**NEIGHBORHOODS USA CONFERENCE REPORT**

By Scott Jones

May 25-26, I attended the Neighborhoods USA annual conference, which was hosted this year in Omaha. The theme was *Bridging the Future*. I attended at the encouragement of the Long Range Planning Task Force, which had identified our relationship with the neighborhood as a key concern, and church member Janet Bonet, who was involved in planning for the conference. I wrote pages of notes or ideas that sprang from presentations I attended.

**Placemaking**

The keynote address was **“Placemaking: Creating the Heart of the Community”** and was given by [Fred Kent](https://www.pps.org/about/team/fkent/), founder and president of Project for Public Spaces. Cities need to create destinations and within those neighborhoods at least ten places for people to hang out and do things (multi-use public spaces), each with ten things to do. He said to think of streets as a series of places for pedestrians. Buildings should learn to “bring the inside outside.” He encouraged the attendees to be “visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear.”

As he spoke I thought of our building and its relationship to the neighborhood. We have been a cultural anchor (a place) in this neighborhood for a century. Now the neighborhood is a thriving destination in the metro and a growing (even gentrifying) residential/pedestrian neighborhood. ***How might we maximize our role of being a place within this destination?***

We already bring the inside out through our patio, labyrinth, and community garden. But can we do more? Surely. There has been talk of a Little Library and outdoor food pantry, a bike rack, benches along the street, improved landscaping and signage. What else could we do to expand on our corner being a place that neighbors stop to rest or do something? How can we also use their pausing to communicate something about the church? Once you start asking these questions, the ideas proliferate.

**arts**

I next attended a workshop on **“Creative Placemaking in the Margins”** about bringing the arts to underserved communities. The presenters were from the [Blues City Cultural Center in Memphis](http://bluescitycc.org/) whose motto is “Arts for a better way of life.” During this session I was still brimming with ideas from the previous talk and continued taking notes while I brainstormed. One thing I thought of was how we might use our growing **Arts ministry** as a way to reach out to the neighborhood/city. Could we plan more events for the neighborhood? Include arts classes as part of the community center ideas from the LRPTF?

Should we create some sort of **network with neighborhood and community stakeholders**? What about a gathering once or twice a year where we invite leaders of some of the groups that use the church, of the area neighborhood associations, some of the business leaders and developers, non-profits, etc. to discuss what’s going on in the neighborhood and how we can be better engaged with it?

**greening**

Next I attended **“Greening Omaha One Neighborhood at a Time: We Have Some Fun!”** presented by a variety of leaders in the [Midtown Neighborhood Alliance](https://midtownneighborhoodalliance.wordpress.com/) (Green initiatives were also part of the LRPTF report). They discussed a variety of projects in the area, including the Dundee flower baskets, the [ReTree program](http://retreenebraska.unl.edu/), community gardens, etc. One area of discussion was **pollinator gardens**. We did have one at one time. There is now [a coordinated effort and certification](http://entomology.unl.edu/pollinator-habitat-certification) through the University of Nebraska Extension. We should recreate our pollinator garden.

They discussed **you pick gardens** where anyone can take fruit and veggies. *What if we had some veggie boxes on the patio that were you pick?*

They also discussed maximizing space for growing vegetables, including using the strip of land that’s usually between a sidewalk and the street to grow sweet potatoes.

I thought about how as part of our exterior signage we could also include these various gardens and how these gardens would help to **express our values**—a way of bringing the inside outside. *We need to think of landscaping as a way to express our values, not just create pretty beds* (though we need to do that too).

They also recommended **signage** for your trees and plants identifying what they are. People like knowing and like stopping to look what a plant is. This would be another way to create a place hospitable to neighbors.

We should also plant some new **trees**. I did grab the recommended trees for 2017 as part of the city’s effort to renew our canopy. Also the Leavenworth Neighborhood Association is one of the few in the area which was never applied for a ReTree grant. *Maybe we can lead the association in doing so and thus get trees not just for ourselves but also our neighbors?*

**Building Community**

Friday morning I attended **“Creative Placemaking: Using Cultural, Design, and Planning Assets to Stabilize and Grow Communities”** presented by a group of Omaha designers and architects about various local projects, including the Dundee Theatre remodel, the Blue Barn Theatre, and the Gifford Park Neighborhood Market. They also discussed local failures in placemaking—the Gene Leahy Mall, the destruction of the Clarinda-Page, etc.

My three notes from this session are:

* **Using creative activity to build community**
* “A building that leaks its program into the outdoors.”
* A spatial gradient between public and private space for a building.

**green infrastructure**

Next was **“Green Infrastructure”** presented by the city’s coordinator of [stormwater](http://omahastormwater.org/) and a UNO professor on environmental studies. They discussed the city’s sewer separation, and I learned a lot about that which I didn’t know before. One thing the city is encouraging is for more businesses, residents, etc. to create their own **green infrastructure and sustainable landscapes**, as that will help lower the costs of the sewer separation. They were particularly focused on rain gardens and discussed how to design those and [what plants to use.](http://www.omahaplants.org/)

Again they emphasized signage that explains your green infrastructure and also creating landscape that’s for people to enjoy and interact with. They also discussed how gardens are **STEAM** educators, which fit with another part of our LRPTF report.

*See, aren’t there lots of ideas for how we can make a place for neighbors and also communicate (and sometimes help achieve) our values by better using our outdoor spaces?*

**good neighbors**

The final workshop I attended was **“Grow in Gifford Park”** about the neighborhood north of the church which is the most diverse in the city and has seen increased vitality in recent years. The LRPTF had discussed this neighborhood and if we could have connections with it.

This session opened with an academic presentation on how architecture and space are forms of communication and about the mental maps that people create in their heads (the term “rhetorical cartographies” was used). The question was raised “What does a space or building communicate?” The academic presenter then talked about how communities can reimagine and **repurpose spaces**. Her focus of study had been how the Gifford Park Neighborhood Association had reimagined vacant and blighted spaces.

The presentation then shifted to neighbors discussing: the [Community Garden](http://giffordparkomaha.org/Community_Garden.html), the [Adventure Playground](http://www.omaha.com/momaha/playground-for-the-imagination-swaps-slides-and-swings-for-lumber/article_1011bd8b-d611-54ba-b092-08b1cbc8d605.html), the [Neighborhood Market](http://www.giffordparkomaha.org/files/Market2013_flier.pdf), and the [Big Muddy Urban Farm](https://www.bigmuddyurbanfarm.org/).

At the conference I heard about two **community gardens** and realized how ours doesn’t quite fit the term. We have a garden area where folk grow their own produce in their own beds, but the garden is not intentionally used to grow community. These other community gardens have events, program, educational opportunities, etc. Developing our community garden was another discussion in the LRPTF.

The **Neighborhood Market** was discussed as “the living room of the neighborhood.” These event, Friday evenings in the summer, has been going on for ten years. I don’t remember ever hearing about it before, which surprised me as someone who lives not far away.

So, that evening I walked there with Sebastian and our puppy Nash. I greatly enjoyed the experience. Neighbors sell whatever they want to sell—produce, crafts, art, food they’ve prepared, etc. There are picnic tables. Live music is being played from a stage. All ages and races were interacting. Teenage girls were selling cupcakes they’d made in order to raise money for themselves. Kids were running around playing. Dogs were sniffing each other. The atmosphere was wonderful.

I purchased our dinner from a Muslim woman in a burqa. I said, “A salaam alaikum” and “Ramadan Mubarak” and she expressed her gratitude that I had greeted her with these words.

*So, could we create a similar sort of event for our neighborhood? Or work with our neighborhood to do that?*