

## PLANNING FOR A SUSTAINABLE CLEVELAND

By David H. Ellison, AIA with Jack Bialosky, FAIA

From a planning and redevelopment perspective, what are the most urgent needs within the City of Cleveland?

Can rezoning help us achieve our collective goals?

Cleveland needs a well-articulated statement of direction and objectives that is based a broad understanding and sensitivity to community interests. The vision for the future of our city and our community needs to be updated. Fortunately, much of the current Connecting Cleveland 2020 Citywide Plan remains relevant and includes important concepts we may want to continue to implement. Unfortunately, if present development patterns continue unchecked, they are likely to lead to a loss of cohesion within our communities and degradation of the historic character of our neighborhoods. Any new plan will need to be more inclusive and holistic in its vision than previous plans.

Most Clevelanders want our city to develop its local economy, our neighborhoods and the capacity of city and regional government to respond to increasing cultural complexity. People want a dynamic, resilient local economy, safe and appealing neighborhoods and an environment where government is predictable, just, and provides meaningful opportunities for citizens to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

Architecturally speaking, carefully planned densification and compatible infill will improve the sustainability of these civic attributes. That planning would include preservation of architectural and cultural resources and help develop economic diversity and resiliency.

A new citywide plan would address the collective future of Cleveland's citizens in an ecological manner, where economic health and diversity is central to the issues of infrastructure management, land-use, housing, historic preservation, public health and education, government performance and quality of life.

The word, sustainability, encompassing the concept that activities be conducted in a way that allows their continuation for the foreseeable future, is thrown around as though walking to a nearby restaurant, driving one's car less, or switching to energy conserving light-bulbs fulfills the requirements of a system in a stable-state. How do we refine public understanding of "sustainability" so that it refers to more than energy conservation and lower carbon emissions? Sustainability in its broader, more complete meaning includes the preservation and improvement of the attributes of our democratic form of government, the development and implementation of scientifically-based public policy, and the protection of fragile assets like air, water, our food supply, cultural memory and the capital investments of previous generations, including older buildings.

In a new city plan, “Historic Preservation” would be included as a central element of an overall strategy aimed at creating a more sustainable environment. It is well-documented that the designation of historic districts tends to cause an improvement in property values and protects existing affordable housing and office space. Preservation contributes to the health and vitality of a place in a variety of other ways. It conserves resources and the embodied energy that is invested in an existing place or building. It preserves the cultural memory of craftsmanship, design ideology and social history. Investment in the rehabilitation and restoration of old buildings even produces more local economic activity than the construction of new buildings, because a greater percentage of the investment tends to be in local labor rather than imported materials. Perhaps most importantly, the preservation of old buildings allows and fosters the essential development of new work, as evidenced in the form of smaller, start-up businesses and new enterprises, because of the lower cost of rent.

In situations where historic preservation or even infill development in sensitive locations becomes a question, reconciliation of private and public interests needs to be mediated by civil institutions in which we invest authority and trust that fairness and justice will prevail. Ideally, block clubs, local review committees, and city boards and commissions provide this opportunity for effective community engagement.

In much the same way, these conflicting interests need to be recognized and the means by which they can be fairly resolved must be part of any new city plan. Neighbors, real estate developers, building owners, preservationists, contractors, designers and the public at large, all need to be confident of an inclusive and fair process, free of undue political influence by moneyed interests or partisan action taken by public servants.

Zoning has served to attach entitlements to specific property owners, restricting the allowable activities of neighbors and limiting the size and configuration of new buildings. As such, zoning regulations directly affect property values and rights and have real consequences to both neighborhoods and private land owners. Variances from these restrictions can become a political act when the commonly accepted requirements of demonstrating practical difficulty and hardship are ignored. On the other hand, too-strict application of the zoning code can be inappropriate in historic areas that pre-date adoption of the code. Responsible infill development in sensitive areas requires separate design guidelines that regulate compatible development. Ideally, a community would have broad consensus on its goals regarding the form of infill development and the intention of its economic impact on the neighborhood. In the absence of such consensus, the means of effective public engagement regarding these questions is even more important.

Shall we rezone Cleveland?....

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By David H. Ellison, AIA with Jack Bialosky Jr., FAIA

Shall we rezone Cleveland?



Development in Cleveland since the passage of the Euclidean-type zoning code of 1929 has been separated into various land uses. For the most part, isolation of housing from incompatible uses has benefited communities and created quieter, cleaner, safer and more desirable neighborhoods. In some cases, this type of zoning has created areas of dullness and isolation, where the design of housing is extremely repetitive, the age, ethnicity and economic status of the residents are more uniform and where long distances separate people's homes from convenient access to transportation, work, or shopping. Those few residential neighborhoods built prior to 1929 which still survive are sometimes among the more interesting, because of more diverse populations and the variety of architectural development. The relationship between housing and other uses sometimes creates easier walkability and more convenient access.

If new development in Cleveland is to address the failings of the old type of zoning and to preserve and support the revitalization of historic neighborhoods, more subtle interpretation of the intent of the code rather than its strict application will be required. Currently much new development requires one or more variances. The process for obtaining these variances can seem cumbersome and sometimes unfair. In the worst cases, it can actually be capricious and arbitrary. At first, these types of inappropriate variances can cause jarring results. Repeatedly granting unreasonable (greater than 20%) variances from set-back and height limitations helps create the unhappy conditions that caused the old zoning code to be adopted in the first place, while ruining historic fabric and the desirability of a place at the same time.

Ideally, the process of community engagement that is involved in applying for and granting these variances allows the time and a format for careful design review and public participation. Such review can and should, but does not always result in compatible infill development to which the neighboring property owners agree and which benefits the neighborhood as a whole.

Complaints and frustration have emerged about both the inflexibility of the old zoning code and the ease with which variances are granted. In response, parcels have been “spot-zoned” for individual developers to allow development contrary to the letter of the code, and proposals for sweeping changes of height, density and parking requirements have been suggested. There is no doubt that this type of approach would eliminate the need for many variances and simplify the process of development, but at significant cost to the democratic process and with potentially catastrophic effects on Cleveland’s neighborhoods, particularly its historic ones. The erosion of credibility and legitimacy of the regulatory bodies, such as the various design review committees and the Board of Zoning Appeals is at risk.

Rezoning might be appropriate in limited and specific areas to facilitate specific, desired types of development. The comprehensive rezoning of historic districts and areas already experiencing relative success could easily jeopardize the qualities that make those areas desirable and would be irresponsible and destructive. Careless rezoning of whole neighborhoods has the potential of disempowering the community and denying it involvement in the decisions that directly affect it and its individuals. Likewise, inappropriate application of platting ordinances in a way that subverts the intention of the zoning code can also disempower and harm a community. Zoning is only a small part of the problems associated with redevelopment in Cleveland and rezoning may be an even smaller part of any solution. Changes to the zoning code will need careful preparation and evaluation by legal experts and significant investment by both city planners and citizens if any changes are to be embraced and successfully implemented. Broad agreement on the goals of such an effort and the means by which to measure its success or failure and to correct flaws as they are identified will be necessary.

A simpler approach to helping infill development occur within historic districts would be to develop and test robust design review guidelines and standards that require compatible, mediating designs that would allow an increase density while preserving desirable characteristics of a neighborhood. Well-funded and publicly administered processes, including design charrettes involving architectural professionals and academicians have the capacity to test such guidelines and predict potential results prior to their adoption and implementation. It is possible that aspects of a form-based zoning code with Building Form and Public Space Standards might emerge that would serve to

supplement and correct inadequacies in the existing zoning code but effective design review processes that allow for meaningful public input will still be required.

How can we improve the design review process and begin to insist on better design?

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How can we improve the design review process and begin to insist on better design?

First, the city's Design Review Guidelines and the Landmark Commission's criteria for reviewing changes to historic structures should be reviewed by everyone in a position of reviewing proposals for construction in the city. Once familiar with both the guidelines and the standards for review, members of the design review committees should attempt to apply them to each of the proposals they review.

After a period of applying the guidelines and standards to proposals, the members of the design review committees, the general public and other stakeholders should meet to review and amend them with the intention of improving results.

Questions of compatibility and differentiation should be identified and addressed in a rational way that amounts to something more than the subjective judgement of individuals.

We can learn from the current circumstances in the Ohio City neighborhood on Cleveland's near west side.

The Ohio City neighborhood, primarily the historic district north of Lorain Ave., has benefited since the 1970's from the long-term commitment by individual residents, property owners and investors who have worked toward the preservation and improvement of the historic character and aesthetic qualities of the district. In doing so, the preservationists and "urban pioneers" of the 1970's and '80's also served to preserve a variety of buildings of different ages and conditions that provided affordable space for a diverse community of economic participants. In stark contrast, the area south of Lorain, not protected by historic district designation, has been subject to widespread demolition and loss of cultural and economic vitality. The housing stock south of Lorain has not increased in value to the same extent as similar properties north of Lorain. This is in part because of the isolation caused by the demolition of whole blocks of buildings.

Existing examples of affordable housing are almost continuously demolished in the area south of Lorain. Residents and city leaders lament its loss, but resist designation of their part of the historic neighborhood as an historic district. Such designation would immediately place prohibitions on demolitions and begin to increase housing values which would in effect preserve existing affordable housing options.

Currently there is an uneven design review process between the two areas north and south of Lorain Ave. Projects north of Lorain Ave. are reviewed by the Ohio City Design Review Committee, a subset of the Landmarks Commission. Projects south of Lorain Ave. are reviewed by the Near West Design Review Committee, a subset of the Planning Commission. The city's Design Review Guidelines are not applied by either group. Both groups frequently produce arbitrary and capricious – and unpredictable – decisions. This leads to a sense of injustice and disrespect for the committees and the design review process. The Design Review Guidelines, first written in the 1980's and since updated in draft form are either unknown or completely ignored by the two review committees and

their supervising boards downtown, despite having been written and thought through by a previous generation of city residents, planners and designers.

Are we planning for the future, or just letting it happen?



In the Ohio City neighborhood, The West Side Market, Great Lakes Brewing Co. and other enterprises act as magnets to attract a more diverse and intermittent population to the neighborhood than its residents alone would provide. The varied users and inhabitants of the neighborhood during the course of the day is enriching. It represents economic and cultural diversity that makes the place interesting and a desirable destination.

Institutional neighbors and large land owners, such as Lutheran Hospital, St. Ignatius High School and CMHA have tended to lessen diversity, remove historic fabric, and reduce local economic vitality. This unintentional damage to the neighborhood where these institutions abut residential and commercial districts can be mitigated by constructive design review of “improvements”. Visual landscape buffering of uses such as surface parking lots or open fields and the improvement of the pedestrian experience along otherwise long and imposing stretches of uninterrupted sidewalks can help.

Where smaller parcels allow infill development within gaps between varying building sizes and types, or along the edges of primarily single-family development where it abuts commercial corridors, the same type of constructive design review can be applied. The intention being to mitigate the potentially undesirable juxtaposition of unlike uses and/or architectural forms. Through this process of enlightened, constructive design review and a more sensitive interpretation of the intent of the zoning code, more dense and diverse, mixed-use development can be encouraged. The interests of immediate neighbors and those requesting design guidance or variance from the zoning code, need to be fairly determined, discussed and an equitable resolution made. In neighborhoods like Ohio City, this sort of sensitivity to the balance of competing interests needs to be observed so that inappropriate development is prevented from destroying the very things that make the neighborhood desirable in the first place.

Since the 1970's, banks, beer halls and upscale dining establishments have gradually displaced a drug store, a hardware store, a department store, a shoe store and most recently a hot dog restaurant. Paradoxically, the economic success of beer drinking, dining and the banking that goes along with it directly threaten the vitality of the area as is evidenced by the loss of the older uses. The famous local example of this type of failure-through-success is of course the east bank of the Flats as it developed in the 1990's. The lack of diversity of use and occupancy and the creation of a monoculture of nightclubs eventually destroyed the environment that seemed so fertile for bar-owners and restaurateurs at one time. If we are to create a sustainable business district, city and region, we will need to prevent the creation of these types of economic monocultures.

As a phenomenon, this failure-through-success, originally described by Jane Jacobs in her book, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, ought to be of great concern to planners.

Zoning restrictions and rigorous historic preservation efforts tend to limit and slow down changes in an area. The inertia they create actually contributes to the area's success. Careless facilitation of development for development's sake can quickly destroy the very things that make an area vibrant and desirable. Careful planning should provide for strategic investment in the diversification of use, recognize the effects of the accumulation of property by single-use institutional owners, preserve existing building stock, and retain existing residents and users while attracting other, new and diverse users.

One example of this form of long-term strategic planning and investment may be the Gordon Square Entertainment District/Battery Park Development. The project was the product of the long-term commitment of neighbors and a Community Development Corporation. Neighborhood characters like James Levin and the community built around the Cleveland Public Theatre during the 1980's and 1990's were instrumental and essential. Gradually, once the CDC and the community surrounding the theater were well established and various environmental and political hurdles were cleared, public and private funding combined to catapult the transformation of the area in the 2000's. It was not the result of permissive zoning relief or the elimination of opportunities for citizen involvement and participation in decision-making, nor was it large-scale investment that involved the destruction of large numbers of historic buildings. Ironically, the continued development "success" of the part of the neighborhood closest to the lake may be compromising the quality – and the real success – of earlier development.





A fundamental question for the planning of Cleveland's future might be,

How do we identify those unique features and individuals of each area of our city and then support and help create the local economic vitality that will cause an improvement to the well-being and future prospects of its residents?

And how can that improvement be measured?

Surely the reduction in poverty, crime, domestic violence and abuse would be included in such a determination, just as the educational and economic opportunities available to its residents would be. The individuals who help ground and inspire a local neighborhood are frequently right before our eyes as is the architectural legacy of a place. Old buildings, because of their lower cost and sometimes more interesting features, given unique consideration under zoning and building codes, can be helpful in providing a place for a neighborhood's community and its economy to grow. The long term implementation of carefully crafted public policies and programs, coupled with private investment and the commitment of residents aimed at improving "sustainability" in its broadest sense, is probably the only manner in which we can begin to improve Cleveland's prospects in a fundamental way. The ongoing and cumulative effect of generations of Clevelanders working to

make a more equitable and a more economically vibrant place will be the result of inclusion and the protection of our community's diversity.