There is No Such Thing as Community. . . or Planning: Six Notes on a Mythological Urbanism

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Once upon a time, there was a city with seven hills – the city of Cincinnati. In 1925 it had been the first major American city to adopt a comprehensive plan – but by 2002, Cincinnati's planning department had been closed, and would remain so for the next six years. This interim vacuum of oversight set the corporations and developers free, allowing them to co-opt the role that planners and architects once played in shaping the city. As if they even had a choice, all the planners and architects were left wondering what to do, and what position to take in this struggle between public and private interests.

In this situation, both architects and planners were ill-equipped to stage any effective stand against neo-liberalist corporate urbanism. Susan Fainstein's "Planning and the Just City" describes how ". . . the emphasis on economic competitiveness that tops every city's list of objectives makes planning give priority to growth over all other values, operates on an opportunistic project-by-project basis, and reinforces critics who see planning as serving developer interests at the expense of everyone else."[1] The training of most architects provides them with little expertise in economics or practical politics. For example, when challenged on their eagerness to collaborate with the Chinese government on the 2008 Olympic Games, several well known architects responded with the stock alibi of "engagement" over critique of the totalitarian Chinese government. This answer seemed to reflect a current trend in architecture toward a so-called *post-critical* stance that may have simply been a bi-product of the (now collapsing) global boom in construction and development. Much like their architectural counterparts, planners have also failed to offer any compelling models for urbanism in the new century. Contemporary planning "is usually characterized by modesty", notes Fainstein, since

> "Attacks on the visionary approach have come from across the ideological spectrum. The Left has attacked planning for its class bias, for its anti-democratic character, and for its failure to take account of social diversity, particularly in relation to the needs of minority groups, The Right sees planning as denying freedom and producing inefficiency; it regards markets as the appropriate allocators of urban space. Centrists consider comprehensive planning inherently undemocratic and unattainable; they see the Modernists' efforts to redesign cities, as destructive of the urban fabric and indifferent to people's comfort and desires."[2]

In the meantime, corporate entities are reorganizing cities all over the country. Whether University Village in Chicago, University Park in Cambridge, or Manhattanville in New York, institutional developers are the new planners for neighborhoods that their marketing departments invent with mildly clever urban branding schemes. Such is the lens under which we have examined Uptown – a "new" district that sits atop one of the Cincinnati's seven hills. Neither a single community nor even a neighborhood, Uptown is a fabrication. Uptown is not real, but rather a mythological[3] entity – an urban brand superimposed onto an assemblage of several geographically contiguous, yet politically autonomous, districts. The importance of Uptown comes from the fact that it contains five of the most significant institutions in the entire region. In 2003 these institutions formed the Uptown Consortium[4], a collaborative organization designed to protect their collective interests as well as those of the community within which they exist "with the idea that together they could accomplish more - for themselves and the community - than they could working individu-

ally."[5] But the community that they speak of is at best ill defined, as is its official relationship to the consortium. Since membership in the consortium requires a financial stake much larger than any resident group could muster, it is difficult to argue that their interests can be protected without being able afford an actual seat at the table.

As an interlocutor among these competing interests, we, the University of Cincinnati's Niehoff Urban Studio, set out to ask these questions, and pose some potential answers. The Niehoff Urban Studio is a joint enterprise between the School of Architecture and Interior Design, and the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati in which students and faculty from both disciplines join forces to work on planning and design problems in the city. After

being located down in Cincinnati's Over the Rhine neighborhood for several years, the Niehoff Studio recently moved up the hill to its new home directly adjacent, but just outside of the University's main campus. The relocation came with a new mission in which the studio was asked to turn its attentions away from Over the Rhine to Uptown.

Given this challenge, we sought to bring both the visionary outlook of architecture and the socio-political will of planning to the project of conceptualizing Uptown. Engaging each other in the hybrid disciplinary space of urban design, our ambition was to construct a body of intelligence that could inform the Niehoff as it moves forward, while also providing positive challenges to the diverse and competing interests that the studio serves. As the
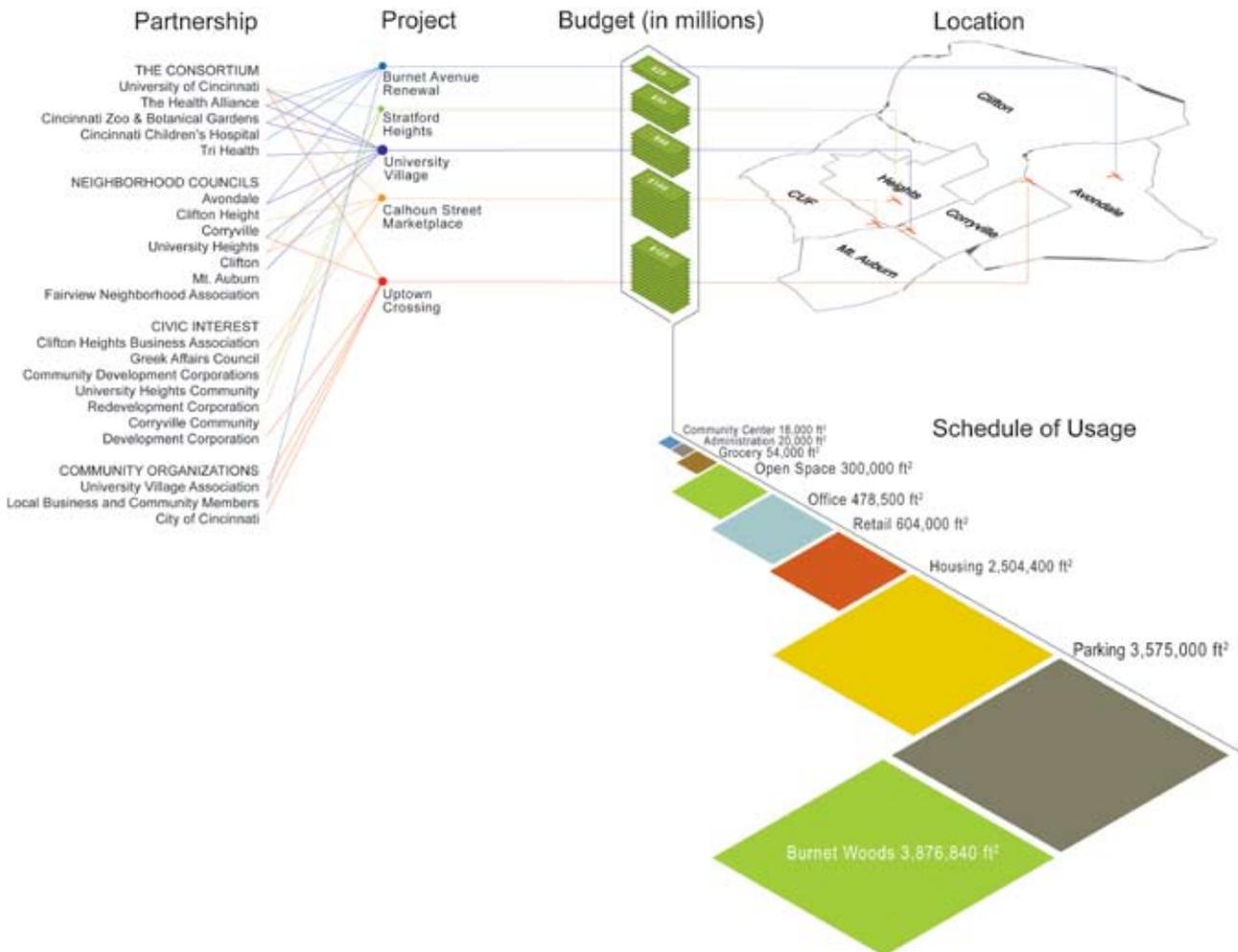

Figure 1. Situating Uptown: A mapping of the various interests currently involved in development projects and their relationships.

literal new kids on the block, we attempted to turn our collective ignorance about this urban territory into an opportunity. We spent a mere seven weeks in the winter of 2008 asking the simple question, "What is Uptown?" Inspired by similar previous efforts, especially Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown's Learning from Las Vegas[6], we developed maps, images, and diagrams that have been compiled in a book titled *This is Uptown: Speculations on a Mythological Urbanism*. Thus the following text represents a field of hypotheses and provocations, to be understood as a collection of initial observations, rather than the promotion of a single thesis or conclusive statement.

1. UPTOWN IS HETEROTOPIA

Liz Pisciotta, a Niehoff studio participant, declared that Uptown is a "five-way," an infamous dish containing chili, spaghetti, cheese, onions, and beans, found at *Skyline*, a local fast food franchise. Like the grocery list of ingredients that go into the chili, each of Uptown's individual neighborhoods offers a specific set of characteristics. On their own, each seems fairly conventional, but when assembled, the mixture produces a uniquely hybrid quality.   Like the five-way chili, Uptown has the potential to become substantially more than the sum of its parts – a *heterotopia* in which an alchemic mash-up of housing, commerce, entertainment, cultures and institutions is created through a simple urbanistic gerrymandering of existing maps. Michel Foucault described heterotopias as

> "real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within the society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and is actually localizable."[7]

Uptown's unique value could be in its diversity of lifestyle options. The aristocracy dwells in the hills of North Avondale and Clifton, while bohemians gather in the Ludlow Gaslight District. The dense residential neighborhoods of Clifton sit directly adjacent to shopping and hospitals. Elephants from the zoo sound wake-up calls in Corryville bedrooms. Bourgeois Cliftonites and their working class neighbors in Avondale rarely mix. University students compete fiercely with Fairview families for space. Though they have been thrown into a com-

mon bowl, the neighborhoods of Uptown are not internally coherent, nor are its denizens culturally homogenous.

This multiplicity comes by virtue of the fact that Uptown has been designed retroactively[8] – meaning that it was created by the Consortium from a group of pre-existing neighborhoods. Their accomplishment is especially interesting since throughout the 20th century, planners and architects had difficulty designing anything of comparable complexity by using a priori planning strategies. First, modernist planning segregated the city into separate zones of living, working, leisure and production. Then suburban non-planning produced mono-cultural enclaves where total privatization excluded any possibility of public life. And more recently, New Urbanist Planning has been useful in its critique of both of the previous paradigms, but unable to produce anything more than a nostalgic retreat to some imagined state of pre-1960's urban innocence. Most likely unaware of this history, and with apparent ease, the Consortium has been able to manufacture a sizeable new urban entity where there was none before. And rather than relying on wholesale invention, they accomplished it through appropriation, combination, and reinvention.

2. UPTOWN IS DOWNTOWN'S OTHER

Most conventional ideas about urbanity are still rooted in the diagram of the concentric city – a dense downtown of commercial activity surrounded by a sparse periphery of housing, industry, and agriculture. And even though this model of development has been under constant assault for the past fifty years, planners and architects have continued to make repeated attempts at its rescue. As metropolitan regions everywhere continue to disperse, most urban design still reaffirms the old opposition of center and periphery. With the invention of Uptown, however, this opposition seems to finally fall apart as it represents the emergence of *downtowns other* – an alternative urban paradigm that blatantly questions whether, either practically or conceptually, there is even still a need for downtown.

Within Cincinnati's landscape, Uptown is fairly isolated, situated on a plateau, which falls away at the south into a series of steep ravines. Bordered by highways on the east and west, and defined by the Mill Creek corridor on the northern edge, these
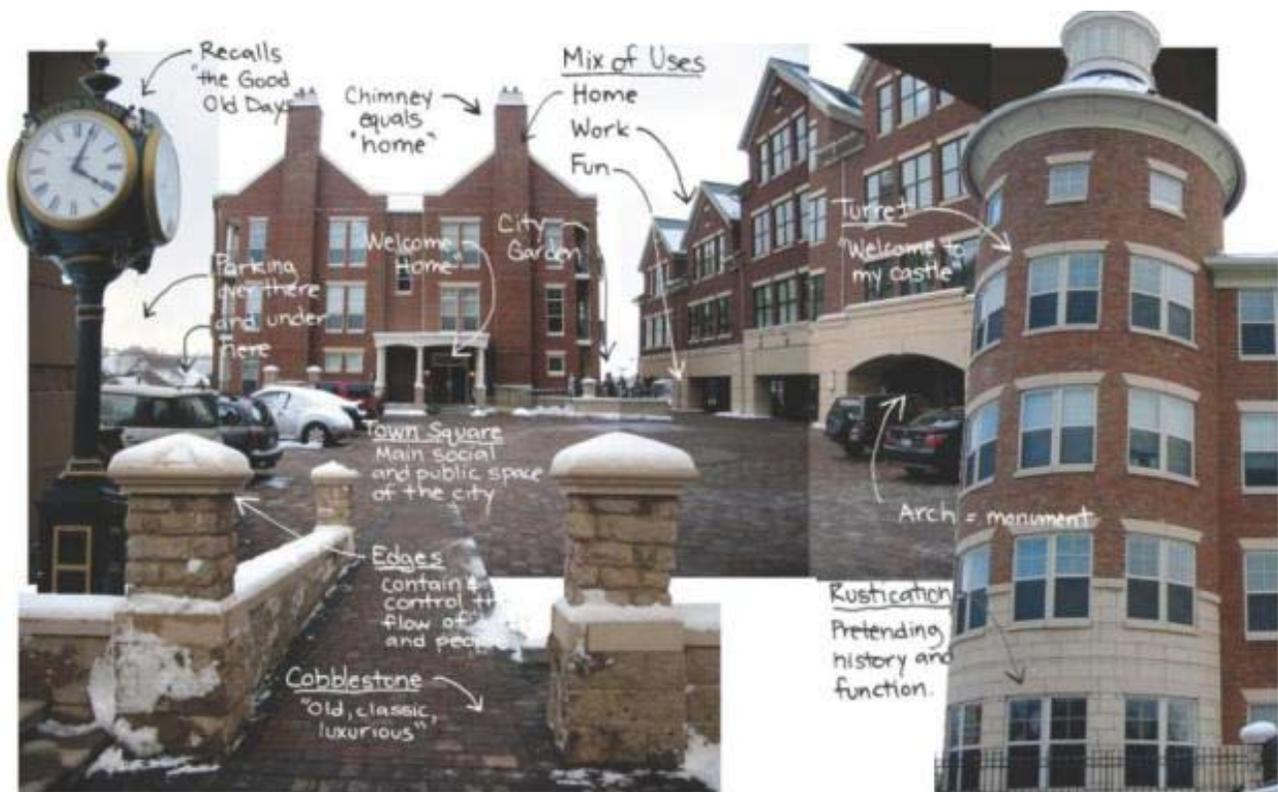
Figure 2:   Semiotic analysis of Stetson Square, a new residential development in Uptown.

hard and soft boundaries result in making Uptown an urban enclave – reliant on downtown for almost nothing, and commercially and culturally self-contained.   Uptown has its own thriving entertainment district and movie theater while Cincinnati's downtown entertainment district struggles and has no cinema to speak of.   There is also a broad range of housing types from single family to high rise that accommodate various lifestyles.   Clean parks and secure parking lots are provided in equal abundance.   And due to the presence of the Uptown Consortium, jobs are in potentially ample supply.

New building in Uptown is increasingly trending away from conventional neighborhoods and toward the development of all inclusive lifestyle centers like Stetson Square, which is just northeast of the University of Cincinnati's main campus. Developments like this one are securing Uptown's function as a surrogate city (figure 2) where downtown living is provided without the inconveniences or risks of actual urbanity.   But to be clear, the surrogate city is not a suburb. Uptown sits well inside of Cincinnati's first real suburban developments, and unlike most successful suburbs, highway access to Uptown is

neither direct nor easily located.   University students compete with Fairview and Clifton Heights residents for space. Massive parking structures are disguised with thin layers of retail and offices that support a minimum of pedestrian activity.   And though there is an abundance of public space, there is a shortage of actual urbanites willing to claim it. This ambivalence toward urbanity may be Uptown's defining characteristic – it is a schizophrenic culture of towers and villages; estates and slums; parks and strip malls.

3. UPTOWN'S MARKETS & EXCHANGES

One university, three hospitals and a zoo – these are the big businesses in Uptown, and all together, these institutions form a massive service economy. The University of Cincinnati is the largest employer in the region, "with an economic impact of more than $3 billion."   The Cincinnati Zoo is the second oldest in the country and has an annual economic impact of $90 million. Cincinnati Children's' Hospital is a world-renowned institution with total operating revenues of over $1.1 billion. Tri-Health has nearly ten thousand employees, half of which work in Up-

town. The Health Alliance is the Cincinnati area's third largest employer and largest health system.[9]

Despite their potential local economic impact, much of the business that the consortium members do is internally focused and takes place within the bounds of their individual campuses. As shown in the initial diagram of recent development (figure 1), provisions for shopping, dining, and other commercial activities in Uptown pale in comparison to institution-related housing and parking, which have exploded in recent years. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Consortium employees do not live in Uptown, so their dollars depart with them to the suburbs every evening and weekend.   Since large pockets of poverty and disinvestment still exist in Uptown despite the wealth of the Consortium, we searched out other scales of commerce and forms of exchange.

Commercial spaces are also social spaces and commercial exchanges such as shopping, dining, and manufacturing are important ways of developing social networks. So far, Uptown lacks a robust commercial culture. A high degree of transience persists among the local population, due to the presence of the University as well as the poverty within Corryville and Avondale, in particular. Thus development of these networks is even more critical if it is to ever stabilize. The Clifton Gaslight District and the McMillan retail corridor support a smattering of commercial activity while the businesses on Short Vine and Burnet Avenues have struggled or altogether disappeared. For an urban center producing billions of dollars in revenue, these are embarrassing failures. Nonetheless, the living is easy in Cincinnati and domestic life tends to dominate, thus challenging one to look even harder for active spaces of commercial and cultural exchange. These spaces don't necessarily announce themselves, but have to be searched out in barbershops, diners, and on street corners.

4. UPTOWN IS VOIDSCAPE

The socially redemptive value of open space is one of the most persistent and unexamined dogmas in modern urban discourse. Every plan must provide for some amount of formal open space, either hard and grey or green and soft. But the simple lack of building – anti-density – cannot always be taken as an inherent good since the most serious problem for most American cities is actually maintain-

ing density. Public parks and plazas in America have been notoriously problematic. Without the long tradition of public social life that one finds in Europe, for example, the activation and maintenance of public open space in the U.S. demands constant injections of artificial stimulants, often in the form of private corporate funding and programming. Jane Jacobs, in her famously blunt fashion, summed up the problem in The Death and Life of Great American Cities:

> "In orthodox city planning, neighborhood open spaces are venerated in an amazingly uncritical fashion, much as savages venerate magical fetishes. Ask a houser how his planned neighborhood improves on the old city and he will cite, as a self-evident virtue, More Open Space. Ask a zoner about the improvements in progressive codes and he will cite, again as a self-evident virtue, their incentives for leaving More Open Space. Walk with a planner through a dispirited neighborhood and though it be already scabby with deserted parks and tired landscaping festooned with old Kleenex, he will envision a future of More Open Space."[10]

This critique may actually be one of Jacobs' more valuable, but least referenced contributions to the field of urban thought. It reminds us that open space is an overly vague genre that includes almost any kind of formed void: playgrounds, parking lots, lawns, athletic fields, sidewalks, gardens, and landfills all fit the general description. Figure 3 shows Fleischmann Gardens, a former private garden which was granted to Avondale in 1925 by the yeast tycoon, Charles Fleischmann. Though a much appreciated part of the Avondale community, one can also see from the aerial view that Fleischmann Gardens is a void within a void – an urban park without a substantial urban fabric to provide it with either programmatic or formal definition.

Figure 3. Fleischmann Garden, a void within a void.

We have employed the term *voidscape* to signify these urban landscapes whose common characteristic is their chronic emptiness. Voidscapes can be manmade, like Fleischmann Gardens or Burnet Woods. Others are natural, like the ravines that tear at Uptown's edges, making large swaths of land undevelopable. And then there is the ever expanding supply of parking, driven by municipal codes and consistently diluting the concentration of Cincinnati as a whole. In the end, voidscape is a concept for understanding the lack of density at multiple scales – the street, the block, the park, and the city.

What is the role of public open space in a medium density Midwestern city with only limited pockets of pedestrian activity? Are community gardens a viable solution for vacant lots within neighborhoods already equipped private yards that are difficult enough to maintain? The parking is never enough when developers and retailers always want more. Rather than building more parks, we would do better to intensify the ones that already exist. The bottom line is that there is no shortage of private open space in Cincinnati or Uptown, so it is no wonder that most public open spaces in the city are under-occupied. In "Nothing but Flowers: Against Public Space," Aaron Betsky argued that

> "Public space is a place where many activities overlap: rich confusion, commerce, seduction, and filth. Public space works not as a designed element, but is instead carved out by wheeling and dealing, crossroads, and the chance at freedom, where a person emerges from shadows into light that grows into the ever-extending space of public gathering and demonstration and seeps into every open pore of the city." [11]

The solutions to the problems of open space come from accepting that in the contemporary city, civic life and nature should not be held in precious isolation, but rather integrated with and infused by everyday life.

5. NOSTALGIA & BLIGHT

At the end of the 20th century, architectural postmodernism and the New Urbanism joined forces to feed the collective hunger for an imagined past. It was argued that certain architectural and urban forms are timeless in their ability to provide structure and meaning to public life. Shopping malls became "town centers" and subdivisions became "villages", naively hoping that some romanticized ver-
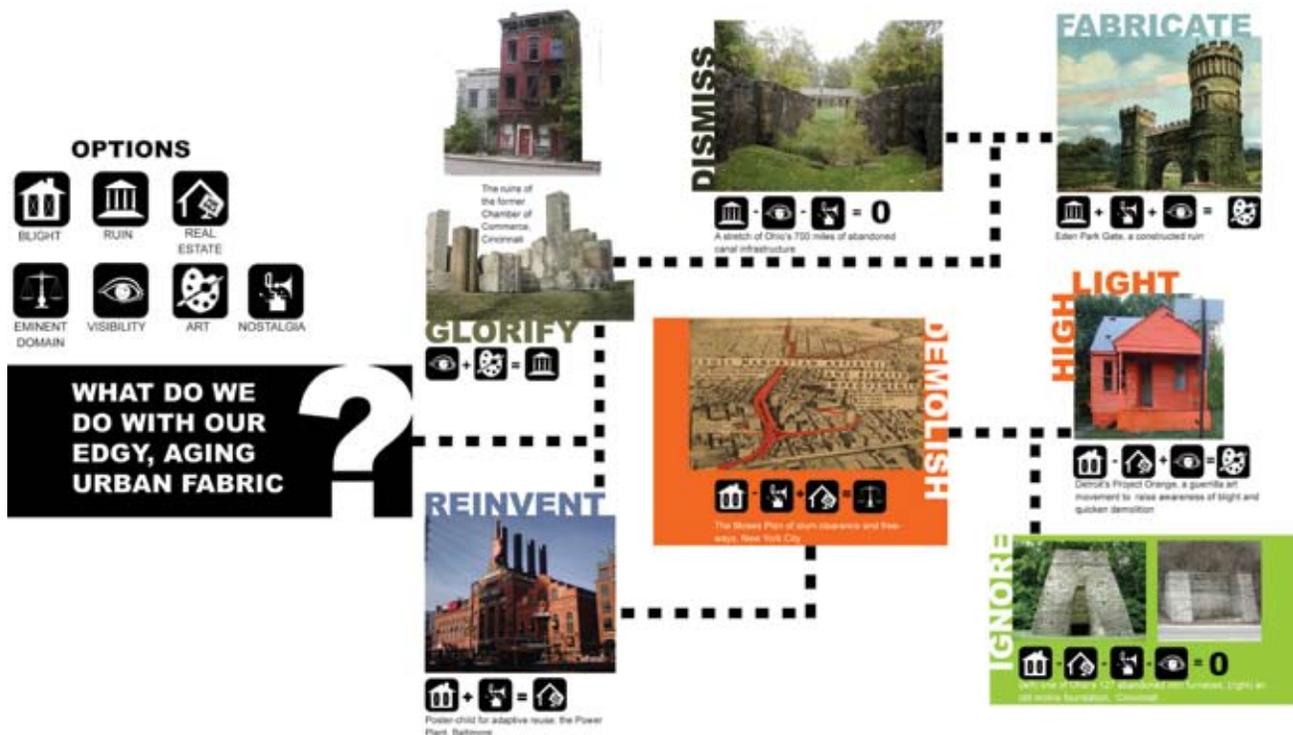

Figure 4: Fight for Your Blight: A strategic mapping of nostalgia, blight & development.

sion of pre-1960's society could be recreated in the process. Now that we have entered the digital age, even the industrial era has become fertile ground for nostalgia (figure 4). In the 70's and 80's, warehouses were turned into lofts by artists and squatters. Now whole urban districts are packed with newly built *loft-ominium*s posing as old factories and warehouses.

Developers have become increasingly facile in their ability to turn the recent urban past into new urban(ish) lifestyle – cultivating a environment built on transience and fakery. Homes are no longer viewed as places to live, but rather as short-term investments – a culture of speculation that has led, in large part, to the recent collapse of the national housing market. In every city and suburb, new developments are sitting nearly empty, trapped in economic purgatory. Now there is a glut of loft-o-miniums and McMansions littering the landscape, decaying far more rapidly than the villages, factories, and estates they were built to imitate, making it increasingly apparent that in the 21st century, nostalgia may become the new blight.

Blight is an entirely subjective designation that is too often a determining factor for whether entire neighborhoods live or die. Blight is also a slur – a scarlet letter used to condemn neighborhoods suffering from the ills of disinvestment and neglect. And finally, blight is a weapon – used by politicians and developers to disgrace neighborhoods to the point where they can be demolished, rebuilt, and then sold back at a higher price. In debates over blight, it is impossible to objectively define the difference between a historic district and a slum, or the difference between a ruin and that which is just ruined. By considering blight, one begins to understand that time is both the friend and enemy of urbanity. When time's passage creates feelings of attachment, the value of a place potentially increases. When the time's passage generates decay, the value conversely diminishes. The delicate patina of historic neighborhoods draws the adoration of preservationists and tourists alike, but when neighborhoods age too rapidly and lose population, this patina is preempted by decay and we finally call it blight.

6. DESIGN AND THE JUST CITY

Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, most architects and planners remain convinced that so-

cially just communities can be designed. They see themselves, and are seen by others outside of the professions, as stewards of the public domain – so issues of equity tend to be central to their thinking and efforts. The soft tyranny of the free market system means that today's design practice must satisfy developers' demands for profits in spite of any more altruistic ambitions, especially since corporate entities like the Uptown Consortium have realized their direct interest in urban development. After decades of flight to the suburbs, cities have once again become centers for investment. And as some cities around the country have experienced cultural and economic renaissance, concerns over gentrification have spawned innumerable public conflicts. And though residents sometimes look to designers for aid in drawing up alternative visions for more equitable development, the growth of American cities is now driven by real estate developers that typically oppose the inclusion of substantial public planning processes in their projects. Large project developers are often accused of reaping oversized profits and/or being overly subsidized with taxpayer money, so residents demand public benefits in return, usually in the form of social services, affordable housing, or public space improvements. The interminable cycle of design charrettes, community benefit negotiations, and lawsuits is at least partly based on the dubious preconception that American cities have ever been particularly just or equitable when it comes to the distribution or development of real estate.

In the final analysis, issues of justice and empowerment are often ultimately resolved on the basis of hard ownership. In figure 5, one can see that Uptown (outlined in red) has a relatively low rate of owner-occupied housing (OOH) compared to the rest of Hamilton County, Ohio. The disparities are even more extreme when compared to national measures. As mentioned earlier, Uptown has a relatively transient population, so these numbers are not particularly surprising. But for the remaining long-term residents, these demographic conditions directly affect their power for self-determination. As these land-owning residents have begun to feel increasingly marginalized, lawsuits have become their last means of defense, increasingly resulting in lengthy stalemates that benefit no one but the lawyers.

An example that brought national attention was when some owners in the path of the University of

Cincinnati's Calhoun Street Marketplace Development successfully fought eminent domain condemnation of their properties.[12] Despite their triumph in court, the damage to their businesses was irreparable and years later, these properties are still vacant. All parties involved are now left waiting for a new corporate development proposal which is likely to resemble the original one, demonstrating that design has very little to do with the outcome of development battles once they reach such an advanced stage of contention.
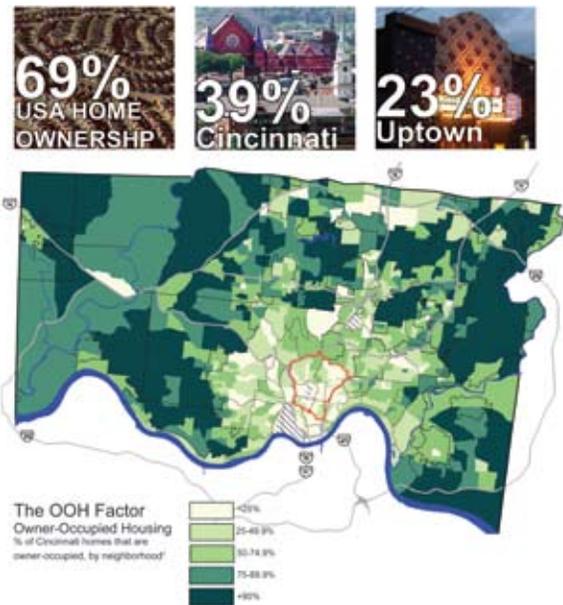

Figure 5: Home Ownership Map of Hamilton County, OH with Uptown outlined in red.

If urbanism emerges in spaces of fierce social, economic, and political competition, it could be true that a certain degree of inequity may be required for the volatility that forces cities to constantly renew themselves in the ways that we have come to value and expect. At the same time, cities are also the places from which many of our notions of fairness and civil society have emerged, when people have settled together in confined spaces for their mutual benefit and protection. And so perhaps in this new century the role of urban design should be to create the space within which that kind of city can still be negotiated. Since imposing solutions from above seems no longer to be our job, perhaps we can construct the conditions for their negotiation instead. The fundamental optimism of design

could be established as a critical tool for working against the current cynicism of the market as well as the hard-earned pessimism of grass roots public resistance.

The study of Uptown articulates a specific situation in Cincinnati as representative of similar conditions all over America. Whether Surrogate City, Voidscape, or Downtown's Other, this mythological urbanism is, at best, the manifestation of a persistent ambition on the part of corporate interests to revive the city, despite the failures of the last half of the last century. Unfortunately, the neighborhoods being built are often tragically banal, drained of any risk, and nearly pure results of the real estate pro formas from which they sprung. This conceptual vacuum is precisely where our visionary talents as designers are needed most: to challenge the relentless repetition of corporate urbanism – rather than submissively fashioning the window dressing for developers' schemes. The value of urban design thinking is that it can clearly articulate complex situations, be a powerful tool for creating shared understanding, and posit unforeseen possibilities outside the many static oppositions that have held the urban imagination captive for too long.

ENDNOTES

1. Fainstein, Susan S. "Planning and the Just City." *Harvard Design Magazine* Fall/Winter 2007. 70.

2. Ibid.

3. Roland Barthes defines myth as a "type of speech" or a "system of communication" based on signification. According to Levi-Strauss, "myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us." Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 109-158.

4. According the their website, http://uptowncincinnati.com/about_uptown : "The Uptown Consortium is a non-profit organization made up of Uptown's five largest employers: Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, The Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati, TriHealth, Inc. and the University of Cincinnati. Uptown generally includes the neighborhoods of Avondale, Clifton, Clifton Heights, Corryville, Fairview, Mt. Auburn and University Heights. Together, the center city and Uptown compose the core of the region. Dr. Nancy L. Zimpher, University of Cincinnati President, is chair of the board and James Anderson, CEO of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, is vice chair. Thane Maynard, Executive Director of the Cincinnati Zoo; Kenneth Hanover, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Health Alliance; and John Prout, Chief Executive Officer of TriHealth, Inc. are board members as well."

5. http://uptowncincinnati.com/uptown_consortium_history

6. Venturi, Robert, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.

7. Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Rethinking Architecture, A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. New York: Routledge, 1997.

8. For more on retroactivity see Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, New York: Moncacelli Press, 1994.

9. http://uptowncincinnati.com/university_of_cincinnati

10. Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House, 1961. p. 90

11. Betsky, Aaron. "Nothing but Flowers: Against Public Space," *Slow Space*. Ed. Michael Bell and Sze Tsung Leong. New York: Monacelli Press, 1998. 458.

12. Beginning in 1998 a plan was initiated by the University of Cincinnati to develop 215,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, along with approximately 950 housing units and more than 100,000 square feet of office space in the area just south of its campus. The University commissioned a blight study which resulted in property takings throughout the area. Some property owners fought the takings and eventually won, resulting in a downsizing of the original proposal. For more on this history, see D'Agostino, Darlene. "The Evolution of Clifton Heights." Aug. 1- Sept. 6 2000. CityBeat Magazine Website. 28 September 2008 <http://citybeat.com/2000-08-31/cover.shtml>.