HERITAGE AMID AN URBAN CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF CLEVELAND, OHIO'S SLAVIC VILLAGE NEIGHBORHOOD

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Pre-organized Session: Legacy Cities: The Quest for Revitalization

RYBERG-WEBSTER, Stephanie [Cleveland State University] s.ryberg@csuohio.edu, presenting author, primary author
Caldwell, Amelia [Cleveland State University] a.s.caldwell@csuohio.edu

In recent years, Cleveland’s Slavic Village neighborhood garnered national attention as the early epicenter of the foreclosure crisis. Slavic Village faces an uncertain future, as housing values plummeted, vacancy and abandonment escalated, and property deterioration and vandalism ran rampant. In response, the dominant policy discourse emphasizes demolition to address foreclosure-related vacancies and, more generally, to reduce an oversupply of housing plaguing neighborhoods in so-called “legacy cities.” Slavic Village’s built environment, though, is the tangible manifestation of the community’s rich immigrant and working-class heritage, with one local historic district, two National Register historic districts, a number of individual local and/or national landmark buildings, and additional historic resources that lack any current local or national designation.

The overarching research question guiding this study is: How do legacy city neighborhood stabilization efforts incorporate heritage and historic preservation? I use a qualitative case study of Cleveland’s Slavic Village, relying on key person interviews with the local CDC (Slavic Village Development), the private-sector Slavic Village Recovery project, and various partners. Other sources include neighborhood plans, organizational documents, and media. The findings demonstrate broad agreement that the neighborhood has a rich and important heritage manifested in its people, traditions, institutions, and buildings. At the same time, Slavic Village’s historic fabric is in peril because traditional preservation regulations, such as local historic districts, and incentives, such as tax credits and low-interest loans, are insufficient given the scale of devastation and the neighborhood’s current market and political conditions. There is an emphasis on iconic, architecturally stunning buildings, to the detriment of Slavic Village’s vast landscape of vernacular housing. Housing rehabilitation efforts often avoid the existing historic districts due to fear of regulatory burdens. And, political support for creative rehabilitation financing tied to historic preservation and for designating additional historic resources is nonexistent.

The research demonstrates that community developers may value heritage and historic buildings, but need to address a multitude of challenges, face political and funding constraints, and have limited preservation expertise. For historic preservation to play a role in Slavic Village’s revitalization, community developers need more flexibility, new (or modified) regulatory tools and funding, and improved means of code enforcement. To prevent a future in which isolated restored landmarks stand amid a sea of disinvestment, disrepair and demolition, preservationists need to engage in coalition-building and devise approaches that respond to the challenges of struggling neighborhoods across the country.

References