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## Signs Of Stability In A Troubled Neighborhood

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Three years ago, Hartford Area Habitat for Humanity announced its most ambitious project to date. Instead of the infill strategy the organization had pursued — a few houses on this street, two on that one — Habitat leaders decided to build 30 units in 25 buildings in a three-block section of Hartford — in essence, to remake a whole neighborhood.

Well, the hammers and saws have been going day and night, and now 23 of the single and duplex homes have been finished, sold and occupied, and the last two buildings are nearly complete.

The neighborhood is, as one resident told me, much quieter than it was a few years ago. It has the daily discipline of parents putting kids on the school bus and then heading off to work. Soon, some youngsters won't need the bus.

The Habitat neighborhood is in the central North End, in an area sometimes called the "five corners" because it is at the juncture of Garden and Westland streets and Love Lane. The focus of the area for many years was the M. Swift and & Sons factory, one of the country's leading gold leaf operations.

Sadly, this century-old Hartford business has closed. The Swift family (one scion is a stellar journalist, former Courant reporter Mike Swift) made some of the land available for the Habitat project, and is now negotiating to donate the 40,000 square foot building to a private middle school.

If all goes as planned, the two-story brick factory building will become Trinity Preparatory School of Hartford, part of a nationwide network of some 65 private, Jesuit-inspired, tuition-free middle schools for youngsters from low-income families.

The school, modeled on one that opened at the Jesuit Mission Center on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1971, is demanding of students and parents. The school day is up to 12 hours, with field trips on Saturdays. The curriculum includes Latin. Parents are asked to volunteer in the school. The idea is that the kids will succeed and go to top-tier high schools and prep schools. The record in New York, Boston and elsewhere is encouraging.

The school expects to open for fifth- and sixth-grade boys in modular classrooms next August while the building is renovated, said head of school Patrick Moore. It will be nondenominational, open to students of all faiths. It will begin as an all-boys school and eventually add a girls school.

Is the school a good anchor for the neighborhood? I think so.

The nostalgic part of me wants another factory to take the Swift property. Life made sense when neighbors walked to the factories that once hummed along in North Hartford. But, with precious few exceptions, those jobs are gone and cannot be wished back.

And I think the loss of work has taken an awful toll. "We have many kids who are growing up never seeing an adult male leave in the morning to go to work," said former fire captain and city councilman Steve Harris, who chose to remain in the neighborhood. The Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson has written about the debilitating and disorienting effects on families when, as he put it, work disappears.

If the goal is to get people back to work, where to start? One can argue for a decent place to live. Habitat has now built 126 homes in Hartford over the past 18 years, and another 26 in the region, with the help of more than 10,000 volunteers. The organization has stabilized several neighborhoods and proven the point that an affordable home can be an attractive home by making its houses fit into those neighborhoods.

Indeed, the streets around the Swift property, which were pretty sketchy a few years ago, look remarkably neat and well-kept. The five corners had gotten a reputation for crime and drugs, but now I'm told it's calmed down. Now there are working families in the neighborhood who are interested in keeping it quiet and orderly.

Habitat homes are sold to people making 30 to 50 percent of the median income for Hartford County. This translates to families making from \$24,000 a year up into the \$30,000 to \$40,000 range or slightly higher, depending on the size of the family. There are both one- and two-parent families. The parents work; they are nurse's aides, school paraprofessionals, landscapers and a host of other things, said Karraine Moody, Habitat's director of family services.

Habitat provides family support and training in finance, budgeting and other skills needed to own a home. Doing a large concentration of housing has made it possible to deliver services "more efficiently and effectively," said Habitat board president Don Shaw.

"It's been the best things that's ever happened to me," said Phyllis Goggins, a nurse's aide and new homeowner who until last summer was raising her five children in an apartment.

Habitat officials are seeing their effort draw private investment to surrounding properties, said acting executive director Mike Brett.

That's important. As great a social movement as Habitat for Humanity is — and it really is — it shouldn't be an end in itself. Ideally it sets the stage for families to move up, to get the education and training for good jobs. Hopefully the success of the five corners will lure businesses to the neighborhood. Some youngsters in the Habitat homes go to magnet schools, some go to neighborhood schools, some are bused to suburban schools via Project Choice. Education is their chance. A demanding private school down the street? What's the downside?

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