

Detroit's Photovoice: A Documentation of Neighborhood Care in Detroit's Brightmoor and Lower Eastside Neighborhoods



Photo Credit: Photovoice Participant

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Neighborhood Care Photo Documentation Project of Detroit's Brightmoor and Lower Eastside Neighborhoods

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Introduction/Background

This project aims to understand how community members in two Detroit neighborhoods show care within their neighborhoods. In order to engage the community and learn from community members about their perceptions of neighborhood care, this project will use the methods of a photovoice project. "Photovoice uses a combination of photography and critical group discussions as a way to engage participants in identifying their own views of the research topic, and as a tool for social change" (Powers, Freedman, & Pitner, 2012). This information will utilize and expand upon methods of observing neighborhood care developed by Joan Nassauer of the University of Michigan to identify "Cues to Care." This study provides a way to begin dialogue and discussion that can bring about changes within the neighborhood and greater community. The long-term goal of the project is that it will allow for the conversation of care to go beyond the neighborhoods that are participating and incorporate leaders from the greater Detroit area.

Specific Aims

The goals of the photovoice project are to:

- 1) Expand further the research about "Cues to Care"
- 2) Help the researchers of "Cues to Care" understand how residents perceive their neighborhood
- 3) Have something tangible for neighborhoods to show documenting the care taking place in their neighborhoods

Proposed Methods

The methods for completing the photovoice project include:

- 1) Participants receive cameras and take photographs of their neighborhood
- 2) Participants engage in discussion about their photos
- 3) A summary of themes is created from discussion notes
- 4) Summary is presented to participants at the next meeting
- 5) Research team creates an overall summary of themes from both meetings
- 6) Summary is presented to participants for checking and approval
(Powers, Freedman, & Pitner, 2012)

The focus group during each meeting is recorded and the recording is then transcribed. In order to come up with the themes, the researchers will open code the transcripts and identify themes based on a theoretical lens, such as structural or institutional changes or community response (Sampson, et al. 2013). This will be done by several researchers and then compared between the two neighborhoods.

Project Activities

The photovoice project examined neighborhood care in two Detroit neighborhoods, seen below. For both of the neighborhoods there were three focus groups held throughout the summer. The focus groups consisted of approximately 6-8 community members from each of the neighborhoods. At the first focus group, the community members were given a digital camera to document what care or lack of care looks like in their neighborhood. Photos were taken in the weeks between each of the focus groups. Before the following focus group, community members chose a few pictures that they wanted to share at the next focus group. At the following meeting, each participants' photos were printed out and hung around the meeting space. Participants shared why they took the photos that they shared and how this showed care or lack of care in their neighborhood. The facilitators of the meetings also asked participants how their neighborhoods and how they are taken care of has changed over time and who is responsible for the care taking place in their neighborhoods. This discussion took place at the second and third meetings. The third meeting also consisted of an overview of what themes and commonalities emerged over the several weeks of taking photographs. This discussion allowed community members to see how their photos might be similar to other members of their community. From these responses, facilitators put together a compilation of responses from the focus groups that community members will use in future projects or endeavors, such as bringing this information to the attention of local government and community leaders.

With this project, community participation is key. Without community members taking photos, the project is not a photovoice project; which is why keeping participation high is important. In order to try to ensure high level of participation, individuals asked to participate in the project were chosen by community partners who already work within the neighborhoods. Along with choosing participants believed to participate fully in the project, participants were given the incentive of keeping the digital camera at the end of the project, along with a small stipend for their time. Incentivizing participation is a way to try and help ensure that participants were active in taking photos and discussing their findings.



Boundaries of the Brightmoor neighborhood and its relation to the city

Photo Credit: Brightmoor Data



LEAP Engagement Area

- Outside LEAP Area
- LEAP Engagement Area



Lower Eastside neighborhood across the Detroit River from Belle Isle

Photo Credit: LEAP Project

Broader Impacts

Much of the discussion around Detroit involves blight and abandonment, yet Detroit is still home to over 700,000 people; many of whom are actively taking part in their communities. This project investigated how people in Detroit care for their homes, neighborhoods, and community spaces. While the project strived to more deeply understand who takes care of these spaces and how this care happens, the project considered how this knowledge can help provide further support for these areas. In the greater conversation of blight in Detroit, can this project help elevate these neighborhoods in these conversations? One potential outcome after the project is finished is that these neighborhoods will have a way to show care within their neighborhoods and use that to find support to continue this care. With the recent release of Detroit's Blight Removal Task Force's plan to remove blighted properties, many people question how these blighted properties will be maintained once removed. Another potential is that these neighborhoods might find support to help care for blighted properties. While the project is only scheduled to continue through the summer months, the project hopes to spark dialogue that will continue after completion; dialogue about how the citizens of Detroit are working with the issues of blight in the city, by taking care of their own neighborhoods and doing what they can to care for the space that they interact with on a daily basis. This project shed light on how citizens are caring for Detroit and began a dialogue around these stories of care.

Supplementary Information

In the first meeting for the Lower Eastside, there were six participants for the Photovoice project. This meeting involved helping the participants get to know one another, as well as the researchers, and introduced the project to the participants and had them sign consent forms for the project. After completing the logistics of the first meeting, the researchers wanted to begin the focus groups and ask the participants about their neighborhoods and their perceptions about the communities where they live. Some of the questions included asking about what their neighborhoods look like, what are things that they or their neighbors do to care for their neighborhood, as well as how people in their neighborhoods continue to show care despite the blight and vacancy that has affected the city as a whole. Despite the fact that this focus group was shorter than the next meetings, a lot of important information was gleaned.

From the first question, which asked the participants what their neighborhoods look like, participants mentioned how they saw their respective neighborhoods as some of the better neighborhoods in the city and attributed some of that to the proximity to the Detroit River and the connection to nature that many of the participants felt. As one participant put it,

“I think our neighborhood is one of the better neighborhoods in Detroit’s Eastside for sure and maybe in the city. Not only are we close to the water, the street that I live on is one of the better streets in the area. It’s wide, it’s tree lined, the neighbors are very involved in keeping up their property those who can afford to you know what I am saying and of course there are seniors and unemployed people who have more of a challenge.”

Other participants compared their neighborhood to that of an urban nature center and talked about the sustainability of the area with the numerous animals and urban gardens that allow people to live off the land, if they so desire. The idea of being close to nature and enjoying their neighborhood due to its proximity to natural features, like the Detroit River, was a common sentiment among the participants.

The next question that the focus group addressed was how the participants and their neighbors care for their neighborhoods. The participants brought up a number of ways that they do this, including planting flowers, creating a produce truck to serve the elderly, or taking care of vacant lots. Often these things were not only things to care for their own property but in order to care for the neighborhood as a whole. One participant mentioned how she bought flowers for not only herself, but also her neighbors as she mentioned,

“My neighbors, we have a competition right around Mother’s Day, the flower day at Eastern Market, so I go and buy flowers, and I buy the neighbors across the street because they are older and another lady down the street flowers, so I kind of start picking the colors that’s going to coordinate so maybe orange over here, yellow over here, purple and a little orange and red over here. And they plant them themselves so they can get out and do that and then it starts to become infectious for people who don’t necessarily do that and then I’ll see them they bought a hanging basket.”

Another participant mentioned that her family business arose out of a need she saw. Senior citizens were going to store and carrying all of their groceries home, so she started a produce truck to assist them. Another participant mentioned that his father purchased a lawn mower, so he rides down the street once a week to mow vacant lots. In all the ways that these individuals care for their neighborhoods, the issues of vacancy and blight were brought up, not only in who

is responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of these lots but also with what the future of the lots would be. One participant mentioned that her major concern was that anybody could complain about the state of the lots, but at the end of the day, she was the one footing the bill to mow the lawns and care for the lots on her street. Another individual liked the urban gardening that she saw happening, but also wanted to know if with the amount of vacant properties around the city of Detroit, something more could be done to repurpose their use.

“You know I was just going to say that to me, you know sometimes I look at what’s happening and think what we have is being devalued and my upbringing is that land is always going to be valuable and then the question is how are you going to use it and I just don’t think that if we were creative and had some resources that we would end at doing farming.”

While these participants often put in extra effort and time to see that their neighborhoods are cared for, a common sentiment in the group was the concern about who will be responsible for the care of vacant lots once more are demolished, along with the concern about how the land might be put back to use and whether or not those uses will be diverse in nature.

After learning more about how the participants perceived their neighborhoods and how they cared for them, the focus group shifted to see how people continue to care with the changes that are happening around the city. This question transformed into a discussion about the institutional and structural changes that have been happening and how those are affecting their neighborhoods. The participants focused on the impacts of neighborhood schools closing and how it is difficult for families to meet the needs of their children’s education with a lack of neighborhood schools. The participants attributed the closing of many neighborhood schools to the withdrawal of families from their neighborhoods and the deterioration of these neighborhoods. One participant said;

“And so I see a lot of clear messages, I call them clear messages. Clear because you know a planner would know that if you dismantle schools than the families are not going to be attracted there. The potential families, like my daughter for example, lived in our family house. The schools have gone, so her family has gone because they are going to go where there are good schools. So being an educator, coming from the school system myself, I said as a teacher, I don’t think it was an accident and I will leave it right there. That’s one way you dismantle whole communities is by dismantling schools because that’s the core—that’s what people who are trying to strive to improve the quality of life are looking for—education and opportunities for their children, so that struck a real chord.”

As previously seen with their responses, the participants are active in caring for their neighborhoods and put in extra time and effort, but seem to wonder how or if their care will be matched by similar efforts from the city or community leaders to ensure that these neighborhoods are being taken care of. In this discussion of care, the last question for the focus group was about how home ownership and care play out, which brought up the community resources that help to care for the neighborhoods and their inhabitants. Participants mentioned how block clubs, social groups and churches were all very important in the community. Just as

the participants mentioned earlier that they were active in taking initiative for things that they believed needed to be done, they believe the same is true as far as bringing the community together. One participant said,

“So what’s my goal is to connect with the people like the ones that you see right here because I think the biggest thing we do is that we encourage one another to keep moving. Keep it moving, identify, we are working on just opening doors, we just go up to the doors now. We in the process of opening doors and just seeing what’s behind that door and eventually we are going to find a door that’s going to work if we don’t get an outcome and so it’s an adventure.”

Overall, it seemed that the participants were happy to be engaged and involved in their communities, but hoped to see answers from the city or city leaders about the care for vacant properties and how the city might work to ease the problems of blight and vacancy.

After the focus group ended, the researchers handed out cameras for the participants to use on their homework assignment, which was to photograph care in their neighborhood. The second session involved looking at photos that each person took and had them describe the photo and how it relates to neighborhood care.

The second meeting for the Lower Eastside coincided with another community meeting that many of the participants were involved in, resulting in only half of the original participants to be in attendance. Despite only three of the community participants being present, the focus group allowed for great discussion about neighborhood care, stemming from the photographs that each individual took. The day before the meeting took place, the participants met at a local library and all of their photos were collected. They indicated which photos they wanted to share at the meeting and those were then printed. Each of the participants chose four photos that they wanted to share at the meeting.

The first individual discussed elements of care at the individual and community level. One of the photos he presented was a picture of his own home. He mentioned how his family had bought the vacant lot next door to them about 20 years ago, but they fenced it off and make it an extension of their own yard. In the picture he captured his mother outside tending to her lawn saying, “My mother loves to cut the grass so she was out on a what was that a Wednesday morning about 7:30 in the morning...she love cutting the grass, it is a stress reliever.” Along with describing his mother cutting the grass, the participant described how they keep flowers in their yard and have bright accent colors to make their house stand out and seem lively. Everything he talked about showed care at an individual level and how the keeping up the physical appearance of their property was important for them.

Another picture that was discussed is the one seen below, which is a bus stop bench in the participant’s neighborhood. One of the other participants mentioned how the bench was part of a project by two Wayne State University students who built these benches out of wooden pallets and placed them across the city. In addition to being a bench, it houses books underneath as a sort of free book exchange for anyone to enjoy. The participant who knew more about the project thought it was a great way to of caring for people in the community. She mentioned,

“And they are around in other areas of the city and I think it was such an ingenious idea. Not only is it convenient for our mothers and our grandmothers as they sit and wait for the bus but they also put books underneath. They are trying to figure out how to keep them free from the elements, like when it rains the books get wet etcetera, etcetera and they don’t mind if you take the books because the whole idea is for people to read more.”



Photo Credit: Photovoice Participant

Another participant also took a lot of pictures focusing on care at a neighborhood level and what the community is doing to care for its inhabitants. Specifically, he mentioned the community garden in his neighborhood that had an open-air garden, along with an 11-month hoop house that allowed produce to grow almost year-round. It benefitted community members not only by consuming produce from the site but as a teaching tool and a future business venture. The participant talked about a community event that was held the week prior, in which community members learned how to cook different produce from the garden. He said;

“...matter of fact when I took that picture, Saturday, they had like for vegetarians they had like a banquet try to show you how to cook and grill and all that stuff, so I didn’t get a picture of me eating but I ate very well and I left you know, but that was some of the pictures that was taken, and the children like I said was all over on the other side teaching

them how to eat more healthy and stuff like that, how to prepare different types of meals and stuff like that.”

Along with community events, the garden was in the process of starting a compost pile, with the hopes of being able to use the compost for the garden and to sell bags of soil to members of the community for their own gardens. The garden has expanded from one vacant lot to three over the past couple of years and that garden is seen below.



Photo Credit: Photovoice Participant

The last participant to present also took pictures within her community that focused on ways that people care for their neighborhoods and communities; not just their individual property. One example that she discussed was a large multi-panel mural that was put up in a vacant lot. The mural was created and painted by a community member, with pictures that depicted the local food system and had a message to eat local. Not only did the lot contain the mural, but it also had a small garden patch and flowers that different community members maintained. The participant felt that this mural was an important part of the neighborhood as she described,

“But if you notice on the third group of pictures, the message is and there’s one letter of each picture and it says eat local. And as you notice the pictures are of food and stuff and

children. You know, so that is a powerful message, especially when you look at teaching our children to eat local and not only that to grow their own food. Or at the very least to know what real food is because you'd be surprised a lot of people think string beans come out of a can."



Photo Credit: Photovoice Participant

Another one of the same participant's photo, showed neighborhood care through a photograph of a woman who took it upon herself to mow all the vacant lots on her street by herself with a push mower. When she talked to the woman mowing, the participant learned that the woman did not want to be recognized because she was not doing it to be noticed, but doing it to help beautify her neighborhood. The participant tried to explain the size of the lots the woman mows when she said:

"This lady made me feel ashamed because I think she older than me, but when you look at what she had undertaken, when I saw her, she, because this is Lakewood north of Jefferson and you may have noticed that there are only 6 or 7 occupied houses on that street other than that it's vacant land and abandoned buildings and as a result the nature just takes over. She mows the area between her house and the abandoned building. Now you can see how much she mowed already, she goes all the way back to the alley, and I

took other pictures to show the distance that she covers with her hand pushed mower. You know it's a power mower but it's not a riding mower."



Photo Credit: Photovoice Participant

The area of one of the vacant lots can be seen in the photo above. Despite the task being a large one to tackle, the woman shows care by tending to the overgrown lots and ensuring that they are maintained. The participant mentioned,

"Based on what I've observed from her and her nature, I don't think that would be the case. I think she's more interested number one in beautifying her living area, number two minimizing the rats and the snakes that might live in all that high grass. But number one, community care. Caring about her community."

After everyone presented their photos, the conversation morphed into larger ideas of neighborhood care. When asked what prevents people from going out and caring for their houses, blocks or streets, one participant mentioned how it was more leading by example that created actions of neighborhood care. It was also a reason why he firmly believed that his neighborhood was great. He mentioned;

"Yeah, what actually happens a lot of times in any community if one person get out and cut they grass and the neighbor next door wants to cut theirs, and usually kind of people

go by example, whatever's being led and generally that seems like that's the whole concept of the community because there's people who, there's a guy who rides through the neighborhood who you know, we have some of the lowest crime rate in the city of Detroit, the 215 area."

Another participant went with the same idea and described how the neighborhood he lives in is one where families often live for generations. Newcomers to the area move there because they seem to know the expectations and want to care for their house and block. There seemed to be a general consensus within the participants that their community takes pride in how they care for their own properties as well as shared spaces.

The conversation also morphed into a conversation of how should these photos be used to inform a broader audience. If anything else should be done with them or if they should be shared with anyone else, what would the purpose of that be? In talking about the woman who mows many vacant lots on her street, several of the participants thought that there should be a program to help her offset some of the cost of the volunteer work that she does. Thoughts varied from neighbors collecting money for a gas gift card to organizing a block club with a tool sharing program that could purchase a riding lawn mower for her to use. Along with thoughts about community actions, the group had thoughts about the need for a city-wide program to assist people who are going above and beyond to care for their neighborhood. The community organizer who helped to find participants said,

"But I see what both of you are saying like, when [she] talked to her acknowledgement is not what she's after, she wants the grass cut, you know, but then how do you, you know, lift up her story without putting her on the spot so much as here are these different examples and different places and just think we are just doing this as compensation in a really small area, so if we had these conversations throughout the city, how could we like knit all these efforts together and maybe create some type of program that you know did do incentives. If you can demonstrate that you have been cutting this grass, and that's a picture of her doing it, that's demonstration in my mind, but if you can demonstrate that you've been caring for property that you do not own, for any period of time, then that should generate some type of incentive, what it is, you know we can all talk that up to the end of time, but whether it's providing riding mowers that the community can have access to like a community tool shed, or in some cases you know some people don't even know how to use a mower, so who is going to teach them how to use these tools like hedgers and you know being able to cut bushes, how to plant things, how to even make a garden. I mean we presume that people know how to do this stuff because we're doing it, and that's not always the case either, so you know it kind of has to be this comprehensive thing where it kind of deals with all of this stuff in one efficient way."

Along with the belief that there should be some sort of assistance program for these community members, one participant mentioned how she believed her photographs showed that life still thrives in these sparsely populated neighborhoods and blocks. She said that contrary to the former Detroit mayor Dave Bing's plan to relocate residents in blighted neighborhoods to more populated ones, these photographs show the day-to-day actions that are keeping these areas lively. Despite some blocks having only a few houses, the people in these neighborhoods are putting in the time, effort, and money to keep their neighborhoods a place that they want to continue to live, whether or not the city is able to help.

Conclusion

The Photovoice project documented the care and community involvement that is already taking place in these neighborhoods. It allowed the participants to have physical documentation of the work neighbors and community groups put into caring for where they live. Going forward, these photos and focus groups should be used to help elevate these neighborhoods in discussion about blight and vacancy. The city of Detroit needs more people to stand up and show the work that they are doing to keep their own neighborhoods alive and the participants of the project did just that.

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