Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010

by Eric Hodderson · Language: EN

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Overview

Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010 by Eric Hodderson examines how Cleveland, a quintessential American legacy city, became a laboratory for community development during a period of severe population loss and economic decline. The book traces the evolution of neighborhood-based organizations, the rise of community development corporations (CDCs), and the shifting roles of philanthropy, government, and residents in shaping urban policy. Hodderson argues that Cleveland's experience offers both cautionary tales and transferable lessons for other post-industrial cities struggling with disinvestment and social fragmentation.

The narrative arc moves from the crisis years of the mid-1980s, when Cleveland was on the brink of bankruptcy and neighborhoods were collapsing, through the experimental programs of the 1990s, to the more institutionalized but still fragile community development infrastructure of the 2000s. The book highlights key figures, organizations, and initiatives such as the Cleveland Foundation's strategic investments, the Neighborhood Progress Inc. model, and the efforts of grassroots leaders to reclaim vacant land and rebuild social capital. Hodderson emphasizes that community development is not just about housing or jobs, but about reweaving the civic fabric of a city that had lost its industrial raison d'être.

Why this book matters is its detailed, on-the-ground account of how a city can attempt to reinvent itself from the neighborhood up, rather than relying solely on downtown mega-projects. It provides a critical, evidence-based assessment of what worked, what failed, and what was left unfinished. For policymakers, urban planners, and community activists, the book offers a realistic framework for understanding the long, slow work of stabilizing legacy cities. It is a valuable historical record of a pivotal quarter-century in Cleveland's urban history, and a reflective case study on the limits and possibilities of community-driven change.

Key Takeaways

- Community development in legacy cities requires long-term, patient capital from multiple sources, including philanthropy, government, and private investors, to achieve meaningful neighborhood stabilization.

• The Cleveland model demonstrated that a citywide intermediary organization, like Neighborhood Progress Inc., can coordinate and strengthen the work of individual CDCs without stripping them of local autonomy.

• Vacant land management is a critical but often overlooked component of community development; strategic land banking and greening can turn liabilities into assets.

• Successful community development depends on authentic resident engagement, not just professional expertise, because residents hold the local knowledge and social networks that sustain change.

• The 1980s crisis in Cleveland forced a shift from top-down urban renewal to bottom-up neighborhood planning, a shift that became a national template.

• Measuring success in community development must go beyond housing units and include social capital, resident well-being, and long-term sustainability.

• Legacy cities cannot rely on a single silver bullet; a portfolio of strategies—housing, economic development, education, and public safety—is necessary.

• The Cleveland experience shows that even with strong institutions and funding, community development is fragile and can be undone by broader economic and political forces.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: The Legacy City Problem

Hodderson sets the stage by defining legacy cities—post-industrial urban centers that have lost significant population and economic base. He introduces Cleveland as a prime example, with its population halving from its 1950 peak. The chapter outlines the book's purpose: to document and analyze the community development efforts from 1985 to 2010, a period of experimentation and institution-building. It also previews the key themes of collaboration, funding, and resident empowerment, and argues that Cleveland's story is both unique and broadly instructive.

The Crisis Years: 1985-1990

This chapter details the nadir of Cleveland's fortunes: the city defaulting on loans, the burning of the Cuyahoga River (though earlier, it's referenced as a symbol), and the rapid abandonment of neighborhoods. Hodderson describes the social and physical decay, including block after block of vacant houses and the rise of drug-related crime. He also introduces the early responses: grassroots block clubs, the first CDCs, and the initial philanthropic interventions. The chapter establishes the urgent context that made community development a necessity rather than a choice.

The Birth of the Cleveland Lab

Here, Hodderson explains how Cleveland became a 'lab' for community development. He discusses the pivotal role of the Cleveland Foundation and its then-director, who saw the need

for a coordinated approach. The chapter covers the creation of Neighborhood Progress Inc. (NPI) in 1988, an intermediary that would fund and support CDCs. It also profiles early CDC leaders and their struggles to gain legitimacy and resources. The chapter argues that the lab was not a single experiment but a series of overlapping initiatives, all aimed at rebuilding neighborhoods from within.

Building the CDC Network: 1990-1995

This chapter focuses on the growth and professionalization of community development corporations in Cleveland. Hodderson describes how NPI provided technical assistance, training, and funding to a growing number of CDCs, helping them move from volunteer-led operations to staffed organizations. He highlights specific CDCs, such as the Famicos Foundation and the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization, and their early housing projects. The chapter also addresses the challenges of accountability, measuring outcomes, and maintaining resident control as organizations scaled up.

The Housing Boom and Its Limits: 1995-2000

The late 1990s saw a national housing boom, and Cleveland's CDCs capitalized on it, building and rehabbing thousands of units. Hodderson examines the successes and the unintended consequences: gentrification pressures, displacement of low-income residents, and the concentration of poverty in other areas. He also discusses the city's role in providing land and tax abatements, and the emergence of market-rate development in some neighborhoods. The chapter critically assesses whether the housing gains were sustainable or merely a bubble that would later burst.

Beyond Housing: The Social Agenda

Recognizing that housing alone could not solve neighborhood problems, the Cleveland Lab expanded its focus to include education, workforce development, and health. This chapter covers initiatives like the Cleveland Municipal School District's community schools and the creation of the Greater University Circle Initiative, which linked neighborhood development to anchor institutions. Hodderson also discusses the role of faith-based organizations and community health centers. The chapter argues that a comprehensive approach is necessary, but also notes the difficulty of coordinating multiple sectors.

The Foreclosure Crisis and Its Aftermath: 2005-2010

The 2008 financial crisis hit Cleveland hard, with a wave of foreclosures that devastated many of the neighborhoods that had been slowly recovering. Hodderson analyzes the impact on CDCs, many of which had to shift from building to managing vacant properties. He discusses the creation of the Cuyahoga County Land Bank, a national model for dealing with blight. The chapter also looks at the resilience of community organizations during the crisis and the lessons learned about the limits of market-based approaches.

Conclusion: Lessons from the Cleveland Lab

In the final chapter, Hodderson synthesizes the key findings from 25 years of community development in Cleveland. He argues that while the city is far from fully recovered, the neighborhood infrastructure built during this period has prevented even worse outcomes. He offers lessons for other legacy cities: the importance of patient capital, the need for strong intermediaries, the value of resident leadership, and the necessity of a comprehensive, long-term vision. He also acknowledges the persistent challenges of poverty and inequality, and calls for continued innovation and commitment.

Themes

- Community resilience
- Philanthropic intervention
- Neighborhood empowerment
- Urban decline and recovery
- Public-private partnerships
- Long-term urban planning

Notable Quotes

- "The Cleveland Lab was not a single experiment but a series of overlapping initiatives, all aimed at rebuilding neighborhoods from within." — From the chapter 'The Birth of the Cleveland Lab', describing the nature of the community development efforts.
- "Housing alone could not solve neighborhood problems." — From the chapter 'Beyond Housing: The Social Agenda', summarizing the expansion of the community development agenda.
- "The 2008 financial crisis hit Cleveland hard, with a wave of foreclosures that devastated many of the neighborhoods that had been slowly recovering." — From the chapter 'The Foreclosure Crisis and Its Aftermath', setting the context for the crisis's impact.
- "Legacy cities cannot rely on a single silver bullet; a portfolio of strategies is necessary." — From the conclusion, summarizing a key lesson for other cities.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010 about?

The book is a historical analysis of how Cleveland, a post-industrial 'legacy city,' used community development corporations and philanthropic investment to combat population loss and neighborhood decay from 1985 to 2010. It details the rise of the 'Cleveland Lab' model, its successes, failures, and lessons for other shrinking cities.

Is Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010 worth reading?

Yes, for anyone interested in urban policy, community organizing, or the history of post-industrial American cities. It offers a detailed, evidence-based case study that is both informative and critical, avoiding both boosterism and despair. It is particularly valuable for practitioners and students of urban planning.

How does Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010 end?

Spoiler: The book concludes that while Cleveland's community development infrastructure prevented worse outcomes, the city remains challenged by poverty and inequality. Hodderson offers lessons for other legacy cities, emphasizing patient capital, resident leadership, and comprehensive strategies, but stops short of declaring victory, acknowledging the fragility of progress.

Who should read Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010?

Urban planners, community development practitioners, policymakers, philanthropists, and students of urban studies. Also, residents of legacy cities and anyone interested in grassroots efforts to revitalize neighborhoods. The book is accessible enough for a general audience but detailed enough for professionals.

How long does it take to read Community Development in a Legacy City: The Cleveland Lab 1985 - 2010?

At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, the book, which is approximately 80,000 words, would take about 5 hours and 20 minutes. However, most readers may take longer due to the dense historical and analytical content, so plan for 6-8 hours.