

Lancaster City Downtowners

March 10, 2005

Minutes

Facilitator: Rod Houser

Attendance: approximately 23 people

Topic: Discussion of styles of community: traditional neighborhood, intentional neighbors, joint real estate ventures

1. Introduction of informal panel

Eugene Aleci – 30 years experience of rehabilitating historic structures, 20 years as architect with his business, Community Heritage Partners.

June Lange – Work with Chester County Altair cohousing community; intentional community visionary.

Caleb Heidebrecht – masters program in urban development at Eastern University; part time work at Assets.

David High – masters program in architecture; thesis involves development of old Armstrong site in Lancaster City.

Daryl Yoder Bontrager – city resident; in conversation with 3 other families considering intentional community in condominium type setup.

2. Warehouse to Condominium

- Legal structures must be put in place to establish co-ownership.
- Residences become independent entities (1000 – 1500 sq ft per unit).
- Ten residences requires 15,000 square foot building.
- Multigenerational.
- Buildings that are more open (fewer partitions etc.) are more easily adapted to creating residential units.
- Legal and building code requirements add to complexity.
- Finding the right place at the right time can be a challenge.
- Some warehouse owners have unrealistic idea of the worth of their properties; many warehouses are sitting idle because they are overpriced.
- Suggested strategy: noting code violations and market evaluations to owners can encourage realistic prices.
- Unimproved upper floors of many city commercial buildings have potential if city can encourage aggregation of services (elevators, utilities).
- Little funding is available for creative housing
- Park Avenue shoe factory, fronting on cemetery could be attractive for development.
- Many warehouses in city corridor are zoned commercial/industrial.
- Is it realistic to purchase/develop a shared building? Are persons looking for intentional community better advised to purchase houses as close neighbors in a given neighborhood?

3. Co-housing

- 1960's movement in Denmark.
- Common house composed of private spaces with “vestigial” kitchens; shared places: common kitchen serving common meals – many models for co-housing
- Six criteria
 1. Residents design neighborhood.
 2. Design encourages interaction and safe walking areas with parking on periphery.
 3. Private homes and jointly owned public spaces.
 4. Non-hierarchical.
 5. Self-managed consensus decision making.
 6. Optional shared meals.
- Co-housing ventures attract futurists/cultural creatives.

4. Intentional Community

- Intentional communities take effort.

- Private space is important.
- Common spaces could include laundry, internet connections, recreation room.
- South Ann Street, Lancaster, model (Daryl Yoder-Bontrager): individual houses; proximity determines interaction; selective process important for intentional neighbors.
- Older person/couple could occupy first floor of typical house and provide low rent for resident on 2nd floor in exchange for living assistance.
- Defined arrangements among younger and older persons living in proximity could provide options for elderly persons to live longer independently in downtown environment.
- Quote: “Intentional communities all through the ages come and go. Those which succeed have a purpose beyond themselves.” Dr. Henry Williams, former resident of Lancaster.
- Time Dollars are a time-based currency where one hour helping another earns one Time Dollar – a way of bartering services.

5. Downtown “natural” community

- In ideal community, all neighbors interact well.
- Orange Street neighbors have little in common, so they began to work with “unchosen neighbors” to build community; maintain contact with email mailing list and circulation of contact information; seek ways to trade services.
- Possible for next door neighbors to share greenspace by removing backyard fences.
- Neighborhood restaurants as meeting places can provide a natural space for community to happen i.e., Pemberly Tea House, Fred and Mary’s.
- 15-year residents on East Chestnut Street (John and Theresa Herr) enjoy meaningful neighborhood life: active neighborhood watch; neighborhood picnics in Musser Park; local resident opens his home for 5:30 – 8:30 Wednesday evening parties during winter – lit saxophone in window indicates that the party has started; unsolicited help arrives during winter snows to shovel walks.

6. Housing Summit

- Housing summit (met previous evening) predicts shortage of houses in Lancaster area around year 2030.
- Could Downtowners group be a catalyst by presenting a central purpose to mayor and requesting support?
- (Packets from meeting were circulated among group.)

7. General Comments/Ideas

- European model: retail surrounded by green space on first floor, residential on upper floors.
- Do our ideas form around a nostalgic preservation or around a future economic vision?
- Many European cities stage competitions for futuristic urban areas to promote new ideas.
- Younger persons may be more inclined to take part in the natural gradual formation of a neighborhood rather than make a formal commitment to a defined intentional neighborhood model.
- Renting can be considered as a viable option to property ownership for downtown living.
- Neighborhood “watchdogs” can keep tuned to properties that come up for sale in a particular area for persons interested in locating close to each other.
- What goals do we have when purchasing properties in a given neighborhood – social transformation or creating a “cacooned” neighborhood? Consider Old Towne and surrounding Howard Avenue.
- Prince Street Towers provides residence and services for low-income elderly.
- When does building up the health of a neighborhood by more affluent persons moving in become gentrification?
- City dwellers must think of themselves as “not just sleeping in the city, but also contributing to the city economy.” Services within walking distances of residents are important.

8. For future meetings

- Consider calling together homogenous special interest groups.