Norman Krumholz, City Planner

In 1979, I had the good fortune to be appointed to President Jimmy Carter’s National Commission on Neighborhoods. Stimulated by a good deal of pressure from noisy neighborhood advocates, the Commission received a million dollars and a year’s time to hold hearings, identify all the problems of our country’s neighborhoods and suggest a set of comprehensive, but low-budget solutions. The Commission struggled, held hearings, discussed, wrestled with the issues and wrote a report. One thing it didn’t do was define what a neighborhood is. Its members were afraid to be fatally bogged down.

Happily, John Grabowski does not bog down on the issue of definition. While posing the question "Was Euclid Avenue a Neighborhood?" his paper provides an excellent overview of the historic formation of Cleveland’s working class and ethnic neighborhoods. The paper also discussed the key roles of transportation, economic opportunity and evolving social tastes in neighborhood growth and decline. With respect to answering the question he poses, Grabowski accepts Webster’s definition. According to Webster, a neighborhood is a small section of a city or town which has definite boundaries, and whose residents have familiar or common associations, similar interests and a degree of cohesiveness. Using these criteria, Grabowski concludes that, yes, elegant Euclid Avenue was a neighborhood even though it was far from the vision of most Cleveland neighborhoods as "ethnic, blue collar bastions of ...frugality and stability." Using the same definitions, I entirely agree. Yet, I am not certain that the definition is sufficiently comprehensive.
For example, neighborhoods can be viewed as political units. From the view of the political right, neighborhoods permit the maximum participatory democracy with respect to issues of local concern. What is most important to this concept is that residents have face-to-face contact on matters involving public decision; a New England Town Hall exercise which says: the small the decision unit, the better. For this reason, Libertarians are partial to the neighborhood concept. But from the political left, neighborhoods may be seen as a political base to organize a work-class and poor constituency in favor of more liberal or radical politics.

In another definitional approach, neighborhoods may be discussed as a communications concept, a place where most of the residents are engaged in multi-functional communications that help create all sorts of beneficial results in terms of social stability. Here, neighborhood residents lose their feelings of anonymity and are more socially at peace. Another concept sees neighborhoods as an invisible latent constituency, called into being only when its environment is threatened from outside. Many other equally valid definitions exist.

Given these different approaches, we should concede that there is much we don't know about neighborhoods. First, there is little agreement about what constitutes a neighborhood. Second, while planners and advocates define most contemporary urban neighborhoods, most residents do not recognize their boundaries and are unaware that they live in these neighborhoods. Third, our understanding of what causes neighborhoods to decline is far from comprehensive; so is our understanding of what is necessary for them to "recover," at least for their indigenous residents.

Finally, we should note the fact that most neighborhood definitions stress small geographic units characterized by similarity in social status, culture, income, race, ethnicity. At the same time, these units tend to be precisely the opposite of the heterogeneous neighborhoods which, for the past 40 years, American public policy has attempted to create.