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Preschoolers Austin Logan, Lillian Bessant, Jaclyn Cloyd, Alexander Lake and Peggy Randon play at the Most Holy Trinity School in Corktown, a rare stably integrated neighborhood in Metro Detroit.



Parker Elementary first-graders listen to teacher Shannon Giletti. "We're like a little United Nations here," says Karen Hessler principal of the Clinton Township school. "Nobody is the same shade."

Two Areas of Hope

Success stories offer lessons

Corktown, Clinton Township neighborhood show possibilities of racially balanced communities

By Ron French / The Detroit News

The neighborhoods are an unlikely pair, aging Victorians surrounding a deserted baseball stadium and suburban tract homes hugging a freeway.

Yet Corktown in Detroit and Clinton Township north of 14 Mile share a characteristic rare in Metro Detroit: both are stably integrated.

The vast majority of the 1,200 census tracts in Metro Detroit are heavily black or white; those that are relatively integrated are usually in the throes of changing from white majority to black majority.

Less than 3 percent of the neighborhoods in Metro Detroit are both racially stable and integrated, according to a Detroit News analysis of 2000 census data. To be considered integrated, a neighborhood must be between 12 percent and 50 percent black. To be stable, a neighborhood had to fit within those guidelines in 1990 and 2000.

A portrait of two of those neighborhoods -- one in predominantly black Detroit and another in overwhelmingly white Macomb County -- offers lessons in the possibilities, and pitfalls, of creating similarly racially balanced communities.

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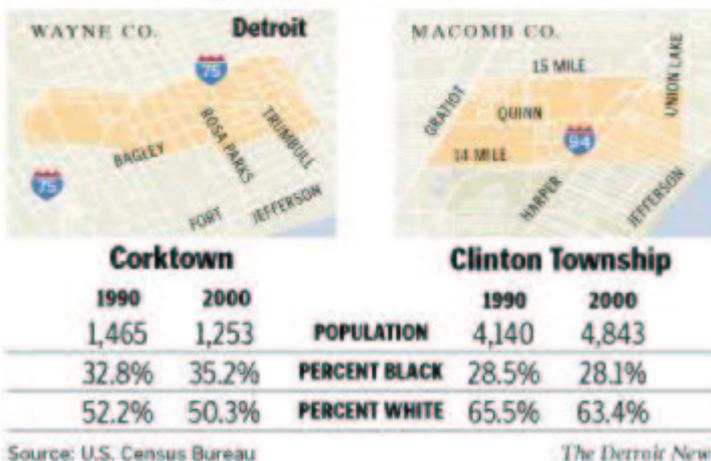
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Stable integration

Metro Detroit has few integrated neighborhoods, but even fewer have remained integrated over time. Here's a look at two:



'Little United Nations'

From the entrance of Parker Elementary School, Principal Karen Hessler can look both directions along Quinn Road and see new homes going up.

Construction isn't news in Clinton Township.

Who's moving in is.

New residents of a formerly blighted area of Macomb County, between 14 Mil and 15 Mile and east of Gratiot, are a mix of ethnicities almost identical to the mix that has lived in the neighborhood for years.

"We're like a little United Nations here," Hessler said, smiling.

"We have everybody. Nobody is the same shade."

The modest, decades-old ranch homes and new brick split-levels with tape still on the windows, form a brick-and-mortar rarity in Metro Detroit -- an integrated neighborhood that is remaining integrated. The area was 64 percent white and 28 percent black at the time of the 1990 census; 10 years later, after growing 17 percent in population, it was 63 percent white and 28 percent black.

The characteristics that distinguish the neighborhood from others in Detroit's suburbs are also what encourages integration in the middle of the most segregated metro area in the nation.

The community offers something experts say is often a catalyst for integration: mixed-income housing. There are low-income apartments just blocks from \$150,000 to \$200,000 homes.

"We have blue collar and professionals here, General Motors employees and a school superintendent," said Joe Monteleone, president of Maplewood Development, which is busy building homes in the neighborhood. "If you want to go to an area that is racially mixed, there are very few if any (communities) to choose from. We are one of the few areas that embrace it."

Rashida Shack, who is black, and Julie Baxa, who is white, attended Parker Elementary in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, both are teachers at the school.

"Race relations are pretty good," said Shack, 26. "We have a tight-knit community. We all seem to work together in spite of race."

For new residents, attracted to the community by affordable new homes, "race doesn't seem to be an issue. There are a lot of Asians, Indian families, Arab

doesn't seem to be an issue. There are a lot of Asians, Indian families, Arab families, Caucasian."

"When I went to school, it was pretty integrated, and it still is," Baxa said. "A lot of times we have children of people who, like me, went to Parker."

That history of integration makes the color of a neighbor's skin seem irrelevant Baxa said.

"I grew up here, and that's how I look at life," Baxa said. "I can't imagine it being any other way."

History may encourage integration in this section of Clinton Township, but the past offers few such lessons in other Metro Detroit communities, which have remained segregated for generations.

Even here, there are reminders of the chasm between blacks and whites in Metro Detroit. The majority of blacks live on the west side of the Interstate, attending Clintondale Schools; whites make up the majority to the east, attending L'Anse Creuse schools. Quinn Road, which runs through the heart of the majority black section of the neighborhood, had a nasty reputation for years.

Yet today, much of the new construction in the area is occurring along Quinn Road. Racial diversity is having a positive economic impact on the neighborhood, believes Philip Williams, president of the Quinn Road Action Committee.

"We're stable because we're a very small community," Williams said. "You get to know your neighbors on a more personal basis. Diversity is always good in today's society."



Corktown resident David Rickfelder, left, and Ramon Croft make repairs to a home on Labrosse Street. The racial makeup of Corktown has changed little in the past decade, remaining about half white, a third black and the remainder Hispanic.

Photos by Max Ortiz / The Detroit News



Thurman Shines, left, greets neighbor Kurt Gibbons outside the Clinton Township home where Shines has lived for 20 years. The neighborhood's mixed-income housing has been a catalyst for attracting a mix of ethnicities and making it a stably integrated area.

Sense of community

The diversity of Corktown can be seen eight feet above Michigan Avenue.

The sign for the Maltese American Benevolent Society hangs between signs for Casey's Irish pub and The Works bar. One block west, flags of Mexico and Ireland flap above the Express bar, waving at the White Castle across the street.

This is Corktown, Detroit's oldest neighborhood, and one of the few in the city that avoided the white flight of most of the city. The racial makeup of the community surrounding Tiger Stadium has changed little in the past decade, remaining about half white, a third black and the remainder Hispanic.

With its mix of third- and fourth-generation residents and *oav* and Gen-X

transplants looking for a neighborhood within walking distance of downtown, Corktown has become a model for stable integration.

"A lot of people who live here have a strong sense of community," said Kelli Kavanaugh, of the Corktown Citizens District Council. "There are a lot of people who really care about the neighborhood."

Whether that sense of community is a cause, or a result, of the neighborhood's diversity, is debatable.

But Corktown has other characteristics that are commonly linked to integrated housing.

Corktown is an integration success story, but it is a story that happened by accident. No one set out to improve or maintain integration in the neighborhood. Still, like a person who has a natural immunity to a disease, the neighborhood can be poked and prodded for clues that can be applied across Metro Detroit.

Like Clinton Township, Corktown has housing for a wide mix of incomes. Last fall, there were homes for sale from \$15,000 to \$205,000. There are new, 3-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath townhomes with decks overlooking collapsed garages.

Developer Steve Flum is building townhomes along Bagley Street, on what once was the site of dilapidated industrial buildings. "There were a lot of skeptics," Flum said. "It was hard to get appraisals for home improvements here 10 years ago. To think that I could build townhouses for \$200,000" was unimaginable."

The departure of the Tigers from Tiger Stadium two years ago could have been the death knell for the neighborhood. But in the past two years, numerous new townhomes have gone up, and more of the graying Victorians have been renovated.

"People like to live so close to downtown," said Flum, who lives in the neighborhood in a cottage built in 1864.

The new residents gentrifying Detroit's oldest neighborhood tend to be educated, employed downtown and racially diverse.

The neighborhood has a growing gay population, which, in cities such as Atlanta, has often been a harbinger of revitalization.

And there is a sizable minority of Hispanics, which tends to increase black-white integration.

"Plus, you have a section of people who have been here all their lives -- for generations," Flum said.

Typical is Felix Formosa Jr. His grandfather opened the Bagley-Trumbull Market in 1938. His grandsons still run the store, and still live in the same neighborhood.

Formosa shrugs off suggestions about moving to the suburbs. To him, Novi may as well be the moon. "You go in the suburbs and people don't know their neighbors," Formosa said.

It may be the only neighborhood with a bocce ball tournament and an Irish-Mexican festival.

"I think I'll live here even after I stop working here," Kavanaugh said. "It's got neighborhood feeling. You can walk down the street and people wave."

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