LESSONS FROM TURIN AND LYON

What Six Clevelanders Took Away from Two European Success Stories and Its Possible Application Here

In July 2004, The Cleveland Foundation, working in conjunction with the German Marshall Fund and its Transatlantic Initiatives Fund, made a modest investment in the future of Cleveland and Northeast Ohio. Six Cleveland leaders bringing different perspectives from their daily work on neighborhood development were sent, along with five representatives from Pittsburgh and two consultants from the German Marshall Fund, to look at neighborhood development projects in Lyon, France, and Turin, Italy.

There, they met with individuals involved in the planning and realization of significant, large-scale development projects that are being funded by the European Union’s (EU) groundbreaking Community Initiative Program, Urban 2.

The Background

Under this multi-national program, the EU has committed substantial funding over a period of six-years (2000-2006) to the implementation of large-scale urban interventions in stressed neighborhoods in 70 cities. The winning proposals were chosen from a European Union-wide competition the purpose of which was to target substantial EU resources to cities and selected neighborhoods facing serious challenges that had devised well-planned and innovative multi-year development strategies. Top priority was to be given to proposed projects that integrated strategies for economic growth and the creative use or re-use of local assets with strategies for addressing long-standing social problems, such as the isolation of the disadvantaged or the degradation of the natural environment.

One of 10 Italian cities chosen from the 89 that submitted proposals, from that country alone, the northern metropolis of Turin (Turino), located just west-southwest of Milan, is a prime example of a troubled city determined to change its destiny. Hit hard by the decision by Fiat, long its largest single employer, to move its principal operation out of the city, Turin found itself facing many of the same problems American Rustbelt cities such as Cleveland and Pittsburgh have struggled with in the wake of the corporate exodus that began in the 1970s.

Fourteen projects designed to promote local economic growth are currently under way in Turin, but the one that captured the excitement of the EU, and a grant of €40 million, was its plan to redevelop Mirafiori Nord, an area with 20,000 residents that rose—and fell—with the success and exit of the nearby Fiat Mirafiori manufacturing complex. Several acres of housing, originally designed and built for Fiat employees
by a leading architect, had been turned into public housing and allowed to deteriorate, until the name of Mirafiori Nord became synonymous with the full range of urban problems.

Lyon (Lyons), with 60 international corporations headquartered there and a major biotech industry that is globally competitive, is an economically stronger city, the second largest in France, and a major transportation hub. The only thing they didn’t have going for them was they weren’t Paris. So Lyon has decided to capitalize on its own unique features, especially the large island at the convergence of two rivers in the city’s center that has been designated by the EU as an historic district. Long consigned, like Cleveland’s lakefront, to industrial and other practical uses, this area is now seen an overlooked resource whose thoughtful development could breathe new life into the central city.

Even though a more robust city, Lyon too had neighborhoods with high concentrations of lower income families and deteriorating housing. Two Lyon districts were visited by the team to learn how they were approaching neighborhood revitalization and improvement.

**The Cleveland Contingent**

The six individuals who were invited to make the trip were selected because of their concern, involvement and commitment to Cleveland neighborhood revitalization, but also for the variety of perspectives they would bring to the experience. They were:

- Vickie Eaton Johnson, who heads the Fairfax Renaissance Development Corporation (the CDC/individual neighborhood perspective)
- Eric Hoddersen, executive director of Neighborhood Progress Inc. (NPI), the citywide umbrella organization that provides technical assistance and other resources to the city’s community development corporations (CDCs) in their work of revitalizing Cleveland’s neighborhoods
- Chris Ronayne, Cleveland City Planning Director (planning and local government’s role)
- Hilton Smith, a successful business executive with deep civic engagement that has included serving as chair of the city’s school board and is on the NPI Board
- Jay Talbot, TCF Senior Program Officer and Director of Special Projects
- Ann Zoller, who directs ParkWorks, an award-winning program that creates playgrounds and green spaces in innercity neighborhoods (the quality of life piece).

A few weeks after their return, they were interviewed separately. Each was asked to name three or four things they saw or learned that they were most eager to tell their board about. Each was also asked about the applicability of any of their experience to Cleveland: Are there lessons there for us? (A resounding yes.)
Indeed, there was a strong consensus on the lessons to be taken away from Lyon and Turin.

The Takeaway Lessons

The Cleveland leaders identified three elements that seem to underlie the success of both cities’ efforts: (1) Planning is vital; (2) it is even more vital that the planning be participatory and inclusive, and (3) neighborhoods matter to a city and region’s well-being.

The Clevelanders also noted some unique features of each that seem to have been crucial to the effectiveness of these three strategic pieces. Again, there was a strong consensus regarding these points.

1) Planning is vital

- Agreed-upon priorities inform all decisions, choices:

It was very evident to the Cleveland leaders that Lyon and Turin each had a well-articulated strategic plan that established clear priorities and goals, and that decisions and choices, were made with those agreed-upon priorities and goals in mind. “They sat down together and looked at the resources and the opportunities and got all the parts marching to one tune,” said one of the travel team members.

Turin’s Mirafiori Nord project, for example, was based on a clearly articulated set of priorities, according to which resources were allocated and committed upfront. The city’s strategic plan, which was adopted in 2000, is seen as “a tool, a frame of reference, for each policy or urban development project, either for individual neighborhoods or the metropolis as a whole” (*Interact: European Cities in Action*, April 2003).

Turin’s natural setting is seen by community leaders as so important that, faced with a proposal to widen the highway through the Alps that is the city’s major shipping corridor, linking it with Lyon and Milan, they elected instead to dig a tunnel through the scenic mountains so important to tourism and the local quality of life. Their prior agreement that preserving the environment and the distinctive character of the place and setting is a top priority prevailed. That’s always the first cut; economic considerations are the second cut.

The community leaders also came to agreement on their goals, such as the kinds of businesses they wanted to attract and create, and on comprehensive strategies for attaining them. The strategy of encouraging entrepreneurial thinking, for example, was even built into the school curriculum.
The planning process is characterized by long-range thinking

Unlike development in cities like Cleveland, which often tends to be project-based, development in Turin and Lyon takes a longer view. “Turin decided there was no point in looking back and trying to recapture what once was.” The original capital of the united Italian states in the mid-1800’s, Turin has, you might say, a sense of perspective. History keeps unfolding, cities move on. So they agreed to put Fiat behind them and move on.

They are focused now on the things they believe will get them to where they want to be. They have Atari (digital games), textiles, “smart” (breathable) clothes, and are putting their investments in what’s working, the industrial clusters that are working. They accept that they’re a “second-tier” city and don’t waste time comparing themselves to Paris. They focus on what works for them – at their scale and size. They understand what makes their city tick. So hosting the Olympics in 2006 is not the be-all and end-all for Turin. More than one Clevelander observed, “They are more focused on their 20-year plan. Their ability to strategize at a bigger and long-term level is impressive.” Turin’s Urban 2 project has been designed to serve the present population, but also in keeping with the city’s vision. Neighborhood revitalization as seen as an important element of the city’s well-being and the region’s future.

Lyon’s development plan, too, is both strategic and comprehensive, not merely project-based. “There is a consensus about what the community’s values are, and what therefore needs to happen. And that led to a deeper, longer-range approach. A different depth of thinking.” Community leaders think and plan beyond mayoral or even presidential four-year cycles. “They aren’t just looking at short-term wins so you can cut a ribbon before someone leaves office.”

Meaningful planning must transcend partisan politics.

Community leadership in both cities has somehow gotten beyond partisan politics and fragmented interests. “It’s all about cooperation and collaboration, deciding the priorities and targeting resources,” one Cleveland leader remarked, “as opposed to just spreading it all around evenly – and thinly –to keep everybody ‘happy’ and feeling like they’re getting something. In Turin and Lyon, all neighborhood programs are linked by design to the community’s larger strategic vision.

In both Turin and Lyon, considerable care has also been taken care to see that everybody—from business people, to nonprofits and foundations, to government workers at every level—understands the Plan and is on board. “Everybody we met, no matter what arena they were working in, was well-versed in it and knew how what they were doing fit into it. Though they operated at different levels and were just responsible for their own piece, each group clearly had the same vision.”
2) Good planning is participatory and inclusive

There was a high level of involvement in the planning process by individuals representing a wide range of perspectives. Some of the Clevelanders found it ironic that Europe, which was so long a collection of monocultural interests, has made a bigger effort at inclusiveness in recent years than cities such as Cleveland with their rich ethnic mix. The leaders in both Turin and Lyon seem to have realized you can’t do it all from downtown. “You’ve got to have grassroots people and neighborhoods involved. People need to take ownership of the plan, communities have to buy into it and into the priorities.”

3) Neighborhoods matter

- **The future of a region is tied to its neighborhoods**

In both Lyon and Turin, neighborhood development is seen in the context of the region and its future. Everybody has to live somewhere; every business and opportunity has to be located somewhere. And the future competitiveness of cities and regions, it is now becoming clear, will depend more and more on their ability to attract and retain businesses and workers who have a choice about where they will locate. Thus, neighborhood development in Turin and Lyon is seen as a part of the region’s economic development. Regional, and national, goals are therefore included at the level of neighborhood planning and development.

Many American cities, by contrast, seem to think about their neighborhoods merely as service areas which must be supplied with snow removal, cleanup, trash removal, fire and police protection. In the new European Union, on the other hand, strong neighborhoods are clearly viewed as important to the region’s overall well-being.

It is not simply a matter of meeting the residents everyday (or seasonal) needs and occasionally doing something “nice” for a neighborhood with whatever funds are left over at the end of the day. In Lyon and Turin, neighborhoods matter. They are seen as the first building blocks of a region, and as such worthy of—indeed requiring—public investment to help them address social and other problems.

The EU looks at a city and its region as a whole, and if any part of it is weak or stressed, they pour funds into that part. After the success of Urban 1 (1994-1999), the EU agreed to commit €728.3 million to Urban 2, under which each member country got to choose its own sites and to allocate the funds. They are now actively trying to de-densify inner-city neighborhoods, facilitate home ownership (as opposed to absentee landlords and tenants with little stake in property maintenance), and encourage mixed-income neighborhoods as a way of linking the poor to the opportunities and resources of the mainstream economy.
Isolating the poor is now seen as having been a tragic mistake. Cut off from positive role models, indeed, contacts with the mainstream economy and its opportunities, left with few resources and little investment in the future of their own communities, the poor become a self-perpetuating problem, a drain on community resources, and their neighborhoods a breeding ground for crime and many poorly socialized (and thus perhaps only marginally employable) individuals.

- **Attention must be paid to quality of life, and of public spaces**

“They are determined to alleviate poverty,” said a Cleveland leader. “If you don’t do something about the latter, everything else you’re trying to do won’t mean anything.” And the community leaders of Turin and Lyon have clearly decided that involves creating a better environment and social climate for people to grow up in and live in. So their strategic plans aspire to a comfortable, safe environment for neighborhood residents, including clean air and green spaces—priorities that are kept in mind when decisions and choices are made about locating certain industries or allocating public resources.

The Clevelanders also noticed “a sense there that the quality of life in the public realm—the piazzas, the riverfronts—matters.”

- **A good plan builds on a place’s assets, including the natural environment**

A city’s plan should begin with an inventory of its assets—things like rivers, public spaces and amenities, underutilized or vacant buildings. The former Fiat employee housing-turned-public housing is a good example of a liability or “problem” that was seen as a valuable asset worthy of investment.

The environment, setting and quality of life, the community’s leaders have realized, are key to competing for the knowledge workers—the people who have choices about where they will live. These cities know their ability to attract and retain professionals will be a huge factor in their future. So, faced with a choice between widening the commercial corridor through the Alps that connects them with Lyon and Milan, they figured into the equation the long-term costs of trashing their environment with noise pollution and damaging the trees with gas emissions and decided it wasn’t worth it. Faced with such a decision, Turin’s community leaders now look at the long-term benefits and costs first—and weigh them against having to waste time and resources later on remedial efforts.

In Lyon, they are reclaiming key districts with a different set of priorities than were operating in the past. They, like Cleveland, had underinvested in, and devalued, the environment (their rivers, island, etc.) and now have come to realize that. They saw the need for an explicit strategy to preserve and enhance quality of life. And, like Cleveland, Lyon had done some short-sighted things, like building a superhighway that cut right through the center of the city and giving over the large “island” that sits where the Rhone and the Somme come together to a prison and stockyards. Lyon
realized its waterfront was a major public asset, and refused to let private concerns take parts of it and close it off, as it were, with barbed wire. Lyon’s goal now is to remove the highway and turn the 500-acre “island,” with the Confluence project, into the city’s vibrant new center, with retail shops, commercial buildings, public space, and an industrial park.

In Turin, high voltage lines are being removed, where no longer needed, or put underground, trestles dismantled, and power transformers that once annoyed people living in the vicinity silenced.

**Applicability to Cleveland**

Getting people to think on a bigger scale than their own immediate interests will be part of the challenge in applying these lessons in Cleveland, the participants say. “The problem is, we’re so territorial in our thinking, so partisan, so tied to election cycles. We’re always safeguarding our own agendas at the expense of the region. You have to decide where you want to be in X years as a community, and not just chop the city up into wards with competing interests.”

Neighborhood leaders, especially the politicians, need to be shown the advantages of supporting the bigger projects. “Even if a new business is not going to be located in your ward, for example, your residents could still get jobs there.” There is also a potentially greater impact to be had in concentrating investments in certain “opportunity zones,” versus just spreading resources around thinly. Vickie Eaton Johnson cites the example of the ‘Bicentennial Village’ demonstration project. “Painting 200 houses on one street has a far greater impact on the surrounding community than painting one house on 200 streets. You have to learn to trust that your turn will come. We need to collaborate more to get significant work done.”

The CDCs in Fairfax, Glenville, Central, Mount Pleasant and Buckeye-Woodland are cooperating these days, she says, putting their maps together, figuring out together what makes sense. “If Fairfax is in a planning stage, why not let Buckeye have it all this year and send the professionals over to help? That way, the best projects would get the resources and get finished.”

“We need to be looking at the assets, the opportunities, the realities in the region,” says Ann Zoller, “and crafting a plan that makes the most of these. Cleveland has ‘good bones.’” The region as an organizing unit is still in its political infancy here, notes Hoddersen; neighborhoods, particularly Cleveland’s neighborhoods, are a bit further along in their organizing. There exist vast disparities in this constellation, of course, but he feels this is the most promising level at which to begin to develop a Big Picture and a mechanism for supporting it. “A neighborhood alliance needs to be developed that is independent of politics.”
At the same time, says Chris Ronayne, we need to be exploring federal programs and potential federal resources. “We should be planning to approach both Senators and Congressional Reps with our plan for regionally competitive neighborhoods of choice.” For its part, say several participants, the public sector needs to be consistent and fund adequately what it funds.

The biggest challenge they will face in applying the lessons of Turin and Lyon to Cleveland, the group agrees, is that there is no single person to lead the effort, to drive the conversation. “The mayor has a lot on her plate.”

The consensus of the participants is that the Foundation, the one entity that is perceived as having “no vested interest,” should convene the alliance. The foundations, they argue, have an opportunity to play a role in this community and they should seize it.” Unlike political or for-profit entities, The Cleveland Foundation can convene players and encourage broad strategic thinking that is not so partisan, so territorial, but focuses instead on the “Big Picture” and help to develop a long-term vision.

**Who Else Should Be Brought into the Dialogue?**

“It would have been very different if we had made the trip separately,” one participant said. “We came to see ourselves as Team Cleveland. It’s important that the six of us stay connected.”

There is a fundamental optimism among the people who went on the trip, both about the future and about their ability to make a difference. “We were very much a practitioner group who had every reason to feel discouraged. Instead we feel energized, and re-committed to the city and its neighborhoods,” said one participant. “My hunch is we will find ourselves, in the coming months, doing some things differently, or doing new things we wouldn’t have done but for that trip,” said another participant.

One challenge the Foundation faces now is how to help channel this new energy to the benefit of Cleveland’s neighborhoods. Keeping the group together so they can continue to exchange insights and new ideas and find ways to collaborate, is part of what they would like us to do.

Another—the bigger challenge—is expanding the group to include other key leaders with whom they can share the lessons they brought home with them and begin to build a larger consensus around certain principles and values: foundation people, people from the universities, the county commissioners, members of the business community—“You’ve got to stir the pot at a lot of different levels”—some of the younger council people who have studied city planning, individuals who are active in the civic realm, our congressional delegation, whoever is impacting the way we spend
our dollars. “Planning done with money already committed at the front end can be powerful.” The group should definitely include people who can commit resources.

But we should also be thinking outside the box, beyond the obvious people, to others who might not spring immediately to mind, says Hoddersen. “There is a core of people in Cleveland who have connections to the neighborhoods, are interested in making change, and have qualities and strengths that are not captured in their job descriptions. This contingent must be included with, and connected to, the civic contingent in a broader dialogue than is now taking place.” Chris Ronayne believes “our most creative work will spring from a partnership between neighborhoods, the city, and a consortium of creative people.”

Most important, the convener must bring to this mix people who have the power and ability to deliver programs.

A third challenge in this whole effort faces will be finding ways to bring neighborhoods and their potential as a key element in the future competitiveness of a city and region into public, regional and national consciousness. “We need a national urban policy like Urban 2,” says Jay Talbot. We need to start thinking about neighborhoods, not as liabilities, but as a contribution to the whole—and in a regional context.”

The key to the new paradigm for neighborhood and economic development, the participants in the Lyon-Turin trip discovered from their own experience, is bringing together seemingly divergent interests around a plan to use their various strengths in concert for the greater good. “An important thing the trip did for us,” says Hilton Smith, “was to bring together people who used to see each other only in passing, and give them a change to get together and exchange ideas and beliefs around a shared experience.” Giving others the opportunity to participate in such a thoughtful exchange, he believes, is key to making this work.

“The sectors are still too fragmented here where neighborhood redevelopment is concerned,” says Ronayne. “The foundations, the nonprofit sector, the corporate community don’t really plan together yet in ways that can have a real impact. What we need is a diverse, inclusive, and united community leadership that can set goals, determine priorities and set forth agendas that can drive a long-term, multiyear investment. In Europe they see this effort as at minimum a six-to-seven-year commitment, in contrast to our two-year block grant cycles. To achieve the kind of transformation and the building of the type of community people want, there has to be an ability to commit longer-term. There’s not enough future visioning here: What would it take to make Cleveland a truly good place to live and work by the year 2020. And somebody’s got to articulate that in a way that gives people hope.”