Vacant and Abandoned Lands: A Theory Paper

Introduction

The use of land within the urban settlements is considered paramount in defining the spatial attributes of a city. Due to its immobile, indestructible, and fixed supply nature, the value of a land parcel is often determined by its location, condition, demand, access, restricted used (zoning), future plans, and social value (Coleman 1982; Peirce 1995). Vacant and abandoned lands especially non-residential are generally not measured or quantified in the U.S. Census and hence a generalized definition is not easily available. However, the United States General Accounting Office (1978) defined property i.e. a building or a lot that has been vacant for two or more years as such. Such vacant or abandoned land can either be publicly-owned or privately-held and may lie vacant due to various factors delineated later in this essay.

Publicly-held vacant land may be deliberately left so for ensuring adequate space for recreation and leisure activities such as parks, playgrounds, athletic fields, forest preserves, etc. Such lands although vacant aren't necessarily considered abandoned because the nature of their vacancy provides positive externalities for the community or the region and thus fall outside the purview of ill effects of vacant properties that we seek to examine in this essay. I shall first briefly list the various definitions and perceptions of vacant and abandoned lands as mentioned in the literature. Second, I shall examine the various economic, political, and social causes of abandonment and finally, shall list out the possible deleterious consequences on the proximate neighborhood.

Vacant Land: Definitions

As mentioned above, vacant and abandoned lands are defined broadly. (Northam 1971) identifies five types:

> (1) remnant parcels that are typically small in size, often irregular in shape, and that have not been developed in the past; (2) parcels with physical limitations, such as steep slope or flood hazard, and thus unbuildable; (3) corporate reserve parcels held for future expansion or relocation; (4) parcels held for speculation, frequently found in

transitional areas; and (5) institutional reserve parcels set aside by public or quasi-public entities for future development, given need and funding.

But for our purposes, we shall consider the examples of the purposively neglected properties within neighborhoods. The literature on neighborhood change and vacant properties henceforth have focused on derelict lands, land with abandoned buildings and structures, brownfields, and greenfields. Although such lands can hold much potential for future development, typically vacant and abandoned properties are associated with negative externalities of crime, poverty, stagnation, and disinvestment. (Coleman 1982) described vegetative wasteland, properties with abandoned buildings, and other non-aesthetic properties such as material dumps and construction sites as “dead space” and “disturbed space”. Greenberg, Popper et al. (1990) creatively described vacant properties within neighborhoods as Temporarily Obsolete, Abandoned, or Derelict Sites (TOADS). The National Vacant Properties Campaign (NVPC) defines vacant residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and vacant lots that pose a threat to public safety or whose owners or managers have purposively neglected the fundamental duties of property ownership. The NVPC monitors not only vacant or under-performing commercial properties and neglected industrial properties (brownfields) but also single-family homes, apartments with housing code violations that have been subsequently abandoned either willingly or by law. The NVPC considers structures that have remained unoccupied and ill-maintained for more than a year as vacant and abandoned properties.

Vacant and abandoned properties are considered as a serious threat to the health and potential of urban neighborhoods but there has been little effort in estimating the extent of the problem. In a March 2000 report, USA Today cited Insurance Services Organization (ISO) estimate of nearly 21,000 vacant buildings of 15,000 sq. ft. or larger across the US. The Brookings Institution found that in 60 cities with populations over 100,000, there is an average of two vacant buildings for every 1,000 residents (Bowman and Pagano 2000). In the same survey of 83 responding cities, the average vacant land in proportion to total city area was found to be around 15.4%. Previously, in a survey of 71 cities, (Niedercorn and Hearle 1964) found the average proportion of vacant land to the total city area was around 18% although in

cities with fixed boundaries, it was much lower at 12.1%. However in recent times either due to upsurge in interest in downtown revitalization or rise of cost of suburban land, the proportion of vacant or abandoned land to the total land area of the city has been steadily declining (Bowman and Pagano 2001). But these numbers may not be comparable as the earlier studies did not focus on abandoned structures as a factor in the vacant-land scenario. The cities in the South were also found to have more vacant land as compared to the cities in the Northeast although comparable cities in the Northeast had significantly higher number of abandoned structures as compared to the cities elsewhere (Pagano and Bowman 2000). Also, compared to previous studies, cities still have not developed reliable methods to collect information on vacant and abandoned properties in spite of availability and development of advanced technology like GIS and computerization of land records. Informal methods such as notification from neighbors or tax delinquency status are often the only ways the city government is aware of vacant and abandoned properties.

Reasons for Vacant Lands or Abandonment of Property

Land although a precious and often a high-priced resource in the urbanscape, has often been neglected by their rightful owners due to variety of reasons. The reasons can be traditional, social, and cultural but in most cases can be traced to economic causes of land demand and supply, models of neighborhood change, and changing preferences of residents.

Neighborhood Change

The study of neighborhood change for interventionist policy purposes is often subdivided into three linearly distinct objectives – how neighborhoods are changing, what causes neighborhoods to change, and what are the effects of those neighborhood changes (Lupton 2004). Although neighborhood change is perceived to be gradual and due to various factors, the consequences some of them unintended are often more common. Traditionally, the most important model of neighborhood change has been the Invasion-Succession model developed first by the Chicago School and the Life Cycle model of (Hoover and Vernon 1959). The Invasion-Succession model reflected on the change in land use and dominant activities in the neighborhood and change in local population composition is considered as the major mechanism though which other aspects of the neighborhood change. Competition for housing

between the locals and the newcomers ensue as nature of economies and employment patterns change leading to conflict that is only resolved when one of the two groups withdraws. The invasion-succession model is least likely to result in vacant or abandoned lands since stakeholders compete for scarce resources i.e. land and changing demographics often based on income and professionalization lead to neighborhood change. Land and property gets recycled and depending on the incoming residents and changing usage, the value either increases or decreases based on the status of neighborhood change.

On the other hand, the Neighborhood Life Cycle model by (Hoover and Vernon 1959) focus on the life-cycle changes those certain areas within a city undergo. The changes are: development, transition, downgrading, thinning out, and renewal. Although not all neighborhoods go through all stages in succession, the basic premise is based on following the neighborhood evolution by observing the change in several components of the neighborhood that include social status, racial and age composition of the population, quality and condition of housing, and intensity of land and dwelling use. Various factors like rates of growth of new housing and population or modifying neighborhood amenities influence the shift from one stage of the life-cycle to another. Also, not all neighborhoods go through all stages but rather pause at some intermediate stage. In our current context, neighborhoods that downgrade and eventually thin out may result in higher incidences of vacant and abandoned lands as people move out of neighborhoods without other incoming residents replacing them. Additionally, the racial models that incorporate elements of the neighborhood life cycle model imply the collusion of monied land interests and financial institutions which selectively deny mortgage credit, also known as redlining, to households located in poor inner-city neighborhoods (Metzger 2000). Smith and Lefaivre (1984) attributes the neighborhood change to deliberate actions by a coalition of monied land interests that operate through interorganizational linkages to restrict development and benefits of revitalization to certain parts of the city. These theories argue that withholding mortgage credit from neighborhoods located in the urban areas of U.S. cities put paid to the chances of physical maintenance and social upliftment of primarily African-American households and communities that were disproportionately located in such regions. The invariable form of neighborhood development through this perspective is through

movement of capital that is manipulated by certain sections of business and political interests that have acted though interventionist measures like the Civil Rights Discrimination Act, Fair Housing Act and the reduction in exclusionary practices like redlining.

Theories of neighborhood change based on the racial implications and dominance of capital movement within the region directed the financial resources away from distressed neighborhoods leading to lack of financial wherewithal to maintain rapidly-dilapidating properties. The final stage of neighborhood life-cycle entail renewal or revival of housing stock but such a move is based on the resurgence of demand in those neighborhoods that would direct revenue either through government subsidies or through property sales in the free market. Lack of market demand for such properties in distressed neighborhood only serves to compound problems of abandonment causing problems of vacancy. Higher the number of vacant properties within an already-disadvantaged neighborhood only seeks to reinforce the negative perceptions of the community leading to higher rate of abandonment thus causing a self-feeding cycle of dilapidation of neighborhoods. Whether such redirection of financial resources are based on racial grounds, unjust government policies, or merely a reflection of population and income changes in the neighborhoods continues to be debated in the literature.

Contaminated Lands

One of the primary reasons for abandonment is contamination. Historically, cities were built around employment centers and the traditional mode of employment was in industrial and manufacturing units located in the inner core of the urban settlement. The working class often lived close to the industries since transportation wasn't sufficiently developed. However, as economies changes and became gradually globalized, industries moved away from the inner cities as the nature of the economic base moved from manufacturing to service-oriented industry. Subsequently, the inner city has suffered due to changes in the economy and job loss as industries moved out of the cities, leaving behind their contaminated sites. These brownfields - abandoned properties with suspected or real contamination due to previous industrial use – account for a large proportion of vacant land in inner cities and have had a detrimental effect on the health of the neighborhood – economically and physically. Change in

industrial, transportation, and manufacturing technology and the subsequent shift in economy from manufacturing to service-oriented industries exacerbated the growth of brownfield sites.

The Environmental Protection Agency defines brownfields as "abandoned, idled, or underused industrial and commercial facilities or properties, expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived contamination" (US EPA, 1995). There are estimated 60,000-100,000 such sites all over the country although varying in size and level of contamination. Contamination of land, along with suburbanization and deindustrialization is cited as one of the primary cause of vacant urban land in the past decade (Bowman and Pagano 2000). Four factors led to the growing emergence of brownfields in American city, namely land-use decisions, racial-economic discrimination, suburban sprawl, and global capitalism (Ellis, Mason Jr et al. 2002) which are similarly to the causes for other types of vacant and abandoned lands.

Lack of environmental standards and awareness prior to the legislation passed in the 70s has adversely affected the quality of not only the contaminated sites but also their proximate neighborhood through consequential effects on health, property prices, and social effects of property dereliction and abandonment. These contaminated sites now located in mostly low-income and minority neighborhoods due to suburbanization, also receive little or no attention regards cleanup and decontamination measures due to pervasive discrimination (Bullard 2000). Cleanup decisions of such contaminated sites are often made on voter awareness of environmental degradation and subsequent membership in environmental cleanup organizations as opposed to economic or social benefits that would accrue to the neighborhood. Due to the location of such sites in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the chances of the resident community rallying around for cleanup of such property is relatively low due to low level of social networking and community cohesiveness. Also, developers, industry, and other service industry interests have followed the middle-income and higher-income 'flight to the suburbs' thus rendering inner-city areas abandoned, derelict, and underutilized due to fears of contamination and ensuing liability for remediation. This caused heavy concentration of brownfield sites within a specific area of a city, notably closer to the less-empowered population i.e. minorities and low-income population of a region.

Thus land contamination compounded by the reluctance of private developers and local government to cleanup such properties has greatly exacerbated property abandonment in primarily inner-city neighborhoods. Although the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA/Superfund) of 1980 in turn made remediation of such properties more difficult by imposing restrictive liability standards, more recent efforts by the government like Risk-Based Corrective Action (RBCA), amendment policies to CERCLA like Small Business Liability Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act (2002), EPA's Pilot Brownfields Program, and state Voluntary Cleanup Program (VCP) have made vacant and abandoned brownfield development economically feasible and development-friendly to a certain extent. But such development is still largely guided by the market mechanisms and is possible only in neighborhoods that are experiencing greater consumer demand due to gentrification.

Market Mechanisms and Demographic Change

In the literature, urban residential location theory is based on the rational behavior of consumers who indulge in utility-maximizing behavior based on location-specific amenities, transportation choices, availability of land and housing choices. These choices are often made in conjunction with a self-imposed budget constraint by individual households. Through a macro perspective, the Alonso-Muth model of urban growth reveals that households tradeoff consumption of land and accessibility. In a perfectly competitive market, households indulge in 'bid-rent' behavior for available properties at alternative distances to achieve a perceived level of utility. However in the face of declining transportation costs and upgradation of highway infrastructure, the suburbanization of America was hastened by relatively inexpensive land in the suburbs thus leading to mass exodus of population from the inner core of the city toward the periphery.

As the housing market expanded, lands in the inner city neighborhoods not only competed with properties in the immediate proximity but also with those that were located in the distant suburbs within the context of the larger housing market. Land being an immovable asset and bounded by its location, consumers in a free market not only make housing decisions based on the quality and location of the dwelling but also consider the package of environmental and government services which often have little to do with the dwelling as such.

As mentioned before, the residential location literature highlights the importance of quality of natural environmental amenities, levels of population and density, nature of demographics in the neighborhood, quality of schools, level of social and government services, public safety and often the suburban neighborhoods offer greater choice and quality in these factors apart from the relative better quality of the dwelling itself. Economic success has led more people to move up in their choice of residential location and suburban locations are often seen as favorable to familial households due to varied and higher quality choices in school and social & environmental services. This increased mobility in households toward the suburbs has led to abandonment of properties in inner city neighborhoods. Residents that can afford to move out do so leaving behind residents who are restricted by income, lack of private transportation or even real or perceived discrimination based on race and ethnicity resulting in neighborhoods where increasingly people are moving out without being replaced leading to large amount of vacant properties.

Excluding cities of high densities like New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, the ethos of "moving up" in regards to housing choice has often directed homeowners away from the central city that causes increased greenfield development on the periphery of the city. As (Bier 2001) elaborates, this leads to a reduced choice for households that would prefer to stay in the central city but cannot do so due to lack of decent-quality housing or availability of higher-quality social services that are now increasingly available only in select neighborhoods located on the periphery of the city. This results in "filtering down" of inner city properties in lieu of suburban lands that are continuing to rise in property value thus making them also a worthwhile real estate investment as opposed to central city properties that are declining in value due to decreased demand. Due to decreasing demand and falling prices, landlords of these properties have little incentive in providing for maintenance. As these structures continue to age and decline in quality, they filter down to lower-income occupants who in due course of time upgrade to housing units within central cities that had been the preserve of middle-income household leaving the ones that no one is willing to purchase or rent to abandonment (Bier 2001).

On the flip side, overestimating housing demand by developers in the market can cause adverse effects in terms of vacant and abandoned properties. As (Bier 2001) elaborates, disconnect between increase in households within a metropolitan area and the addition of new housing leads not only to vacancy problems but also abandonment of the worst properties that only serves to exacerbate the ill-effects propagated by such properties. As observed in most growing cities in the United States, annual household construction exceeds household growth since home builders neither typically consult long-term trends in urban growth nor incorporate demographic projections but instead are more concerned in the short-term sales. However, the growth is also disproportionately skewed in favor of the suburbs while central cities continue to be plagued by abandonment although suburbs can experience similar decay if they are not properly maintained (Berry 1985).

Another reason for abandonment and vacancy is the rising incidence of foreclosures and although such behavior might be involuntary on part of the households and may affect neighborhoods irrespective of their locations, some of the blame can be attributed to the fluidity of financial markets and hasty behavior of lenders. The recent subprime mortgage crisis has been compounded in part by the eagerness of lenders to increase the spread of loans in the market without adequately assessing the risk of the households they are making the loans too. Homeownership is promoted excessively even by the government as a measure of uplifting households from social ills and increasing economic opportunities but such promotion is not often backed by financial management that is necessary to make good from such large investments. Although the subprime mortgage crisis has seemingly affected all types of households, it has predictably affected minority and low-income households more disproportionately. Neighborhoods with minority populations of less than 10 per cent in 2000 saw an increase in foreclosures of 215 per cent, while neighborhoods with 90 per cent or greater minority populations experienced an increase of 544 per cent (Immergluck and Smith 2006). Similarly, foreclosures in low-income neighborhood typically located in the inner-city are more likely to lead to abandonment and concentration of foreclosures within such neighborhood over a short period of time can lead to extended vacancies and eventually long-term abandonment and dereliction of property.

Impact of Public Policy and Role of the Government

Apart from historical and economic reasons for abandonment of properties within urban neighborhoods, the role of the government has also been influential in altering the urbanscape and redirecting people away from certain sections of the city while offering incentives to move to other parts of the region. The widely received perception of moving up and toward homeownership has been strongly encouraged by the government right from drafting the G.I. bill post-WWII to inception of the long-term mortgage offerings that made loans for new housing possible to larger sections of the population while reducing the risk for lenders through mortgage insurance. The revisions in capital gains tax notwithstanding, moving up toward newer and higher priced properties was strongly encouraged by tax exemptions that drove people to making higher-priced home purchases whether they wanted it or not (Bier 2001). The deductibility of mortgage interest leads homeowners to have as large mortgage as they can afford which in turn leads them to purchase larger and more expensive homes in order to maximize their deductions. This invariably leads consumers to purchase more expensive and larger homes in the suburbs and thus move away from the central city causing such properties to filter down to the lower income class of residents who may lack the financial resources to maintain their property or if they do not, it deters them from making investments to increase the financial viability of the property because the tax code favors purchasing property compared to upgrading existing property.

Innovations and investment in transportation and telecommunications infrastructure had the unintentional but inevitable consequences of people choosing to live further from their place of work in central cities. Ease of transportation and choice of telecommuting made it possible to choose residential location not based on proximity to work but on other factors like availability of social and environmental resources and quality of schools. Greater emphasis on construction of interstates and expressways within the periphery by the government instead of reinvesting in the city's urban resources like remediation of land contamination, development of inner-city schools, maintenance of city parks, etc. led to the out migration of population that was mostly higher-income causing depression of land (residential) values within the city center.

Another cause for decline, dilapidation and eventually abandonment of city properties is the imposition of rent control that seeks to freeze property rents at a pre-determined rate which are far lower than the market rate. Often in cities like New York and Mumbai, such rent controlled properties are occupied by tenants who refuse to vacate premises in fear of losing their occupancy and the only way the landlord can legally hope to evict them is to forgo the maintenance and upkeep of such properties. Such properties then slowly decline in quality and are generally occupied by low-income tenants who neither afford to move up to home ownership nor invest in the property's maintenance that they reside in. The tenants eventually move out only when evicted by force by the city on grounds of public safety or when the properties are in serious dilapidation. By that time, the properties lacking in maintenance are so degraded that they do not reflect the value of the potential rent they might be worth and have already caused the proximate neighborhood to decline due to physical decay. Laws regarding wills, probate titles, property inheritance, property descriptions, and surveys often have negative effects on property transfers especially within inner city low-income neighborhoods that eventually lead to owners dying without bequeathing the properties to their next of kin (Bright 1995). Although the properties may be in demand, they continue to remain unoccupied due to legal battles and thus result in long-term temporary vacancy. Also, in cases of higher property taxes disproportionate to the assessed market value of the market especially in suspect neighborhood lead the owner to forgo on payments and such outstanding property liens are allowed to accumulate until they reach or exceed the property's market value. Instead of opting to paying the back taxes, the owners often choose to cede ownership and let the property lie abandoned until the city forecloses on such properties. Local governments often untrained in the problems of mass foreclosures either due to pending property liens or outstanding mortgage payments are unable to formulate an effective short-term strategy for ameliorating problems caused by such vacant and abandoned properties. Dispersion of properties within several neighborhoods also may prove to be cumbersome in any effort to use land banking as a strategy to counter abandonment. The legality of foreclosures in addition to the social stigma compounds the problem of abandoned properties thus devaluing the proximate properties in the neighborhood leading the community at large to decline.

Negative Consequences of Abandoned Land

Vacant and abandoned land not only proves to be an aesthetic eyesore on the state of the neighborhood but also implies a social stigma on the health of the community. Properties that are neglected or abandoned imply declining interest in the willingness on part of the residents to invest in the neighborhood and are symptomatic of decreasing market demand. Burchell and Listokin (1981) describe the ill effects of abandonment thus:

> Abandonment is both a symptom and a diseases – a symptom that indicates poverty, selected migration, employment loss, and usually a generalized decline of tax base and resulting municipal fisc; a disease that it becomes a causal mechanism, exercising a distinct feedback mechanism which accelerates and perpetuates urban decline (pg.15).

Thus, Burchell and Listokin's identification of abandonment as both a symptom and disease of urban blight is indicative of the broken windows problem. This problem first mentioned in Wilson and Kelling's (1982) seminal article in the Atlantic Monthly titled *Broken Windows* indicates that if broken windows in a neighborhood are left unrepaired then it might attract vandals who would break more windows and eventually upon finding it unoccupied might break into the property and occupy it illegally to pursue nefarious activities. Abandoned properties similarly impose a negative externality on the neighborhood by lowering the market value of the surrounding properties (Accordino and Johnson 2000). As market value of the neighborhoods decreases, the city might be prompted to raise its property taxes leading to possible abandonment and subsequent foreclosure. If the city fails to raise taxes, the reduced revenue in terms of property taxes causes the city to reduce essential services that further add to the decline in public improvements and maintenance of the neighborhoods.

Greenber, Popper, et al. (1990) in a survey of 15 largest cities in the United States identify fire hazard, shelter for homeless, toxic waste, drug problems, and dumping of trash and rodent infestation as some of the problems that arise from abandoned properties. These problems on abandoned properties often act as magnets to crime. Vacant properties often signify physical and social disorder and undermine the ways in which communities maintain control. In the words of Jane Jacobs, in neighborhoods that have increasing number of vacant and abandoned properties, the "eyes on the street" are reduced to such an extent that any

informal monitoring of the community is drastically reduced. Criminals often find such neighborhoods suitable for their illegal activities because the chances of getting caught are reduced. Skogan (1992) argues that abandoned buildings can not only harbor and imply social and physical decay but also provide refuge to trash, rats or other stray animals, squatters or even criminals. Such properties often serve as drug dens and used by predatory criminals who may attack neighborhood residents. Theft from abandoned properties is also less likely to be reported and neighbors are not emotionally invested in the affairs of neglected properties.

Conclusion

Vacant and abandoned properties constitute a serious and unresolved urban problem in today's cities. Although not always the cause of decline and dilapidation of the neighborhoods they are located in, they are often indicative of the nature and health of the community. Vacant properties are not only result of the normal workings of the housing market but also an unintended consequence of government and public policy that has long favored greenfield development on the periphery of the city as opposed to reinvesting in the inner city neighborhoods. Although there has been a resurgence of interest in the revitalization of central cities, several problems such as land contamination, crime, social and physical decay has deterred interested consumers from tapping into the immense real estate potential of vacant and abandoned lands. Redevelopment of such properties will not only revitalize the social fabric of inner city neighborhoods but also provide much needed revenue to the city and pave the way for increased business activity in the region.

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