

1 of 4 DOCUMENTS

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Immigration fuels one city's resurgence; Guyanese transplants 'breathe new life' into Schenectady, N.Y.

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STRATEGIES FOR REBUILDING CLEVELAND

How have you observed your cities rebuilding after dealing with all the vacant homes?

Like a flower in the sand, a peach-colored house blooms from a bleak and battered street in the inner city of Schenectady, N.Y.

On a block of outdated and sometimes boarded-up double deckers, the slender home wears vacation clothes. Its siding gleams in cool Caribbean colors. A decorative black fence necklaces a front garden bursting with colors.

Strangers might suspect they had stumbled upon an artist's enclave or a bed and breakfast in the urban blight, but anyone from around this upstate New York factory town knows better. They will assume another Guyanese immigrant family has moved in and that, chances are, the street is on the rise. For where one Guyanese buys and restores, others follow.

Facing the kinds of job losses and abandonment known to Cleveland, Schenectady pursued a creative solution. It introduced itself to an immigrant group in New York City, lured curious couples north to view its impossibly cheap homes, and let capitalism and immigrant dreams run their course.

In less than a decade, people who hail from the South American nation of **Guyana** have become about 10 percent of the city of 62,000, and streets once considered worthless now stir with fussy homeowners.

"They breathed new life into

this town," said Albert P. Jurczynski, the former mayor who marketed his city with bus tours and his mother-in-law's homemade cookies. "They changed Schenectady. And they never asked for a dime from anyone."

With the real-estate catastrophe having devalued, crippled and partially emptied whole

neighborhoods of Northeast Ohio, it's time to ask, "What next?"

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Local recovery strategies range from selective demolitions to artistic boarding projects. But creating side lots in Shaker Heights and painting pies onto boarded-up windows in Slavic Village is not going to be enough, experts say.

Once the foreclosure crisis cools, a haunting emptiness will loom. Cuyahoga County Treasurer Jim Rokakis assumes 25,000 homes sit empty in Cuyahoga County, including 15,000 in the shrinking city of Cleveland.

In some sections of the city even well-kept, lived-in homes are impossible to sell because of the rot around them. The foundations of a neighborhood must be rebuilt.

For that kind of a job, bigger ideas are needed - Archimedes-sized levers.

"One thing everyone can agree on - the past approaches are not enough," said Joseph Schilling, co-founder of the National Vacant Properties Campaign.

"Someone has to be willing to say, 'We are going to experiment with new ideas and we are going to tackle this problem.'"

A few cities say they have struck upon solutions with power, maybe the power to change everything.

Land banking on the future

The construction fence looping around a block of boarded-up homes and vacant lots near downtown Flint, Mich., hints at a higher authority with plans.

The range and nimbleness of the Genesee County Land Bank, which is rebuilding the Carriage Town neighborhood where General Motors was born, exceeds the scope of any developer this city has ever seen.

To ensure the success of its latest project, the land bank reached to the neighborhood's edge and bought and closed a notorious flophouse. It's converting the former drug den into upscale apartments, within walking distance of an expanding University of Michigan-Flint.

"We don't have a magic dust, but we have a lot of development tools at our disposal," said county Treasurer Daniel Kildee, who chairs the land bank. "We can deal with the kinds of property the market does not want."

Flint, a hard-luck car town whose unemployment lines inspired Michael Moore's documentary "Roger & Me," is gaining accolades for something else these days. Its response to vacant space is considered a national model for recovery.

In 2003, the Michigan legislature followed tax and foreclosure reform with a law that allows a regional authority to quickly acquire property. It's called a land bank because of its primary duty - to bank property until it can be put to productive use.

But the Genesee County Land Bank does much more than take title to a tax delinquent house before it can be flipped on eBay. It assembles blocks of property for re-development. It demolishes homes. It builds homes. It creates green space and mows the lawn. And it pays for itself.

It's what Cuyahoga County Treasurer Jim Rokakis dreams of when he drives one of Cleveland's lonely East Side streets. Rokakis is championing two bills in the Ohio legislature that would launch a county land bank with the might of Genesee County's.

Nicholas Hoffman, an antique dealer and a restoration specialist busy in Flint, said the public decisiveness spurs private investment.

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He recently pried the boards off an art deco gem in Carriage Town and opened a gourmet delicatessen and antique center. But not before the land bank closed the seedy Berridge Hotel across the street.

"Nobody wants to bring mom and the kids down to eat next to the rescue mission," he said. "The potential is awesome here, and thanks to the land bank, this city is starting to take off."

Becoming smaller and greener

When Hunter Morrison sees a grim, low-lying neighborhood near a vanquished steel mill, he does not envision a rebuilding project. He imagines a green field. Maybe a pond and a bird sanctuary.

Resurrecting mill houses built for an industry long gone makes little sense, argues Morrison, the director of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at Youngstown State University. A better idea might be to let the neighborhood empty out, knock things down and plant over.

"You let it go fallow, just like a farmer would, until the market catches up," he said. "Until then, it looks pretty."

Morrison, the former city planner for Cleveland, is an author of Youngstown's plan to become a smaller, greener city. Youngstown 2010 calls for re-investing in blocks with potential, like the Smoky Hollow neighborhood aside the university, but allowing some neighborhoods to fade, even disappear as the city tears up streets and sidewalks.

Youngstown is one of the first American cities to embrace the concept of controlled decline. After seeing its population sink by half since 1950 - from 168,000 to about 80,000 today - the city that Big Steel built and abandoned had little choice, Morrison said.

Still, he and others describe the decision to shrink as almost freeing.

"Once you accept that you don't have to be what you always thought you were, it's almost cathartic," said Jay Williams, the city's young mayor and an architect of its "clean and green" philosophy. "For generations this city was defined by the steel mills. We become trapped in that definition. It was paralyzing."

Williams sees advanced manufacturing and environmentally friendly technologies powering the Youngstown of the future.

He's not sure how long it will take to get there. But he insists he's not looking back.

Recruiting immigrants to fill the void

Schenectady's rebirth began with a desire to pray. A fledgling Guyanese community needed a Hindu temple but was too poor to build one. Deryck Singh, a Guyanese immigrant who manages a chain of convenience stores, approached the mayor for help.

Albert Jurczynski was intrigued. Who are you people? he asked. How many of you are there? The grandson of Polish immigrants had problems of his own to address. Decay in his city had reached crisis proportions.

Schenectady, the birthplace of General Electric Co., grew up and thrived on manufacturing jobs staffed by waves of European immigrants. When GE moved the jobs out, the "electric city" dimmed.

Population fell by a third between 1950 and 2000. When Singh came calling in 2001, about 13 percent of city homes lay vacant.

The mayor found the Guyanese a temple, a vacant German Catholic church, and shared his dilemma with his new friend.

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"I told him, 'You're dreaming if you think middle class families are going to move back to these neighborhoods,' " Singh recalled. "I said, 'Your only hope is immigrants.' "

He told the mayor of a huge Guyanese community crammed into the Richmond Hill section of Queens, 3½ hours away. The descendants of indentured servants from India, the Guyanese spoke English. They shared a thirst to own homes. And they were paying \$1,000 a month for basement apartments.

A \$10,000 house in Schenectady's inner city might look like a dream.

Jurczynski struck upon a modest idea. He sent a bus to Richmond Hill and filled it with couples rounded up by Guyanese Realtors. The mayor's tour of Schenectady and its big empty houses ended with Italian cookies and wine at his mother-in-law's.

A strategy and a legend was born. Before he left public office at the end of 2003, "Mayor Al," as the Guyanese call him, led more than two dozen bus tours of his hometown. He watched a new immigrant group take root and grow. Today, the city is home to a highly visible community of about 7,000 Guyanese and other West Indians.

Not everyone was happy to see it happening. Members of older ethnic groups chafed at the attention showered on the newcomers, who brought a new religion, customs and tensions. Black and Latino residents complained the Guyanese were getting ahead with government help, a charge members of the Jurczynski administration hotly deny.

"We gave them zero. Nothing," said Jay Sherman, the city's former development director. "All we did was show them houses no one else would buy."

A once-familiar immigrant story unfolded. Arriving unskilled and often uneducated, the newcomers took low-wage jobs as dishwashers, janitors and nursing home aides. Some employers, mindful of a hungry new work force, began reinvesting.

Even at minimum wage, two-parent, multi-income families were able to buy houses and restore them. Whole blocks brightened as new homeowners sought to outdazzle one another. Property values rose countywide, surging in some of Schenectady's worst neighborhoods.

Between 2003 and 2008, the median home price in Schenectady climbed by 35 percent, to \$118,200. Last year, in the thick of the national foreclosure crisis, city housing values rose by another 3 percent.

Steve Jacobson, Schenectady's housing director, credits a prayerful immigrant group for insulating the entire county from the worst of the mortgage meltdown.

"They stabilized our housing market," he said.

Kelli Grant, an astonished agent for Realty USA, Schenectady's largest home seller, said she watched home values double and triple on blocks once deemed impossible to sell.

"Homeowners replaced absentee landlords and speculators - that makes all the difference," she said.

Current Mayor Brian Stratton no longer lures Guyanese home buyers with bus tours. He doesn't need to. A well-oiled chain migration provides a steady stream.

On a recent weekday, Desmond Ramsammy and his wife of one year, Panchawattie, stepped out of an immaculate, two-family house near downtown Schenectady and surveyed a world they were surprised to find.

Crack dealers and layabouts once dominated Hawk Street at the edge of the Hamilton Hill neighborhood. Today, the narrow block reflects fresh paint and new energy. About 80 percent of the houses are occupied by Guyanese. They mind each other's children,

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walk to West Indian groceries on busy State Street, and cheer the cricket matches over at Central Park.

Desmond Ramsammy, a heating and cooling mechanic, discovered the scene when he drove up from Queens to visit his brother. He came back with his wife.

"It's much more relaxed here," he said. "The cost of living is much less. Even gas prices are lower."

The couple paid \$127,000 for a house that had sat vacant for six years before Mohabir Satram, a Guyanese home restorer, bought and rebuilt it from top to bottom. Now it holds new dreams.

The Ramsammys expect to sell their small house in Queens for about \$650,000 and use the money to start a business in Schenectady.

Annunciating words that are music to the ears of civic leaders, Desmond Ramsammy said, "We plan to raise a family here."

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GRAPHIC: GUS CHAN THE PLAIN DEALER Marigolds bloom in front of Tulsie Persaud's white picket fence in the inner city of Schenectady, N.Y. In recent years, he and hundreds of other Guyanese immigrants have bought up the city's vacant houses and helped to spark an urban renaissance. Photo GUS CHAN THE PLAIN DEALER Mohabir "Moe" Satram, 51, a former high school teacher in **Guyana**, is a leading home restorer in Schenectady. He has bought and renovated about 30 houses since arriving five years ago. All sold to fellow Guyanese immigrants. "Are there vacant houses in Cleveland?" he asked. . Photo The hulking red-brick Schenectady Hindu Temple was built by German immigrants as a Catholic church. Now it anchors a growing Guyanese neighborhood near downtown Schenectady. Photo The children of Guyanese immigrants donned traditional Hindu dress for a cultural event at their temple in September. Thanks to girls like these, Schenectady City Schools are seeing enrollment grow. Photo A dancer gets a little help from a young audience member at a recent fund-raiser at the Schenectady Hindu Temple. The former mayor helped the Guyanese community acquire a vacant Catholic church for its temple, sparking an immigrant wave. Photo Preparations for services are elaborate at the Shree Raam Mandir, one of three Hindu temples in Schenectady. Hindu immigrants from **Guyana**, South America, began streaming into the city five years ago, lured by bus tours of its big empty houses.

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