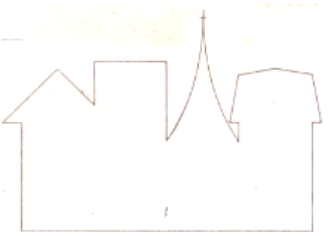

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"Cities are neighborhoods and neighborhoods are people."

ANALYZING NEIGHBORHOODS FOR REVITALIZATWN

by Robert Porter Lynch

PART I OVERVIEW

Anyone interested in improving the quality of life in a neighborhood is dealing with the dynamics of change -- changing individuals, changing groups, changing organizations, changing attitudes, changing laws, changing patterns of behavior and changing systems or methods of decision-making.

In order to understand the change process it is vital that you understand the neighborhood you are dealing with today, and how it got to be the way it is. All too often planners, politicians, and others try to change neighborhoods before they understand how those neighborhoods work.

This article does not attempt to describe how to transform a dead neighbor- hood into an "ideal" one, but rather how to understand how the neighborhood functions (or fails to function) and then pinpoint several areas that may help slow down the process of deterioration or begin to reverse the tide of abandonment and decay.

The Neighborhood as a System

It should be noted that because neighborhoods are acted on by a diverse group of forces, they become highly complex organizational systems. Changes to one set of forces in the neighborhood may take a great deal of time to have a significant; impact on other forces in the neighborhood. For example, it may be several years before an increase in neighborhood pride has any effect on how the political representatives respond to the new demands that prouder constituents make on politicians.

This time lag depends very much on the quality of the linkage between sets of forces in the neighborhood. If, as an example, a revitalization effort takes place in a business district in a neighborhood, the time-lag for the business revitalization to rub off on the residential district will be substantially less if the business owners live and work in the neighborhood, if the business district also serves as a prime social center for the neighborhood, or if the people in the neighborhood initiated the demand for a better business district.

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On the other hand, a poor linkage between the commercial and residential sectors would exist if the business district was a boundary for the neighbor- hood rather than the geographic center of the neighborhood. A poor linkage would also exist if, while revitalizing the business district, businessmen's personal values and needs were brought into conflict with those of the residents (i.e. putting a tavern beside a church. destroying landmarks for parking lots, etc.)

Revitalization is a "systems process," meaning every effort on one part of the system is likely to have some impact (positive or negative) on other parts of the neighborhood. Revitalization impacts people, buildings, economics, and social organization. Rehabilitation deals with the visual environment, building, and economics – it's narrower in scope and purpose, and may suffer from addressing symptoms not causes.

Human Dynamics

Planners especially should also take note of the fact that neighborhood revitalization, unlike urban renewal, takes place incrementally, because every change in the neighborhood causes a reaction or response in some other sector of the neighborhood system. Because it is difficult to monitor or predict the effect or direction of all these changes, the decision-making process should proceed a bit at a time to keep in tune with the changes in needs and perceptions of the people affected by the change. One can easily lose sight of the fact that two people viewing the same situation see things in a radically different way. This is especially true if one person has a high level of self-esteem or is under little stress and another person has a negative sense of self-esteem or is highly threatened.

In most revitalization efforts, one can expect to have to deal a great number of people in the deteriorated project area who may regard themselves as failures. They may have acquired these traits from schooling, from parental relationships, from their jobs, or from associations with groups who felt like failures. Dealing with these "failure syndromes" presents many obstacles, but they are usually surmountable obstacles if one begins to consider the causes of such failure and some elemental strategies to deal with failure.

The first approach is the most obvious:

- Pick an issue or area where there can be a quick success in solving a highly visible problem. Getting a vacant lot cleaned up, painting a house, etc. are typical examples. Often leaders become caught in the trap of focusing on the most complex and difficult problem rather than the simpler, high visible problem. Because neighborhood revitalization requires a high degree of commitment from local residents, it is important to show visible results that can help the revitalization process gain the momentum necessary to tackle larger problems. By approaching revitalization from this perspective, people have a greater sense of achievement, and therefore a greater psychological commitment to the change process.

Revitalization should also be fun for people.

- This does not imply that revitalization is not hard work, but simply that there should be a great number of opportunities for social interaction where people can meet

one another, where friends can be made, and where teamwork and cooperation are common place.

A strong emphasis should be placed on providing recognition for people who have successfully accomplished a difficult task. Oftentimes the news media singles out the leader for special recognition. However, an effective community leader will make sure that all supporters get their fair share of publicity and recognition.

The Plague of Apathy

And finally, there must be a heightened sense of personal potency as a result of any change efforts. Everyone wants to be able to make a difference. People should feel stronger, more independent, and less influenced by forces outside their control. If people, as a result of revitalization, feel that they are only pawns in a game where someone else is calling the moves, then the change that has been brought about may have destructive effects on the people in the neighborhood.

Apathy is the outside manifestation of depression, a prolonged sense of failure and impotency. For these reasons, revitalization must consistently manifest physical results and joint/team effort.

The effort should yield both mutual benefit and impact on one's personal self-interest. Leaders need to be magnanimous in their praise and empowerment of people who join the effort.

PART II DIAGNOSTIC MODEL

Before attempting to revitalize a neighborhood, it is critical that one understands how the neighborhood presently functions. Without this understanding the neighborhood will seem ambiguous, and, more importantly, those responsible for initiating the change process will be extremely vague about what specific aspect of the community are valuable and should be maintained or preserved throughout revitalization process. Similarly, it is important to define exactly what is to be achieved or changed as well as what is to be avoided during the change process. The following diagnostic model presents many of the questions a leader must ask if he or she is to:

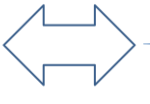
a. Understand how the neighborhood functions
b. Clarify what should be:

1) Achieved or changed
2) Maintained or preserved
3) Avoided

Fundamentally, this model looks at neighborhoods as an organic system composed of five basic subsystems:

Sub-Systems

1) Psycho-Social
2) Organizational
3) Political
4) Economic
5) Environmental



Issues

- Housing
- Economy/Jobs
- Crime
- Transportation
- Education

One must know what is happening in eacn one or these subsystems and how occurrences in one subsystem affect the other four subsystems. Moreover, one must view the systems from a developmental perspective -

- how have these issues come into the present from an historical point of view and given the dynamics of the present, where are the systems now heading?

Psycho-Social Systems

When analyzing the psycho-social aspects of a neighborhood, focus is placed on individuals and how they operate in small groups, such as families, cliques, friendships, etc. The primary concern is to understand how the bulk of the people in the neighborhood think, feel, and behave. Asking diagnostic questions will help everyone understand the base-line realities. Some important questions to ask:

a. What is the predominant attitude of people toward:

   1) Themselves?
   2) Others?
   3) Their neighborhood?

b. What is the typical aspiration of:

   1) Children?
   2) Young men?
   3) Young women?
   4) Older women?
   5) Older men?

c. How have these attitudes and aspirations changed over the last few decades?

d. Do people think of themselves as living in a neighborhood? Community? What do they call the neighborhood? Community? (note meaning: common unity)

e. What do people like/dislike about their neighborhood? At what age levels?

f. How do people deal with authority figures?

g. What degree of apathy exists in the neighborhood?

h. What issues in the neighborhood promote the greatest amount of involvement? What age groups get involved?

i. What is the effect of crime on the attitudes of people in the neighborhood? Do they fear strangers? Do people perceive that crime is getting better, worse, or remaining stable?

j. What are the ethnic traditions of the neighborhood?

k. Why do people stay-in or move out of the neighborhood?

l. Is the age of the population growing older, younger or remaining the same?

m. How do people deal with problems of conflict? Do they personalize the conflict or focus it onto issues?

n. Do people feel that they have any influence on changing their neighborhood?

o. Does remaining in the neighborhood become a symbol of success or failure?

p. How do people in the neighborhood respond to pleas for help by their fellow neighbors?

q. What is the neighborhood response to education? The school system? Learning in general?

r. Do parents encourage their children to continue in school? What is the truancy rate in the schools? Do parents support the teachers in the schools?

s. How do people regard their history/heritage?

t. What is the function of ethnicity to people in the neighborhood?

u. Do parents think that the neighborhood is conducive to raising a family?

v. Who do people feel should be responsible for improving the neighborhood?

w. What traditions of the past are carried on today? Do people feel that these traditions will last into the future?

x. Where do people socialize in the neighborhood?

y. What social service programs exist in the neighborhood? Who do they serve? What is their effectiveness?

z. Do people in the neighborhood volunteer their services to others? What programs to they work within?

Do people include or exclude other races? Nationalities? Religions?

Where do people work in the neighborhood? Do many work in the same place?

How far are people willing to travel in order to find employment?

This aspect of neighborhood deals with how well people become attached to organizations within the neighborhood. It is a key element because it forms the foundation for developing leadership, responding to change, and providing affiliative ties. Relevant questions to ask are:

a. What are the organizations that exist in the neighborhood?
b. Social? Business? Historical? Ethnic?

c. What kinds of people belong to these orgailization$? What people are excluded?

d. How well do these organizations:

1. Achieve their primary goals?
2. Adapt to the changing needs of its constituency and environment?
3. Manage its human relations?
4. Develop new leaders?

e. What is the typical leadership style in the neighborhood?
   a. Authoritarian?
   b. Adversarial?
   c. Transactional?
   d. Collegial?
   e. Collaborative?
   f. Isolationist?

f. How willing are people to commit themselves to their organizations? What is the quality of the neighborhood organization's leadership?

g. Do the organizations of the neighborhood feel that they are responsible for the progress of their neighborhood?

h. How do conflicts get resolved in the organizations?

i. How do people influence one another in the organization? By persuasion? By power? By mutual problem-solving?

j. What kinds of rewards systems are in effect in the organizations?

k. Are the organizations oriented toward results?

l. What informal organizations exist in the neighborhood? (i.e. common friends, elites, political coalitions, bar room associations, emergency rescue, etc.}

m. What kinds of-decisions are/are not made in the organizational system that affect the neighborhood? Who makes or does not make these decisions?

n. How do people find out what is happening in their organizations? How well do neighborhood main mission or purpose? organization's purpose? How well do people view the importance of organization's purpose?

Political System

Political parties, elected officials, power brokers, laws, and governmental agencies are the main forces acting upon neighborhoods in the political system.

One must begin to assess the impact of the political process on the neighborhood as well as the impact of the neighborhood on the political system. Some useful questions are:

a. What political parties exist in the neighborhood? Which ones have the support of what people? How do the parties succeed or fail to gain power? Who really holds the power – those on the surface or those behind the power structure?

b. What is the honesty/trustworthiness of the political parties? How much graft and corruption goes on behind the scenes? What impact does the corruption have on the community? Can the corrupt elements be easily bypassed? How?

c. What influence do neighborhood people have on the political decision- making process? Do the political districts conform with the boundaries of the neighborhood?

d. What is the impact of decisions made at the municipal, state, and federal levels on the neighborhood? Does the neighborhood have any input into this decision-making?

e. How responsive is the political process to the needs of the neighborhood? When conflicting needs emerge in the neighborhood, do politicians act as arbitrators to develop mutually acceptable solutions or do they see that the "favored" group wins and the "unfavored" group loses?

f. How are the various ordinances (zoning, building codes, etc.) enforced? Are exceptions made that does harm to the fabric of the neighborhood? Is "spot zoning" common?

g. How are housing violations and abandoned housing issues handled? Is there an enforced building code in the neighborhood? Is it enforced fairly and equally? How does the court system deal with housing violations? Landlord/tenant problems? Arson? Burglary? Assault?

h. Are sign codes in operation that enhance the cooperation of businesses or do they promote competition by encouraging "sign-wars"? What is the compatibility of signs in mixed use residential/business zoning?

i. Do governmental agencies have clear-cut policies that can be implemented without excessive external political intervention?

j. Do public service agencies (police, sanitary, public works, etc) respond effectively to neighborhood needs?

k. Are these services getting better, worse, or staying the same?

l. Does the neighborhood perceive the political system as serving the needs of a few or of many?

m. Does the executive branch have a specific policy toward the neighborhoods backed up by action programs to promote neighborhood revitalization?

n. Do governmental agencies respect and reinforce the neighborhood's perceived boundaries; (i.e. by establishing planning districts, traffic control, police districts, census tracts, etc. that conform to neighborhood boundaries)

o. What political decisions are made that affect the neighborhood? Who is affected?

Economic System

This system deals primarily with the basic issue of whether the neighborhood is a place that will be monetarily profitable to the investor. Without sufficient investment incentives, the capital markets will turn their backs on a neighborhood and thereby increase its problems of deterioration. The idea of investment is not just a banking issue, it is an issue for every homeowner too – they want to see their property values increase to improve their financial security. Similarly, local service businesses want to know their investment will be secure and growing. Some questions to think about are:

a. Do commercial business serve the needs of the local neighborhood residents?

b. Is there enough excess capital in the neighborhood to support a full-service shopping district?

c. What is the chance of a small business being successful 'in the neighborhood? What factors would most strongly affect its success or failure?

d. Are there sufficient job opportunities in the neighborhood (or nearby)?

e. What distance are people in the neighborhood willing to travel in order to achieve gainful employment?

f. Is it economically viable to invest in a home in the neighborhood?

g. g. Will banks provide reasonable financing for the moderate or low income home buyer?

h. Are capital investment firms willing 'to purchase property in the neighborhood?

i. What is the ratio of resident savings accounts to resident mortgage loans? Local branch banks? Is this ratio increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable?

j. Do neighbors/businessmen have confidence in the economic viability of the neighborhood?

k. Is most of the housing owned by occupants or absentee landlords?

l. What financial resources are available to the neighborhood? Federal? State? Municipal? Private?

Environmental Systems

The physical environment encompasses a broad range of issues from architecture, to housing, to visual appearance, to tree planting, to perceptions of social centers, boundaries and routes of transportation. It should not suffice to analyze these factors only against some generally "objective" criterion, but also to evaluate the effects of the environmental system upon the other systems in the neighborhood. Cultural perceptions have a very significant effect on whether an environmental factor is judged positively or negatively by the neighborhood populace. One must be extremely careful in evaluating' these data and insure that the perception of the data collector is not projected into the perception of the local people.

The environmental system is composed of housing, focal points and boundaries, visual appearance, wild life and transportation.

I. Housing

a. How old are the houses in the neighborhood?

b. Are the houses one family or multiple family?

c. What is the historical or architectural value of these homes?

1) Do the people of the neighborhood perceive the age of these homes as an asset or a liability?

d. Are the houses set far back from the street?

e. Do people sit on their front porches or front steps and wait for neighbors to come by and socialize?

f. Do people respect and appreciate the architecture of their buildings?

g. What colors do people paint their homes? What is the significance of these colors?

h. Do the homes have insulation or other energy/money saving devices?

i. Do the homes have sufficient recreational space in the yard or nearby?

II. Focal Points and Boundaries

a. What are the main focal points in the area? Buildings? Geographic structures? Historic landmarks?

b. Does the neighborhood have a clearly defined center?

c. Does the neighborhood have a clearly defined set of boundaries?

d. Is there general agreement among people within the neighborhood concerning the neighborhood's boundaries?

e. Are the boundarie s of the neighborhood impermeable and constant (i.e. as with a river, superhighway, etc.)? Or are the boundaries variable (i. e, as with a residential street, etc.)?

f. Is the geographic layout of the neighborhood perceived as being ambiguous, vague or definitive? Can people draw a map of the area?

g. Do the residents perceive that there is a center of activity in their neighborhood? What activities occur here?

h. Is this center of activity on the geographic boundary of the neighborhood or near the center?

III. Visual Appearance

a. Do people care about the visual appearance of the neighborhood?

b. Are public properties cared for? . .

c. If litter is thrown on the sidewalk, who do people think is responsible for picking it up?

d. Do people perceive their neighborhood to be visually 'attractive or exciting? What is the most attractive feature? What is the ugliest feature?

e. How much visual clutter exists (i.e. telephone poles, signs, etc)?

f. Row aware are people of this clutter?

IV. Wild Life

a. Are there trees and flowers on the sidewalks?

b. When trees or flowers die, are they replaced? who replaces them?

c. Do houses have gardens, grass, or trees on their property? Are these maintained?

d. Is there sufficient open space for recreation? How much open space is considered to be necessary for recreation from the neighborhood point of view?

e. Do people plant shrubs and bushes around their homes, or do they prefer concrete and asphalt?

V. Transportation

a. How easy is it for a resident to get from one end of their neighborhood to the other end?

b. Is mass transit available? Does it force people .to have a particular directional orientation? Is it affordable? Does it run on a convenient time schedule?

c. How do transportation systems facilitate or prevent inter-personal communications?

d. Where does pedestrian traffic occur in the neighborhood?

e. Are the sidewalks safe to walk (i.e. kept in good repair, well lit, safe from crime, etc)?

f. Is automobile traffic compatible with the size and layout of the streets?

g. Do old automobiles collect in vacant lots?

h. Are cars with noisy mufflers allowed to race on the street?

i. Do driving habits of the residents make it unsafe to walk or drive in the streets?

j. What 'functions do the streets serve other than for automobile traffic?

k. Does the street 'pattern give the neighborhood a sense of unity and direction?

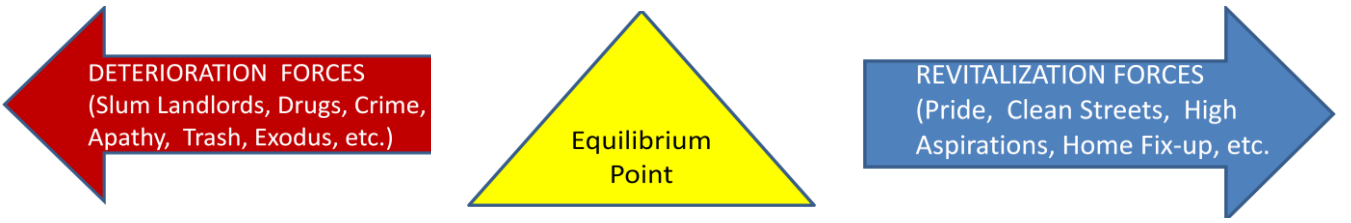
l. Is there sufficient parking for business interests in the neighborhood?

PART III EVALUATING THE DATA

After analyzing the forces that exist in a neighborhood, it becomes imperative to look at these forces in relation to each other in order to see how they act on the entire neighborhood. Then the next step is to assess the neighborhood's readiness to change and select several leverage points in the neighborhood that will create a "domino effect."

Diagramming the Forces

The data derived from the preceding diagnostic model can be described in terms of various "forces" that are acting in the community. The first step in evaluating these diverse forces is to separate those forces that have either a positive or 'negative impact on neighborhood revitalization from those forces that seem to have little or no impact. These revitalizing forces and the deteriorating forces can be viewed conceptually as a dynamic balance of forces working in opposite directions to hold the community in equilibrium. his equilibrium can be disturbed by changing either the revitalization forces or the deterioration forces.



For example, some of the forces Deterioration may be problems like:

1. Increasing crime and vandalism
2. An over abundance of absentee landlords
3. Trash and garbage in the streets, etc.

The forces pushing in the direction of revita1ization might be:

4. Ethnic pride
5. An appreciation of the history of the community
6. A visionary Chamber of Commerce, etc.

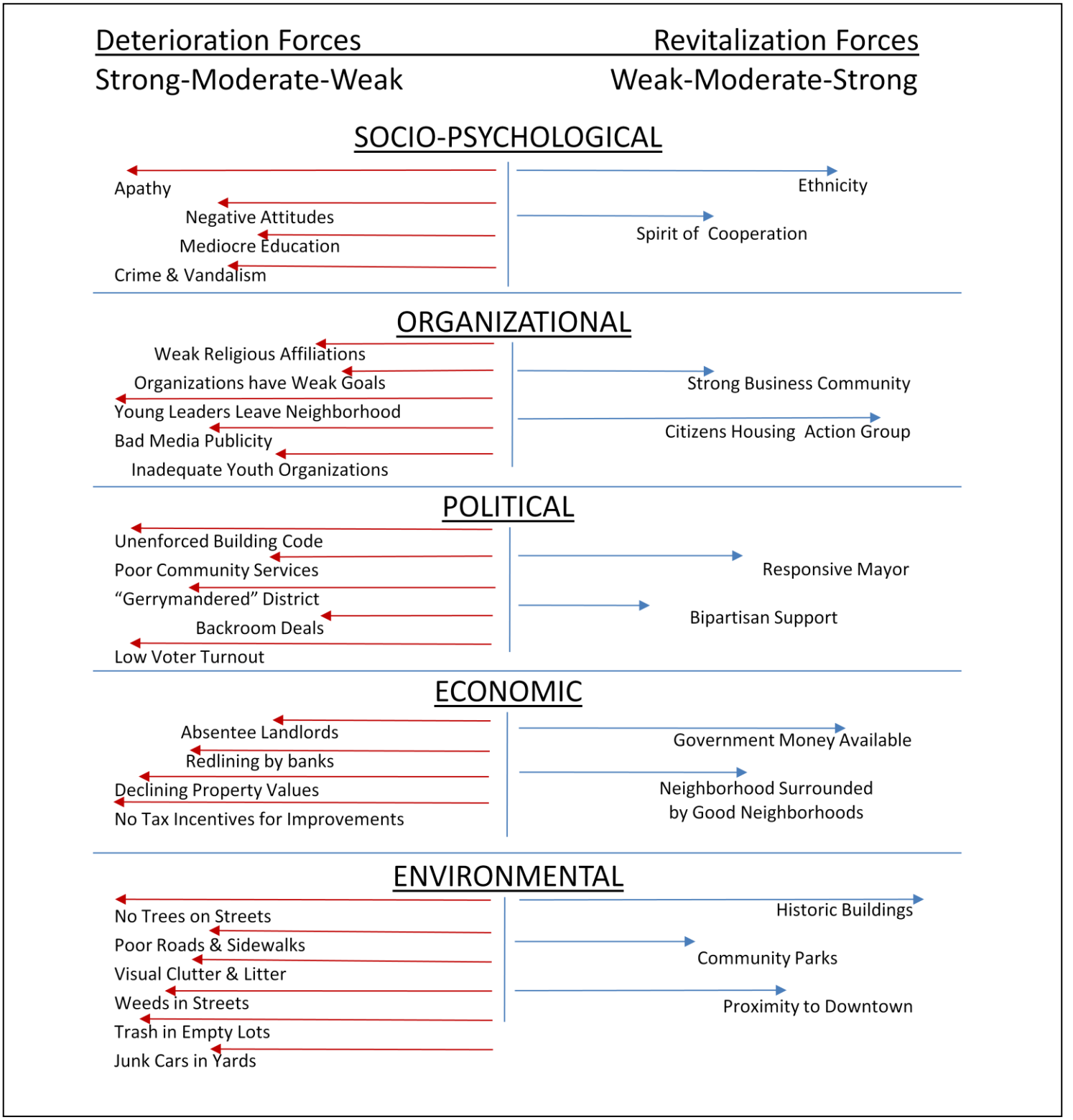
The objective is to tip the balance in favor of the positive forces - called the tipping point of critical mass.

The next step is to look at the five systems of the neighborhood analysis and begin describing each system in terms of the revitalization and deterioration forces that exist at the present time.

The Sample Chart below represents some of the typical forces operating in a declining neighborhood. Be sure to customize this chart, using forces from your analysis, using words that fit the realities of your neighborhood.

This is not just an exercise in analytics, but also a design of new forces that can come into play to make the revitalization stronger and the negative forces weaker.

The relative strength of these various forces should be assessed by drawing an arrow whose length corresponding to the relative strength of the force -- strong, moderate, or weak.

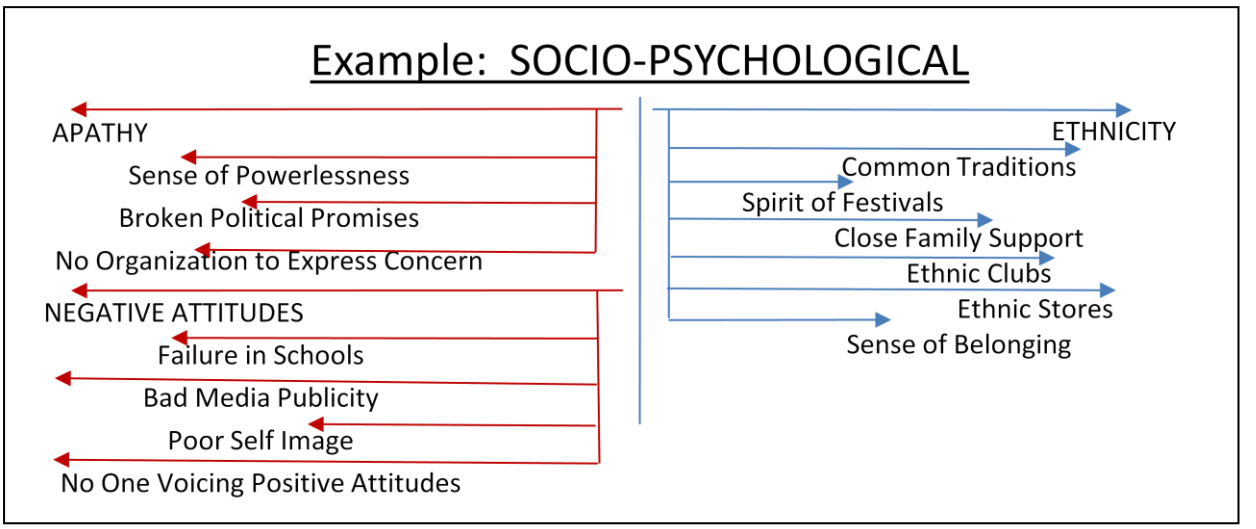


NOTE: There is often a strong tendency to assume that every force has a mirror image on the opposite side (e.g. good publicity is a revitalizing force, and bad publicity is a deteriorating force). However, if the evaluation of forces is to be an effective diagnostic and planning tool, it is important to deal only with the forces which are actually in existence in the community, rather than those forces which could potentially exist.)

Determining the Underlying Forces

The forces diagrammed in the preceding section are usually only the most visible .manifestation of the problem -- they are often symptoms, rather than causes. Therefore, it is often advantageous to determine what forces or causes keep these larger forces in operation.

For example, if apathy is one of the major deteriorating forces in the neighborhood; one might probe deeper to discover that apathy is caused by several other forces: A sense of powerlessness because no one listens to new ideas, a lack of organizations through which to express concern, and promises not kept by politicians and bureaucrats. It is useful to diagram these underlying forces to see how they affect the neighborhood.



By examining the various underlying causes that keep the larger forces in op~ration, several things often become evident.

First, several underlying causes may emerge that hold the key to reversing the trend toward neighborhood decay. These causes generally affect two or more of the systems in the neighborhood, and by neutralizing these forces, the momentum can often be reversed. .

Secondly, by analyzing the underlying forces, the inter-relationships between the systems often becomes visible. If, for example, the socio-psychological system negative attitudes are prevalent, the organizational system may be suffering from a lack of effective leadership, which may in turn have a strong negative impact on the political process.

Thirdly, the underlying forces give clues as to what types of revitalization objectives might be realistic and which ones are most likely to fail. Some objectives may have a great deal of support, whereas other objectives will only receive negative response.

Fourthly, be examining these forces, it is more readily apparent who would be most threatened by any substantive changes in the status-quo.

Fifthly, just by creating a visual representation, people can see the issues and attack them one-by-one, allocating different individuals to different problems or opportunities as they become ready to be addressed.

Finally, all revitalization is an orchestration of alliances and alignments of people and organizations.

Decisions are made by the interplay of rational and emotional forces. Financial decisions are seldom completely rational. A decision to disinvest is preceded by a series of negative emotional experiences about borrowers, bad loans and crime. Investment occurs when positive things are making people feel safe and secure, emotionally and financially.