Building a Future by Finding the Past

City of Shaker Heights
Shaker Heights, OH

Effective neighborhood revitalization efforts require the foundation of a strong network of engaged neighbors. In places where interpersonal connections have dwindled, those relationships may need to be rebuilt before other actions take place. Such was the case in Shaker Heights, Ohio, when the City's Neighborhood Revitalization Department began building revitalization plans for the southern Moreland neighborhood. As the Director of Neighborhood Revitalization, Kamla Lewis, began outreach to gather input, she was faced with the challenge of a community where many residents had been displaced because of the housing crisis and the neighborhood association had not met in over two years. "This is where we had to start," Lewis said. "Our biggest challenge was the lack of active groups in the area, and the mistrust of local institutions."

The department decided to take a step back and consider ways to first address the underlying issue in the neighborhood, the lack of interconnectedness. Lewis suggested a Network Centric Model, which focuses on ways to build connections rather than starting with structured events or targeted objectives. The idea was to provide a base for discussion, not structured content. The department decided to hold a drop-in event at a warm, inviting space with food but without an agenda. This allowed neighbors some time to get to know each other. After a meal and socializing, they decided on discussion items and broke into small groups. At this meeting, the participants decided to meet monthly.

Each subsequent 'neighbor-to-neighbor' meeting began with people sharing their name, street, and something positive in their life, which set the tone for the event. Any guest could suggest a topic and the room continued to break into discussion groups so guests could focus on what was most important to them. At the end of each meeting, groups would come back together to debrief and set actions for follow up. Volunteers would describe issues and propose solutions and take responsibility for actions. Each monthly meeting ended with dedicated work groups focused on specific goals.

After each meeting, a newsletter was sent to neighborhood residents explaining what was discussed, upcoming plans, reports on last months' activities, and resources available. As meetings continued, connections and support between neighbors formed, and people began working together to solve problems on their own, outside of these meetings. Conversations continued and relationships developed. One group formed a walking club, a group of youth began making plans for parks and green spaces, and another launched a community theater production.

While much of the focus was on addressing current neighborhood challenges, residents early on identified that the history of the neighborhood was important. As one resident put it "how can we plan for the future if we don't understand the past?" They began exploring neighborhood stories and researching historical events in the area. They started capturing oral histories and made that effort intentionally intergenerational, asking local youth to interview those who had lived there for many years. Local university historians helped train residents, design questions, and build out those histories.

As residents contemplated oral histories, they began noticing local architecture and how it fit into the neighborhood narrative. Architects and historians were brought in to share information about architectural styles and residents soon learned that the neighborhood had examples of every type of early American architecture. "The place is an architect's dream," said Lewis. "So, they built on that."

Using Wufoo, Lewis created an app so residents could easily catalog different types and styles of homes in the neighborhood from their phones, and the county assembled that data online. Building cards are now available for most homes, identifying the original architect, original buyer, types of siding, and so on. This tool is helping residents to understand their homes and their neighborhood, and residents now talk about their home's history and style with pride.

In the Moreland neighborhood, building local stories helped build neighborhood pride, which encouraged action. It developed trust and self-esteem, and inspired ideas. It enabled the community to start taking control of the narrative about their homes and their neighborhood. Residents also learned that history, art, and creativity can bring people together. "Everybody has something to share," said Lewis. "Through this process, we were able to show that. People learned about each other's hidden talents, and some learned about their own hidden talents as well."

Read the Oral Histories and learn more about the Moreland Neighborhood History.

Click here to learn more about Moreland Rising
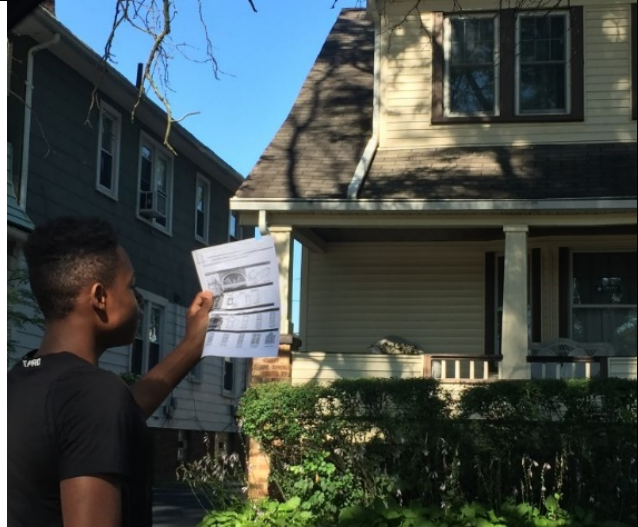
Photo courtesy of the City of Shaker Heights

"We know the perception of a place can be elusive. Sometimes a neighborhood identity exists based on negative experiences, while other times it is strong. Some parts of a neighborhood identity are organic, while other parts are self-made. The neighborhood of South Moreland in Shaker Heights is an example of how residents decided to take control of the narrative. Not to change the story, but to reveal its history through story."

-Kamla Lewis, Director of Neighborhood Revitalization, City of Shaker Heights

Neighborhood Ventures

As projects unfolded and gained momentum, residents became true ambassadors of the neighborhood. Below are examples of projects undertaken by the residents of the south Moreland neighborhood:

Pride and Preservation: The history initiative sparked neighborhood-wide pride that inspired many to focus on maintaining special, historical features of homes. It changed the way people talked about their neighbors and the neighborhood. Check out the [Architectural Guide to Southern Moreland](#) for details on the different types and styles of homes. Residents also began looking at historical businesses in the area, for example a local candy store, whose first owner was remembered for giving candy to kids if they could not afford it. To celebrate this story, residents created a life-sized cutout of the woman and displayed it in that space.

Hunting for History: The great historical findings in Moreland eventually led to a fun, interactive event, a neighborhood scavenger hunt. As part of the scavenger hunt, participants were given clues to historical events and 'hunters' had to search the neighborhood and find that historical place. Residents were stationed at various locations to talk with participants and share stories. People took selfies when the found what they were looking for, like the candy lady pictured here, or a particular historical home. Some completed the scavenger hunt by bike while others walked, and all ages were involved. This event brought residents out into the community and drew visitors from outside the neighborhood as well.

The Coloring Book: Using historical content, residents created a 15-page coloring book that included historical homes, types of architecture, moments in neighborhood history, and historical figures. They were distributed to children with a box of crayons, to create an early connection with the neighborhood. Lewis used a free design app – called [Reallycolor](#) – that converts photos to coloring book pages. "We kept it simple," said Lewis. "We printed the pages, stapled them and handed them out. This does not need to be complicated, or expensive."

Bungalow

The Bungalow type (1905-1930) spun off from a trend that began in England in the 19th century. This trend, dubbed the "Arts & Crafts Movement", aimed for handmade products that emphasized utility, simplicity and stylistic honesty. The term "bungalow" is derived from the word for a summer house used by colonists in India's Bengal region.

Public Arts: Local parks have been activated as spaces for art projects, block parties, and graduations. Residents, working with artists, created a mural with faces from the neighborhood and obtained funding for a 'gateway' piece showcasing historical doors in another. These items have become iconic and help create a place for people to connect and enjoy.

Neighborhood Play: In the first year, residents performed the play "Our Town," bringing together amateur and professionals from throughout the city.

Stayin' Alive 2020
During the pandemic, neighbors felt it was important to stay in touch, while maintaining social distancing. They began phone trees to check on each other, had virtual Halloween and Kwanzaa parties and continued Neighbor Nights via Zoom. Neighbors also held a ***Moreland Dance and Sing***, where at a designated time and date, neighbors came out onto porches to sing and dance to the Bee Gees "Stayin' Alive." Check it out on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsNw2zwrFno

Photos courtesy of the City of Shaker Heights

Building History

In the Moreland neighborhood, the very first objective was to create connections. People are not drawn to work, they are drawn to social experiences. "The work that needed to be done was in their minds," said Lewis. "They simply needed to connect and affirm it would benefit the neighborhood." Exploring a neighborhood's history helps to create projects as well as relationships.

Photo courtesy of the City of Shaker Heights

Once goals and initiatives are created, the group will need help. Bring together academics, architects and historians, as well as local government, to help plan for each idea. By learning and working together, residents will build trusting relationships with one another, the city, and partner organizations. These experiences help foster discussions about community and change and help residents talk about who they are, and who they want to be. Historical initiatives build pride and a sense of place, plus inspire action.

Historical Initiatives: Tips for Success

Do Your Research	Before you begin, reach out to community organizations to get advice on how to best connect with residents.
Run with Ideas	Let people suggest ideas and take responsibility for them. You never know what will gain traction!
Provide Resources	So often, ideas and motivations are there, but the tools and resources are not. Provide support and create a resource tool kit.
Build the Foundation	Create a strong and simple foundation for the project to grow from. In Moreland, this meant building a foundation based on relationships.
Be a Connector	Help residents make connections with their neighbors. This will enhance their experience and strengthen the neighborhood. It is also important to provide a connection with local government, universities, schools, libraries, and historical societies. These resources are critical for success.
Gather Neighborhood History	Ask people to share photos as they share stories. Find a way to document stories with photos so the whole neighborhood benefits.
Create a Regular 'Neighbor Night'	Building a regular opportunity to connect helps to create overlapping networks. Relationships build resilience in a neighborhood.
Don't Let Funding (or lack of) Stop You	You do not need money to take action; it is more important to get the right people together. Once you do that, you can focus on raising funds for projects, if needed.
Provide Meals	Food brings people together and creates a relaxing mood for guests.
Let Residents Lead	Let residents identify problems as well as solutions. Usually, what residents need most is support from local government and organizations who can help bring their dreams to reality.