





*"Our Neighborhood. Our Choice."*  
BMHA Perry Choice Neighborhood

# THE WALKING TOURS

NARRATIVES ABOUT THE COMMODORE PERRY  
HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

FEBRUARY 2012





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# Executive Summary

## ***About this Report***

The re-creation and re-development of the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site (Perry) is meant to catalyze the radical transformation the Perry Choice Neighborhood (PCN) and its surrounding communities. Perry, one of the oldest housing developments in the City, has fallen into disrepair over the years, especially the area to the east of Louisiana Street. It is anticipated that about 414 housing units will be demolished. In 1996, the Buffalo Municipal Housing used a HOPE VI demolition grant to eliminate 304 housing units that left about 6.26 acres of vacant land in the center of the housing Development, between Hayward and Alabama streets.

These housing units were more than an assemblage of brick and mortar. They were also containers that held the memories and experiences of the people who lived there. So, when the housing units were demolished, the memories stored in them were also lost. Residents did not want this to happen again, so the Perry Choice Neighborhood planning team worked with them to forge a strategy to preserve the memories of the residents and to deepen our understanding of how they use and view the spaces and places that comprises the physical neighborhood. The Walking Tours created the opportunity for the residents to share with us their memories, concerns, visual and social assessments, and general thoughts about the neighborhood.

## **What We Did**

The walking tours were designed to create person-to-person conversations with the residents and members of the planning team. On each tour there was a recorder and videographer, the interviewer and the resident. To facilitate the touring process, the neighborhood was divided into three zones (Map 2). All participating residents were asked to report to the Commodore Perry Auditorium, where they were given a brief overview of the tour and how it would operate. During the tour, the residents were asked, "show me the places you like." "Show me the places that you dislike." "What places and/or events should be remembered?" "Show me places that are special to you." "Show me safe places and places that are unsafe?" The goal of the walking tour was to engage the resident in conversation about the neighborhood and its meaning to them.

Following the tour, the planning team member would write their report, and mark on a neighborhood map, the physical location of the various sites and places mentioned during the tour. The data was entered into Excel and the information integrated into our Perry Choice GIS system. A coding system was developed so the information could be graphically produced.

## ***The Walking Tour Narratives***

### **What We Liked**

Though peoples' thoughts varied, some commonalities came out of the tours. For example, Mercy Comprehensive Care center was mentioned several times because it makes health care accessible to those who need it. Also, since it was recently constructed, residents felt that it was a nice addition to the neighborhood because it seemed well-kept. Some of stores in the neighborhood also came up several times as places where people liked—especially Tom's Store, Carbone's, and the shopping center along South Park. Many of the "likes" in the neighborhood fell in the west side of the neighborhood, between Louisiana and Chicago.

### Nostalgia, Lanigan Park and Field House & Environs

Lanigan Park and Field House were the most “liked” places in the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site, and it held great significance for some residents. The Field House is important because it provides a variety of recreational activities, including summer field trips to places like Fantasy Island. The consensus was that Lanigan was the central place in the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site, as well as the anchor that held the community together.

### Other “Liked” Places

Many older female residents recalled the times when South Park was vibrant, and the offerings of retail, shops and amenities were plentiful. The Old Firehouse on Chicago Street was another great site for interactions, between firefighters and youth seeking to cool off by being sprayed with the fire hose on a hot summer day. Residents liked both the high-rises and the row house and there was a significant clustering of the places “liked” in zone one, which is both newest and best kept section of the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site.

### What We Disliked

As expected, there are varying opinions about places that residents disliked. In some cases, residents disliked the eastern part of the neighborhood, which is down by Hamburg St. and Tom’s Store, because this part of the housing development is rundown, where there are significant tracts of vacant land and the buildings are in need of major repairs. This section of the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site is also targeted for by major development by the Choice Neighborhood Planning Initiative.

Many residents expressed a serious dislike for all the vacant properties in the housing development. To them, it makes the neighborhood “feel empty” and abandoned. Some residents felt the properties should be used for the homeless, rather than remain vacant. The “dislikes” expressed by residents were not always related to the physical environment. In some instances it reflected their disdain for the housing development administration.

## **SAFE and UNSAFE PLACES**

### Safe Places

The question of safety is a complex one at the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site. At one level most resident felt that the neighborhood was a safe place, and this was particularly the case for those residents who have lived in the area for a long time. The longer one resided in Perry, the safer they felt. The reason, according to residents, is that Perry is a close knit community, where people one another. In this primary face-to-face setting, people feel safe. This causes the entire community to view the neighborhood as a “safe haven.”

Zone 1 was considered the safest part of the community. In this generally safe environment, two sites stood out as places that were particularly safe—a service station called Big Basha’s and the High Rise apartment units in zone 1. Since surveillance cameras were installed, Big Basha’s has been considered safe. The high rises stood out because the lighting was very good, a police satellite station was nearby, and the high rise doors used swipe cards for access.

All residents felt that zones 2 and 3 were more “unsafe” than zone 1. In the late evening or at night, the “Middle” seemed scary. Both men and women suggested that the large tract of vacant land caused the “Middle” to attract drug activity and loitering, which especially made the women feel uncomfort-



able. Men also felt the “Middle” was troublesome especially at night and in the early morning. They surprisingly suggested the police should patrol the area on foot or in a vehicle at night or in the early morning. This is surprising because men typically did not like the police, who they say target black and Hispanic males and do not show them respect.

The lack of adequate lighting was viewed as a big problem, which made people fearful of walking in the evening hours. For this reason, people were particularly concerned about safety in zone 3, in part, because it was the greatest distance from population clusters and because it had the largest number of vacancies. Located in zone 3 is an alley known throughout the community as “Crack Alley,” because of its drug activity, spawns fear among older black women, who are frightened by the possibility of sexual attacks. While none of the tour guides provide examples of such attacks, the fear of the area was apparent.

There were also concerns about the personal injury side of the safety equation. Older women, in particular, were worried about teen-ages being hurt while riding their bicycles on poorly maintained roads, while others complained that the lack of handicap accessibility made travel throughout the housing development very difficult for the physically challenged. Also, while black females really loved the splash pool, they were fearful that the broken glass might injure their children. Another major safety concern expressed by young black females is a lack of stop sign visibility at some streets surrounding the housing development, such as Hayward and Perry.

## **Places & Events to be Remembered**

The Commodore Perry neighborhood is more than brick, mortar and open space; it is also a container that holds the memories of its residents. Amidst the likes, dislikes, safe and unsafe places are the memories, especially those that people want to keep—the deaths of friends and families, folks who lived at Perry and those moved own, experiences, events and places.

Through the process of the Walking Tours, we learned many places of historical significance to the residents. First and foremost was the Lanigan Field house and park, which served as a place for bonding and pride. Many residents said that it seemed just like yesterday that they played basketball, or caught a fly ball on the baseball field, or played handball. Other places and experiences included:

- Teddy Bear Memorial (56 Hayward Street)
- The Middle
- The White Wall (Along Otto St.)
- South Park Commercial Corridor
- Perry Days (Lanigan Park)
- 200 Chicago St
- The Old Catholic School (190 Fulton St.)

## **Conclusion**

The reflections of the residents indicate that conditions have worsened over time, especially since the 1980s. These reflections, nevertheless, provide us with important clues about the past, which can guide the community’s future development. The residents make it clear that Lanigan Park and field house was the center of the neighborhood, even though this facility is owned by the City of Buffalo. Nonetheless, this was a gathering place and much of the neighborhood life and culture coalesced in this site. The residents also spoke fondly of the courtyards and other gathering places, especially the recreational



rooms, which were found in some buildings. Other issues, such as the importance of walkability of the neighborhood and the when shops and stores scattered along South Park, bring back warm memories.

Collectively, these reminiscences speaks to the importance of neighborhood memories and the significance of finding a way to preserve them. People from different races and genders shared their experiences and memories and gave us a sense of ways that we might preserve these memories in the future. The really good news is that these residents provided the planning team with a framework to use in the “co-creation” of the new Perry Choice neighborhood.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations are based on the resident's narratives, as well as on comments from a focus group session that took place when the planning team shared the results of the walking tour with the residents. For a more detailed discussion of the focus groups see, *The Walking Tours: Perry Choice Neighborhood Working Paper #One*.

1. Deconstruction, rather than demolition, should be used to “unbuild” the units to be torn down. This process will make it possible to re-use the bricks from the original construction in the rebuilding of the housing development.
2. Lanigan Park is the heart and soul of the community: Lanigan needs to be redeveloped as the center of the neighborhood and be positioned to act as a social anchor. This approach would recreate the social fabric of the neighborhood. Use as multi-use facility: Cluster recreational and social activities around Lanigan (e.g. day care, gym facilities, social and human service programming, community center / community hall, computer access for residents).
3. The mural on the side of the Lanigan Field House should be preserved. If the building is demolished, a way should be found to retain that wall, even if it is deconstructed and rebuilt on the site.
4. Good lighting is an important requirement for creating a sense of safety and security throughout the neighborhood.
5. Landscaping and high standards of maintenance must be critical components of the “new” Commodore Perry neighborhood. The landscaping should be creative and provide the community with a “garden-like” feeling.
6. Transform the “White Wall” into a Wall of Respect, which holds the names of important residents, critical events in the life of the community, and ordinary residents that have made important contributions to the development of the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site.
7. Memorial Placards should be used to commemorate special events, people and places. For example, there should be a memorial placard at the site of home of Rick James.
8. Establishment of the Perry Choice Neighborhood History to collect oral histories of residents and to serve as a repository for the collection of photographs and other items of historical significance.





# About this Report

The re-creation and re-development of the Commodore Perry Housing Development (Perry) is meant to catalyze the radical transformation of the Perry Choice Neighborhood (PCN) and its surrounding communities. Perry, one of the oldest housing developments in the City, has fallen into disrepair over the years, which will necessitate the demolition of about 414 housing units. Most of this “unbuilding” will take place east of Louisiana Street where housing conditions are very poor. About sixteen years ago, Perry lost about 304 housing units, when the housing authority used a HOPE VI demolition grant to clear land in anticipation for a housing initiative, which was not funded. This “unbuilding” process left about 6.26 acres of vacant land in the “middle” of the housing development, between Hayward and Alabama streets (Map 1).

**Map 1: Commodore Perry Housing Development**



These “destroyed” housing units were more than an assemblage of brick and mortar. They were containers holding the memories and experiences of the people who lived there. When these units were knocked down, the memories stored in them were also lost. This should never happen again. The establishment of the neighborhood walking tours represents the first step making sure this never happens again. The goal is for the planning team to view the neighborhood through the eyes of the residents so as to deepen their understanding of how they use the space and to gain their views on different aspects of neighborhood life. The idea is for the residents to share with us their memories, concerns, and general thoughts about life in Perry.

Neighborhood history and the lived experiences of people are important and should inform the site planning and neighborhood development process. Knowledge of the neighborhood’s history is a source of pride for residents and it is also a framework that can be used to solve problems and overcome the obstacles required for meeting the challenges of 21st century living. Moreover, to re-create the Commodore Perry Housing Development, we need to understand how residents view the community’s physical environment and how they use the neighborhood space in their everyday life. To achieve these goals, the Perry Choice neighborhood planning team, in collaboration with the residents, conducted a series of resident-led neighborhood walking tours.

## **What We Did**

The walking tours were designed to create person-to-person conversations between residents and members of the planning team. Each tour group consisted of a recorder, videographer, interviewer and resident. To facilitate the touring process, the neighborhood was divided into three zones (Map 2). All participating residents were asked to report to the Commodore Perry Auditorium, where they were given a brief overview of the tour and how it would operate. During the tour, the residents were asked: show me the places you like; show me the places that you dislike; what places and/or events should be remembered; show me places that are special to you; and show me safe places and places that are unsafe?

Following the tour, the planning team member would write a report, and mark critical sites and places mentioned on a neighborhood map. The data was entered into Excel and the information was integrated into our Perry Choice GIS system. A geographic information system (GIS) was developed for the project, and where possible sites were geo-coded and entered into the system. Eighty-three walking tours were conducted, with eighty-six residents taking part in the tours, including 58 women and 28 men. Most of the participants were Black, but others included four Latinos, four whites and one bi-racial individual participant. Residents from across the age spectrum participated in the walking tours. There were 12 participants below 20 years, 17 between the ages of 20 and 39, 42 between the ages of 40 and 59 years, and 15 sixty years and older. To incentivize resident participation, adult residents were given \$30 Wegmans food store gift certificates upon completion of the walking tour. Residents under 18 years had given \$30 gift certificates to the Walden-Galleria Mall.



**Map 2: Perry Choice Neighborhood Walking Tour Map**

## The Context

The Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site was constructed during the late 1930s and opened in 1940. It was built in the heartland of Buffalo's Industrial City and located in the midst of a multi-racial working class community. The new public housing units were built within a modernist framework which eschewed the existing built environment. These units not only ignored the existing architectural design in the construction of the new dwelling units, but also imposed a "super block" system over the existing neighborhood block through its grid system. In so doing, they not only destroyed the existing neighborhood, but constructed the public housing unit as an island, which had no connection with the surrounding neighborhood. Even so, when the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site was completed in 1940, they offered its residents a significant improvement over their previous housing situation (Map 3).

**Map 3: Start of the Construction of Commodore Perry Development**

# Walking Tour Context

## Zone One

To facilitate the walking tour, the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site was divided into three zones. The first zone was bounded by Chicago on the west and Louisiana on the east, with the New York Thruway and South Park Avenue providing the northern and southern boundaries respectively (Map 4). Zone one is divided by Perry Street, which separates the BMHA administrative offices and three of the high rises from the rest of the settlement.

This is the newest part of the development, and the BMHA administration refers to it as “The Best of Perry.” This area not only contains the headquarters of the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority and the Resident’s Services Building, but also the newest housing units in the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site. This extension to the original Commodore Perry units was built in 1956 and consists of both row houses and high rise buildings, which the resident’s fondly refer to as “the towers.”

Zone one also includes Lanigan Park, one of the oldest parks in the City of Buffalo. Lanigan separates the towers and main cluster of row houses from a smaller cluster, the Perry Auditorium, and the adjacent walk-ups. Although Lanigan Park is intertwined with the housing development and mostly public housing residents use the facilities, it is nevertheless owned by the City, and its programs are run by the City’s recreation department and the Police Athletic League. Today, Lanigan Park consists of Lanigan Field House, an outdoor basketball court, a large open field, a small playground and the splash pool. Additionally, zone one contains the Perry Auditorium, where most public events are held at the Perry Auditorium, including church services on Sunday.

**Map 4: Zone One—Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site**





## Zone Two

Zone two is a mixed land-use area, containing both BMHA and privately owned properties, and is bounded by Louisiana on the West, Fulton Street on the North, Hayward on the East and South Park on the South. Zone two contains a small commercial plaza, with a service station/corner store and Family Dollar Store. Just behind the plaza is a Mercy Hospital, a small community-based health clinic. Outside of the plaza and Mercy Hospital, the area is characterized by a large tract of vacant land, called the “Middle,” along with numerous dwelling units in poor condition and poorly maintained streets and sidewalks.



## Zone Three

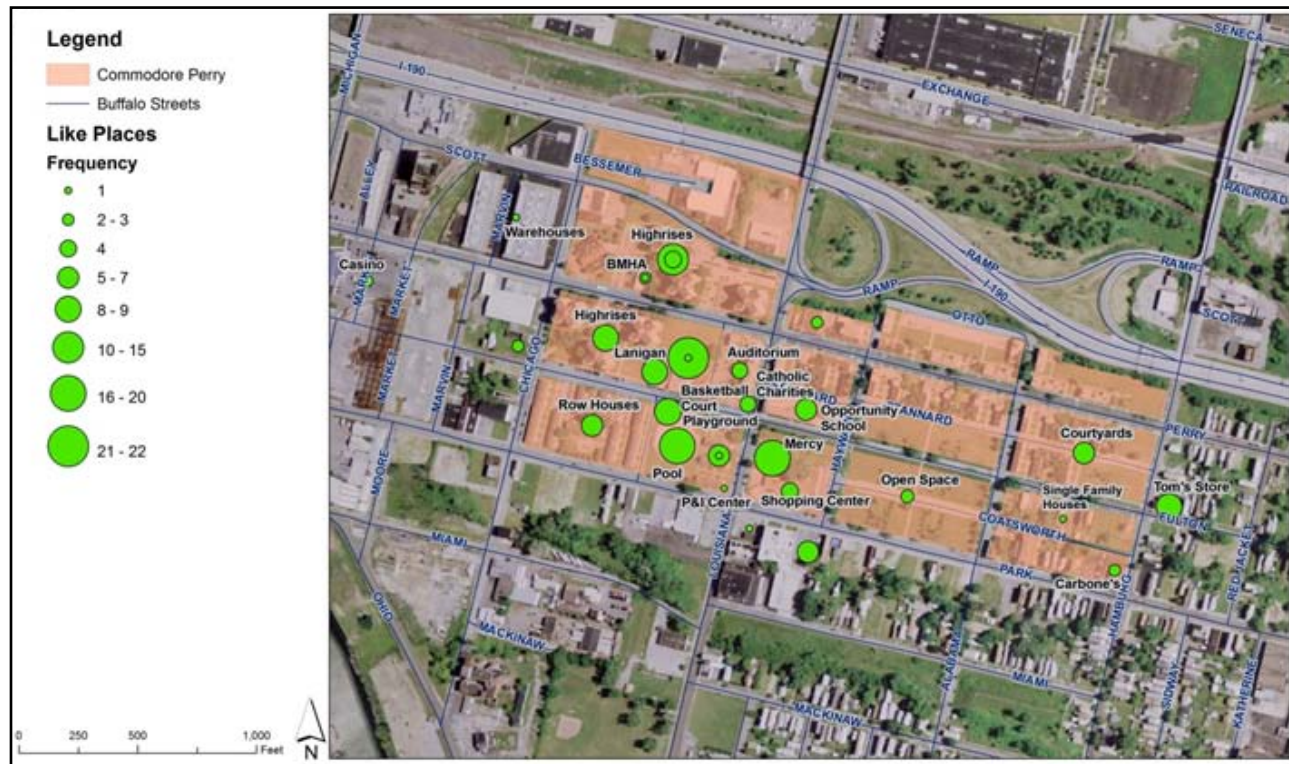
Zone three is bounded by Alabama Street to the West, Hamburg to the East, South Park to the South and the white retaining wall to the North. It is characterized by public housing units and vacant lands to the North of Fulton Street, while privately owned structures are found to the south of Fulton.





# What We “Liked”

This map displays a variety of places that people liked. Though peoples' thoughts varied, some commonalities came out of the tours. For example, Mercy Comprehensive Care center was mentioned several times because it makes health care easily accessible to those who need it. Also, residents especially like Mercy because it is well maintained. Some neighborhood stores were mentioned several times as places that people liked—especially Tom's Store, Carbone's, and the shopping center along South Park. Many of the “likes” in the neighborhood were in the western side of the neighborhood, between Louisiana and Chicago, the newest section of Perry.



## Nostalgia, Lanigan Park and Field House & Environs

Lanigan Park and Field House were the most “liked” places in the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site, and it held great significance for some residents. For example, residents “liked” the playground because the new equipment provided the neighborhood children with somewhere to play, while the splash pool provided the kids with something to do on hot days.

The field house is important because it provides a variety of recreational activities, including summer field trips to places like Fantasy Island. It is particularly important to males. For example, it was once considered a venue where adults guided boys into manhood. Males spoke in revered terms about the place of Lanigan in their lives. For some, it was a place where they got their first job and were shown the value of discipline, work and responsibility. One young man reminisced about how he and his father formed a marching band, known as the “Brinton and White Marching Unit.” His father's involvement in activities at Lanigan spawned discussions about renaming the field house to honor his father. Others talked about the old baseball field, the handball court, and the supervised boxing matches that took place behind the field house, adjacent to the baseball field.

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, we did not find out the type of employment available to the young men at Lanigan.



For young girls, the Lanigan Field House provided enrichment activities such as girl scouts, and competitions in which many young girls recall winning trophies. Residents also spoke of the significance of having St. Brigids School in the community and having a childcare facility at the housing development. Older residents also reflected on the electric atmosphere produced during outdoor events and competitions. The consensus was that Lanigan was the central place in the Commodore Perry Homes and Extension Site, as well as the anchor that held the community together.

### **Other “Liked” Places**

Many older female residents recalled the times when South Park was vibrant and the offerings of retail, shops and amenities were plentiful. The Old Firehouse on Chicago Street was another great place for interactions between firefighters and youth seeking to cool off on a hot summer day. The kids enjoyed being sprayed with the fire hose. Close by, at 200 Chicago Street (now abandoned), young folks enjoyed attending bible study sessions held in conjunction with the church. Additionally, there is the annual “Perry Days” event which closes off Perry Street for performances and activities. The Perry Auditorium, also a key gathering place for the residents, is liked; however, it currently is not available for use by residents, due to restrictions placed by BMHA. Residents liked both the high-rises and the row houses.

Zone one is the newest and best kept section of Perry, so it is not surprising that most of the “liked” items in the neighborhood were clustered in this locality.

# What We “Disliked”

The things that people “disliked” painted an intriguing portrait. Some residents “disliked” zones 2 and 3 because the buildings were rundown and there were tracts of vacant land. While the views of the residents about this area are understandable, it should nevertheless be mentioned that zone 3 is targeted for extensive redevelopment with the Choice Neighborhood initiative.

Most interesting, there were a number of places that appeared on both the “liked” and “disliked” list. These conflicting viewpoints were not “contradictory; rather, they reflected the complexity of the Perry neighborhood. For example, many people “like” Lanigan Park and the basketball court, but they simultaneously “dislike” the area because it is not well-maintained. Many people like the row houses because of their central location and because they are the best housing units at Perry, but they also “dislike” them because the grounds are poorly kept. These viewpoints are double-sided perspective places that provide the residents with positive experiences, while simultaneously upsetting them because they are not maintained at a higher standard.

There were two “dislikes” that came up again and again. Many residents expressed a serious “dislike” for the vacant properties in the neighborhood, because they make the community “feel empty” and abandoned. Indeed, to bolster the liveliness of these areas, some residents even suggested allowing the homeless to live in the empty units.

These residents view the “Middle” as an eyesore and a symbol of the community's downward trajectory. This perspective is best captured in the words of a resident who said, “See, there’s just nothing here.” This resident saw the “Middle” as a wasted opportunity, and he was reminded of this “failure” every time he walked by this place.

For others, walking by the “Middle” spawned feelings of sadness. They remembered the “Middle” as one of the liveliest sections of the Perry community. It is a place that conjured up good memories for them. The HOPE VI demolitions wiped out those memories, leaving not only a huge space in the community, but also in the lives of some residents.

**Map 2: Disliked Places**





The “dislikes” expressed by residents were not always related to the physical environment. In some instances, they reflected the resident’s disdain for the housing authority administration. For example, some residents identified the BMHA Administrative headquarters as a place they disliked. They blamed the Housing Authority for the neighborhood’s dilapidated housing and the poor maintenance problem. They feel that BMHA does not do enough to help the residents and that BMHA does not serve the public good; thereby brewing suspicions of a “secret agenda” held by the administration. For example, some residents believe the administration deliberately allowed the units to decay, so that they could level the site, thereby making way for more profitable investments at Perry. One way to interpret these concerns is to view them as evidence of the resident’s desire for a quality neighborhood that is well-maintained and anchored by a cornucopia of amenities.

The police satellite station also showed up on the “dislike” list. Some residents felt that having a sub-station in the neighborhood was a “big Joke,” because many residents had a poor relationship with the police. There was a clear gender difference on this issue. Female residents were more appreciative of the police presence, while males felt threatened by them.

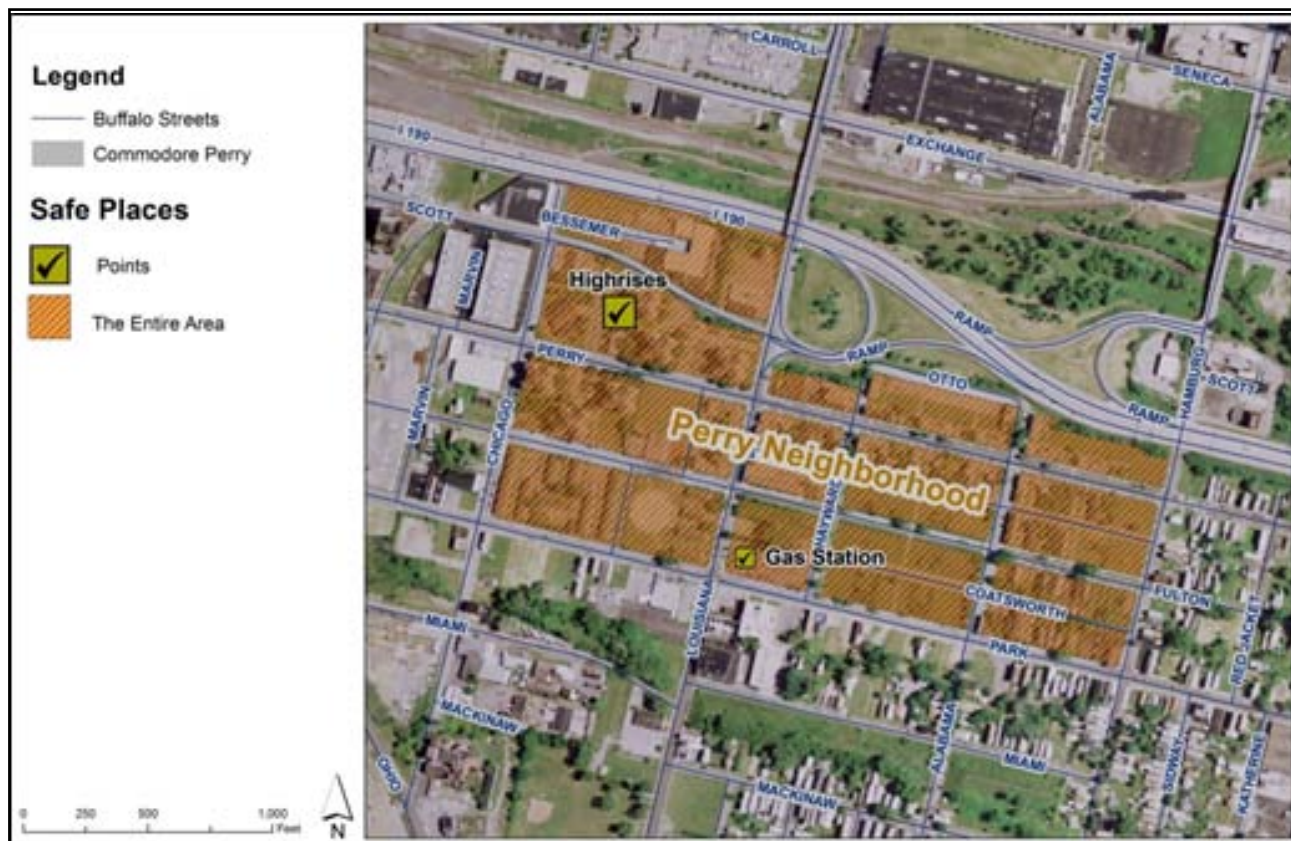
Some residents felt that Commodore Perry was an isolated and forgotten place. “The only way to get here,” an old black man joked, “is by bridge or boat.” This seemed to be the general sentiment of most residents. For the most part, the men and women shared the same perspective on their dislikes, most of which related to the maintenance of buildings and the site. One female resident complained about the noise from I-90, along with the inadequacy of shopping within the neighborhood.

# Safe and Unsafe Places

## Safe Places

The question of safety is a complex one at Perry. At one level, most resident felt that Perry was a safe place. This was particularly the case for long-time residents. Indeed, the longer one lived at Perry, the safer they felt. The reason, according to some residents, is that Commodore Perry is a close knit community where people know one another. In this primary face-to-face setting, people feel safe because they know how to negotiate the community—they know the places to avoid, the times when certain locations are not safe, and the best routes to travel to avoid problems. Life can sometimes be inconvenient, but their intimacy with place nonetheless transforms the entire community into a safe haven.

Within this framework, zone one was considered the safest part of the community. In this generally safe environment, two places stood out as locations that were particularly safe—a service station called Big Basha’s and the High Rise apartment units. Since surveillance cameras were installed, Big Basha’s has been considered safe. The high rises stood out because the lighting was very good, a police satellite station was nearby, and the high rise doors used swipe cards for access. This later finding is also significant because “high rises” have been vilified in the literature on public housing.





## Unsafe Places

Although residents generally felt that Commodore Perry was a safe community, there were nonetheless apprehensions, which sometimes differed by gender, race and ethnicity. Hispanic women, for example, thought that zone one, especially around Chicago Street, on the western boundary, was a menacing place. Along Chicago, where many Hispanics live, the women said violence, drug trafficking and some killings took place in that area, making them very anxious about living there.

The men also suggested that first floor windows in the row houses might provide easy entry for burglars, while the narratives made it clear that time of day also affected one's perception of safety and security. Both men and women, across the racial divide, said that in zone one, as it grew darker, the neighborhood became less safe, especially around the playground and Lanigan Field House. The Lanigan Park area was a particular concern of white women, who were made anxious by the congregating of young men in the evening hours.

All residents felt that zones two and three were more "unsafe" than zone one. In the late evening or at night, the "Middle" seemed especially scary. Both men and women suggested that the large tract of vacant land caused the "Middle" to attract drug activity and loitering, which especially made the women in particular feel uncomfortable. Men also felt the "Middle" was troublesome especially at night and in the early morning. They surprisingly suggested that police should patrol the area on foot or by vehicle during the night and early morning. This was unexpected because men typically did not like the police, who they say target black and Hispanic males and do not show them respect.



The lack of adequate lighting was viewed as a big problem, which made people fearful of walking in the evening hours. For this reason, people were particularly concerned about safety in zone three, in part, because it was the greatest distance from population clusters and because it had the largest number of vacancies. Located in zone three is an alley known throughout the community as “Crack Alley,” because of its drug activity. Older black women are especially fearful of this area because of the dangers of a sexual assault. While none of the tour guides provide examples of such attacks, the fear of the area seemed real.

For most women on the walking tour, zone three was a “no travel” zone for them. Even those residents who believed that Perry was a safe place, cautioned people about travelling into zone three, especially at night, because of the dangers of robbery, violence or rape. Thus, the irony is that while most people felt that Commodore Perry was safe, they still had trepidations about the place, especially zones two and three. For example, some male residents act as escorts because the elderly residents do not feel safe walking in the neighborhood alone, especially going to the corner store.

This brings the issue of perception to the forefront. As mentioned earlier, the longer a person lives in the neighborhood, the more comfortable and less fearful they become. Even so, young people and middle-age black females feel the community has become increasingly safe, while seniors believe that gang members have been moving into the housing development, making the entire community less safe. Most important, in the City of Buffalo, Perry is viewed as an unsafe place. For example, restaurants have been advised to place Perry in a “do not deliver” zone because of the safety issue.

There were also concerns about the personal injury side of the safety equation. Older women, in particular, were worried about teenagers being hurt while riding their bicycles on poorly maintained roads, while others complained that the lack of handicap accessibility made travel throughout the housing development very difficult for the physically challenged. Also, while black females really loved the splash pool, they were fearful that the broken glass might injure their children. Another major safety concern expressed by young black females is a lack of stop sign visibility at some streets surrounding the housing development, such as Hayward and Perry.

There were also concerns about proximity to the I-90 access road. Residents talked about drivers losing control of their cars and crashing into the housing development. Others complained about the noise, and some speculated about the heavy traffic contributing to respiratory problems in the neighborhood. Male residents, in particular, complained about the condition of streets and sidewalks, and suggested that some type of traffic calming device was needed in the community.

## Places & Events to be Remembered

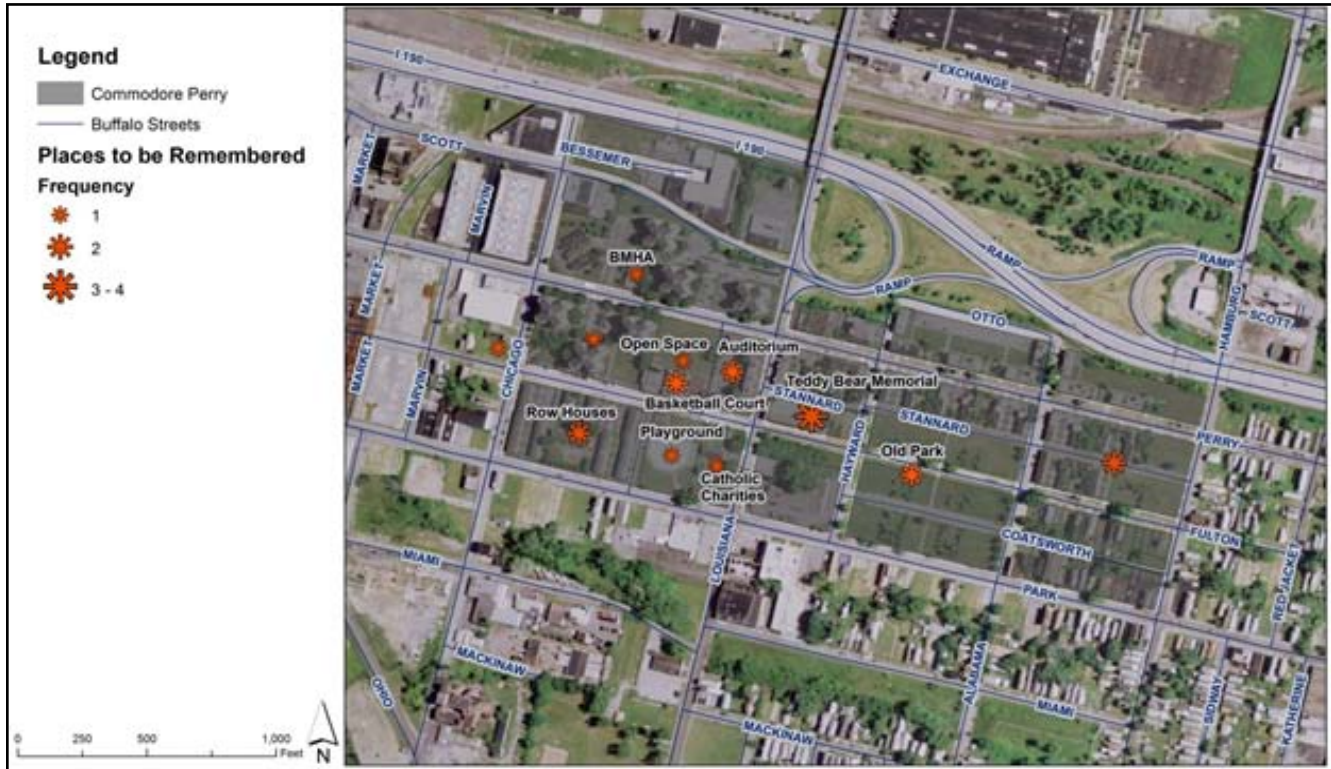
The Commodore Perry neighborhood is more than brick, mortar and open space; it is also a container that holds the memories of its residents. Amidst the likes, dislikes, safe and unsafe places are the memories that animate and give meaning to life —the deaths of friends and families, folks who lived at Perry and those moved on, experiences, events and places. For example, the resident told us that before 1980, Perry was a close knit community, where the authority sponsored many social events and excursions for the residents. They not only sponsored field trips, but also social trips, such as shopping journeys to the mall, Niagara Falls and Cameo's restaurant.





Back then, the residents reminisce, Perry was well-maintained and flowers were everywhere. One resident discussed how people felt as if they owned their place of residence and it was their prized possession. Residents recalled the times when living in the Perry complex wasn't just as a last resort, and it was actually a good place to live. Folks are not sure what happened, but they say after 1980, things really started to change for the worse.

**Figure 8: Places to “Remembered” (grouped by frequency)**



**Figure 9: The Teddy Bear Memorial**

In addition to these stories, we learned many places of historical significance to the residents. First and foremost was the Lani-gan Field house and park, which served as a place for bonding and pride. Many residents said that it seemed just like yesterday when they played basketball, or caught a fly ball on the baseball field, or played handball. Other places and experiences included:

Teddy Bear Memorial (56 Hayward Street): A couple of years ago, a young male resident of Perry was shot and killed by people outside of the Perry Neighborhood in this courtyard. Today, a collection of teddy bears and a peace-maker dove sign can be found in this courtyard paying respect to this young man's life which was ended too soon. Painful memories surround this memorial. However, most residents thought it was important to not forget this event to serve as a reminder about the kind of tragedy that can come from violence.



**The Middle:** The large, open lots in the middle of the neighborhood, referred to as the “Middle” by some residents, represents a sad spot in the neighborhood. Residents remember having a variety of important life experiences here: childhood memories come from playing outside in an old park located in this area; people met their first loves in this area; people were born and grew up in these walk-up houses; BBQs in the summer happened in these courtyards.

**Figure 10: The Middle**



**The White Wall (Along Otto St.):** Back by the I-190 corridor, there is a white retaining wall which serves as a significant location in the neighborhood. Many residents know this as simply “The White Wall.” Some residents remember this wall fondly, as it was a site of playing for younger people in the 1970s and 80s. Some residents reminisce about more recent tragedies which occurred at this site. In particular, a couple of fatal car accidents happened at this site.

**Figure 11: The White Wall**





**South Park Commercial Corridor:** When walking along South Park, residents who have lived in the Perry Neighborhood for 20-30 years remember fondly how much commercial activity occurred up and down this street. At one point, a Laundromat, a shoe store, a liquor store, a Loblaw's grocery store, and a clothing store could be found along this street. Residents remember fondly when all of these stores were thriving, making for an interesting place to walk around and interact with neighbors.

**Figure 12: South Park Commercial Corridor**



**Perry Days (Lanigan Park):** Every summer, Perry residents gather in Lanigan Park to celebrate "Perry Days." Some refer to this event as the "Perry Reunion" because past residents are invited back to the neighborhood to remember the times when they lived in Perry. In years past, the event required Perry Street to be closed to automobile traffic. The activity serves as a fundraiser for the Tenant's Council. This event truly represents community pride, and residents look forward to its celebration annually.

**200 Chicago St:** Some residents in their 50s and 60s recall 200 Chicago as a place to hang out after the Lanigan Field House closed on school nights. This building housed Bible studies, along with general opportunities to hang out with friends. This building acted almost as an informal "pub" where residents of legal drinking age could have a beer or a drink with friends.

**Figure 13: 200 Chicago**



**The Old Catholic School (190 Fulton St.):** When walking past this structure, people had different names for it. Some remember it as the old St. Bridgid's Catholic School which was run by a local Catholic Church. Nuns were the teachers, and some of them even lived in the neighborhood. After the Catholic School closed, the City of Buffalo converted it into an alternative school for students who were pregnant or had other special circumstances. Now, the structure stands vacant. Many residents remember what the building used to be and wonder what it could be for the future.

# Conclusion

The Commodore Perry Neighborhood Walking Tours provided the project planning team with an opportunity to see the neighborhood through the eyes of residents. The results showed us that this is a close knit community that residents enjoy. There were many dimensions of life in the neighborhood that they enjoyed and wanted replicated. The residents enjoyed living downtown and near the interstate highway access. Young females discussed the ease of accessing transportation and the availability of multiple routes and bus stops as a benefit to the area.

The commentaries of the residents also make clear that they dislike the dilapidation and rundown character of the community. This sentiment appeared in the narratives of both men and women as well as younger people. Indeed, many of their “dislikes” centered on issues dealing with the upkeep and maintenance of the housing development, along with concerns about crime, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

Crime is also a big problem in the neighborhood. Here, the concerns expressed by the residents might not appear in the formal statistics, but they are nevertheless the “down on the ground” factors, which influence everyday life and culture. This anxiety over crime is reflected in the numerous comments about drug trafficking and the perception of violence and danger felt by many residents. Here, the poor lighting and absence of security cameras heightens that anxiety, especially in the evening hours. As the sun goes down, the “Middle” and the empty buildings, especially in zones two and three take on an ominous appearance. Yet, at the same time, residents feel that the community is safe and secure. These two feelings are not necessarily contradictory, but rather reflect the duality of living in distressed neighborhoods. As long as the crime and violence remains below an indeterminate level, it is acceptable, even though it generates much anxiety. Yet, at the same time, because the environment is familiar, residents know how to negotiate it and how to avoid places where danger lurks, especially when it is dark.

The concerns about crime, when added to other dimensions of life in Perry, reminds us that life in a distressed neighborhood is composed of many layers, not just one. Nowhere is this clearer than when the residents reminisce about the “good old days.” The stories about Lanigan Park and the field house are endless. The older women recalled the times when buses frequented the area more often and routes extended out to Beaver Island in the summer months. They also talked about a time when BMHA offered more activities, including sponsoring shopping trips and excursions to other cities. They also discussed the sad times and painful memories.

The reflections of the residents indicate that conditions have worsened over time, especially since the 1980s. These reflections, nevertheless, provide us with important clues about the past, which can guide the community’s future development. The resident makes it clear that Lanigan Park, and field house, was the center of the neighborhood, even though this facility is owned by the City of Buffalo. Nonetheless, the park was a gathering place and much of the neighborhood life and culture coalesced around it. The residents also spoke fondly of the courtyards and other gathering places, especially the recreational rooms, which were found in some buildings. Other issues, such as the importance of walkability and the need for shops and stores along South Park, brought back warm memories, when Perry was a very animated community.

Collectively, these reminiscences speak to the importance of neighborhood memories and the significance of finding a way to preserve them. People from different races and genders shared their experiences and memories and gave us a sense of ways that we might preserve these memories in the future. The really good news is that these residents provided the planning team with a framework to use in the “co-creation” of the new Perry Choice neighborhood.



# Recommendations

The recommendations are based on the resident's narratives, as well as on comments from a focus group session that took place when the planning team shared the results of the walking tour with the residents. For a more detailed discussion of the focus groups see, *The Walking Tours: Perry Choice Neighborhood Working Paper #One*.

1. Deconstruction, rather than demolition, should be used to “unbuild” the units to be torn down. This process will make it possible to re-use the bricks from the original construction in the rebuilding of the housing development.
2. Lanigan Park is the heart and soul of the community: Lanigan needs to be redeveloped as the center of the neighborhood and be positioned to act as a social anchor. This approach would recreate the social fabric of the neighborhood. Use as multi-use facility: Cluster recreational and social activities around Lanigan (e.g. day care, gym facilities, social and human service programming, community center / community hall, computer access for residents)
3. The mural on the side of the Lanigan Field House should be preserved. If the building is demolished, a way should be found to retain that wall, even if it is deconstructed and rebuilt on the site.
4. Good lighting is an important requirement for creating a sense of safety and security throughout the neighborhood.
5. Landscaping and high standards of maintenance must be critical components of the “new” Commodore Perry neighborhood. The landscaping should be creative and provide the community with a “garden-like” feeling.
6. Transform the “White Wall” into a Wall of Respect, which holds the names of important residents, critical events in the life of the community, and ordinary residents that have made important contributions to the development of Commodore Perry.
7. Memorial Placards should be used to commemorate special events, people and places. For example, there should be a memorial placard at the site of home of Rick James.
8. The placement of memorial signs for outstanding leaders of the community on street sign poles.
9. Establishment of the Perry Choice Neighborhood History to collect oral histories of residents and to serve as a repository for the collection of photographs and other items of historical significance.





