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YVONNE ABRAHAM

Trust and transformation in a Roxbury neighborhood

By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST JULY 24, 2014

It was a scene so ordinary and so utterly improbable.

On Tuesday morning, a dozen toddlers frolicked in a fountain at the Dennis Street Park, just outside Dudley Square, racing around with ear-splitting delight. All around the park, handsome houses stood in the sunshine, their planters cascading petunias.

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Twenty-five years ago, this Roxbury neighborhood was one of the most blighted places in the country, a monument to racism and neglect. Half of the 62 acres surrounding this park were vacant lots. And not just vacant lots, but overgrown wastelands where people dumped old refrigerators, burnt-out cars, rotting meat, and hazardous construction waste. Arson for profit was rampant. The neighborhood was left for dead.

“They found a lady dead over there,” said retired MBTA worker Ron Stokes, standing in his cozy living room, pointing in the direction of the toddlers. “The weeds were so high, it was only the smell that led them there. . . . You wondered how in the world [this place] could be part of a major city.”

How does such appalling desolation become uplifting beauty? “This here is what you call a miracle,” Stokes said.

You hear that kind of thing a lot in this neighborhood, that there was some higher power at work in what happened here.

That may be, but the transformation of this triangle of misery is also a lesson in how determined people can make massive change. It began when residents organized to protest the dumping. But activists were smart enough to see that cleaning up wasn't enough: This part of Roxbury had to be rebuilt. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative established a community land trust, Dudley Neighbors Inc. A block party at the park this Saturday will mark the trust's 25th anniversary.

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The goal was ambitious: make a community where there wasn't one and make it last. In the first arrangement of its kind in the nation, Mayor Ray Flynn handed over city-owned lots and gave the trust power to take the rest by eminent domain.

Because it was selling the houses and leasing the land to buyers, the trust could make the homes affordable, within reach of people like Diane Dujon. After winning the chance to buy one of the first 10 homes in a lottery, she drove by each morning on her way to work as a secretary at UMass Boston, watching her home rise from the ashes.

"I felt as though I was rich, having a house built," she said.

Up they went: sweet three-bedroom houses with backyards, mixed income co-ops and affordable rentals, with easy access to green spaces, 225 in all. Eventually, some of the land became part of an urban farm, the neat rows of arugula mocking the chaos that once lived here. In a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse on Brook Avenue, tomato plants reach to the ceiling in what was once a chop shop.

The genius of this arrangement: It recognizes that ownership alone does not a stable community make. You only have to look at Detroit or parts of Florida, to which the recession laid waste, to see that. The crash didn't undo the progress here.

"In 25 years, we've had only four foreclosures," said Harry Smith of Dudley Neighbors Inc.

Because homeowners lease the land on which their homes sit, the trust must sign off on all mortgages. That allowed it to protect owners from predatory lenders. When banks wanted to foreclose, they had to deal again with the trust, a formidable adversary, given its control over the land.

It's such a successful model for stabilizing communities that it's a wonder it hasn't happened in more places. It might soon. Dudley Neighbors Inc. is in talks with the city about other vacant land in Roxbury and is getting involved in other areas where working people are beset by gentrification or blight: Chinatown, Springfield, and Chelsea.

It will be a long time before aspiring homeowners find "For Sale" signs around Dennis Street Park.

"When I leave here," Stokes said, "they're putting me in a box."

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