

# THE CONTEXT OF INNER CITY REVITALIZATION

by Jack Harris

Inner city residential revitalization represents an important departure from the traditional "filtering down" experience of most older neighborhoods. An extensive body of writings has developed to promote, explain and even criticize the phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> It is time to examine the meaning of revitalization in the broader context of urban growth dynamics.

What made urban revitalization such a startling and exciting development was its apparent absence in the orthodoxy of neighborhood change. Old neighborhoods were supposed to be absorbed into the mixed urban center, as new development expanded outward in search of greener pastures. Along the way, these areas served to house successive waves of less discerning and less affluent residents. As Frederick Babcock observed over 40 years ago: "Neighborhoods tend to decline in investment quality."<sup>2</sup> The idea was reiterated in various theories of urban change, from "concentric rings" to "sectors," later to be formalized in the "filtering" process described by Richard Ratcliff.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Andrews expanded upon this idea to develop a life cycle concept for the neighborhood. He explained how site values rise to a peak as an area is developed and populated. After an indefinite period of stability, the area begins an inevitable decline, brought about by competition from newer and more attractive areas. The stage of decline is marked by the decreasing socioeconomic status of the area's residents. At some point, the predominantly residential character of the area is compromised. Depending on the success of this limited conversion, the area may achieve a new cycle and new type of development,

or continue its downward slide toward abandonment.<sup>4</sup> Hoover and Vernon have documented this type of life cycle for New York City.<sup>5</sup>

The driving force behind the life cycle is the willingness of incumbent residents to relocate in newer, more spacious surroundings. Rising affluence encourages this movement, as proximity to the city center is relinquished in favor of greater space and amenities. As long as a ready supply of useable land is available, city services are expanding, and new construction is affordable, this outward movement will continue.

It was recognized that some neighborhoods could resist the filtering process if they were sufficiently insulated from mainstream urban dynamics. Fiery observed that neighborhoods in Boston had stubbornly resisted change, either due to strong attachment to old, elite families or introspective ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> Others have contended that certain areas are characterized by a form of "dualistic" economy, where paternalistic landlords view their properties more as personal estates than financial investments.<sup>7</sup> Such uneconomic decision making leads to isolation from impinging market forces and adds uncharacteristic stability.

These cases are not typical in the traditional view of neighborhood change. Residential areas are expected to filter down and eventually succeed to some nonresidential use or outright abandonment. This pattern has provided the government with its basic rationale for urban renewal programs. The ability of an area to recapture a competitive position goes unmentioned. Yet recent experience shows evidence of this capability.

## The Nature Of Revitalization

Today most metropolitan areas have at least one old neighborhood that is undergoing revitalization. The reasons for such activity are not difficult to find: Continuing expansion of suburban housing has met with resistance from high cost construction; land is scarce, expansion of

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public infrastructure has slowed down; and the demand for close proximity to employment and retail centers has increased. Consequently, the value of existing housing has been enhanced.<sup>8</sup>

There has also been a coincidental shift in tastes and preferences. Inner city housing is no longer considered “off-limits” but is a realistic alternative to suburban living. Moreover, some of the unique attributes of inner city housing have taken on a value of their own. Such changes have led to stabilization, even significant appreciation in property values of the older housing stock, aided considerably by a favorable press.<sup>9</sup>

Much has been written in the popular literature on the virtues of inner city revival, as well as some suggestions of the dangers of “gentrification.”<sup>10</sup> Because of the unexpected, though welcomed, appearance of the movement, the importance of revitalization may easily be exaggerated. When viewed in context with the experience of the entire inner city, however, revitalization is seen as highly selective and somewhat different from what is often characterized.

Even in its advanced stages, revitalization rarely extends beyond a few well-chosen neighborhoods, and is often confined to one or two blocks. This points to the fact that much of the inner city is too dilapidated, lacks historical or architectural significance, and is too entrenched in being the abode of society’s “undesirables.”

It is also indicative of the limited number of “pioneers” who are willing and able to rescue the older parts of town. Recent research shows that the typical renovator is not a disenchanted suburbanite but a young family that has moved from a rental unit in the city. Rather than a “back-to-the-city” movement, revitalization appears to be a “stay-in-the-city” phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

The areas selected for revival are not necessarily assured of a long running renaissance. Revitalization possesses a life cycle of its own, beginning from the time of discovery by urban pioneers to the arrival of affluent latecomers.<sup>12</sup> What happens when the final stage of this cycle passes is unknown. Examination of recent development in one city may provide some basis for speculation.

### A Case Study

The city of Atlanta serves as a worthy case to show how various stages of revitalization may coexist with continued decline. The inner city area is compact yet possesses a variety of neighborhood types. The Central Business District remains a strong regional employment center, primarily attracting white collar professionals, government employees and retail store workers. The central area is serviced well by expressways, a limited rapid transit system and extensive bus routes.

Neighborhood revitalization is very active in the city. The movement began in a few northeast areas in the late 1960s and accelerated in the mid-to-late 1970s,<sup>13</sup> spreading generally in southward and eastward directions. The affected areas are generally endowed with moderate vin-



tage (60 to 100 year old) housing and unique natural and man-made amenities, such as public parks, winding streets, extensive vegetation and rolling topography.

In order to derive representative quantitative measures, neighborhood boundaries are approximated by census tracts. Although this introduces some distortion, the procedure seems to provide more advantages than disadvantages. The choice of census delineations opens up the extensive collection of historical data collected by the Census Bureau. Data for 1976 are provided by a special local survey.

By examining the rankings of tracts on a variety of measures including median property value and income and over several time periods, it is possible to cluster the tracts into categories. This categorization, using a completely subjective method rather than rigorous statistical techniques, aims at describing the various dynamic processes at work throughout the inner city. The data seem to suggest, again from subjective analysis, the existence of five basic stages or processes, which are described in the following narrative as well as shown in the Table and Figure.

### Prestige Neighborhoods

Located in the northeast corner of the inner city<sup>14</sup> is a group

**TABLE**  
Selected Characteristics of Inner City Neighborhood Categories, Atlanta

	Category				
	Prestige	Filtering	Stable	Gentrifying	Low Income
Number of tracts	5	22	3	9	12
Median housing value, 1976*	\$49,700	\$16,700	\$18,200	\$25,600	\$13,800
Median housing value, 1960*	\$19,200	\$ 9,400	\$ 7,800	\$10,400	\$ 8,500
Median household income, 1976*	\$23,600	\$ 8,800	\$ 8,000	\$ 9,000	\$ 6,300
Median household income, 1960*	\$ 8,500	\$ 4,800	\$ 4,700	\$ 4,700	\$ 3,000
Percent nonwhite, 1976	1%	74%	17%	26%	96%
Percent nonwhite, 1960	1%	28%	15%	25%	92%

\*Unweighted mean of census tracts in category

of residential areas with some of the finest homes in the city. Endowed with attractive rolling topography, curvilinear street design and handsome architectural styling, these areas are in high demand and are easily accessible to the downtown employment center.

In spite of their amenities, these neighborhoods — primarily Ansley Park, Morningside and Druid Hills — once stood on the brink of decline. Developed in the early part of the century, these areas became an outpost for Atlanta's elite. For example, the governor's mansion used to be in Ansley Park. As new areas opened to the north, many of the fine old homes were converted to apartments.

The threat of decline was stemmed by design-oriented renovators who recognized the inherent appeal of an area interspersed with small neighborhood parks and in close proximity to the Memorial Arts Center, the Piedmont Driving Club and Emory University. The area became more stable in response to their efforts.

A potentially major problem was a planned limited-access freeway that threatened to split the area in order to provide better rush hour service to the expanding northeast sector. Neighborhood associations forged a successful fight to stop the development, and, in turn, greatly intensified the preservation cohesion within the areas. Today, these neighborhoods are relatively secure in the mature stages of the revitalization cycle.

### Filtering Neighborhoods

Although revitalization is well advanced in Atlanta, much of the inner city continues to be subject to filtering accompanied by racial transition, as blacks move from their traditional neighborhoods in search of better housing. As depicted in the Figure, these areas are primarily on the southwest and southeast edges of the inner city, fanning out from the concentration of longtime black neighborhoods in the center. By 1976, most of these areas had long passed their "tipping point"—the level of racial in-

tegration where whites begin to rapidly vacate the neighborhood<sup>15</sup>—and property values had stabilized somewhat.

### Stable, Moderate Income Neighborhoods

These "in-between" zones appear to serve as buffers between the downward filtering areas and revitalizing neighborhoods. Each has suffered decline in relative property values but has stabilized in recent years as moderate income residential areas. They are predominately white and consist of a large percentage of homeowners. Their future is uncertain, yet Candler Park and Grant Park are considered to be on the next wave of revitalization.<sup>16</sup> Although few in number, these neighborhoods are important in understanding the relation between filtering and reviving areas of the city.

### Revitalizing Neighborhoods

Areas located to the south of the northeast prestige neighborhoods and a few areas surrounding downtown are representative of the middle stage of the revitalization cycle. Their revival is rooted in the search by many youths in the 1960s for an alternative lifestyle. The midtown area, complete with "head" shops, food co-ops and communal living, became a center of this "counterculture."

As these individuals matured, they took responsible jobs and formed families but retained their preference for an alternative to the stereotypical American lifestyle. "Crash" pads became homes; co-ops became neighborhood associations. The old architecture and environment of areas such as Little Five Points and Inman Park evoked a sense of nostalgia, simplicity and freedom from the pressures of modern society.

Property values in these neighborhoods were beginning to respond by 1976 to the increasing demand for older housing. Many of these areas, notably Inman Park, are entering the final stage of revitalization, although there still

**FIGURE**  
Atlanta Inner City Neighborhoods  
D-1



exist pockets of unrestored structures and low income rental units.

### Low Income Neighborhoods

These neighborhoods surrounding the downtown area, especially on the south and southwest side, contain the lowest property values in the city and traditionally have housed the bulk of Atlanta's moderate and low income blacks. Such concentrations have provided the impetus for much of the racial transition in surrounding areas.

Representing the later stage of decline in the traditional life cycle model, these areas, by and large, are losing population as blacks take advantage of better housing

in surrounding areas. This process of depopulation has been aided by the public clearance activities of urban renewal, model cities and highway construction, especially during the 1960s and '70s.

### Lessons From The Atlanta Experience

Although Atlanta is used as an example, it is not meant to be presented as the epitome of the American city, or even of the revitalizing city. Atlanta has its own set of distinctions: It has enjoyed all the attractions and prosperity of the Sunbelt; it owes its relatively new physical development to its unique history; its downtown area has a strong professional, governmental and retail employment base;

and it is ideally situated as a transportation hub. All these features reinforce the value of central access and provide a strong economic appeal to close-in living.

Atlanta's older neighborhoods have been heavily impacted by highway construction and urban renewal, which has had the effect of uprooting many of the poor and stimulating conversion of these areas to nonresidential use. The thread of further highway development brought forth strong citizen organizations in many older neighborhoods, which have been instrumental in maintaining and improving the quality of the neighborhoods.

While Atlanta's distinctions may have helped to determine the pattern and pace of revitalization, they apparently were not critical factors in the emergence of the movement. As Lipton has demonstrated, revitalization has been a common experience in many large cities in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup>

These cities share certain attributes with Atlanta, which appear to be instrumental in the success of revitalization. The downtown sections of these cities retain a measure of economic vitality that serves as a magnet to draw young professionals who desire to live reasonably close to jobs. Ethnic minorities, traditionally confined to the inner city, have been provided access to older suburban areas, which relieves the pressure on some older neighborhoods to succumb to the filtering down process. These cities also possess older neighborhoods with sufficient amenities and architectural character to warrant extraordinary restoration efforts. Not to be undervalued is the fact that each city nurtured a small group of mavericks who sought out older neighborhoods as an environment compatible with their values and lifestyles. Thus, the seeds of revitalization were planted.

### Future Of Revitalization

The interesting feature of revitalization is not what has happened in the past but what lies ahead. Beyond the euphoria of revival advocates is the reality that the movement has provided mixed blessings to city officials. Many of the constituents who supported or were indifferent to the current administration have been replaced by politically active groups demanding improvements in public services commensurate with their upgraded communities. As this transition takes place, official reaction to it will help determine the fate of the movement.

The Atlanta case allows us to speculate on this future direction. The central area provides significant attractions, and valiant efforts are being made to retain retail, cultural, entertainment and sports facilities in the downtown area. The urge to split the older neighborhoods by highway development has been blunted by construction of rapid transit. There are even plans to transform previously obtained, but unused, highway right-of-way into a massive park.

A key to the future lies in Atlanta's success in maintaining amiable race relations and countering the image of the city as crimeridden and hostile to white inhabitants. The re-

vitalized neighborhoods have effective representatives on the city council for this task.

Another key is the resolution of the problems of residents who are displaced by the revitalization process. Reports in some cities indicate organized efforts by groups who feel threatened by the rising values and rents in their old neighborhoods.

This does not appear to be happening in Atlanta. In most of the affected areas, residents have tended to be transitional and accustomed to change and redevelopment due to the rapid growth of the city. Furthermore, there is little advantage for low income workers to reside close to the center, since there is a lack of unskilled employment in the downtown area. Also in the areas experiencing revitalization, little racial transition has occurred. Therefore, gentrification does not present the problem of affluent whites running off disadvantaged blacks, who are, in turn, left to crowd into what remains of the ghetto.

These factors would seem to indicate an amiable future for Atlanta's older neighborhoods. Several areas have reached a point in the revitalization cycle where long-term stability is assured. Other areas are on the threshold of a significant revival. Much effort and money have been invested to reach this point, and more will be required to continue the progress.

Even under favorable conditions and with dedicated proponents, however, neighborhood revitalization is impacting only a small portion of the inner city housing stock. Filtering and land use succession remain at work for the larger part of the urban core. This should not be considered a failure or even an adverse development. While the re-creation of high quality living environments in the central city is a positive development, there is still a need for inexpensive, low quality housing that no public housing program could satisfy. This need must continue to be met through the traditional recycling of existing housing.

It should not seem so surprising that some inner city neighborhoods have managed to revitalize. The economics for recycling housing were favorable, and a relatively mobile and affluent group of homebuyers to take advantage of the economics existed. Also, organizations readily emerged to reinforce these efforts. Furthermore, the activity developed as a result of market forces in contrast to the largely failed efforts of governmental urban renewal.

The long-term dream of city planners to maintain a middle-class presence in the city has been realized, though possibly not as they envisioned. It is time for revitalization to become a part of the economic theory of neighborhood change.

### NOTES

1. See for example, J. Thomas Black, Allan Borut, and Robert Dubinsky, *Private-Market Housing Renovation in Older Urban Areas* (Washington: Urban Land Institute, 1977); Shirley B. Laska and

Daphne Spain, *Back to the City* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980); Dempsey J. Travis, "The Black Ghetto: New White Frontier," *Real Estate Issues* 4 (Summer 1979); Rolf Goetze, *Understanding Neighborhood Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Ballinger, 1979).

2. Frederick M. Babcock, Maurice R. Massey, and Walter L. Greene, "Techniques of Residential Location Rating," *Journal of the American Institute of Real Estate Appraisers* 5 (April 1938), 133-140.

3. Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), 73-79; Homer Hoyt, *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities* (Washington: Federal Housing Administration, 1939), 14-16; Richard U. Ratcliff, *Urban Land Economics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), 321-322.

4. Richard B. Andrews, *Urban Land Economics and Public Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 100-123.

5. Edgar M. Hoover and Raymond Vernon, *Anatomy of a Metropolis* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1962), 183-198.

6. Walter Fiery, *Land Use in Central Boston* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1947).

7. Roger G. Krohn and E. Berkeley Fleming, "The Other Economy and the Urban Housing Problem: A Study of Older Rental Neighborhoods in Montreal," Joint Center for Urban Studies, MIT/Harvard, 1972.

8. Robert J. Mylod, "Revitalization/Gentrification Trend Brings Overlooked Values to Light in City Housing," *U.S. Housing Markets*, April 25, 1980.

9. Goetze, 63-65.

10. See, particularly, Travis.

11. Mylod, 9.

12. This cycle is described in Margaret S. Warner, *The Renovation of Lincoln Park: An Ecological Study of Neighborhood Change*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1979; and Parkman Center for Urban Affairs, "Young Professionals and City Neighborhoods," *Real Estate Issues* 3 (Winter 1978), 89-90.

13. Mylod, 10.

14. For purposes of this study, the inner city is delineated by those census tracts which comprised the city of Atlanta in 1940 and excluding tracts within the Central Business District which are predominantly nonresidential.

15. Eleanor P. Wolf, "The Tipping-Point in Racially Changing Neighborhoods," *Journal of the American Institute Planners* 29 (August 1963), 217-222.

16. Mylod, 10.

17. S. Gregory Lipton, "Evidence of Central-City Revival," *Back to the City*, edited by Laska and Spain, 42-46.