Community Partnerships to Examine Local Housing Markets: A Reflection

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In 2012, six years after the start of the economic recession, neighborhoods in the Twin Cities metropolitan area are still struggling to bounce back. Vacant and bank-owned housing remain commonplace in many neighborhoods and every week more individuals and families enter the foreclosure process. Despite these realities, few academic studies have focused on understanding the effects of the housing crisis on individual neighborhoods. Not many projects have collaborated with city residents or organizations to gather local knowledge on existing housing market strengths and weaknesses. Community-based housing studies with a block-by-block focus are vital for politicians, academics, community organizations, and other nonprofits that seek to revitalize struggling housing markets.

Last spring, the Macalester College Urban GIS class embarked on a research project using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to visualize the lingering effects of the housing crisis on individual neighborhoods in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Our methodology was informed by the Folwell Center for Urban Initiatives report "North Minneapolis Housing Market Index" (2011), which presents a block-by-block view of the housing market in North Minneapolis. The Macalester College Urban GIS class adapted the Housing Market Index (HMI) methodology for five additional Twin Cities metropolitan area neighborhoods: Powderhorn Park (Minneapolis), Longfellow (Minneapolis), Dayton's Bluff (St. Paul), Frogtown (St. Paul), and the City of Richfield.

Our study examined the following variables for each neighborhood: Vacancy, Owner-Occupancy, Condition, and Estimated Market Value Change Overtime. Combining these measures, we produced and mapped a Housing Market Index (HMI) for the neighborhoods to highlight areas of relative strength and weakness in each housing market. Partner organizations provided tours and vital information on housing trends, such as verifying the long-term vacancy status of particular houses. Combining our partners' knowledge with GIS expertise, this research collaboration illuminated the continued impact of the housing crisis on unique urban communities. The article submitted for this journal is a case study of the research completed for our partner organization in Powderhorn Park.

Reflections on this Community Based Research Project

This project taught me a number of lessons about the challenges and opportunities within community-based research. Three of the main challenges include: 1) designing a mutually-beneficial project for all partners given time and resource constraints, 2) incorporating local knowledge and community input, and 3) predicting the applications of this research for the neighborhood or community partner.

For this research, our class had to design a useful project for our neighborhood partners in the face of two significant constraints: a strict methodology to follow and a time limit of one semester. Our Urban GIS class was replicating a well-developed methodology from the Folwell 2011 HMI study and our partners were involved out of an interest in acquiring their own local HMI analysis. Indeed, our class extended the original HMI methodology in some meaningful ways; unlike the Folwell study, this was a "community-based research project" in that our

partners weighed the importance of each individual HMI variable for their local housing market. For instance, in Powderhorn Park, our partner saw Vacancy as a better indicator of housing strength/weakness than Owner-Occupancy, and weighed these variables accordingly. Some organizations also directed each student group to classify visual data differently or create additional maps to fit their interests. For instance, the Powderhorn Park group created supplemental maps on the age and types of housing in the area. Despite these positive adjustments to the HMI methodology, time was a significant constraint on more substantive research extensions. Our semester-long class was limited in our ability to focus the research on other needs of our community partners, such as mapping foreclosures or sheriff sales.

This project also highlights the challenge of incorporating local knowledge and community input into the research process. It made logistical sense to work with neighborhood associations and other civic organizations to acquire local input on the housing market. The HMI methodology was useful for our chosen partners because they focus on neighborhood-scale development and residents' quality of life. However, while they are undoubtedly invested in the development of the communities in which they work, the participating organizations may not fully represent the interests of all neighborhood residents. Indeed, long-time homeowners, business-people, renters, landlords, and others have very different ideas of what factors influence the strength of an area's housing market. Given more time, our research could benefit from more in-depth engagement with the residents and their perspectives on the need for housing investment and support.

In one final frustration, this project generated uncertainties about the ultimate application of community-based research. We found that it is nearly impossible to identify how community partners will make use of finished research. Although our community partner in Powderhorn Park has had programs to support housing and homeowners in the past, financial resources, staff time, and volunteers remain scarce. Our report may be helpful for our partner's future grant applications and requests for housing programs and nonprofit partnerships. With our maps, our neighborhood partner might be able to show how outside investment—such as grants or loans to homeowners or investment in new affordable housing—could make a huge difference when focused on a single block or zone. However, at this time, it is unclear if the HMI data will actually inform the work of their organization, given their current workload and organizational foci.

In order to address some of these frustrations and to produce a more beneficial community-based housing study, some methodological changes should be made. Future research must allow community partners to *determine* (not just weigh) the variables that signal relative strength and weakness in their local housing market. In such a collaborative process, our discussion might start with the question, "what does a strong housing market look like?" or "what are some signs of weakness?" This version of the project may involve preliminary deliberation on what housing trends would be useful to map and what specific data we can feasibly gather and produce. Such an open-ended research process would also have drawbacks. Shifting away from an index with a fixed set of variables would limit the researcher's ability to compare neighborhood housing markets with one another. In this way, our project reveals the tension of designing a project that is neighborhood-specific and beneficial for practitioners while also generalizable and replicable for future studies.

Despite its challenges, this project also reveals the immense possibilities that exist in the field of community-based applications of GIS technology. This project was a step towards making housing market research more inclusive and relevant for the purposes of community

actors and institutions. Because of our affiliation with an academic institution our class had access to up-to-date GIS technology and datasets not readily available to small, lower-budget, neighborhood-based organizations. This project also afforded Macalester students a chance to learn advanced tools of GIS and to apply their knowledge to look at housing problems facing local residents and community organizations.

Through this project, I learned more about the work of neighborhood associations and local governments, as well as local initiatives addressing foreclosure and housing affordability. I gained practice in synthesizing and presenting information in a way that is accessible for non-academic audiences and those less familiar with GIS. Most importantly for me, the structure of this project encouraged the question, "How can I apply my knowledge and skills to address local housing problems and concerns in a meaningful way?" Now that I have graduated from Macalester College, this question—and by extension, this experience of community-based research—will guide the commitments I make in my personal and professional life for years to come.

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References

Folwell Center for Urban Initiatives. 2011. "North Minneapolis Housing Market Index." *Folwell Center for Urban Initiatives*. http://www.folwell.org.