A decade ago, abandonment seemed the certain fate for many of Philadelphia’s row house neighborhoods.

Block after block showed evidence of a declining population and high poverty rate. Sometimes, after a hard rain, weary houses would just fall down. Vacant lots took their place, becoming breeding grounds for crime. In June 1999, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission reported that the city had over 22,000 abandoned houses and 30,000 vacant lots.

As an experiment, residents of the East Kensington neighborhood crafted a beautification strategy in the late 1990s. They organized to plant trees and start community gardens, and assigned ownership of abandoned lots to nearby residents.

Over time, the results have been dramatic. "People who were planning on moving decided not to move, and businesses have been coming in," says Sandy Salzman, who directs the New Kensington Community Development Corporation. "That wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t been able to improve the neighborhood’s curb appeal."

The neighborhood’s success attracted the attention of John Street during his successful 1999 mayoral campaign. He saw the improvements in East Kensington as a model for dealing with the problems of unsafe buildings and vacant lots all over the city. He
A citywide program to stop blight gets fairly good marks.

Neighborhood Power
By David Holtzman

Campaigned on an anti-blight platform, which eventually led to the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative.

By the end of Street's second year in office, the city had issued $296 million in bonds for NTI, largely to demolish unsafe buildings and assemble land for redevelopment. The city has since authorized the acquisition of more than 6,000 properties in communities throughout Philadelphia, with particular emphasis on 34 neighborhoods and three commercial corridors.

Private developers responded with proposals for new apartments and condominiums. Neighborhoods in North, West, and South Philly that hadn't seen a single new unit of housing in a generation suddenly saw new housing developments sprouting and an influx of new residents from a variety of economic backgrounds.

Initially, the city planning commission was not closely involved in this process. NTI worked with the Reinvestment Fund, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit group that finances revitalization projects, to identify neighborhoods with the weakest housing market; it used data such as housing value, turnover, occupancy, and land vacancy rates to identify their market characteristics. In 2001, when the planning commission beefed up its staff, it began a series of neighborhood planning efforts, which have helped NTI set priorities for demolition and land acquisition.

Meanwhile, NTI's development work proceeded apace. "The physical conditions in certain neighborhoods were so bad and the housing market so weak that we made the decision in those areas to try to pick up every vacant parcel we could," says Eva Gladstein, who has been NTI's director since May 2005. "So there was this citywide process and then there were the community-based plans."

Gladstein, NTI's second director, had worked closely with the initiative in her previous job as executive director of the city's empowerment zone. Earlier in her career, she cofounded the Tenants' Action Group of Philadelphia and directed the Pennsylvania Low-Income Housing Coalition.

Two neighborhoods
One of the planning commission's first community plans, prepared in coordination with NTI, was completed in April 2004 for the...
Neighborhoods are also being revitalized along the once heavily industrial Delaware Riverfront north of Center City, guided in part by the city's waterfront redevelopment district zoning. A residential zoning overlay developed by a team headed by Barton+Partners of Norristown was adopted for private residential development in the area. The firm's site plan and architectural design for the planned Independence Pointe project calls for a 50-foot-wide riverfront esplanade.—Chris Reynolds, Media, Pennsylvania

Strawberry Mansion neighborhood in North Philadelphia. The neighborhood, which is adjacent to Fairmount Park, had a tremendous amount of blighted housing, but it also had a good stock of grand architecture. However, it lacked a strong community development organization.

At the time of the planning process, more than 20 percent of the neighborhood's housing units were vacant and its 23,000 residents had an average income below the city as a whole.

As a result of the NTI designation, the city's historical commission conducted an inventory of neighborhood assets worth preserving and NTI partnered with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia to initiate a program to help home owners pay for historically accurate façade renovations. The initiative also worked with developers to renovate a number of larger historic structures, including the Vernon House, a 1910 apartment complex that was redeveloped to provide 68 affordable rental units for seniors and persons with special needs.

Meanwhile, NTI has moved to fill the area's vacant properties. On one block of Berks Street, 10 houses that had been vacant for years were renovated and sold to first-time home buyers at below-market-rate prices. And thanks to NTI, the neighborhood has a newly formed community development corporation.

In the Brewerytown neighborhood, just south of Strawberry Mansion, a local group, the Brewerytown Community Development Corporation, is leading the planning process, which is now about three-quarters completed.

Aazim Muhammad, the Brewerytown CDC's executive director, says he prefers this grassroots approach. "Most planning in the past had been done by the planning commission and it was always a top-down approach," he says.

The neighborhood, once filled with breweries and warehouses, is bordered by row houses, the Girard Avenue commercial corridor, and, to the west, Fairmount Park. Housing prices in the neighborhood had dropped to as low as $25,000 in recent years. In 2003, the city condemned several warehouses that had been operating illegally as horse stables. NTI has concentrated its redevelopments in the former industrial area at the west end of the neighborhood, where developers are building mostly market-rate townhouses and converting warehouses and breweries to condos.

NTI did manage to convince one developer, Pennrose Properties, to provide 61 affordable units in one of those warehouses. The developer also agreed to hire local residents and to include a computer lab in one of the new buildings for community use. NTI's involvement has had good results, Muhammad says. The new development "has not displaced anyone or caused the gentrification everyone thought was going to happen as a result of those $300,000 houses. It has not impacted the residents in the surrounding blocks. If anything, it's had a positive impact for them," he says.

Links
Today, NTI's scope has broadened from its early focus on clearing land and building housing. That includes partnering with other city agencies to target public investments in selected corridors and to leverage private funds.

In December, for instance, the city, which has exhausted the original bond funding that made NTI possible, issued a new bond for $150 million. Of that amount, $65 million is dedicated to revitalizing commercial corridors as part of the ReStore Philadelphia Corridors initiative.

Another related program is GreenPlan Philadelphia, a citywide effort to create a long-term plan for acquiring and managing open space in the neighborhoods. Eva Gladstein points out that this program depends on the enhanced coordination among city agencies and community-based organizations that NTI encouraged.

David Holtzman is a freelance writer in Hillsboro, West Virginia. He is a former associate editor of Shelterforce magazine, which covers housing and community building in low-income neighborhoods.
Copyright of Planning is the property of American Planning Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.