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FIXES

How to Build a Better Neighborhood

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Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

A great public place gives residents of a neighborhood a sense of belonging, pride, connection and beauty. But too many neighborhoods have no such place. Some have been destroyed by recession, with shuttered businesses and boarded-up buildings. Others are simply soulless, built for cars, not people, featuring strip malls that require driving instead of places for residents to walk, bike, play or gather.

How do residents transform their neighborhoods into places built around people? Usually, they start by talking to city officials, and if they are lucky, begin a series of public meetings, consultations and debates. If they are very lucky, these meetings progress to plans, visions and renderings. If those work out, something changes. This can take years. Too often, though, years go by and what is produced is nothing more than a document.

Or, those with less patience can do what Jason Roberts did.

Roberts lives in Oak Cliff, a part of Dallas generally known for its crime. Oak Cliff used to be on the streetcar line, which brought with it diners, cafes and shops. No longer. “I wondered why we don’t have those anymore,” Roberts said. “A block I could walk to, have a cup of coffee, get outside, take my kids to something.”

The reason, of course, was cars. The streetcar disappeared and the city widened the streets to making driving faster. In addition, zoning regulations cemented the demise of sidewalk traffic and pedestrian life. Putting flowers outside your building incurred a fee of \$1,000 — per year. Each awning: \$1,000 per year. Installing cafe

seating on the sidewalk cost \$1,000, or the market value of the space times 85 percent times 12 percent, whichever was greater. Per year. Displaying goods on the sidewalk was forbidden. Gathering a crowd was forbidden. (No one I spoke to was sure why these regulations were put into place. Roberts says the laws go back to 1941 and speculates that discouraging public street life in the low-income area was a motivation.) “We had all these rules that stripped away beauty,” said Roberts. It was Dallas, after all — charm was downright subversive.

He thought about going to the city government. “But in our community we had rendering fatigue. I got fired up to go to City Hall and see if I could take part in reshaping my community. But there are so many processes, so many meetings.”

Roberts decided that the most important issue was getting people to get the tangible sense of what a better neighborhood would be like. “Everybody knows what great places look like and feel like,” he said. “You don’t necessarily need a consultant.”

So in April, 2010 he got a group of people together to take a weekend and build the place they wanted. Some trees in planters on their way to a hotel made an unscheduled stop in Oak Cliff for the weekend. Residents outlined bike lanes and painted crosswalks. They borrowed chairs and tables and set up cafes. They brought in pots of flowers, hung art and set up a pop-up coffee shop and flower market. An unused garage became a children’s art studio.

The organizers printed up all the laws they were breaking and posted them in windows. And they invited the neighborhood — and the City Council — to the party.

Some things have changed since. The City Council reformed the zoning rules. The crosswalks remain, bike lanes are coming, and the street is becoming two-way, which will slow traffic. The art studio is now a thriving business called Oil and Cotton, and three or four other businesses have started. To mark the fourth anniversary, this April a new plaza popped up on the site, as a demonstration project to try to speed formal changes along.

Oak Cliff replicated the event six blocks away. Using the same weekend approach, Oak Cliff residents also started a pop-up dog park movement. The city had

originally claimed that dog parks required several acres of land, but the first pop-up park (on far less land) is now becoming permanent, and others are starting.

Roberts didn't know it at the time, but what Oak Cliff did was called placemaking — a term for people shaping their own environment to facilitate social interaction and improve quality of life. It's a grass-roots expression of the work of Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, Kevin Lynch and other advocates for people-centered urban design. (This report by M.I.T.'s department of urban studies and planning looks at 10 different placemaking projects.)

Success at a weekend party is great — but it may have no relationship to what's sustainable for the long term. So how could a weekend event help lead to permanent transformation?

One way is that it gives people a taste of what's possible so they can look at their block with new eyes. “One of the most amazing things I hear from people who are born and raised here is ‘Why should I care about sidewalks or bike paths? I don't see anyone biking or walking,’ ” said Jackie Lightfield, the co-founder of Norwalk 2.0, which seeks to preserve historic buildings and prevent the downtown of this small Connecticut city from becoming “a cookie-cutter vision of nothingness.” Residents often don't see the potential and value of their downtown areas. “When we do temporary events concentrating foot traffic, people driving by say, ‘Wait a minute — I see a whole bunch of people,’ ” she said. “It's not instant, but over the long term, it's a game-changer.”

Pop-up events can also cut through fatigue. Like the Rapid Results Initiatives, which help communities set big goals and achieve them in 100 days, these quick projects take things out of the realm of business as usual.

Most important, guerrilla pop-up projects can be small victories that lead to bigger ones. The M.I.T. authors write that changes to a physical space aren't the only important transformation — perhaps more important are the participants' new sense of confidence and the social bonds created. “At the most basic level, the act of advocating for change, questioning regulations, finding funding and mobilizing others to contribute their voices engages communities — and in engaging, leaves these communities better for it,” they write.

After their events in Oak Cliff, Roberts, an I.T. consultant by profession, and Andrew Howard, an urban planner, started Better Block, which helps neighborhood groups and cities with pop-up placemaking. The requests have come in largely from the Midwest and South — there have been lots of Better Blocks in Texas, but also Denver, Norfolk, Va., Oklahoma City, St. Joseph, Mo., Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., and Memphis, among other cities. An urban planning student at the University of Arlington brought the Better Block idea back to his hometown: Tehran, Iran.

In addition to what Oak Cliff did, cities have used their Better Blocks to set up farmers' markets, beer gardens, bookstores and fruit stands. They've built swings and climbing areas, set up trampolines and presented school plays, local dance troupes and open-mike musicians. Roberts said that paradoxically, things go better with a tiny budget. "These never cost more than \$3,000," he said, "and we can pull them off for as low as \$500 if we have to." Borrowing stuff from local businesses and residents creates trust; nailing and painting together creates community. If you have the luxury of buying, you create neither of these. He also maintains that Better Blocks work best in poorer neighborhoods, even blighted ones. "You need to go to areas where there's one business trying to pioneer, and everything around it is vacant," he said.

It takes a lot of work to provide the variety of activities needed to attract large numbers of people. For the past three weekends, Norwalk 2.0 staged an Artist Village in a small city park, constructed in and around shipping containers unified by a colorful canopy designed by architecture students at Norwalk Community College. It was a great idea, but on a beautiful Saturday night only about 60 people were there — possibly because the Artist Village violated the first rule of any mass gathering: Sell food.

Memphis, the first city to hold a Better Block outside Texas, has now built them into the city's neighborhood strategy. "We're working to demonstrate Better Blocks as a good tool," said Tommy Pacello, who directs efforts to revitalize neighborhoods with the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team. "There are some tired corridors with two or three blocks of commercial buildings, some boarded up, some empty. How do you wake those up?" The city held a series of meetings a decade ago, but they ended up in nothing, Pacello said. "It reached the state of gathering dust."

Better Block got things going. Memphis has held four Better Block projects: the first organized by a group called Livable Memphis and businesses in November 2010 to revitalize three blocks of Broad Avenue, and three shepherded by MEMFix (slogan: “here comes the neighborhood”), a coalition of the mayor’s office, Pacello’s unit and neighborhood groups.

Memphis followed three of the four projects with MEMShop, which puts new businesses into vacant storefronts with financing, consulting and a low-price lease, which over six months moves up to market rates. So far 50 businesses have submitted applications and nine were chosen for the program. Only one of those businesses has closed.

Since the Broad Avenue event, that three-block stretch has seen \$20 million in private investment, 25 new businesses and around 17 renovated, Pacello said. Rents in some cases have risen by 50 percent — high enough now that property owners are investing to bring the buildings up to code. There’s a night market, art walks and a two-way cycle track.

Pacello stresses that a Better Block event is the beginning of a process. “If you do it and walk away, it’s not going to happen,” he said. “It would be silly to suggest [the improvement] is a direct result of this event. It’s the result of those neighborhoods putting together the organization and leadership to revitalize themselves. It serves as a catalyst for building social capital within neighborhoods — if we can do this, we can do other things.”

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