NEIGHBORHOODS AS COMMUNITY ASSETS

THE PORTERS COMMUNITY, GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA
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PROJECT SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

The Neighborhoods As Community Assets project was the design and pilot testing of a new approach to fostering strong neighborhoods, which combined elements of collaboration, empowerment, and neighborhood narratives. The project piloted the new approach in the Porters Community (also known as the Porters neighborhood, or just Porters), which is a historically African American neighborhood located in the short distance between the University of Florida campus and downtown Gainesville. The tight-knit Porters Community has a rich history, and residents are bound together by a strong sense of place and multi-generational community ties. Yet these strengths, or assets, are not widely known, and they are being threatened by encroaching re-development spurred by growing interest in downtown and near-campus living. Similar situations are playing out across Gainesville, other college towns, and cities around the country.

For this project, a team of five urban planning faculty and researchers from the university engaged Porters residents and stakeholders, especially a nine-member steering committee, in a 15-month process to establish a neighborhood narrative. Neighborhood narratives are stories, themes, and graphics about a neighborhood that residents collectively tell themselves and share with others, including government entities, stakeholders such as businesses and developers, and the general public. Neighborhood narratives communicate what makes a neighborhood special and should be protected in the face of development pressures. Urban planning scholars have studied the existence and use
of neighborhood narratives, but this project is the first to create a participatory process for establishing a narrative with the aim of neighborhood empowerment. This differs from the traditional planning approach of visioning, which is more abstract and focused on the future.

The project was also innovative in its approach to establishing a narrative by viewing a neighborhood as a community asset, in order to expand the constituency for neighborhood protection and revitalization. Recognizing neighborhoods for their existing assets, which are or could be valued by the city as a whole, is a prerequisite for government entities and stakeholders to enact compatible policies, programs, and projects. The project accomplished this for Porters in a collaborative fashion, by combining the perspectives of neighborhood residents and stakeholders with those in the City of Gainesville, the University, and the public, as expressed through staff interviews, existing plans and policies, the local news media, and historical analysis.

The purpose of this brief report is to summarize the project’s aims, methods, and results, not only for the Porters Community but also to showcase a transferable model of neighborhood engagement which could be applied to strengthen other neighborhoods, including in Gainesville. The next section of this report further details the problem addressed by the project, which relates to gentrification and neighborhood empowerment. This is followed by an overview of the project’s methods. Next, the results for the Porters neighborhood are presented. Last, the report notes the project’s accomplishments and evaluates the Porters case to draw lessons for a transferable model.

In addition to this summary report, the project produced a 174-page report focused on the project methods, including an extensive review of the scholarly literature, and the results for the Porters Community and its narrative. In order to promote the Porters narrative to the widest audience, including residents of all ages, the project created an original picture book, Home. The narrative graphics, with a few shown here, are also
available. The project team and steering committee will present the results to city and university officials, report to the news media, and publish in academic and professional forums.

PROBLEM ADDRESSED

Nationwide, cities are experiencing a resurgence as suburbanites and businesses return to vibrant urban scenes. Cities are increasingly recognized by baby boomers and millennials alike as amenity-rich places to live. Likewise, employers and economic development agencies have found that urban revitalization attracts employees and fosters the “creative class”. The City of Gainesville, a mid-sized college town, is in the midst of such an urban renaissance. Examples of large redevelopment projects include the Innovation District, The Standard, Midtown, and Depot Park. The City and the University of Florida (UF) would like to further increase housing options near the campus and downtown to meet growing demand, and to increase the supply of higher-end housing in the urban core. As the Gainesville urban core and areas surrounding the University of Florida redevelop, interest will inevitably turn to nearby neighborhoods as places of residential and commercial reinvestment.

Typically, neighborhoods have a lifecycle that exists along a continuum of renewal and decline. Gentrification is a component of the neighborhood lifecycle and is indicative of growing market interest. However, gentrification can have negative social, economic, and cultural consequences if growth is not controlled, neighborhood character is not maintained, and resident and business displacement occurs. Older neighborhoods, particularly those with low-income residents, may be targeted for reinvestment without viewing them as assets in their own right, to the loss of the community as a whole. Neighborhoods with a strong sense of community and place are hard to replace, and when this is destroyed, the city loses community spirit and culture. The residents lose part of their identity and social support, while feeling displaced and not supported by the larger city and society.

Fortunately, UF’s Strategic Development Plan (2016) recognizes that central city neighborhoods are a source of community pride, and it outlines a major initiative for the
protection and support of strong neighborhoods. Similarly, the City of Gainesville’s new strategic planning framework arising from the *Blue Ribbon Report* in 2015, seeks to expand housing options and affordability while keeping the negative effects of gentrification at bay. The Neighborhoods as Community Assets Project aimed to assist the City and University with valuing and supporting existing neighborhoods, and to directly empower neighborhood residents and stakeholders to pursue their goals.

The project team proposed to design and pilot test an innovative approach to neighborhood empowerment in the Porters Community, because Porters has a unique history, remains socially and culturally intact, and is experiencing redevelopment pressures from two directions, the university’s campus and the city’s downtown. Within the 68-acre Porters neighborhood are an estimated 929 residents (longtimers and newcomers of all ages), about 289 dwelling units (old and new single family homes), historic churches and sites, a thriving Community Center, and urban mixed uses along the northern and eastern boundaries.

The Porters Community lacks formal neighborhood planning, however it has active community leaders and neighborhood associations, meeting monthly, and other neighborhood-based organizations such as churches and small businesses. This project built upon a 2013 study by the Porters Neighborhood Association President, Gigi Simmons, with assistance from the Gainesville Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), to identify
resident demographics and needs in the older western half of the neighborhood, in order to begin to define a neighborhood vision to guide policies and programs.

The 1980s marked a time of disinvestment and higher crime rates for the Porters neighborhood. As indicated in the quote to the right, the narrative of the “forgotten neighborhood” was established and still exists today. The “forgotten” narrative and surrounding development pressures are exacerbated by a lack of neighborhood planning by the city since 1982. Porters receives the most attention from the CRA, since the agency’s downtown district encompasses the neighborhood. A series of articles in the mid-2010s documented residents’ feelings that they were being pushed out of their neighborhood by students and young, white couples. According to Simmons, who served on the project’s steering committee, "creating a narrative for our community was essential as we face the many pressures that surround our neighborhood. In doing so we are able to articulate our concerns, educate our residents and help to create viable solutions that everyone can partake in."

METHODS

The initial design of the project was created by the planning faculty and researchers, but because the design was participatory and collaborative, the team immediately partnered with Porters leaders to form a nine-member resident and stakeholder-based steering committee (see the front cover). The project used a variety of methods to engage persons and gather information to characterize the Porters neighborhood from two perspectives: (1) Porters residents and stakeholders, and (2) “outside” perspectives, including the views of staff in various City of Gainesville departments and agencies. Each emergent perspective informed the development of the Porters neighborhood narrative, which culminated through a series of activities conducted by the Steering Committee. The process also identified counter narratives, which were present but not consensus-based. The last step was to identify potential uses of the neighborhood narrative, including to promote within the neighborhood, and to suggest actions by the City and University.
The original one-year project was extended by three months with additional funding in order to publicly share the results, especially at the Porters Summer Block Party, and to continue to meet with the steering committee to identify the next steps for neighborhood advocacy. This included analyzing existing City and University policies and programs, and identifying alternatives in keeping with the Porters narrative. Also during this time, the team evaluated the project as a transferable model.

**OUTCOMES**

The Porters neighborhood narrative – text and graphics – speaks to the past, present, and future. The narrative consists of four themes, answering “Porters is ___________”:

- **Home.** Since its establishment in 1884, the Porters Community has been home to generations of families, many of whom still reside in Porters.

- **Engaged and Inclusive.** Porters’ strong roots have resulted in a close-knit community that welcomes new residents into the fold.

- **Resilient.** The Porters Community has proven its resilience, surviving racism and maintaining a strong communal spirit to this day.

- **Opportunity.** The Porters Community reflects the best Gainesville has to offer. Its strengths enable proactive planning, which can inspire other neighborhoods.
The narrative produced three overarching icons, which were incorporated into the graphic designs:

Steering committee member and resident Angela Wright summed up the Porters narrative as “Home is where the heart is.” The narrative was remarkably clear and consistent among residents, stakeholders, and City representatives. The narrative focused on social, cultural, economic, and physical assets valued within the neighborhood, as well as what the neighborhood has to offer the city as a whole. This dramatically differed from the “forgotten” narrative. The project also noted an undercurrent of interrelated counter narratives of resident distrust, resulting from past actions of the City and University, internal factions, and some owners’ interest in profiting from rising property values. In contrast, the main narrative is simultaneously community oriented, protective of assets of all kinds, and forward thinking. From the perspective of outside organizations, the Porters narrative communicates the neighborhood as a community asset along three dimensions: (1) The Porters neighborhood has historic, cultural, and social assets, which are tied to, and thus enrich, those of the City and University. (2) Protection and advancement of Porters would serve the City’s current social equity and affordable housing initiatives. And (3) The diversity and proximity of the Porters Community lend themselves to innovative policies,
programs, projects, and practices for neighborhood resilience, and to serve as a model of a “new American neighborhood”.

At the 7\textsuperscript{th} Annual Porters Summer Block Party in 2018, children and adults learned about the narrative through crafts and games representing each theme, and they received mementos bearing the narrative graphics. A special memento was \textit{Home}, an original book that told the story of Porters through a conversation between a granddaughter and her grandparents, which connected to an activity to paint wooden hearts for display.

Upon the project’s conclusion, the Porters project steering committee selected promising strategies they will further investigate and advocate for neighborhood protection and revitalization, such as a neighborhood overlay district, alternative zoning (such as U2 for the low density residential areas), and participation in a community land trust. They have also been communicating more closely with key players in the area’s redevelopment, especially the City’s Department of Doing, the CRA, and the University.

\textbf{ACCOMPLISHMENTS}

The aim of the Neighborhoods As Community Assets project was to design and test a new approach to fostering strong neighborhoods, which combined elements of collaboration, empowerment, and neighborhood narratives. The key criterion for evaluating the project, and thus beginning to identify its transferability to other neighborhoods, is whether the Porters Community was stronger as a result. While the project was only one of many actions in the neighborhood, it’s clear that the project directly strengthened the Porters neighborhood by building three capacities: informational, social, and political. In
terms of informational capacity, the project’s detailed report consolidated a substantial amount and variety of information about the neighborhood. For social capacity, the project brought together a diverse group of residents and stakeholders, fostered consensus around a common narrative, and raised awareness of the narrative in engaging, culturally significant ways. And in regards to political capital, which is empowerment, the project produced a unified neighborhood narrative that speaks to a future of respect and investment for the mutual benefit of the neighborhood, the City, and the University. The project provided specific direction for neighborhood policies, programs, and projects, including tapping into existing city- and university-wide values and opportunities. The project’s collaborative approach led to stronger boundary-spanning relationships between residents and the key players, and it has already produced new initiatives for neighborhood protection and revitalization.

Beyond noting the project benefits in the pilot neighborhood, additional aspects should be addressed to establish a transferable model for use in other neighborhoods. Transferability requires consideration of how other neighborhoods may be different, as well as variations in project teams and resources, such as time and funding. Based on the pilot project experience, several principles were essential and should be retained in any future application. The project team should have expertise in community development, urban planning, and communications, and be trustworthy to facilitate a neighborhood-based participatory process. The project should establish a diverse resident and stakeholder based steering committee, and be flexible enough to change specific activities and timeframes based on the committee’s input. At least some members of the project team and steering committee should be politically astute and well connected, in order to focus on empowerment and neighborhoods as community assets. If these principles are followed, the specific activities can vary and be scaled up or down as resources, interests, and opportunities permit. Details of specific activities used in the Porters project are provided in a separate 174-page report. Details of the block party activities and Home are separately available.