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### Higher Density and Affordable Housing: Lessons from the Corridor Housing Initiative

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## Higher Density and Affordable Housing: Lessons from the Corridor Housing Initiative

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**ABSTRACT** *The Corridor Housing Initiative (CHI), now the Corridor Development Initiative, in Minneapolis-St. Paul, is a collaborative process to assist planning, designing and developing higher density and affordable housing along major transit corridors. These locations provide access to transportation options, retail amenities, parks and job opportunities. As a programme of community capacity building, it gives local residents the skills to be active participants in attracting and shaping development that fits their own values as well as city goals and development realities. Design is used to help resolve the potential conflicts between neighbourhood values, development constraints and city goals.*

### The Initiative in Brief

In many places around the world the need to increase densities and expand affordable, lifecycle housing units in residential areas has been met with suspicion and resistance by communities fearful of what development will do to the character of their neighbourhoods. Municipalities need processes to engage community support for development that can meet citywide goals and adhere to neighbourhood values. Local communities need ways to constructively influence the future of their neighbourhoods rather than rely solely on 'stopping' strategies. They also need to become more equal partners with developers and government on decisions that affect them. The Corridor Housing Initiative, recently renamed the Corridor Development Initiative, was designed to achieve some of these aims, bringing communities, governments and developers together to share information, build relationships and create shared guidelines for how future development can both add value to the neighbourhood and expand housing choices in the context of what is financially viable.

Since 2003, this innovative programme has worked on 19 project areas or 'corridors' in established and suburban cities in the metropolitan area of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul in Minnesota, US. It has also been replicated in a

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slightly modified form in Chicago (Metropolitan Planning Council, 2008). In Minnesota, the focus of this paper, each 'corridor' includes representatives from neighbourhood and community groups, or the citizen planning and housing boards of small cities, who have applied to be part of the process. Community groups do this because of an interest in attracting or shaping higher density and affordable development in their neighbourhoods.

Over a period of six months a steering committee convenes to define key issues, goals and work plan for the process. Several public meetings and workshops are held with different stakeholder groups and the broader public, and community representatives devise a simple set of guidelines or goals to proactively attract developers to their neighbourhood and interest them in preferred sites and possibilities. The city also commits to use the guidelines to attract and/or approve independent development initiatives. While the project does not literally use community benefits agreements outlining benefits of development, the spirit of the process is to help key partners negotiate developments that fit local values and provide positive outcomes for neighbourhoods and communities. CHI is fundamentally a programme of community and city staff capacity-building that produces results. Of the first five corridors in the programme, four now have housing projects moving ahead.

This practice note draws on interviews, documents and the personal observations of the authors, who were involved in the CHI technical team, to outline how the initiative came about, a typical process, the core techniques and materials developed or refined for the programme and key lessons. While the life span of its main influence is a handful of years in each neighbourhood or suburb, this time span is probably enough to allow innovative developments to go ahead in a collaborative manner. It is a process that can break through the impasse that so much redevelopment faces by inviting participation, identifying and articulating key values, and using urban design as part of an awareness-raising process (Peterson, 2007; Sarkissian *et al.*, 2008).

### Why the Initiative Was Needed

The project came from an insight by Gretchen Nicholls, the Executive Director of the Center for Neighborhoods in the Twin Cities at the time, and now offering the initiative through the Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). In the early 2000s the Metropolitan Council, the metropolitan government for the area of over 3 million people, was projecting a metropolitan population increase of approximately 1 million people by 2030; approximately 25 000 more households were expected in the City of Minneapolis alone (Metropolitan Council, 2007). The city's comprehensive plan proposed placing much of that increase in population in redevelopment that comprised attached housing units along transit (bus and light rail) corridors and in designated centres. This strategy simultaneously protected the cores of existing lower-density neighbourhoods, located new housing where it could be less dependent on cars, and helped to promote affordability by more intensively using land (Cervero, 1998; City of Minneapolis, 2000).

However, such redevelopment was proving difficult—too often developers came to Minneapolis' strong, city-supported neighbourhood groups with fully designed proposals that met fast rejection or years of delay (Martin & Pentel, 2002). This drove up costs for development, meaning that neighbourhoods that

might like new housing options were not getting them. Residents feared ugly development, poorly maintained apartments, and new residents with low incomes or with too many cars. While higher density and affordable housing can be well designed and managed, such good examples were typically invisible to residents. Similarly, those eligible for affordable housing shared much in common with the existing residents; however, this was not always apparent in public debates. The initiative, designed over a year-long process that involved a steering committee from government, neighbourhoods and non-profits, was created to get around that impasse for those neighbourhoods interested in redevelopment.

Neighbourhood groups in the central cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul were the focus of the first corridor projects. These groups were often involved in opposing developments that they have thought to be inappropriate, but were also facing development pressures or were concerned about a lack of housing options in their neighbourhoods. They voluntarily submitted applications to participate in the project—funded largely by foundations and housing funders—and became the core of the corridor-specific steering committees. In 2007, while central city work continued, the project was extended to suburban areas, typically working with citizen boards and commissions (e.g. planning boards that typically advise councils on development approvals, housing and redevelopment boards concerned with redevelopment).

Overall, the neighbourhood associations and citizen boards are key partners in the initiative with a powerful role. However, one of the strengths of the CHI process is that it brings together residents, city officials and those involved in development in a dialogue. Two of the key designers of the process, Gretchen Nicholls and Barbara Raye, talked early on about the issue of empowerment and the ‘locus of power’. They set about to design something that brought the three parties together as equals, changing the role of neighbourhood groups. Rather than react to proposals they would play an active part in directing development for their community, coming to realize how increased density and the subsidies available for affordable housing could be tools for creating a viable development project.

As the staff member of a large neighbourhood that participated in two CHI processes explained in an interview conducted for a CHI video:

One of the strengths of the Corridor Housing Initiative is that it uses what I'd like to call a three-legged stool approach. So you have the city at the table; you have developers at the table; and then you also have community stakeholders at the table with everyone having an equal voice in the outcomes that are produced as part of the process ... And I think that's really one of the strengths of the Corridor Housing Initiative, is that it allows the community to have an agenda, the developers to have theirs, and the city as well.

### **The Initiative in Action: A Typical Corridor Process**

The CHI project partners include city staff and elected officials, community organizations and volunteer committees, and the CHI Technical Team. Together they work over a six-month period that involves meetings of the steering committee, information gathering and public events.

The steering committee for each CHI project area is composed of city planning staff and representatives from community groups, business associations and other critical stakeholders. The steering committee works with the CHI coordinator and facilitator to identify key issues, aggregate current planning reports and studies and propose specific opportunity sites to be explored. They also help design a series of community workshops, an outreach and communication strategy, and to authorize the final products provided through the CHI process. The non-profit and university technical team of the convenor (Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)), facilitators (Center for Policy, Planning and Performance), a non-profit developer (Aeon), and urban designers (for the first years, the Metropolitan Design Center) provide the technical support for this project.

The initiative provides a menu of activities and resources that are hand-crafted into specific corridor processes. While the CHI team has had a preference for adding CHI events onto existing activities such as farmers' markets or planning meetings, the committees have often wanted special meetings. Most corridor events have had solid attendance with each attracting dozens, and in a few cases hundreds, of people to participate in meetings and other public events.

A typical process involves:

- Initial meetings of the steering committee to assess where they are in the planning process and to tailor the menu of CHI activities to their situation.
- A public meeting explaining existing planning and identifying neighbourhood concerns. This and other meetings use ground rules that speak about respect and listening, allowing conflict to be surfaced in safe ways.
- A focus group with local businesses or with developers who have undertaken projects in the area.
- A second public meeting with an interactive exercise explaining local development conditions—the block exercise (see below).
- A third meeting where a panel of local developers and business people talk about opportunities and constraints with residents that are now more knowledgeable about current market dynamics and viable development options.
- A public or steering committee meeting to finalize a one-page development preferences sheet—this is to give developers guidelines for future development.
- Ongoing meetings to implement strategies to attract preferred development.

Building public participation for the CHI community workshops is a multifaceted approach. Occasionally CHI will partner with a neighbourhood or community group that is able to provide a local organizer to door knock or recruit participation. CHI will contract with those organizations to provide resources for the staff time and costs associated to that outreach. Communication and outreach strategies include a range of materials including: postcards, flyers, posters and emails; a section of the CHI website and websites for each local organization; newsletter and newspaper advertisements; and letters from elected officials.

The most important way that the initiative implements public participation is to provide interactive methods with independent (neutral) facilitators that are also knowledgeable about community development for participants to come to grips with the challenges to development that the market and location define. Participants gain a rich awareness of each other as they interact through facilitated small group discussions, the block exercise and in dialogue with panelists.

The facilitator is able to draw out the many perspectives and capture key ideas that bring clarity about community goals and priorities.

### Specific Techniques

Several techniques combine to make this project unusual. In order to enhance project transferability most are documented on the project's website and in the project videos. They draw on the rich literature in participatory design, but form a unique collection (Nick Wates Associates, n.d.; Sanoff, 2000; Sarkissian *et al.*, 2003; Urban Places Project, 2000). They include the block exercise, educational materials, tool transfer, outreach and independent facilitation focusing on acknowledging change.

#### *Block Exercise*

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the educational components of the initiative is the relatively simple interactive block exercise that community members refer to as 'transformational'. Working from a base map made of a large aerial photo of a hypothetical development site in their neighbourhood, citizens create development options from physical block models representing standard



Participants voting with dots at a farmers market—by using existing events participation is increased.



Educational materials as background information in a public meeting.



A corridor-specific display of façade options allows participants to discuss local character.



Participant looking at density poster showing local examples of attractive housing at a variety of densities.

**Figure 1.** Participatory exercises and educational materials in use

unit sizes. Two designers are at each table—one to help with the site planning and one to sketch the result. The blocks are photographed with a Polaroid camera and this is used to sketch the option in styles chosen by participants. Sketchers use as a base panoramic photos with a grid of floor heights and unit modules overlaid. With this preparation a fairly detailed perspective sketch takes about 15 minutes. By photographing the designs, participants can be working on the next block model while sketching is under way. Development option costs and revenues for the specific designs are calculated by a development consultant almost immediately using local assumptions about developer fees, subsidies, construction costs and rental/sales prices for that specific neighbourhood (see Figures 1 and 2).

The process helps community members understand the financial issues and trade-offs the developer will be working through when considering options for a specific site (i.e. mix of residential and commercial uses, surface level or underground parking, amount of green space, number of units, integration of affordable housing, etc.). The financial calculations are a vital part of the project as they allow the exercise to go beyond attractive pictures of what can be built. Without the development pro forma that explains unit numbers, tenure, green space, parking numbers and location, subsidies, and most importantly the financial bottom line, the exercise would not work.



Participants discuss options. Facilitator is to left.



Participants work at a table; the facilitator is on the right, and the sketcher at the end of the table.



Sketcher draws buildings from block model that has been photographed with a Polaroid.



Developer calculating development numbers.

Figure 2. Participants at a block exercise

More conceptually, the block exercise is framed to allow participants to build something that represents the values they identify during the first meeting—and then to understand the extent to which current financial and market realities support the development they have built. Participants often find themselves in a position of understanding that they cannot get ‘everything’ they want, but they can negotiate and prioritize important values so that development in a given area becomes an asset for the community and offers long-term value.

Participants quickly recognize why developers often need greater densities to make a project viable, and what happens to the cost and design of the building as the development transforms into different variations (i.e. mix of commercial and residential, all residential, mix of affordable and market rate housing). In this metropolitan area with many detached houses, participants come to realize why four storey buildings (the limit to wood framing) may be needed to make development work out financially. In some neighbourhoods already having many apartments, higher density involves high rise. In many areas adding significant amounts of affordable housing would bring enough government subsidies to make a development break even; in that context participants quickly rethink their attitude to affordable housing. In some neighbourhoods commercial space breaks even, but in others it brings a loss.

Through the work of the designers sketching their options, supported by the images of attractive local affordable and higher density housing described below, they also realize that such higher density and affordable housing can be made to fit in their neighbourhoods. Participants come to recognize how landscape and building design, rather than merely the size of the building, can make a great difference in how such developments fits.

A summary of the results of the exercise with a map, photos of the site and workshop, sketches of proposed buildings and development numbers is produced. This is still very rough and conceptual, but can be the starting point for informed conversations about actual developments. These summaries are placed online to be shared with those who could not make the workshop (see Figure 3).

An example of the transformational aspect of this exercise comes from a neighbourhood near a university where the population had been declining, with some multiple unit buildings converted back to single family homes. This neighbourhood saw CHI as a way to begin a master planning process, but they were more interested in corridor planning than housing. The design team created a visual preference survey on building height, but members of the steering committee thought it would be too controversial. This made the first meeting quite important. At this meeting the representative of a local foundation presented demographic trends that showed declining enrolment in the elementary school, making it at risk for eventual closure. A member of the design team showed a PowerPoint presentation on neighbourhood character. Focusing on built form and landscaping, she showed that contrary to local perceptions of neighbourhood buildings being largely one and two storeys high, that several important buildings were four or five storeys and these were often on hills, accentuating the topography. She also showed that there were attractive and unattractive buildings of all heights.

This set the stage for the block exercise a few weeks later. Neighbours were still suspicious of development but were prepared to try it out. One group started off wanting a one-storey restaurant and once they figured out that such buildings

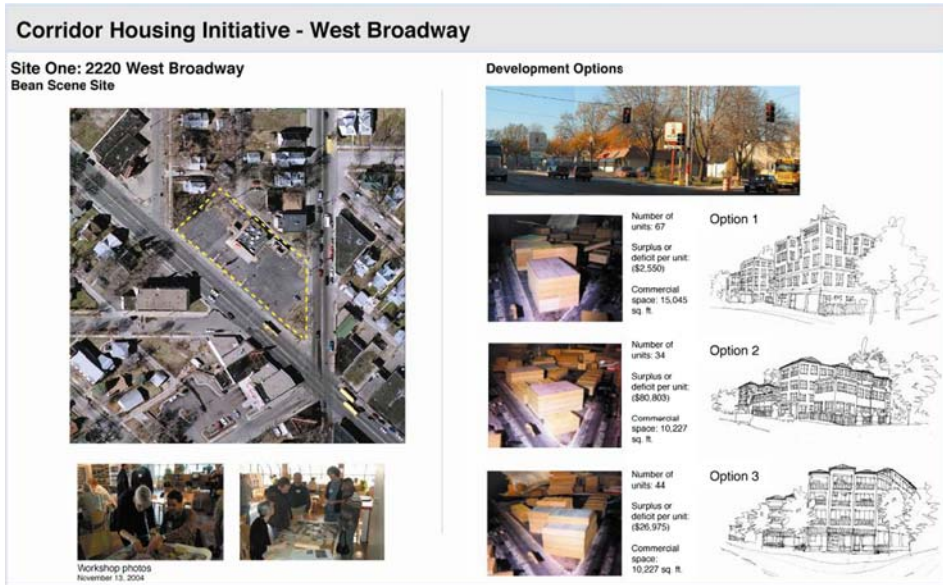


Figure 3. Parts of summary sheet from a block exercise meeting

would not be financially viable, quickly developed attached options of three or more floors. Another group, inspired by the idea of buildings accentuating the topography, decided to explore high rise because of views, even though lower-rise buildings would have been less expensive. Overall, buildings ranged up to 16 storeys with many using affordable housing to help break even. This allowed local residents to think about higher buildings and affordable housing as a strategy for getting better development, to consider the needs of the ageing residents and possibilities for attracting more households with children, and to explore designs reflecting the actual diversity of their area (rather than its perceived architectural homogeneity).

### *Educational Materials*

What does the community want to achieve through development, and what are the concerns? This initial question posed at the CHI community workshops sets the stage for a candid discussion of the way the community views itself, as well as what it will become. Change can be a destabilizing force, and people in

communities are interested in taking care of each other. But their ideas of what is possible are often limited to a few examples.

The initiative's educational materials offer an expansive array of housing types and mixed use options to consider, images of local examples of well-loved places with a range of density levels, and positive local examples of affordable housing (that are difficult to distinguish from market rate housing). A handout on income levels of those eligible for affordable housing is eye opening for residents who frequently see their own incomes on the sheet. Materials are typically available in a variety of formats (web, poster, PowerPoint and handout). All are downloadable from the website at [www.housinginitiative.org](http://www.housinginitiative.org).

They draw on lessons from the international literature on housing and density with sources cited in small text on sheets or on introductory materials (Cooper Marcus & Sarkissian, 1986; Jones *et al.*, 1997). However, the use of images of local examples of housing types, affordable housing, mixed-use models and

Housing Density
East Village • 62 <sup>units</sup>/<sub>acre</sub>




East Village is a mixed-use development that provides a variety of housing choices for a variety of income levels in a compact, urban neighborhood on the edge of downtown.



The mix of apartments and retail in East Village creates a strong, lively street edge that has revitalized its Elliot park neighborhood.

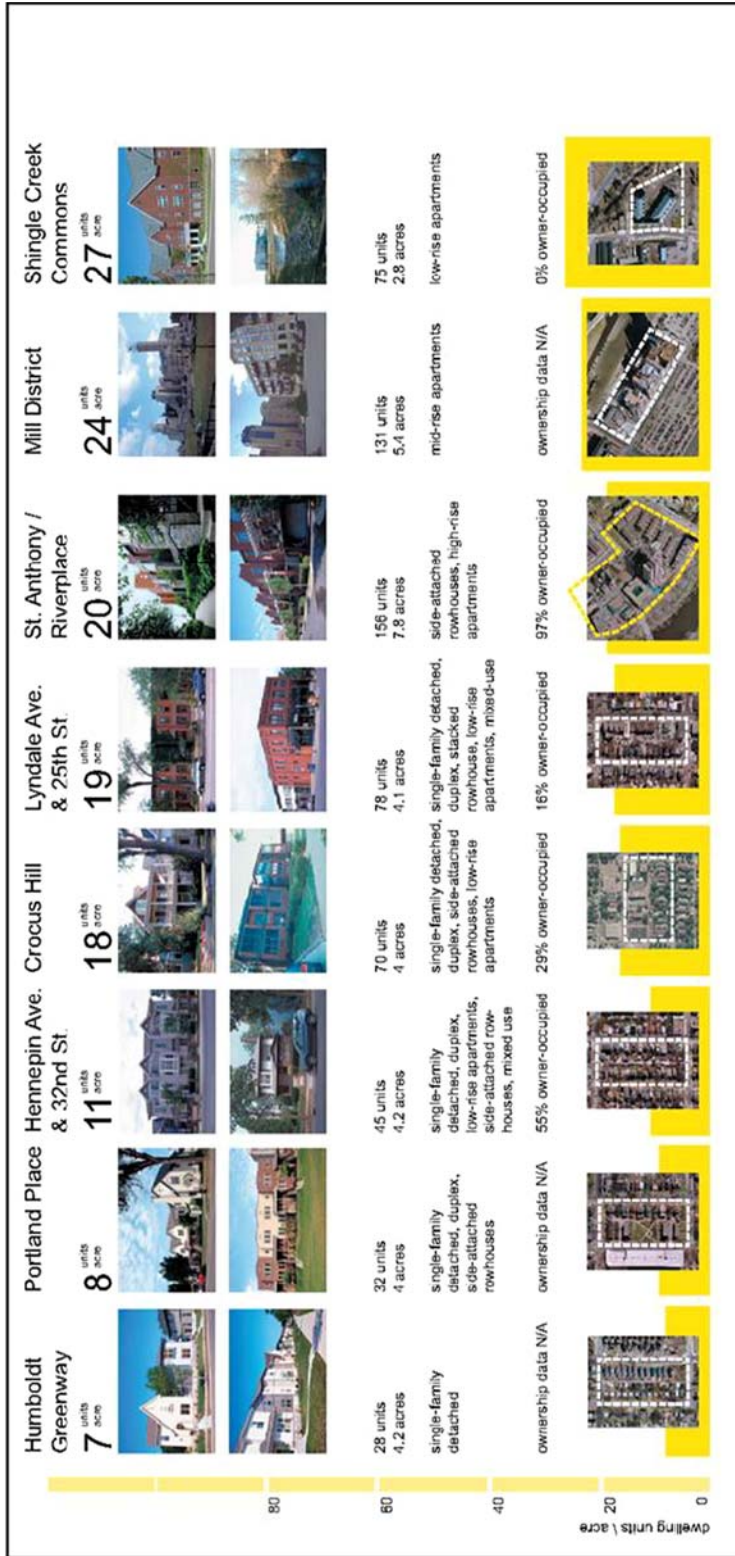


In addition to apartments, East Village has stacked rowhouses, in which apartments, or flats, are placed over individual rowhouses or townhouses.



The street-level houses of East Village's stacked rowhouse units have small porches that open onto fenced patios. They provide clearly defined private space along the street, and within a communal interior landscaped courtyard.

**Figure 4.** Part of density sheet featuring local example and affordable housing. The other side featured site and context maps and demographic data; this example includes affordable units



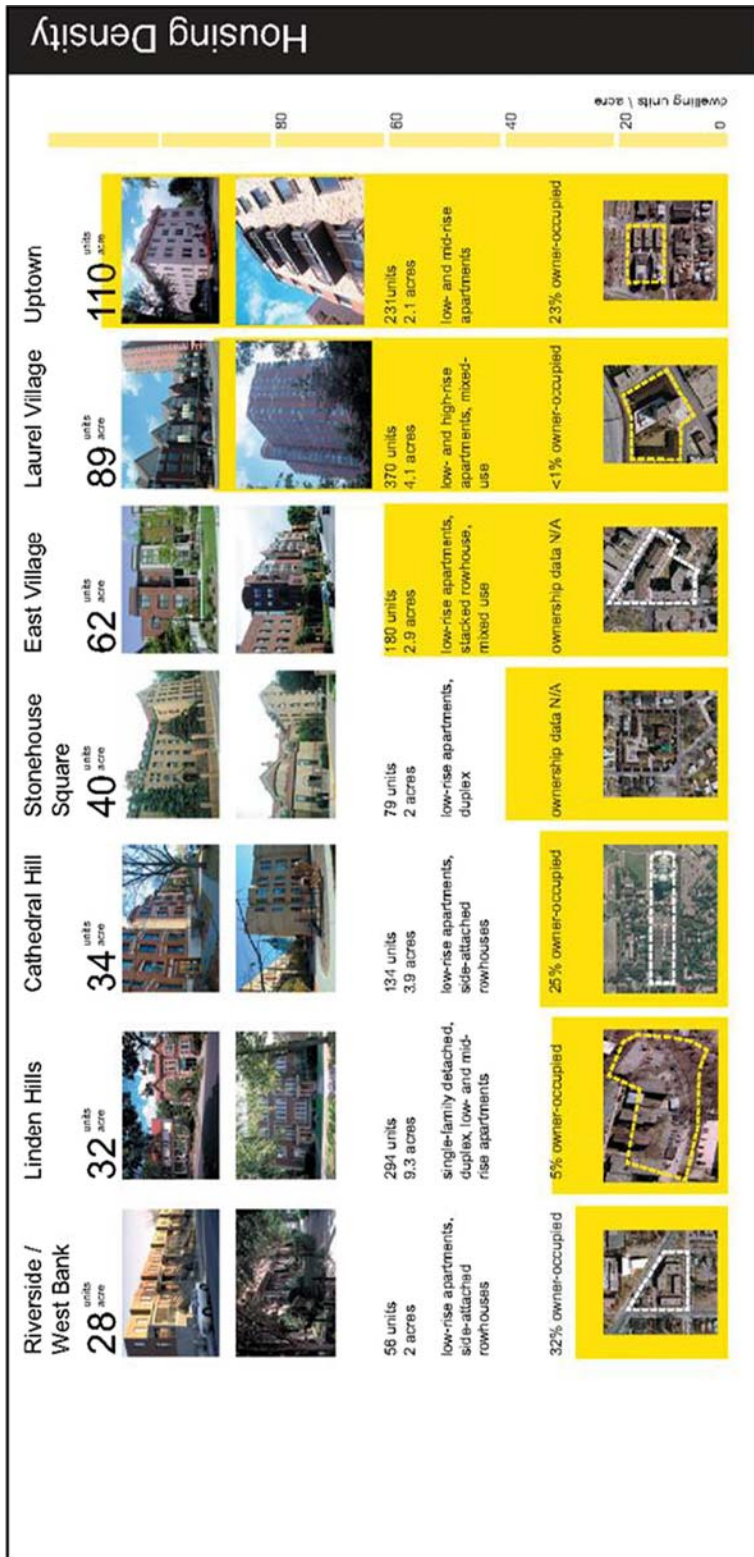


Figure 5. Density scale for central city housing using local examples

density levels makes options real for participants, who can draw from their own experience of what the places feel like. The housing density and housing type materials have been particularly well received as they show local examples of block-level densities up to 110 units per acre (271 units per hectare) in the central cities and 50 units per acre (123/hectares) in the suburbs; and a range of attractive housing types beyond detached houses and row houses. The design team spent weeks searching the metropolitan area to find well-designed developments that included both market rate and subsidized affordable units (see Figures 4 and 5).

### *Outreach*

Outreach works differently in centre cities and in suburbs. In centre cities there are many community organizations to work as partners. In suburban areas the initiative assists suburban cities in thinking about ways to build broader public participation and engage the community in development opportunities. Overall, local residents come from rich and poor neighbourhoods and a number of ethnic and religious groups, meaning the outreach approach needs to be flexible and multifaceted—working with the steering committee to identify people beyond those normally expected and even mediating between groups that had bad experiences with each other in the past to enable them to move forward together in this process.

The main CHI website at <http://www.housinginitiative.org/> and partner websites also reach those not attending events and meeting. Holding events in open venues such as coffee shops can reach those who might not come to a typical meeting. It was not always possible to piggy-back onto other events, but as one resident leader explained in a letter about such a process:

Taking advantage of already popular events ... we integrated CHI into these gatherings to broaden community involvement ... These events were hugely popular and brought a very deep awareness of the CHI process into the neighborhood as a whole. This plan helped the neighborhood residents see the need for affordable housing in one of the more affluent neighborhoods in the city, and actually embrace the call for more, instead of rejecting it.

### *Tool Transfer*

The project has also worked to transfer these skills to others. As previously stated, all educational materials are available on the website. CHI has produced two videos. Both are available on YouTube and can be downloaded from the web (available at: [http://www.corridordevelopment.org/15/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=94&Itemid=110](http://www.corridordevelopment.org/15/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=94&Itemid=110)). The first, *Corridor Housing Initiative Because Place Matters* (11 minutes) explains what the initiative is and why it is important. The second, *Corridor Housing Initiative: A Strategy for Successful Planning* (30 minutes), explains the process in more detail for those interested in doing it themselves. In addition, through a series of training processes, CHI has been transferred to the Madison Neighborhood Design Center and to the Chicago Metropolitan Planning Agency with great success—and a video made by the Chicago group is now online (Metropolitan Planning Council, 2008).

Supplemented by the *Corridor Housing Initiative Block Exercise How to Guide* (available at: <http://www.corridordevelopment.org/15/index.php?>

option=com\_content&view=article&id=91=Itemid=107), a forthcoming facilitation guide, and other materials on the web, it will be possible for communities to attempt the process themselves.

### *Independent Facilitation*

The project uses experienced large-group facilitators to ensure that dialogue occurs in a safe and honest environment. The facilitators do not come from the city, the community, or the developers yet have enough grounding in the discipline and language of each perspective to help translate and enhance genuine communication. By being independent, and separate to the other parts of the design team focused on specific tasks, the facilitators have a sole allegiance to helping those attending the meeting/session to say what they need to say without bias or resistance. Barbara Raye, the leader of the facilitation group, had previously worked in planning and also had significant high-level facilitation training. Due to her dual training, the facilitator has been able to understand nuances in meetings and more quickly translate terms into common vocabulary or manage difference and debate.

A strength of the facilitation approach has been its emphasis on allowing community members to acknowledge that change is a part of the history of their neighbourhoods and cities, and that change will occur with or without their guidance. This develops a context where the options are to constructively imagine and invite the change that will make a positive difference or continue to rely on the anti-organizing work of stopping bad things from happening. It is also a conscious way to dismantle the we/they dynamic that is expressed in calls for 'no change', often the code for 'others' need to stay out. For example, in a gentle way the facilitator often reminds people of the historical use of government subsidies and the benefits that many of them or their ancestors benefited from, for example, mortgage interest deductions, the GI Bill, and other housing subsidies after World War II. This creates some space for them to consider the new public policy concerns of affordable housing, green incentives and density.

### **Lessons and Limitations**

The project has been evaluated continuously—a requirement for grant funded projects in the current period. Participants fill in evaluation forms for specific meetings. It has also been evaluated twice for its overall impact. These evaluations have been conducted by the facilitation group in the technical team, and reflect participatory values. The evaluations show that CHI helps to expand the options that residents can imagine while also giving voice to the community as an integral part of finding solutions and guiding development.<sup>1</sup> These evaluations led to its change in name from the Corridor Housing Initiative to the Corridor Development Initiative, a change that leaves open the form of the redevelopment. It has won a number of awards, with the chair of one national jury (American Planning Association), describing it as a 'model' for resolving "controversial neighbourhood redevelopment and infill issues". There are also some important limitations to the process as several key lessons—both are described below.

### *Limitations*

*Participation has a limited half life.* The initiative is primarily a process of education and relationship building. It does not create plans or developments. This means that over time as people move out of neighbourhoods some of their local knowledge is lost; as the process is so forward looking some key people can hold much of this knowledge. The half life of such a process is probably some years, not some decades, and may not be synchronized with real estate cycles. However, times when the housing market is not 'hot' are good times for planning processes such as CHI. This is a delicate balance.

*Control of land.* Ultimately, the CHI process is meant to produce units, but in only some of the corridors has a government or similar entity had control of land that could be developed. Thus it relies on developer interest and community efforts to attract and promote projects; current landowners must also be willing to sell or cooperate. This has occurred in many of the early corridors, but this lack of control makes the implementation process more complicated.

### *Lessons*

*It is important to bring government and residents closer together.* The public often participates in development decisions by saying no to a development, using political pressure to stop change in their neighbourhoods. Part of the strength of the CHI process is to transform public input by helping them gain a sophisticated understanding of design options and development realities. In addition, the process also builds the capacity of city employees to engage the public in respectful and meaningful ways. City staff members participate in the steering committees, write and present summaries of previous plans and explain the overall city plan. By bringing government officials to the table, identifying people who have real names and have real power at city hall, elected officials and professional staff, the CHI process helps people build relationships and cuts the distance between people and their government.

*Common values.* In the developer panel at one typical meeting, doing design work and developing guidelines, community members learn that having a quality development is also in the interests of developers, investors and city staff. This awareness of something important that is held in common by all the parties provides a foundation for the work that will come later and for the compromises and adaptations need to be made throughout the development process.

*Design can help resolve conflicts.* The initiative has a crucial insight—that design can help resolve the potential conflicts between neighbourhood values, development realities and city goals (Madanipour, 2006). Educational materials expand the options that neighbours can imagine, the block exercise allows participants to experiment with design options in their neighbourhoods, surveys and workshops promote discussion about community values. Site planning, landscaping, streetscapes and open space amenities are a key part of this discussion. With volatility in energy prices, and growing awareness of environmental issues, green design is also a key issue. However, the corridor initiative goes beyond some issues of building technologies and places housing

near jobs and services, in attached housing which is more efficient. Again, providing attractive design visualizations can help residents see that green urban design, not just green buildings, can contribute to their quality of life.

*The economics of development is intensely engaging.* By working with real numbers on identifiable sites participants in the block exercise come to understand the local development context and the financial implications of different design options. In the CHI process this spurred imagination to consider affordable and high-density options.

With the economic downturn starting in 2007, actual development resulting from this process has slowed—so only the earliest corridors have units in the pipeline. Conditions are in place to take advantage of the future recovery of the housing market, and to also build on the growing interest in infrastructure improvements from the Obama administration. Overall the initiative demonstrates a multifaceted and participatory approach to promoting redevelopment and more intensive use of urban land.

### Acknowledgements

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### Note

1. The initiative has also been recognized more formally. It was awarded the 2007 National Grassroots Planning Award from the American Planning Association (APA) as well as a Minnesota APA outstanding Plan Award. It was a 2005 finalist in the Innovations in American Government Awards and a 2006 winner of the Innovations in Minnesota Government Awards. These awards have helped raise the profile of participatory techniques in planning and policy circles (Forsyth & Nicholls, 2006; Peterson, 2007).

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