

Prospects for Community Design in the Urban Redevelopment Setting: Weaving a Community in Fort Lauderdale

ANTHONY ABBATE
Florida Atlantic University



Fig. 1. Temporary street closures have been installed to stabilize residential areas of the district. Photo: FAU School of Architecture 1998.

INTRODUCTION

As the professional fields of architecture and planning transition into the new century, we are often visibly reminded of the unmet challenge of urban neighborhood revitalization. Urban professionals are haunted by the troubling notion that too many of our nation's core inner-city neighborhoods continue to deteriorate economically, socially and physically. Despite vast expenditures of federal, state and local dollars and the delivery of numerous revitalization plans and strategies only a few success stories can be cited. As inner cities continue to deteriorate, the debate on how best to aid them grows increasingly divisive.¹ The criticism has also been leveled that revitalization success stories are often urban renewal projects and extensions of the unbridled corporate investment so pervasive in Central Business Districts across the country.

The purpose of this paper is to shed new light on the enabling factors and conditions for urban neighborhood redevelopment. The issues are complex and the frustrations seemingly endless. When urban form is contemplated in urban redevelopment, the challenge then becomes one of implementation. Here the community decision-making process becomes critical as urban plans and zoning codes must reflect a clear design vision. The vision must fully

anticipate the development considerations of private investors and city officials. The following case study of Fort Lauderdale's Flagler Heights neighborhood is the story of one such neighborhood. The neighborhood study emanated from a larger urban redevelopment movement in South Florida known as "Eastward Ho!" to shift development back to South Florida's older, eastern cities and away from the fragile Everglades ecosystem. Flagler Heights, a Fort Lauderdale neighborhood, is located in the geographic center of this zone. The case study provides an analysis of the physical, economic social and regulatory factors and conditions for creating infill redevelopment opportunities within a designated "Urban Village" District.

A REDEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

The on-going plight of our nation's inner cities appears to have taken a back seat to another pressing and, perhaps, more vocal discussion regarding urban sprawl. Anti-sprawl and anti-Edge City writers pay homage to traditional urban centers and note how sprawl drains valuable resources from the urban core. However, the sprawl/anti-sprawl debate focuses much more on the suburban development pattern and its impacts on transportation, the environment and quality of life issues.

One can characterize "distressed" inner-city neighborhoods as areas where the economic and social fabric of community has been rent leaving little semblance of the neighborhood environment that once existed. Outward manifestations include concentrations of poverty, deteriorated properties, high levels of absentee ownership, antiquated or non-existent public infrastructure, high crime rates, poor public schools and a lack of clearly defined active and passive public space.

The complexity of urban redevelopment issues requires a systematic design and planning response. Reinvestment strategies must involve multiple stakeholders including residents, investors, and city officials. The redevelopment plan must focus on the future design of the neighborhood as well as economic, social and physical needs. While the level of citizen involvement will vary from city to city and neighborhood to neighborhood, it is important for residents to be engaged in the visioning process for what their

neighborhood will become. Residents must first become familiar with the physical elements of their neighborhood. Nodes, paths, edges, districts and landmarks are the physical elements that give form to the neighborhoods by evoking an “image” that is recognized.² These elements also serve as tools for designers and planners in discussions with neighborhood residents regarding proposed redevelopment activities.

Jane Jacobs’ writings provided a strong case for careful observation and consideration of the physical elements of neighborhoods. Jacobs viewed the city as a living forest with a complex ecosystem in which the old growth co-existed with the new growth and were dependent on one another for their sustenance.³ Typically, urban infill strategies involve some level of land assemblage to make projects economically feasible. The economics of a more small-scale, incremental redevelopment scheme would undoubtedly cause apprehension among private developers and city officials.

Yet a more incremental and integrative approach to urban neighborhood redevelopment is essential to the conception of urban infill. In fact, blending the old with the new should help preserve the urban integrity of city neighborhoods as they evolve through an eclectic, slowly organic redevelopment process.

The following section provides the policy background that stimulated South Florida’s urban redevelopment planning initiatives whereby many cities amended their comprehensive plans and zoning codes to incorporate ideas promoting pedestrian circulation and compact, higher density development.

EASTWARD HO!: SOUTH FLORIDA’S URBAN REDEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Legislative Background

In the State of Florida, the Governor’s Commission for a Sustainable South Florida was established in 1995 to help ensure that a healthy Everglades ecosystem could co-exist and be mutually supportive of a sustainable regional economy. A major goal of the commission was to create sustainable communities in Southeast Florida.⁴ The sustainability initiative was linked to the state’s 1985 Growth Management Statute that was recently amended to further direct growth away from the Everglades and toward the older central cities to the east. The new urban infill and redevelopment legislation allows local governments to designate Urban Infill and Redevelopment Areas for the purpose of “holistically approaching the revitalization of urban centers, and ensuring the adequate provision of infrastructure, human services, safe neighborhoods, educational facilities, job creation, and economic opportunity.”⁵

In its 1995 *Initial Report* the Governor’s Commission for a Sustainable South Florida recommended the establishment of an Eastward Ho! study area that was delineated as the land between and around two major railroads and the interstate highway corridor from southern Miami-Dade County north to central Palm Beach County. The area includes the region’s major downtowns, airports and seaports.⁶ This region, originally opened up by Henry Flagler’s railroad in the

early part of the 20th century, has since become increasingly deteriorated in many locations with concentrations of brownfields, dilapidated housing, conflicting land uses and crime.

Redevelopment Activity within the Eastward Ho! Corridor

Economic development within the Eastward Ho! Corridor consists primarily of urban redevelopment activities within the downtown areas.⁷

A recent study of the financial impediments and solutions to redevelopment in the Eastward Ho! Corridor highlighted several key problem areas including the cost of redeveloping older communities, gentrification, lack of affordable housing, and local government inaction.⁸ The study also pointed out the lack of “holistic” community plans to address the complex issues of redevelopment in the urban core areas.

FORT LAUDERDALE’S FLAGLER HEIGHTS REDEVELOPMENT PLAN

Typical of other cities within the Eastward Ho! Corridor, Fort Lauderdale’s economic development activity occurs within the context of urban redevelopment. Fort Lauderdale has experienced substantial redevelopment activity both along its beachfront and in the downtown area. Despite their apparent success as predominantly economic generators they contain minimal infrastructure to support transit, mixed uses, and unprogrammed public activity.



Fig. 2. Aerial view of the Flagler Heights area north of the Fort Lauderdale Central Business District. Photo: the City of Fort Lauderdale

The Flagler Heights Neighborhood, immediately north of downtown Fort Lauderdale, is part of a larger Community Redevelopment Area known as the Northwest Progresso Flagler CRA. The city's 1989 Comprehensive Plan designated the neighborhood along with other adjacent downtown neighborhoods as a Regional Activity Center (RAC). The purpose of the RAC designation is to nurture a functional downtown containing an employment center, major governmental offices, cultural facilities, housing and retail; shopping. To achieve the objectives of the Comprehensive Plan, the RAC was divided into five distinct zoning districts including City Center, Art and Science, Urban Village, Transitional Mixed-Use and Residential and Professional Office. The Flagler Heights neighborhood received the Urban Village designation, intended to support the City Center by providing a mix of housing, mixed uses, office, commercial, and institutional uses.⁹

The vision of Flagler Heights as a functional "urban village" was substantiated by two prior community design initiatives organized by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects and Florida Atlantic University and funded in part by the City of Fort Lauderdale. The former plan, *A New Vision for Flagler Heights /Progresso*, by Christopher Alexander and the Center for Environmental Structure, was intended to help city officials and neighborhood residents visualize a pedestrian friendly, urban village environment, while establishing a process for incremental transformation. The latter, Charles Euchner's *Toward an Urban Village in Flagler Heights*, helped build neighborhood consensus concerning identifiable problems and solutions. Both studies provided an optimistic assessment for the future redevelopment of Flagler Heights.

The Alexander assessment exercise consisted of a three-day process that included an all-day workshop with neighborhood residents and community leaders. The process acknowledged that while Flagler Heights was not perceived to be a positive place to live or create a new business, there were hundreds of good and useful things present in the general area including homes, businesses, parks, and small communities, that must be preserved in any future redevelopment. To this end, Alexander proposed the creation of two essential structures: 1) a pedestrian environment of public spaces and walking paths, a network that would become the "living room" of the neighborhood and 2) a process of transformation and "piecemeal growth" through which Flagler Heights could gradually reinvent itself as a vital and living place.¹⁰ The incremental redevelopment approach espoused by Alexander is significant as it clearly deviated from the neighborhood master planning process that South Florida was more acquainted with. To implement the community's vision and goals Alexander recommended that Flagler Heights be designated a mixed-use "Urban Village" with a special zoning district backed by a special development process. The implementation plan also recommended initiating a special planning process for the Flagler Heights Urban Village. The special planning process included establishing a collective vision of the landowners, residents and local businesses; block-by-block and lot-by-lot diagnosis of the neighborhood; identification of five concrete small-scale construction projects that would jump start the redevelopment effort; and a larger scale plan of open space,

and as a matter of immediate priority, a physical master plan of pedestrian space. Alexander did not recommend a specific zoning density believing that this should be left to the domain of the special planning process.

The Euchner Plan focused on four primary areas: 1) community centers or focal points, 2) the circulation system, 3) the periphery or edges, and 4) outside relationships or linkages. For each focus area, neighborhood potential and problems were identified along with solutions, their rationale and, finally, implementation strategies. An example within the plan of both a community center and a circulation improvement is the "Boulevarding of Third Avenue." The identified problem was that Third Avenue does not fulfill its potential as a gathering place for commercial activity and community life. The potential for Third Avenue is that of a street with pleasant paths with viable businesses fronting upon a "memorable" boulevard. The suggested solutions to the problem included reducing the space available for traffic, widening sidewalks, installing medians, extending sidewalks into key intersections, installing brick crosswalks and constructing public art, special lighting and other markers along each block of the boulevard. From an implementation standpoint, the plan recommended the use of a proposed \$30 million bond issue for improvements to parks for "linear green spaces", the city's five-year capital improvement program and tax increment financing funds from the larger Community Redevelopment Area.¹¹

Despite widespread community support, the proposed incremental improvements and redevelopment strategies advocated by each plan were not implemented in the years to follow. Changes in the organizational structure of the city's government, redevelopment focus on beachfront and downtown improvements, and general apathy toward inner-city neighborhoods were several reasons commonly cited by neighborhood residents and property owners. Subsequent ad hoc actions, such as the closing of three through streets (Fig.1), despite their rough and temporary impression, have led to a perceived stabilization of the neighborhood's residential core consisting of predominantly single family and duplex dwellings.

In order to reinvigorate development interest, the city's Downtown Development Authority requested the assistance of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and School of Architecture at Florida Atlantic University to devise an implementation plan for the redevelopment of Flagler Heights. The deliberative nine-month collaboration focused on neighborhood consensus building and the development of a working relationship with city officials. The plan, entitled *A Call for Action*, recommended a three-year Targeted Improvement Program that built on the neighborhood's prior planning and community design initiatives. The key components of the plan included a recommendation for working partnership agreement between the various redevelopment agencies and the City Commission to ensure the plan's full implementation; a neighborhood stabilization and targeted infrastructure improvement plan including street, sidewalk and drainage improvements, land assembly, concentrated code enforcement, and right of way and urban design guidelines; regulatory and programmatic revisions including substantial amendments to the neighborhood's Urban Vil-

lage zoning code, organization of the city's Urban Land Development Regulations, improvements to the local permitting process, and targeting of federal, state and local economic and community development funding programs; and a management and performance evaluation plan that would measure the timeliness and effectiveness of the plan's three-year implementation schedule.¹²

The creation of the implementation plan for the Flagler Heights Urban Village faced certain obstacles and impediments including property deterioration, a fragmented land use and ownership pattern, aging or non-existent public infrastructure, absentee ownership and crime. Exacerbating these distressed conditions was a growing level of land speculation that threatened the vision of a Flagler Heights Urban Village. Inflated land costs also impacted the city's ability to acquire and assemble properties for potential mixed-use projects. But perhaps the most exasperating impediment to plan implementation was the Urban Village zoning code itself. It became abundantly clear after several neighborhood meetings that neighborhood pioneers - new property owners and small investors, had become completely frustrated with the new zoning code and with the city's zoning administrators.

The study team began with a survey and analysis of the physical aspects of the Flagler Heights Urban Village (see Figure 3). The survey considered the neighborhood's existing land use and transportation pattern, condition of private property, and the quality and extent of public infrastructure. The study team contemplated the "action-driven" nature of the neighborhood plan in performing the land use analysis component. As such, a market perspective was applied that considered the "competitive advantage" of Flagler Heights within the local economy. The assessment indicated local economic capacity with respect to the neighborhood's strategic location and proximity to the downtown, principal roadway access, land availability and zoning flexibility. However, the assessment also indicated economic shortfalls in terms of street infrastructure, property maintenance, neighborhood appearance and zoning compatibility. While the neighborhood demonstrated obvious strengths and advantages, the fragmented land use pattern and lack of public infrastructure have created real economic disadvantages that effectively negate the neighborhood's redevelopment capacity.

A strong correlation appeared to exist between the level of public infrastructure investment and private property conditions. The quality of the streetscape suddenly became a clear, identifiable issue. What became apparent was that where public infrastructure was in place and private improvements were made there was a better chance of success. Public infrastructure was not perceived as a guarantee that physical improvements in the private sector would occur. However, where a clear streetscape, sidewalk and drainage system was in place, private investment appeared to enjoy higher property values.

The study team sought to engage various scales of architecture and urban design in the participatory community workshop process utilizing a technique for establishing a community inventory of opportunities and priorities. This system was based on *Design Michigan*, a model developed by the University of Michigan and

the Cranbrook Academy.¹³ The residents were given choices of how new redevelopment activity could be integrated into the fabric of their existing neighborhood environment utilizing visual representations of environments supporting similar urban densities and activities and the previously adopted vision and plans developed by Alexander and Euchner.

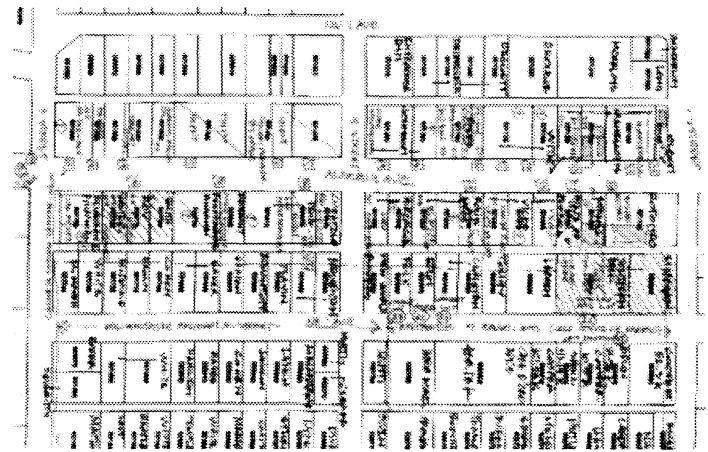


Fig. 3. Portion of physical survey of the Flagler Heights Urban Village Zone. Drawing prepared by David Benjamin PhD MNAL and Anthony Abbate.

A critique of the newly adopted Urban Village zoning code was performed as an on-the-ground assessment using several different development scenarios. The study team proposed various mixed-use developments for typical parcels within the neighborhood. The assessment also included a market analysis to determine the economic feasibility of each development scenario. While the intent of the zoning code is clear, its application has proven problematic. For example, while the ordinance clearly describes development and uses consistent with a community vision for an "urban village", it does not specifically provide for mixed-use development as a permitted use. The study team recommended that the zoning code be sufficiently clear so that a conceptual plan could be prepared without ambiguity as to how various sections of the code might apply to the project. A stand alone, fully self-contained Urban Village code was recommended that would anticipate and facilitate both incremental and large-scale mixed-use projects. All parking, landscaping, signage and compliance issues in particular would be included specific to and consistent with the intent and purpose of the Urban Village District.

In order to test the utilization of the existing Urban Village zoning code, the study team prepared a development plan for a selected parcel of assembled land with 200 feet of street frontage. The particular development scenario consisted of a 40-unit multi-family apartment complex. The resulting schematic plan was driven by the requirements for on-site parking and setbacks. The plan graphically portrayed the difficulty in meeting the intent of the code to design a positive pedestrian environment. It was determined that the standard requirements for parking and landscaping had a significant impact on the project's design. Even with a reduction in residential parking requirements to 1.2 spaces per dwelling unit, the specific parking and landscaping requirements for on-site ve-

hicular use areas offered no flexibility or opportunity for creative design that would promote or produce development consistent with the stated intent, purpose and vision of the Urban Village District.

Also problematic was the zoning code's lack of attention to existing nonconforming structures. One of the most promising and exciting redevelopment opportunities identified by the residents of Flagler Heights was the reuse of abandoned warehouse buildings along a railroad corridor skirting the western boundary of Flagler Heights. The warehouse district provided a real test for the type of incremental development first envisioned in Alexander's study and subsequently supported in the Euchner and University plans. It was soon learned that the Urban Village zoning code did not anticipate adaptive reuse plans for nonconforming structures. This forced the owners to go through an expensive and time consuming permitting process for even the smallest incremental property improvements such as window replacements, awnings, and signage.

The university's plan built on the citizen participation process began by Christopher Alexander and further enhanced by the summer long planning study led by Charles Euchner. Indeed, an eclectic community had evolved with an active neighborhood association comprised of new property owners and small investors. This breed of urban pioneers purchased small cottages in the neighborhood and one-by-one gradually improved whole city blocks. The pace and scale of Flagler Heights redevelopment has suited the neighborhood association. They have also endorsed the incremental, pedestrian oriented development pattern recommended by Alexander and Euchner. The challenge for the University's study team was to devise an action plan that would bring their urbanized village dream to reality while preserving the community mosaic.

Ultimately, the success of *A Call for Action* would require the political will to move the recommendations forward through the local decision making process. The fact that the neighborhood has logistic proximity to the larger downtown area was a clear advantage. However, its proximity had already induced a discernible level of speculative land assembly that could compromise the integrity of a functionally integrated urban village. Political leadership would be needed to approve the regulatory, programmatic and public infrastructure recommendations intended to inspire the implementation of the neighborhood's vision of an urban village environment.

Each of the plans evolved from a continuous and open participatory process with community design issues serving as the focal point of discussions. From these various workshops, tenacious neighborhood residents created an eclectic tapestry of mixed-uses and assorted architectural preferences sewn together by a network of paths, sidewalks and neighborhood parks.

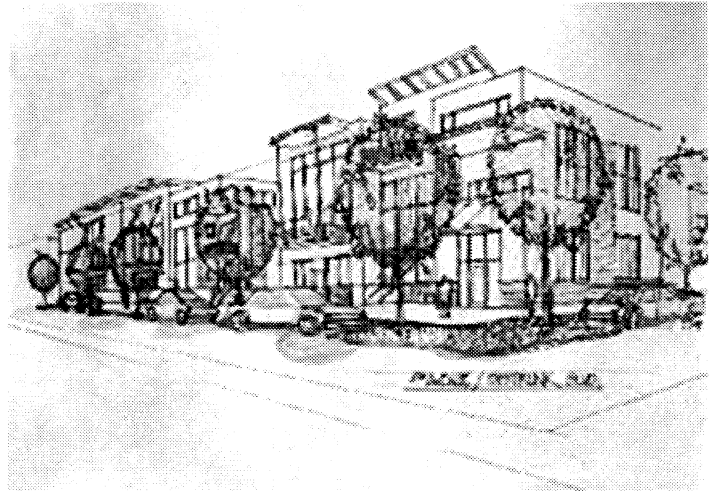


Fig. 4. The Urban Village Mixed used development. Drawing by Douglas Mumma, 4th year student, School of Architecture, Florida Atlantic University.

LESSONS LEARNED

Policies and strategies for inner-city neighborhood redevelopment need to consider the existing built environment along with any emerging investment pattern that will ultimately need to be integrated into the larger redevelopment theme. The level of community engagement is critical. Capacity and consensus building will require patience and a long-term planning commitment. There are no quick-fix solutions for distressed inner-city neighborhoods. And, as in the case of Flagler Heights, it may require several over-laying planning studies to ultimately create the impetus for change. After all, neighborhood disinvestments did not occur over a period of months but rather during a span of several decades.

In Fort Lauderdale consensus building concerning the redevelopment of Flagler Heights has been on going for several years. The redevelopment of Flagler Heights as an urban village district will eventually provide the opportunity to create higher density and mix of new jobs and affordable housing for inner -city residents. The redevelopment of a neighborhood CRA could also serve as a model for other CRA activity within the Eastward Ho! Corridor which to date has primarily benefited downtown central business districts.

Neighborhood leaders including new homeowners and small investors spurred the redevelopment potential of Flagler Heights who coalesced around issues such as crime, traffic, and the general blight attributed to absentee property owners. The political development of the neighborhood was enhanced with the appointment of neighborhood property owners to the Community Redevelopment Agency Advisory Board. Neighborhood representatives are also politically active, regularly attending Downtown Development Authority and city commission meetings.

On an ongoing basis the community participates in regular design workshops and reviews of graduate level design studio projects at the School of Architecture.¹⁴ This involvement developed increased awareness and fueled discussion about the role of architecture and design in the community vision for development and urban infill.

The university's plan revealed that having resources, programs and regulations do not guarantee redevelopment activity. It also demonstrated that the roles of municipal planning and the design professions are more effective when inflected toward a broader, more transparent design process. Sustainable neighborhood redevelopment will require working public/private partnerships involving key stakeholders, user-friendly land use regulations, carefully crafted funding mechanisms, professional management, built-in performance measures, and a clear articulation of the urban design structure and opportunities for design education and public participation.

Physical solutions alone will not solve economic and social problems, yet economic vitality and community stability cannot be sustained without a "coherent, legible" and "supportive" physical framework. The question then becomes whether an organic and incremental redevelopment plan open to diverse design tendencies could be defined as a coherent and supportive physical framework. It just may be that the concept of a diverse, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented Urban Village District can effectively be achieved through an appreciation and understanding of a woven tapestry.

NOTES

¹For a more detailed discussion of the economic advantages of the inner city and the shifting role of government see Michael E. Porter, "The Competitive Advantage of the Inner City," *Harvard Business Review* 73 (May-June 1995): 55-71

²See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1960)

³This perspective was in keeping with her criticism of urban renewal practices that replaced "blighted" areas with new development. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961)

⁴South Florida Regional Planning Council, "Eastward Ho! Revitalizing South Florida's Urban Core." 1996.

⁵State of Florida, *The Growth Policy Act*, 1999.

⁶*Eastward Ho! Revitalizing South Florida's Urban Core*.

⁷Florida cities are enabled pursuant to Chapter 163 of Florida statutes to designate certain "blighted areas" as Community Redevelopment Areas (CRAs). The city's Community Redevelopment Agency (often the city commission) then prepares a redevelopment plan for the area detailing proposed redevelopment activities that might include transportation improvements, housing, office, retail and capital improvements. Land assembly through site acquisition is one of the more common practices of Community Redevelopment Agencies. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is the principal financing tool for public infrastructure projects within CRAs.

⁸FAU/FIU Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems, *Eastward Ho! Financial Impediments and Solutions to Redevelopment*, 1998.

⁹City of Fort Lauderdale Ordinance C-97-19, 1997. *Unified Land Development Regulations, Volume II*.

¹⁰Christopher Alexander, "A New Vision for Flagler Heights/Progresso." The Center for Environmental Structure, 1996.

¹¹Charles Euchner, "Toward an Urban Village in Flagler Heights." 1996.

¹²Anthony Abbate, and Edward P. Murray, "A Call for Action: The Flagler Heights Target Improvement Program." College of Architecture, Urban and Public Affairs, Florida Atlantic University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 1999.

¹³Jack Williamson, "Community Design Management." Design Michigan, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1995.

¹⁴Anthony Abbate and Margi Glavovic-Nothard, Design IX Studios, School of Architecture, Florida Atlantic University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 2000.