



## Neighborhood Preservation, Inc.

MEMPHIS TENNESSEE

Promotes neighborhood revitalization by collaboratively developing practical and sustainable resolutions to blighted properties and to the systems that lead to widespread neglect, vacancy and abandonment of real estate. The Organization focuses on policy advocacy and implementing/documenting replicable comprehensive neighborhood improvement projects.



# The Pink House on the Corner

by: Heather Fjord

Imagine an idyllic neighborhood. Rows of well-maintained houses filled with friendly neighbors lining the litter-free streets. Streetlights bathe the sidewalks when evening falls, filling the area with a sense of peace and security. Of course, the ideal setting is never quite so picturesque in the real world. Things tend to get messy. A raccoon knocks over several rows of trashcans. Paint peels. Sidewalks crack. Weeds grow. Abandoned homes fall into disrepair. The time and effort required to fix each problem will vary widely, and frequently, what seems simple is far from it.

Consider the process for reclaiming and rejuvenating an abandoned building. An individual or group of individuals call in a complaint: the pink house on the corner is falling apart and no one has lived there for years. Months go by and it seems like nothing has happened.

The official complaints continue, and people begin to grow frustrated. Meanwhile, the Department of Housing and Code Enforcement dispatches an inspector who determines what (if any) violations apply to the structure. Then the department must identify and locate the building's owner, inform them of the violations, and begin the process of bringing the building up to code. With violations that range from uncut grass to failure to maintain siding, and with homeowners who might be deceased or living in another state, it is easy to see how complicated and frustrating the process can become. That pink house might stay vacant and dilapidated for a couple years more, especially when you factor in good, old-fashioned bureaucratic inefficiency.



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### learning by doing

Frater and the LeanFirm do not operate through a strictly top-down approach. They prefer to work with the employees in facilitated focus groups and workshops. This process, called "Kaizen", roughly translates to good change. Fundamentally, it means learning by doing, and necessitates the involvement

of the people doing the work. Frater notes that the employees are the ones in the weeds who know the processes forward and backward. Most often, the individuals doing the work are the ones who can problem solve and identify solutions. Frater and his team work alongside staff to identify process waste

as well as gaps that need to be filled. Kaizen is a visual process that involves documenting the step-by-step procedure for a process on butcher paper. From there, the team works together to determine and eliminate unnecessary steps that add no value to the process.

## That's where Mark Frater and LeanFirm come in

Frater worked as an industrial engineer before turning his keen eye for processes and standardization to city code enforcement. After working with the City of Memphis for the past 2 years, he has already seen excellent results. Steve Barlow of Neighborhood Preservation, Inc. notes, "[Frater's] focus on the details and his ability to bring everything together into a compelling case for improving processes has wowed me more than once...I consider Mark Frater's work to be some of the most important and transformative work for code enforcement in Memphis that I have been a part of in 20 years of working here."

Frater's work takes on a two-pronged approach. First, he and his team delve deeply into the details of the process itself, working with organizations to identify unnecessary steps.

These are most likely to occur due to miscommunication. For example, two people might unknowingly spend time working on the pink house simultaneously. In addition, proper procedure might dictate that one person pass off the case to a new person, losing most of the knowledge and facility the first person had gained through research and experience with the abandoned pink house. LeanFirm identifies these moments of miscommunication or lost knowledge and implements a structure which is standardized and easily digestible so that if a hand off must occur, knowledge about the case is maintained. Problems also arise when the process is not clearly mapped from beginning to end. The case of the pink house might dead end when an inspector is stuck with no identifiable next step.





Once the full process is mapped out and all extra steps removed, Frater and the organization work towards standardizing the process. This is the second major prong of Frater's work: developing a policies and procedures manual to codify city processes. Standardizing operating procedures leads to consistent follow through with

properties like the abandoned pink house, ensuring inspectors never meet a dead end.

Currently, Frater focuses his work on two areas: eliminating wasteful steps and standardizing procedures. Most of the work is on the front end, ensuring that complaints and the properties they represent move fluidly through the system. Moving forward, there is still work to be done. Frater's method also includes continuous improvement of the process and an examination of automation potential. It is critical, he points out, that automation come at the end. Automating bad or wasteful processes does no one any good. The abandoned pink house does not get brought up to code any faster simply by automating an extraneous form. As Bill Gates points out, "automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency."

While Frater's work may not lead to overnight changes, it assuredly results in a more streamlined process. The pink house on the corner no longer stagnates between steps to renovation. Instead, it moves progressively toward reestablishing that idyllic neighborhood.



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## Mark Frater

Mark is a proven team builder with a successful track record in helping organizations institute lean principles. With 15 years of experience in operations, quality improvement and project management, he has a demonstrated ability to create and implement a foundation for change. He has experience in leading kaizen events at all levels. He has significant expertise in working with public housing authorities, cities, counties and municipal courts.

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