

Letter to the Editor re: *Shining a Light on Cities' Abandoned Buildings, From the Inside Out* (NYT – 11/26/16)

Alan Mallach is correct in attributing the disparity between viable and struggling neighborhoods to economics. In hundreds of distressed but walkable and relatively affordable neighborhoods throughout the country, the cost of buying and renovating a home exceeds its market value. This condition is known as an “appraisal gap”. Tragically, even when an appraisal gap is small, it is powerful enough to drive away homebuyers, lenders, and developers – all of whom are needed to reinvest in and rebuild our aging cities and inner-ring suburbs.

Last Spring, a group of nonprofit housing developers, community development lenders, and neighborhood revitalization policy advocates quietly gathered in New Orleans to discuss possible solutions to the appraisal gap problem. Our proposed solution is the Neighborhood Homes Tax Credit – a federal tax credit that would generate dollars from the private sector for investment in poor and working-class neighborhoods, specifically to renovate blighted 1 to 4-family houses that could then be sold at market price to homebuyers, who would commit to living in the homes for a minimum of 5 years. These simple, modest, and cost-effective investments could save thousands of salvageable houses from expensive demolitions and create tens of thousands good-paying construction jobs while boosting property values and repopulating formerly vibrant places.

As a nonprofit homebuilder in post-Katrina New Orleans, I have witnessed firsthand how steady and strategic reinvestment in rebuilding single-family homes can serve to revitalize a neighborhood and shrink the local appraisal gap until it disappears completely... At which point the lights come back on, permanently.

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Shining a Light on Cities' Abandoned Buildings, From the Inside Out

An art installation is drawing attention to urban blight in three upstate New York cities by illuminating the windows of vacant properties.

By JANE GOTTLIEB NOV. 25, 2016

ALBANY — On a recent evening, Cameron Payne found himself walking along a row of empty and deteriorating homes and businesses in his neighborhood, but suddenly their windows were lighted.

“This is so much better,” Mr. Payne, 54, said of the illuminated buildings on Henry Johnson Boulevard in this Arbor Hill neighborhood here. “It’s mesmerizing.”

But the lights, which slowly pulsed behind white shades, were a work of art, not a utility. Soon they will go off for good. The buildings are among 200 that are part of “Breathing Lights,” an installation across Albany, Schenectady and Troy that seeks to make a statement about the blight spreading across poor neighborhoods.

Conceived by Barbara Nelson, an architect in Troy, and Adam Frelin, a professor at the University at Albany, and supported by the cities’ mayors and many community groups, the \$1.2 million project was one of four winners of the national Bloomberg Philanthropies Public Art Challenge.

For four hours every night this month, structures in the three cities have been lit by battery-powered LED strips fitted into window frames. The lights dim and brighten to mimic breathing, hinting at the people who left the buildings. When Ms. Nelson and Mr. Frelin installed the lights, they said they found houses filled with furniture

and clothing, as if the residents had just fled. Other houses had been empty for so long that kitchens had plunged into basements; moss grew on waterlogged carpeting.

The lights illuminate once-proud houses on quiet streets and decrepit structures along main thoroughfares.

“There has been pervasive disinvestment in our cities,” said Ms. Nelson, who leads the Troy Architectural Project, which supports revitalization efforts in that city. “I would like to see an increase in resources and policies that allow us to get our buildings renovated again. Art is a neutral platform. While we enjoy or criticize the art, we are actually turning up the volume about these vacancies.”

Though the lights will go off gradually through the end of the month, the “Breathing Lights” project has also included community discussions, youth film festivals, tours, celebrations and home-buying clinics. Some of these events will continue.

Based on responses to the project, “Breathing Lights” organizers will make recommendations at a public meeting early next year. Ms. Nelson said the recommendations might include better marketing of properties, expediting foreclosures and working more effectively with land banks. She said she hoped the project would also build momentum for helping prospective buyers.

“This can help reinforce the efforts of the people already doing a lot of the hard work,” Ms. Nelson said.

But the success of the project depends on local response, particularly from the people who live around the abandoned properties. The range of feedback has included jubilation to near-rage at the conditions in some neighborhoods.

“Art is good — the lights are beautiful — but what happens after?” said Mr. Payne, who remembered when families and businesses filled the buildings on Henry Johnson Boulevard. “Why do they need to turn them off?”

In dozens of meetings neighbors of “Breathing Lights” houses asked Ms. Nelson why the money for the project could not be spent on fixing homes. (The grant can only be used for the art project.) Some people worried that out-of-town purchasers

would become absentee landlords or gentrify their streets. Some said the lights would deter drug addicts and squatters, or attract them. Some resented the notoriety. Others were grateful.

“Where I live, people are to the point where they’re almost complacent,” said Marion Porterfield, a Schenectady City Council member working with “Breathing Lights.” “It’s like, ‘We know the houses are vacant, they’re always vacant and it’s just part of the lifestyle.’ We are putting children on school buses in front of vacant buildings so that is what they get used to. Now, we are saying that this is not acceptable.”

Alan Mallach, a senior fellow at the Center for Community Progress in Washington, said decades of declining population in poor cities had left a glut of empty structures and a lack of effective strategies for managing them. While vacant buildings are quickly bought in affluent parts of Boston, New York City and Seattle, they pile up in Baltimore and Albany. They become an even less viable investments as they deteriorate, Mr. Mallach said.

“The fact is, you don’t see abandoned houses in Park Slope,” he said of the Brooklyn neighborhood. “It’s not that the houses are any different. The economics are different.”

Vince Perry, 51, has learned this as he restores his 1851 wood-frame house downtown here, just a few doors from the governor’s mansion. Soon after Mr. Perry bought the house at auction for \$16,000, the roof sprung a leak, and an original water line broke.

“Everyone was excited when I bought the house,” said Mr. Perry, who is living in a suburb while he renovates the property. “They thought the facade would be fixed. Now, it’s two and a half years later and I have a gutted house and no facade. It’s a long-term investment.”

Mr. Perry laid flooring under construction lights while the structures on either side of his house pulsed with “Breathing Lights.” He said he liked the concept, at first.

“But my perspective changed when I talked to the people who live here,” he said. “They don’t need a reminder of the empty houses.”

In Arbor Hill, at Albany’s northern end, some blocks have so many abandoned homes that a house in the “Breathing Lights” project provides the only light.

“I doubt the people who might want to buy buildings are coming through this neighborhood,” Celeste Knight, 49, a lifelong Arbor Hill resident and political leader, said, using her cellphone as a flashlight to navigate the sidewalks.

“We have become so adjusted to the darkness and dimness of the neighborhood,” said Mark Robinson, an Albany councilman who can name former residents of nearly every vacant home he walked past. “My anger does run deep. What good do these lights even do? What’s the game plan?”

In South End, yet another Albany neighborhood with “Breathing Lights” houses, Willie White, director of the community advocacy group AVillage..., Inc., has seen similar approaches come and go.

“We are in a poor, poor neighborhood with no tax base that’s perpetuated by the blight,” Mr. White, 57, said. “The biggest problem is the lack of jobs in our community.”

But in Schenectady’s Hamilton Hill neighborhood, Molaine Gilmore sees “Breathing Lights” as a disruption in a long pattern of neglect.

“I want locomotive trains; I want murals; I want 3-D lights and Christmas postcard backdrops,” Ms. Gilmore, 64, said as she toured Stanley Street with Ms. Porterfield. “It’s when the lights are out that the depression sets in.”

On one side of the street, nearly every home either pulsed with the lights or had been boarded up.

“I think they need to keep the lights on until these houses are sold,” Ms. Gilmore said. “I’ll turn them on.”

“And I’ll charge the battery,” she added.

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