating living and public space into a single dense neighborhood. These neighborhoods are characterized as having pedestrian friendly streets and situating housing within a short walk to the public neighborhood center. Other features of New Urbanism design schemes include architecture focused aesthetics,

connectivity in terms of street grids and transportation, and a range of housing types that cater to a range of residents (age, incomes, races, etc.)

Although New Urbanism towns have been praised for their ability to densely house residents in an efficient yet aesthetically pleasing environment, many criticisms of the movement still exist. A main criticism is that while claiming to battle American urban sprawl, New Urbanism projects tend to be located on greenfield sites and are in reality simply a means of controlled sprawl. Also, New Urbanism projects have yet to fulfill the principle of mixed-use and diversity in terms of accommodating residents within a range of incomes. Seaside, Florida was one of the first examples of New Urbanist design. The town is now mostly a resort town, with residents only spending several months of the year there and other real estate available for renters on vacation. Lots and homes there are rather expensive, with some of the most expensive homes upwards of a million dollars. The irony is that Seaside was designed with the New Urbanist principle of mixed-use residents in mind, yet property values suggest the town is uninviting to low-income residents. On paper, New Urbanism seems like a viable solution for combating urban sprawl. The principles of the movement suggest that it could be a successful way to revitalize inner city neighborhoods while accommodating those with different levels of income. Yet this application has yet to be realized.

I feel that the greatest missed potential of New Urbanism is that it has yet to be applied to existing inner city neighborhoods, but rather has been a means of designing new towns on previously vacant or otherwise rural pieces of land. The principles of New Urbanism, walkability, connectivity, mixed-use and diversity, quality architecture, and increased density, are all appealing strategies for managing urban revitalization. In theory, the objectives of New Urbanism seem like they could create successful and flourishing communities that address the social responsibilities designers have when faced with revitalization. But can New Urbanism principles be applied to an

existing neighborhood without the unfortunate effect of gentrification? New Urbanism projects in the past have created a manufactured community, but when introduced into an existing one, can it successful create housing and commercial opportunities for a range of residents?

The goal of my project is to analyze a neighborhood where revitalization efforts have begun, and to research and propose alternative models that address both residential and community needs, as a means of answering these questions. I plan to create an urban revitalization model following principles established by the New Urbanism movement that allows for population and economical growth while catering to residents in a range of incomes and creating favorable housing options. My project will address issues of urban design and architecture, as both are integral to creating any model for urban revitalization. I intend to focus on housing options for the neighborhood by creating a series of housing models that address different existing conditions or communal needs. Architecture in this case is used as a formal and social tool. Through a traditional studio design process I want to create a housing model which serves a greater objective: to responsibly address the negative social implications of gentrification and neighborhood revitalization while creating a building with relevance to modern design aesthetics. In addition to housing needs, I intend to intend to design for commercial, parking, and expansion areas. By looking at successful urban housing schemes, research about cities affected by gentrification, and New Urbanism principles of design, I plan on creating a catalog of ideas that are vital to a mixed-use residential and commercial revitalization design scheme.

SITE

The site that I have chosen for the design project is a neighborhood of Akron, OH called Highland Square. Highland Square is an eclectic, historic neighborhood located several miles from

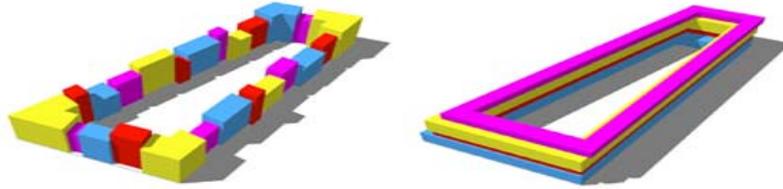
downtown along the neighborhood's main thoroughfare West Market Street. The area has several high-rise apartment complexes and is more densely populated than the rest of the city, with about 12,000 residents. Highland Square is located between the low-income neighborhoods of downtown Akron and the middle-class suburbs of West Akron. The neighborhood has become known for its diversity, as it home to many homosexual residents, and has recently seen a wave of development efforts. Highland Square has been in the local news lately precisely because of these developments. Several years ago, a neighborhood development plan was put into effect resulting in the demolition of the areas only grocery store in favor of a new park and strip mall, now only occupied by a Chipotle and local café. A new First Merit Bank and Akron Public Library were built on the site as well. The development company working in Highland Square is currently being sued by the Highland Square Neighborhood Association for failure to follow through on the promised grocery store. Residents of Highland Square all agree that the area is in dire need of a grocery store because of the elderly and low-income residents whose only means of transportation is the bus or walking.

The part of the site that I intend to focus is on is a small block located to the Western boundary of what is considered Highland Square. The lot is currently a park with two small existing office buildings on site. Several years ago, a Taco Bell was to be constructed on the site, but local residents lobbied against it and successfully stopped the chain restaurant from being built. This communal effort led to the Highland Square Development Association and the Highland Square Business Association, both organizations dedicated to maintaining the neighborhood. The site was acquired by the city and held since its acquisition in anticipation of the eventual development of a more contextually appropriate use. I feel that a mixed-use building that incorporates the housing model I plan to create along with a grocery store and other commercial space would be an

appropriate use of the site, as long as the green space it displaces is reclaimed elsewhere in the neighborhood. Several years ago, a document was drafted which outlined the developmental goals of Highland Square in anticipation of neighborhood revitalization. These goals are similar to those expressed by the New Urbanism movement, including higher density in housing development, grid street networks to relieve traffic congestion, and mixed use and income developments linked with pedestrian access. The goals of Highland Square resonate with the ideals of New Urbanism that I intend to incorporate in my revitalization design. As a former resident of Akron, OH, I am familiar with the neighborhood and the current events happening there. I am very passionate about this project as I feel the gap between architecture and social issues such as gentrification is often overlooked or underestimated. Although the site is located in my hometown, I feel I can remain objective to the issue throughout the design project and design to the best of my ability.

METHODOLOGY

I want to begin this design project by looking at precedents of large scale housing projects by the firms MVRDV and the Bjarke Ingles Group (BIG). There are several buildings done by these firms that are exemplary in their ability to combine residential and commercial program. For example, a project by BIG called The Big House is a residential building with commercial program at its base and green space on the roof. The images below illustrate a way of rethinking the city block that I believe could be a helpful tool in proceeding with my project. Bjarke Ingles group took the program and laid it out in horizontal bands so that each residential apartment would receive sunlight and the office and commercial program could meet the street and be easily accessible by the residential program. Like with this project, I want to identify a series of elements that these buildings possess and create a catalog of properties needed for a successful large scale residential scheme.



Other Buildings Include (but are not limited to):

MVRDV: WoZoCo Housing
The Mirador

PLOT: The Big House
Better and Cheaper Housing
Housing Integrated with a Park
Housing, Retail and Parking in Kiev

A second phase of my research will be to create a model of comparison between the

Highland Square neighborhood and the Short North in Columbus, OH. The neighborhoods are similar in that they both serve as a cultural and entertainment hub just outside of the metropolitan downtown areas in Akron and Columbus, respectively. The Short North, although much larger than Highland Square, is an extensive collection of upscale boutiques, eclectic art galleries, and cozy restaurants and bars. Aside from a few housing developments on High Street, much of the residential program is concealed in the second and third stories of the buildings lining High Street, or just off of the main thoroughfare on side streets. There is a blending of program between the residential and commercial, with many entrances to apartments located in the back of buildings, and the street takes a cultural life all its own. In Highland Square, the same can be said for how apartments are handled in respect to the commercial program, however, Highland Square has more single family homes located on cross streets. I believe that Highland Square has the potential to develop into a more successful and densely occupied neighborhood much like the Short North. Comparing and contrasting the two neighborhoods will produce a set of guidelines and principles needed to begin to design for revitalization in Highland Square.

The methodology of research that I am producing I anticipate occurring in two phases. The first phase is the research that I have completed thus far. With my current research, I intend to fully understand the concepts, principles, and ideas of gentrification and New Urbanism including benefits and criticism. I feel I have a greater understanding of both movements and see the potential for using these concepts in influencing my revitalization design. In the beginning weeks of spring quarter which will be the second phase of my research, I want to focus more on case studies that can provide specific examples of successes and failures. For example, I intend to look at other New Urbanism schemes such as Seaside, Florida and the Stapleton International Airport site in Denver, CO to obtain a greater understanding of New Urbanism principles at work. Also, I intend to look at case studies of neighborhoods that have seen waves of gentrifications. One of my primary sources on gentrification, Gentrification, Displacement, and Neighborhood Revitalization, includes a section examining six U.S. cities in terms of cause and effects of gentrification and displacement issues. The book clarifies what exactly caused resident displacement, focusing mainly on the difference between displacement caused by revitalization practices versus those caused by outside events happening in the city or surrounding areas. I feel that by examining these instances of specified gentrification affects, I can gain a better understanding of individual instances as they have occurred in the past. Cataloging these cause and effect relationships and comparing demographic information will help to inform my critical decisions in my design project.

BEGINNING INTEREST

My initial interest in the topic came after taking Comparative Studies 367.01, American Identity in the World. The class looked at American culture viewed from inside and from the perspective of foreign cultures, as seen in literature, film, art, music, journalism, folklore, and popular culture. One segment of the course was dedicated to studying neighborhood gentrification

in Columbus, OH. As a class, we watched the PBS documentary “Flag Wars,” about Olde Town East residents in Columbus, OH who are faced with the hardship of their neighborhood gentrifying. The film is rather biased in its portrayal of those wanting to gentrify the neighborhood and those being displaced, but what it does it give an example of a real situation where the proposed urban renewal is affecting many in a negative way. The “Flag Wars” documentary is even more relevant now with the completion of the South Campus Gateway.

“The South Campus Gateway, which opened in August 2005, is a dynamic blend of entertainment, restaurants, retail, offices, apartments and parking within a series of buildings whose architectural quality exemplifies the best in “Main Street” urban design,” is the description taken from the Campus Partners website. With the success of the Short North closer to downtown, it seems natural that similar expansion and revitalization could occur along High Street. In this case, neighborhood revitalization occurred on the surface. The prime real estate along High Street has been taken over by new retail stores while the rest of the neighborhood consists of project housing. The South Campus Gateway was an opportunity for a revitalization plan to take on the issue of housing and low-income residents, but instead decided to cater to the campus market instead. The recent closing of the Sunflower Market demonstrates that perhaps another route would have suited the area better. With the Kroger located down the street, was it necessary to introduce a high-cost gourmet supermarket (which has now closed) into the area? I am interested in pursuing issues surrounding the South Campus Gateway and surrounding areas in terms of demographics, i.e. rent rates for the graduate apartments in the Gateway versus rent rates in the surrounding areas.

Along with creating a model of comparison between by proposed site, Highland Square, and the Short North District, I also intend on comparing the success of the Short North with some of the failures of the South Campus Gateway. Development of the Short North was a gradual process in which the residents where heavily invested in. In comparison, the South Campus Gateway was the opposite of a gradual process and set up an even greater barrier between campus and the project housing as close to campus as 11th Avenue. The South Campus Gateway and the Short North are both revitalization developments that occurred in the same city in a relatively similar timeline, yet retail and commercial efforts are failing in the Gateway as compared to the successful market in the Short North. A comparison model is intended to help account for these differences and provide relevant information to help inform my design processes.

GOAL AND PROGRAM

The main goal of the project is to examine and redesign housing typologies as they are relevant to the site revitalization while applying principles of New Urbanism as well as design principles already set forth by the Highland Square Development Association. I intend to design multiple housing solutions that can be duplicated on and adapted to different blocks of the site. In addition to designing housing approaches, I plan to focus on a specific block* of Highland Square where there is an existing park. I plan to design a mixed-use and mixed-income building to address the community needs of housing, parking, and retail. The outcome of this project will be a master plan design scheme including housing options of the Highland Square neighborhood and a more traditional design studio approach to a single building on my specified site, following my proposed program:

130 Residential units

50	1 Bedroom Units	750 square feet each	37500 square feet
50	2 Bedroom Units	1500 square feet each	75000 square feet
30	3 Bedroom Units	2000 square feet each	60000 square feet

Residential Total: 172, 500 square feet

Retail

	Grocery Store	50000 square feet
	Restaurant	8000 square feet
	Laundry Mat	1000 square feet

Retail Total: 59000 square feet

Total Square Footage= roughly 250,000 square feet

*See attached images

PROPOSED TIMELINE

-submit abstract to Denman Research Forum by March 31st

SPRING BREAK

March 17-21: My spring break will, for the most part, be spent in Akron so I plan on photo-documenting my site. I plan on getting in contact with the Highland Square Neighborhood Association and trying to schedule a meeting to take place over Spring Break.

SPRING QUARTER

Week 1, March 24-28: Catalog of precedent examples and ideas; Comparison model of Highland Square and Short North; Comparison model of Short North and South Campus Gateway; Case study research of New Urbanism projects

March 31: Deadline for submitting proposals to Denman Research Forum.

Week 2, March 31-April 4: Complete catalog and case study research. Finish site studies and being physical and 3D model of site.

Week 3, April 7-11: Begin Design Phase exploring housing strategies and typologies.

Week 4, April 14-18: Continue Design Phase

Week 5, April 21-25: Continue Design Phase, Mid Review

*If I can get into contact with someone from the Highland Square Neighborhood Association, I would like to invite them to attend either mid-review or final reviews.

Week 6, April 28- May 2: Continue to work on project, Begin to develop presentation for Denman Research Forum

Week 7, May 5-9: Continue to work on project.

Week 8, May 12-16: Week of Denman Research Forum (March 14th)

Week 9, May 19-23: Complete project.

Week 10, May 26-30: Final reviews.