Orchard Demolished:

A Hidden Treasure of Urbana Faces Demolition

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Ethnography of the University
29 November 2006
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Hidden in a secluded, yet not far removed, corner of the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign lays a complex. This complex is home to nearly 1000 people, childcare centers, play grounds, laundry facilities, educational programs, social activities and most importantly, it is home to a vital graduate community. For decades, students, mostly international, have flocked to Orchard Downs in a search for a family friendly environment that could provide them with easy access to all the services that they require. This complex is now under review by the University of Illinois for redevelopment.

PART I

THE PRESENT FUNCTION OF ORCHARD DOWNS

When originally created, Orchard Downs was seen as an all purpose facility. The University of Illinois built it with international students and their families in their minds. The concept was to create a residential epicenter where graduate families would thrive. First, the complex would be apartment style housing, allowing room for the graduate student and between one and four more family members. The apartments were built to have a living space for communality and a kitchen to ease the stress of meals. The facilities were given many amenities outside the actual apartment to allow for better service. By having services such as laundry outside the apartment it would keep costs down and promote bonding within the community. Additionally, by sharing amenities, residents could get more for their dollar. However, the apartments were not the only things designed to accommodate the residents.

Keeping in spirit with building more than just residences, but rather a community, the complex provides many services that are useful to the families. Orchard Downs has
many services to help with children of all ages. For younger children, the complex has child care facilities that will watch over the child while the rest of the family is busy fulfilling other obligations. As they get older and begin to attend schools, the programs shift their attention. Instead of providing all-day care (a redundancy because of the school system), Orchard Downs provides after school programs. The students can get directly dropped off at the community center where they are taken care of until their family can resume care. This easy, low maintenance program is a gem that is seen as one of the top amenities available to residents (Orchard Downs Promotional Pamphlet).

In addition to childcare, the entire development is dotted with playgrounds. The playgrounds serve many purposes and are more utile than people often recognize. First, the playgrounds serve as a social tool for both parents and their children. At the playground, parents can meet other parents. Through this networking they are able to develop important relationships with other residents who have much in common with them. The child receives a similar benefit by being able to socialize with children just like them. In this way, the playground helps promote a sense of community within the development. The playground can also serve as an alternative form of less formal childcare. If the family has a brief engagement, they know that there is a place within Orchard Downs where they can safely occupy their children under the watchful eye of the neighbors (OD Anonymous Interview, 8).

One of the most appreciated services offered through Orchard Downs are their educational opportunities. Because the facility was built with international students in mind, there are many English-foreign language class offered. There, families and students can take English courses to help improve or generate their fluency. Many
people move to Orchard Downs with zero English background. This education allows them to function in the Urbana community in a much more healthy way. English classes are not the only type of classes offered at Orchard Downs though. There are classes from many different disciplines and even some recreational areas. For example, the community holds classes about cooking, both American and foreign foods. This class is not only fun for the residents, but it also serves an important function in that it brings the residents one step closer towards being completely independent (OD Anonymous Interview, 8).

Another feature of the housing at Orchard Downs is the pricing. When developed, it was seen as a good value. The gentle balance of independence and community amenities provided a happy medium in the rent. Though it was by no means the cheapest housing on campus, the idea was that the residents would pay a small amount more in exchange for the great benefits.

When developed, Orchard Downs was not just seen as a housing center with a lot of services though, it was seen as a community. Orchard Downs is completely self-sufficient and enables its residents to live the best lifestyle they can. The designers of Orchard Downs had a vision that their development would be a destination for international students. They would be able to select living there and not need to worry about anything else, the rest would fall into place. They needed not fret over their family because they would be looked after at Orchard Downs. Additionally, another huge advantage that was in mind was the social environment that was being built. Because many of the students that would be living there would be in similar situations, bonding would be easier amongst residents. Families would not have to worry about being alone.
Orchard Downs was seen as a solution to all the problems that graduate families needed solved (Archival Interview).

**REDEVELOPMENT PLANS AND THE NEED FOR THEM**

For over a decade, rumor mills have been swirling over redevelopment plans at the Orchard Downs complex; some rumors held more validity than others. Realistically, this euphoric housing destination was getting old and run down and less and less of a destination and more and more of a burden. Complaints from residents and community members began piling up. First, they came from the residents. They were criticizing how antiquated the facilities had become. The apartments lacked carpeting, air conditioning and proper insulation; residents wanted improvement. Meanwhile, the surrounding community had their fair-share of grievances as well. They felt that the land was pretty and the grounds were nice, but the apartments were an aesthetic bore (Daily Illini, 2005).

After hearing the complaints of residents and community members, together, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the City of Urbana erected a team to look into these grievances. The team studied the housing at Orchard Downs and reported back to the proper authorities. Through their investigations, the team found that Orchard Downs was in “dire disrepair” (Daily Illini 2004). Not only were the facilities falling apart, they were dangerous. They also reported that the cost of repairing the facilities was so high, that it would be more cost effective to simply demolish the entire complex and simply start over again. It was after this report that people began seeing Orchard
Downs as a location in need of assistance, but rather a massive and valuable plot of land that was in need of redevelopment.

Another important factor leading up to the redevelopment process is money. Orchard Downs is on a very large piece of valuable property, yet, the city of Urbana is unable to collect any real estate tax income on this land. Urbana has presented many documents that show how Urbana’s economic development is constantly being threatened by the University and it is causing them to go broke. They insist that the development of properties like Orchard Downs into tax generating pieces of property would benefit all. However, the only way to make this property create income is to raise the rent, rezone for other purposes and demolish and start over on the entire complex.

Orchard Downs was at this point beginning to make regular appearances in master plans for the campus as well as in Urbana. The governing bodies of both sectors saw Orchard Downs as somewhere that needed attention. Though plans rarely gave specifics for the redevelopment, they always mentioned the desire to improve the existing facilities (Daily Illini). Finally, after appearing in several planning documents, action was taken.

The University, in conjunction with Urbana, formed an Orchard Downs over-sight committee. The committee was put in place to ensure the proper handling of this project. It consisted of a dozen members of varying backgrounds. This committee then went forth and began a commercial bidding process through which local development firms in which four contracts would eventually be given (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006). The committee awarded each firm $100,000 dollars. In return, each firm was to investigate a redevelopment plan for Orchard Downs. Their plans are to be all inclusive and be presented in the board in the spring of 2007. After their submission, the plans would
then become property of the Urbana. It would then be up to them to decide which plan or mix of plans if any to be used in the project (Daily Illini 2005). Because no specific plan has been selected nor are the plans public, little is known about the project. The redevelopment of Orchard Downs is hypothetical, simply under a very strong investigation.

**INCORPORATION OF THE GREATER COMMUNITY IN THE THOUGHT PROCESS**

From the start, both the University as well as Urbana believed firmly that the greater community needed to play a role in the redevelopment. It was then decided that a series of public meetings would be held in order to allow a proper medium for people to express their wishes and ideas to the developers and to the board. The first and second meetings held were chaotic in their nature. They were unorganized and there was no effective way for the community to interact with the city, university or developers. This problem was mostly solved in the third (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006). At this meeting, a sign up sheet was utilized to specify the order of the speakers. The speakers were to permitted to say anything they please for as long as they needed to speak. The hope is and was that the developers would listen to the people and incorporate their needs and desires into their plans. The University gave direct directions to the developers to try and heed the words of the community (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006).

**POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR POTENTIAL REDEVELOPMENT**
A myriad of sources have led to a long list of possibilities of the redevelopment of Orchard Downs. Though none are official, all have validity and are potential plans. One of the main reasons given by Urbana for redevelopment is to improve economic development in that sector of the city. Therefore, many of the unofficial ideas include commercial zoning and high rent, non-student housing. These options would permit a better tax base to form there. Some plans suggest Alumni condominiums for part-time occupancy. Other plans speculate luxury style apartments. Commercial development has been rumored to be anything from Meijer to a small coffee shop (Daily Illini 2005).

PART II

METHODOLOGY

This is a project that we, Brian Frost and Briceida Rodriguez, treated with the utmost care. Our charge, to investigate the future redevelopment at Orchard Downs, we saw as a vital topic that demanded accuracy. We pursued perfection in every possible medium. This included the examination of a variety of sources and locations, some of which yielded wealths of information, some none.

This research process included the use of human subjects. We recognize that this qualitative method opposed to a quantitative one has a stronger inherent bias, but we feel the positives of face-to-face information far out weigh the minute negatives. We challenged our bias and moved forward with the most objective approach possible. In an effort to keep our interview process as non-bias as possible we followed the following parameters. When interviewing subjects, they were chosen at random. We attended the homes of residents, randomly selected a housing neighborhood and went to every
freestanding building there. Each building contained 4 apartments, and one person from each building was interviewed. Each interview varied in length between 5 minutes and 30 minutes. The first response received was interviewed and the order of doors knocked on in the building was rotated. Our interviewing process spanned many hours to avoid inconsistencies. People were interviewed before, during, and after standard meal times. We also made every effort possible to not let a language barrier deter us from interviewing a subject. Every possible effort was made to understand the subjects. We often repeated the question several times or rephrased it in a more simple way. In one instance, the resident used a hand-held translator to understand what we were saying. We had as much patience as possible when communicating and rephrasing. Only one interview was not possible because there were not residents in the apartment at the time that spoke any English. Our on-site interview process was complete when there stopped being a variety in the responses and they began to repeat. See the appendix for sample questions used. Additionally, every person interviewed signed a release in compliance with the Institutional Review Board (see appendix). All stipulations in that release were honored, and as such, no names will ever be released.

When attending the public hearing we became abreast of the needs of community members. We were not in charge of the interview process and therefore could not control it. However, everyone who wanted to speak was allowed to and we listened and noted all speakers to make sure that all possible points were recognized. The meeting was also audio taped to allow us to further review it. After review, the tape was erased.

RESPONSES AND FEELINGS OF GREATER URBANA COMMUNITY
The Urbana community feels a strong connection to Orchard Downs and has vocally expressed their opinions of this project throughout the process, but there have been very mixed feelings in the community about their level of involvement. Some feel as though they have been ignored, others feel misled, others are excited. However, the greater community has nearly all felt alienated by the literature they received. They felt it to be one-sided propaganda that dodges all the difficult questions related to the project. The community has used the public forums as well as the media to get their opinions heard. Unfortunately for the community, they do not all see eye to eye on this project and, just like in any urban planning scenario, not everyone will be able to get their way (OD Anonymous Interviews). Generally speaking though, the community expressed their concerns in four major areas: traffic, commercial development, type of housing, and preservation.

TRAFFIC

Local residents are very concerned that an increase in development would cause a change in the local traffic patterns. As it stands, traffic is relatively low because there is no commercial draw and not an excessive number of residents. However, with the addition of possible high rise residences or major commercial developments there is a fear that traffic will skyrocket. The increase in traffic would lead to more noise and busier less quaint streets. This has led the community to generally fear over-development.

The community suggested several suggestions to the problem, but they did not all see eye to eye. When community residents spoke at the forum and commented on traffic, they never solved the issue, they just moved it to a different location. One speaker said,
“I have lived on in the same house for 20 years and I moved in to it because it was so quiet…build [the commerce] on the far side of the development because it will cause fewer disturbances over there” (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006). Virtually every speaker said an increase in traffic would be manageable, as long as it was not on their side of the development. To back up their arguments, people used a myriad of reasons such as lack of space, inadequate exposure, and lack of thru streets. People are okay with adding traffic to the surrounding streets, but despise the very thought of it happening on their own street.

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Residents of the community had strong feelings about the nature of the development but again, failed to see eye to eye. The argument centered around two different battles. First, there was disagreement over the size of the development. Some residents argued that the development needs to remain small. Large commerce would draw huge amounts of people and the neighborhood is not built for such an influx. Too much commerce would cause too much traffic. They also protested the need for more big stores; “the community cannot handle that much commerce, we simply can’t support it!” one resident argued (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006). If there was commercial development, they want boutique style or a coffee shop, some place they can go and relax. Conversely though, some residents felt the need for the commerce to be large. They argued that “if you are gonna have a commercial development it may as well be big and worthwhile.” They hardly saw the need for more coffee shops in the neighborhood. They also argued that having a large grocery type store would be perfect because it would
make for great utile shopping within walking distance. One person even suggested building a Meijer underground (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006).

COMMUNITY PRESERVATION

Orchard Downs is currently home to a wealth of open spaces. There are orchards, bike paths, forestry, greenery, playgrounds and a sledding hill just to name a few features. The surrounding community feels strongly that these features must be preserved. They feel as though urban sprawl is at its worst and people are constantly demolishing green space in an effort to get rich. People feel that clearing the green space and developing the area would be a huge mistake. They got up and told story after story on how important the greenery is in their lives. Many even claim to have moved to the neighborhood specifically for its green. “Children need a place to play out in the open!” one community member shouted out in anger (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006). The community kept bringing up how delightful it is to have so much area to enjoy within walking distance. Much of the commenting also was about the trees. One lady criticized that a wise developer would know to “keep the ‘orchard’ in Orchard Downs” (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006). Many of the trees are over a hundred years old and it would take decades before the new development could provide a similar look. Therefore, residents felt that they did not want a single tree torn down. One resident even threatened to chain herself to any bulldozer that came near a tree in Orchard Downs. Some residents were so passionate that the trees were all they cared about. One area resident hailed, “I don’t care what you do to Orchard Downs, just don’t demolish any trees!” (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006).

NATURE OF HOUSING
Though the exact nature of the development is not exactly known, it is for sure that there will be a residential aspect in some capacity. However, it was the debate over the nature of the housing that was quite heated. The discussion fell into two categories, quality of housing and graduate placement.

The disagreement over the price range and quality of the housing was not shocking. Many residents felt it was important to build a complex that was luxurious and high quality. They want to see classy and pretty developments get built. Yet there was also the converse argument. Other residents argued that Urbana was beginning to start a trend of demolishing low income housing and replacing it with high-income developments. They said there is nothing wrong with building pretty and high quality apartments, but they must be affordable. Making them too luxurious would out price the poor.

This argument bled into the other issue at hand, the housing of graduates. If the housing became too luxurious, graduates would not be able to afford to live there. Orchard Downs was built on the premise that graduate students and their families would be able to live in a reasonably priced community, and luxury condos or apartments would not allow for that. This spawned the argument over the type of housing to be built. Some felt that in redeveloping, they should try to build it in a very similar layout to what currently exists. This would allow the community style living that currently is a great format for families to continue. Yet others felt that high-rise would be best because that would allow for many residents, thereby more tax revenue, but still leave plenty of greenery. However, one argument did remain constant no matter what side they had previously fallen, the graduates must be addressed (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006).
WHERE WILL THE GRADUATE STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES GO?

Initially, the talks never mentioned the relocation of the graduate students. They were a completely ignored aspect of this process (Daily Illini 2003). It was not until the third town-hall style meeting that their best wishes were addressed. Because there are no official plans available, there is no plan for the relocation of the graduates, however, many ideas have surfaced. One idea is that the graduate students do not need to worry about relocation. Orchard Downs could get redeveloped in a similar format that would allot a place for them and their families to live. Another idea is that Orchard Downs will be rebuilt but they will be in a high-rise format so the family style living will still function but much of the community aspect will be lost. The third, and scariest, concept is the that graduate students will be left out of the redevelopment project all together and be forced to find their own alternative housing. The only realistic destination for relocation is the Goodwin/Green apartment complex. However, there is not nearly enough space and nowhere near as many services offered as there are at the Orchard Downs site (Daily Illini 2005). However, this fear was shut down verbally by the administration. During meeting number three, it was stated that no plan would be enacted, much less accepted, if it did not account for adequate housing for graduates and their families (Public Hearing, October 25, 2006).

VIEW POINT OF CURRENT RESIDENTS

The interview process of the residents of Orchard Downs was quite revealing. Residents there, just like residents of the community had varying opinions from each
other. However, they did have one concept that united them all and it was the only question asked to which the same answer was always received. The residents of Orchard Downs love living there. They moved in with hopes of finding a friendly community and that is what they found.

The rent at Orchard Downs was a highly contested topic among residents. Approximately 50% of interviewees found the rent to be too high for what is offered, while the remaining believed it to be just right or even low. The rent at Orchard Downs varies depending on who lives there, and how long they have been there and the type of room it is. The various international backgrounds provides a different monetary context, thus yielding the different opinions on rent. However, across the board, rents are just above market rates. Because the residents are graduate students, they are living on a very low fixed income. “Trying to support a family on under $10,000 a year is very difficult and that is why the rent must stay low,” one resident retorted after being asked how she felt about a recent raise in the rent (OD Anonymous Interview, 6). With a possible new development on the way, residents are unsure of what will happen to rent, but it will almost positively not go down. “There is a limit to how much we can pay,” said a graduate student in the School of Engineering (OD Anonymous Interview, 6). Many residents fear that rent would be prohibitively high in the new complex and they would be forced to live someplace substantially less desirable (OD Anonymous Interview, 4).

Residents of Orchard Downs love how easy it is to adjust there. Many residents even listed that as a primary reason for choosing to live there. “When I came here from India,” a student began, “I knew no one. Now I am a fulltime member of this great community” (OD Anonymous Interview, 2). International students gravitate towards to
Orchard Downs because it has a great reputation for doing the work for you. Once a resident decides to live there, that is essentially the last decision they need to make. They do not have to worry about their children or family. They do not have to worry about education or childcare and usually have their rent fears allayed. They also do not need to worry about transportation, an often over looked aspect (OD Anonymous Interview, 2).

Orchard Downs is situated in a secluded area from the campus, thus making transportation an issue, in theory. However, residents almost exclusively take the “amazingly convenient” bus service to and from campus. The MTD offers constant service between Orchard Downs and the UIUC campus, thus easing transportation throughout the greater Champaign-Urbana community. Many graduate students and their families cannot afford the cost of having a car on campus nor do they want one. They say parking is a difficult and arduous task. Residents love the simplicity of taking the bus straight to their classes. This is just one more way that Orchard Downs helps out its residents (OD Anonymous Interview, 3).

When interviewed, the students and their families feared that if Orchard Downs was redeveloped and they were forced to move elsewhere, many of their services would be lost. They had similar fears if the facility was rebuilt for mixed use that included them. The students and their families enjoy having their own community because they automatically have things in common with their neighbors (OD Anonymous Interview, 6).

GRADUATE STUDENTS ON THE IMPACT OF THE REDEVELOPMENT ON THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
The University of Illinois is one of the world’s top rated public universities; it has a phenomenal reputation worldwide for its international community and high standards of achievement. International students are a vital part of the success of the UIUC campus and community. When asked, no student chose the University of Illinois just because of the housing; they were almost always academically drawn. However, many commented that the availability of housing at Orchard Downs was a factor in their decision and gave Illinois an extra edge over other well-respected universities. One of the primary factors though of people selecting a university when coming from abroad is personal recommendations. When asked, nearly all interviewees responded that they would absolutely recommend the university and Orchard Downs to their peers. However, when asked what they would do if Orchard Downs did not exist, every respondent hesitated. Many stuttered and thought long and hard about this question. After long pauses, the answers were divided. “Orchard Downs has been an essential part of my life here, I am not sure what it would be like without it. I would have never made it without this facility” (OD Anonymous Interview, 1). That was the beginning of a response from one graduate resident living at Orchard Downs with three other family members. The responses were mixed, and not everyone could state with conviction that they could still recommend the university to their peers without the amenities offered by Orchard Downs (OD Anonymous Interviews).

CONCLUSION

There are many factors that will surely go in to the final decision at Orchard Downs; the end result will only be revealed with time. However, through careful
research, many things can be learned. This is more than just a residential complex; it is a community that 1,000 people call home. Conversely, it is not just a plot of land, it is a valuable piece of property that is hemorrhaging money and could be generating millions of dollars in revenue, money that could be used to heal some of Urbana’s worst ailments.

There are many opinions, all coming from valid sources, and many of them disagree. This gets at a fundamental debate within Urban Planning, does one assist the minority that is in need of representation or does one do what pleases the most people possible? It is an inevitability in urban planning that not everyone can win. Those who want traffic on Windsor Road instead of Florida Avenue and visa-versa cannot both win. In this particular instance, the minorities are the graduate students and their families. They are the least represented in this battle. The majority of people are in favor of redevelopment, and providing adequate housing for grad students and their families is something that has yet to be proven possible by the university, city or development firms. Simply allowing a majority rule in this case would prove to be devastating for the international and other communities at Orchard Downs. However, simply letting the status quo housing continue is a solution that would anger the masses, thus the conundrum. The answer must be found in a happy medium that pleases all.

The potential redevelopment plans for Orchard Downs are a very serious matter for both the University of Illinois and the City of Urbana. It could prove to be the most brilliant moment in their combined history or it could be the most detrimental. This is a project that needs to be handled with the utmost care and caution. Anything less would be irresponsible and neglectful. The University and Urbana have obligations to the students, families and communities here, and they cannot afford to fail, the stakes are too
high. The lives of graduate students and their families are in the balance. The status of the University is at stake.
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Orchard Downs Public Hearings 1. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Urbana,
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Orchard Downs Public Hearings 2. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Urbana,
April 19, 2005.

Questions—All that apply:

1. How long been living in/working in community?

2. What is composition of family?

3. Why chose to live in Orchard Downs?

4. Why chose U of I?

5. What do you know about the redevelopment project?

6. What is your source of information?

7. How do you feel about changes?

8. What is your course of action if implemented? Why?

9. If you had known this was going to happen, still come here?

10. What is number one way it affects you?

11. What brought this project about?

12. Actions taken to check with community?

13. What is the plan for the relocation of these people?

14. What changes in rent will occur?