The University: Friend or Foe

Residents & the Orchard Downs Project

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1
Motivation for Research & Ethnography of the Researchers... 1
Research Question ...................................................................................................... 2
Methods ...................................................................................................................... 2
Reflection on data collection ...................................................................................... 3
Summary of data collected ......................................................................................... 3
Major findings ............................................................................................................ 4
Implications ................................................................................................................ 7
Reflections about EOTU experience .......................................................................... 8
Relation to Neighborhood Planning ......................................................................... 9
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 10
References .................................................................................................................. 11
**Introduction**

The plan to redevelop the Orchard Downs Graduate Student Apartments is one of the most controversial projects proposed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in recent years. The university plans to tear down the old apartments and replace them with retirement homes, retail stores, and some graduate student housing. Residents who live in the apartments and in the neighborhood near them have expressed concerns about the project. Public meetings on the project have attracted hundreds of participants. In local newspapers, 20 stories have been printed about the project in the past two years. As part of the Ethnography of the University project, we examined the redevelopment of Orchard Downs to find out how it has affected the university’s relationship with residents who live in the apartments and residents who live in the Southeast Urbana neighborhood near the apartments.

**Motivation for Research Question & Ethnography of the Researchers**

The motivation to examine this issue emerged from our experiences as students in *Urban Planning 474: Neighborhood Planning*, a course taught in Fall 2006 by Dr. Stacy Harwood. Lectures and readings in the course examined topics such as *Neighborhood as the site for Community Organizing, Are Neighborhood Real?* and *Neighborhood as the site for Diversity and Segregation*. What we learned from the course is that urban planners need to recognize the power of the institutions they represent and the need to ensure that neighborhood planning is an open and participatory process. These lessons prompted us to think critically about the relationship between the University of Illinois and the communities surrounding it.

*About the researchers:* Sarah Floyd is an urban planning major with particular interest in how the university deals with underprivileged groups in the Urbana and Champaign area. In particular, she is interested in whether university community outreach efforts have had a positive impact on these groups. Scott Presslak, also an urban planning major, is interested in the impact that the university’s extension programs have had on the Urbana and Champaign area. Specifically, he is interested in how the university interacts with non-profit organizations that participate in the extension programs. Owen Kulemeka
is an advertising and public relations major. He is interested in how the university communicates with underprivileged groups and how this process can be transformed so it is beneficial to both the university and the various groups it affects.

**Research Question**

The first question we developed was as follows: *In certain university and community based organization relationships, is the university perceived as a friend, foe or both.* Our initial plan was to study the university’s relationship with three groups: (a) the Urban League of Champaign County, (b) a local non-profit organization that focuses on agricultural issues, and (c) people who will be affected by the Orchard Downs project. In order to carry out a more in-depth study, we decided to focus solely on the university’s relationship with two groups affected by the Orchard Downs project: (a) residents who live in the Orchard Downs apartments and (b) residents of the Southeast Urbana neighborhood near Orchard Downs. We revised our research question to read as follows: *In the university’s relationship with the residents of Orchard Downs and Southeast Urbana, is the university perceived as a friend, foe or both.*

**Data Collection Methods**

In order to answer our question, we collected data in the following manner:

**Analysis of news coverage:** we used the news database *Factiva* to identify stories about Orchard Downs and the software *Copernic Summarizer* to identify common themes in these stories.

**Analysis of web discussion:** we used *Google, Intelliseek Blogpulse, and Technorati* to examine internet conversations about Orchard Downs.

**Interviews with residents of Southeast Urbana:** we walked door-to-door asking questions.

**Interviews with residents of Orchard Downs:** we walked door-to-door asking questions.

**Online survey:** using *Questionpro.com*, we distributed an online survey to people who are members of the University of Illinois Graduate Employee Union email list.

**Participant observation:** we observed two public forums on Orchard Downs: (a) a meeting for Southeast Urbana and Orchard Downs residents and (b) a meeting for faculty and staff.
Reflection on Data Collection

The most challenging aspect of the data collection was the door-to-door interviews and online survey. In regards to the interviews, we found that participants were reluctant to sign consent forms because they feared that they could jeopardize their employment with the university or become victims of identify theft. The majority of people we asked to participate in the study were at first willing but when told they had to sign a form, they declined. A similar issue arose in our online survey. Due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, we could not simply send a survey and ask email recipients to respond. Instead, we had to go through a process that appeared convoluted to many participants: (a) we would send an email asking for participation, (b) after receiving a response, we would email consent forms, (c) confirm they have signed the forms, (d) email a link to the survey and (e) analyze the survey results. When faced with what appeared to be a complicated process, many people refused to participate.

Another challenge that emerged was due to the fact that we conducted door-to-door interviews immediately following the Halloween holiday of 2006 and the November 2006 elections. Many potential participants, tired of opening their doors to politicians and kids seeking candy, simply refused to participate. Another intriguing challenge emerged in the area of attire. In order to gain the confidence of the potential participants, the researchers dressed in business attire (suit and tie). Unfortunately, many participants noted that the attire made the researchers look like salespersons or individuals seeking to propagate religious views. In future studies, we will (a) work with the IRB to design a study that does not required signed consent, (b) avoid conducting interviews in post-holiday/election periods, and (c) choose more casual attire.

Summary of Data Collected

We collected and examined the following data:

- Statements made by Orchard Downs and Southeast Urbana residents in 20 Daily Illini and The New Gazette newspaper articles.
- Statements made by Southeast Urbana residents on the internet discussion board: 
  https://mail.prairienet.org/pipermail/suna.
- Statements from 22 interviews and surveys we conducted with Orchards Downs and Southeast Urbana residents.
- Statements made by 30 Southeast Urbana and Orchard Downs residents who spoke at a forum held on October 25, 2006 at the Carle Hospital in Urbana, Illinois.
- Statements made by 10 University faculty and staff who spoke at a forum on held on November 16, 2006 at the University of Illinois Student Union in Urbana, Illinois.

**Major Findings**

Our analysis of the statements made by Orchard Downs and Southeast Urbana residents in the interviews, surveys, on the internet, at the public forums, and in the newspaper articles revealed that they are concerned about 14 key issues regarding the redevelopment. The following tables (1.1 and 1.2) explains these issues and gives example quotes from the participants.

**Table 1.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Aging</th>
<th>Concern for Graduate Students</th>
<th>Tax Revenue from Development</th>
<th>Low-Income Housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanation</strong></td>
<td>The potential impact on the environment and whether developers will use sustainable energy sources.</td>
<td>The multicultural environment at Orchard Downs must be preserved.</td>
<td>The new Orchard Downs development should provide adequate resources for seniors.</td>
<td>Graduate students should be at the decision making table.</td>
<td>The potential tax revenue benefits from the new development are unclear.</td>
<td>The new development should also address the low income housing needs in the area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example Participant Quote</strong></td>
<td>The park like environment must be preserved. We want innovative design and green space.</td>
<td>We want a multicultural, intergenerational living environment</td>
<td>Locate a life long learning institute there.</td>
<td>Why is there no student representative on the advisory committee?</td>
<td>What will the increase in tax revenue be?</td>
<td>We have upscale housing; it’s the low income housing we don’t have.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Value/ Tradition of Orchard Downs</th>
<th>Traffic/Safety</th>
<th>Sprawl</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Public Input</th>
<th>Impact on Academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Orchard Downs has served as the home to a variety of distinguished scholars.</td>
<td>The new development should not bring in too much traffic or undesirable individuals into the area.</td>
<td>The university is expanding its boundaries too quickly and is not efficiently using the land it currently has developed.</td>
<td>The University has reigned on its promises in the past.</td>
<td>The input process should be not be simply for public relations purposes. Input should influence policy.</td>
<td>Reducing graduate housing at Orchard Downs will deter students from attending the Univ. of Illinois.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example Participant Quote</td>
<td>The new president of Ecuador is a former resident of Orchard Downs.</td>
<td>Recreation facilities should not bring outsiders; Cars should only be on Windsor.</td>
<td>There is too much development on the south side.</td>
<td>We hear but we don’t see it in writing.</td>
<td>We expect developers will take our responses seriously.</td>
<td>In the material, there is no reference to the impact on the academic infrastructure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In our interviews and surveys, we asked the participants 11 questions to gain an understanding of how they view the redevelopment and whether it has affected their relationship with the university.

In the following sections, we provide the questions we asked and explain what we learned from participant responses.

**Do you know that the university plans to rebuild the Orchard Downs Apartments?** The majority of Southeast Urbana residents (from now on referred to as SUNA residents) are aware Orchard Downs will be redeveloped. In contrast, many residents of Orchard Downs do not know that their apartments are going to rebuilt in the next 3 years.

**Are you familiar with the university’s new project website for Orchard Downs?** The majority of SUNA and Orchard Downs residents are not aware that the university has established a new website explaining the project.

**Do you plan to attend future public meetings regarding Orchard Downs?** The majority of SUNA residents stated that they will attend future meetings on the project. In contrast, many residents of Orchard Downs stated that due to time and transportation constraints, they will not attend future pub-
How satisfied are you with the university’s plan to rebuild Orchard Downs? Among the SUNA and Orchard Downs residents who were aware of the redevelopment plans, the majority expressed dissatisfaction with the project. Both groups cited the university’s lack of clarity on various issues (i.e. what type of retail will be on the site; how much student housing will be in the new development) as reasons for their displeasure.

How satisfied are you with the university’s response to the concerns that residents of Orchard Downs have about rebuilding Orchard Downs?

The majority of Orchard Downs residents familiar with the project expressed displeasure at the university’s response to their concerns. They noted the fact that the last public forum on the redevelopment was held at the Carle Hospital (an inconvenient location for many of them) was a sign that the university does not value input from residents of Orchard Downs.

How satisfied are you with the university’s response to graduate student concerns regarding other issues besides Orchard Downs?

Residents of Orchard Downs also expressed dissatisfaction with how the university is handling issues such graduate student pay and health benefits. These results, however, should interpreted with caution because some of the residents we interviewed are active participants in the graduate student union’s battle for higher pay and better benefits.

How satisfied are you with the university’s response to the concerns that residents of Southeast Urbana have regarding other issues besides Orchard Downs?

SUNA residents expressed dissatisfaction with how the university has handled other development issues in their neighborhood. They stressed that the university appears to be expanding without thinking about the impact on their neighborhood.

How do you feel about the overall impact the university has on the community you live in?

Despite frustration over Orchard Downs and other issues, the majority of SUNA and Orchard
Downs residents stated that they are satisfied with the overall impact the university has on their community. They noted that the variety of resources available at the university make the Urbana and Champaign area a pleasant place to live in and raise children.

**How do you feel about the university’s effort to monitor growth and protect the environment in the community you live in?** The majority of participants argued that the university has done a great job projecting the environment around campus. Although some complained about sprawl, the consensus was that the university cares about the environment.

**Implications**

Two key lessons that can be drawn from our findings. First, Many SUNA and Orchard Downs residents feel that that university has mishandled the Orchard Downs redevelopment project. Second, in spite of frustration regarding the Orchard Downs project, many SUNA and Orchard Downs residents view the university as having a positive impact on their community. The university, in their view, is both a friend and a foe. These findings should be examined closely by the university. They demonstrate that even though it is still very early in the redevelopment project (plans on how the new development will look like have not been drafted), many feel that the university is not doing a good job of getting residents involved. This view is likely to get stronger as the project becomes more refined. The findings also demonstrate there is still a great deal of good will toward the university among SUNA and Orchard Downs residents. The university should take advantage of this good will and take steps to address problem areas the residents have pointed out. These include:

- **Clarify the role that SUNA residents will play in the process:** Many SUNA residents complained that although that university is holding public forums, it is not clear how comments from the forums will be used. The university needs to clarify how input from SUNA residents will shape the plan for redeveloping Orchard Downs.

- **Enhance awareness among residents of Orchard Downs:** Unfortunately, Orchard Downs residents are the least knowledgeable about the project even though they will be greatly affected. To avoid a
future backlash (i.e. families discovering they only have couple of months to find affordable housing),
the university should make an effort to increase Orchard Down residents’ participation in the process.

In regards to the practice of community development, the findings reiterate the importance of
citizen participation in planning projects and ensuring that participation is not merely symbolic but actu-
ally allows people to influence decision-making. Public forums, although a good tool, should be com-
bined with smaller input sessions where leaders of affected groups can provide their direct input. Sim-
ply holding large “complaint” forums can be frustrating for people who can sometimes feel that their
participation is for symbolic purposes only. Planners should make it clear how public input will be used.
In addition, planners should also take advantage of the goodwill that may already exist in the commu-
nity. This includes identifying areas where an organization is viewed as doing good (protecting the en-
vironment) and making sure proposed projects exemplify these admired characteristics.

**Reflection on the Ethnography of the University experience**

The most notable thing about our experience was that university administrators (despite our re-
peated attempts) refused to talk to us because they viewed our project as potentially critical. We found
that except for academic faculty, many individuals affiliated with the university (staff in particular) were
reluctant to participate because they feared some sort of backlash. We ascribe this fear to the univer-
sity’s public relations apparatus which is one-way in nature, centralized, and frowns upon staff com-
menting on issues without approval. This made conducting research a challenging process. The result
was that we were unable to talk to administrators and staff about their perspective on Orchard Downs di-
rectly (which would have enhanced this project). In the one circumstance that we gained access to offi-
cial university discussion on the project, we were expected not to ask questions and limit our role to be-
ing unobtrusive spectators.

Our conclusion from this experience is that unless administrators are willing to engage in mean-
ingful dialogue with student researchers, Ethnography of the University researchers will continue to find
hard to learn the university’s official perspective on issues.
Relation to Urban Planning

The first key thing our project taught us regarding neighborhood planning is that the internet can play a key role in enhancing neighborhood-based community organizing. SUNA residents are using the web extensively in their efforts to influence the Orchard Downs project. The advantage of the internet is that it enables residents to discuss issues at their own convenience without having to meet physically. In addition, its also economical. The SUNA resident website, for example, contains hundreds of pages of university reports that, if printed out for a physical meeting, would be costly. In addition, visitors to the website are able to present extensive arguments about the project without worrying about time constraints. Residents even go as far at to plot out agendas on how to address university administrators at public forums.

The second key thing we learned is that transience, hectic schedules, and feelings of disempowerment can serve as significant obstacles to community organizing. Although residents of Orchard Downs live in close proximity of each other, their ability to act as a united group is hindered by the following factors:

- Transience: many are short term residents who feel that they should not be concerned about what they view as long term problems. This view was common among master’s degrees residents or visiting scholars who anticipate staying at the university for a short period.

- Hectic schedules: many residents have multiple roles in life. In addition being full time students, many serve as instructors, parents and even caregivers to elderly parents. Many noted the hectic demands of their schedules leave them with very little time to become involved in neighborhood issues.

- Disempowerment: many residents are international students who noted that they feel they have limited power to influence policy making in the United States. Some were surprised that they did not have to be a citizen to attend city meetings on Orchard Downs. Their perceptions that they have little influence on policy making makes organizing difficult.
Conclusions

This project revealed that among residents of Orchard Downs, awareness of the rebuilding remains very low. The next step of this project is to raise awareness among these residents. To accomplish this, we are doing the following:

We have formed the Orchard Downs Residents Coalition and established the website http://orcharddowns.blogspot.com and an internet discussion board at http://groups-beta.google.com/group/orcharddowns?hl=en

The coalition will hold its first meeting on January 27, 2006 at the Orchard Downs Community Center. The goal of the meeting is to organize a group of residents who will speak at the next university forum on Orchard Downs scheduled for February 22, 2007 at the Alice Campbell Alumni Center.

We are currently carrying out an online and offline campaign to raise awareness of the Orchard Downs issue. The techniques we are using are similar to those Brown University residents recently used to stop the outsourcing of a bookstore on their campus (see www.savethebookstore.org). The techniques include:

- We have created a video advertisement that is being played on www.youtube.com and other popular social media sites. A copy of the video can be seen here: http://tinyurl.com/yn98og. The video will also be played on local cable television.

- Email campaigns. Because many people cannot participate physically, we will give residents a means to voice their opinion electronically.

Through these techniques and many others currently being developed, we hope to raise awareness and prompt residents to become involved in shaping the future of their community.
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