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Mapping onto Community

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In many ways, Kansas City is an overgrown small town with local relationships still at the core of its identity. Over several decades, activity in the downtown core has dissolved, and communities at its edges have developed and flourished. Planners have now begun to fill in the gaps left by downtown’s decay with a new *entertainment district* already under construction. Close attention needs to be paid to existing local networks and efforts because they are vital to the unique identity of the city. We want to begin with a series questions with the intent of starting a discussion about how large-scale changes in our environment map onto existing community structures.

- 1. What is the difference between large-scale and small-scale development?
- 2. What should be the proper ratio between large-scale development and small, local business and development?
- 3. Is the city government acting in the best interest of Kansas City by encouraging large-scale development?
- 4. Does the influence of large-scale development undermine small, local community efforts and sensibilities?
- 5. How does that influence affect culture?
- 6. How big will the impact of large-scale development actually be on existing communities and business?
- 7. How can we maintain the viability of existing communities with the introduction of large-scale development, and its byproducts, into downtown?

Development administered by planners and government often consists of national corporate chains and easily recognizable brands, as will most likely be the case with the *entertainment district*. There are well-established methods and reasons politicians rely on large corporations often overlooking small, local business. Corporations are able to provide statistics and models to ensure their economic viability. Large-scale development is also a highly visible symbol of success that politicians and planners desire.

Corporations seek to connect with a population by providing standardized services and products at low cost. This equation is a hallmark of what is often referred to as globalization. Globalization is more an intangible force than an easily definable term. On a practical level, however, globalized efforts often gather resources by wholesale or from cheaper markets for their sale in more expensive ones, thus increasing profit and keeping cost low. For this discussion, we are thinking of large-scale retail and national chain businesses as manifestations of globalization.

Many ethical issues, both large and small, surround the practices of globalization and free market capitalism. The questionable acquisition of cheap labor and materials, the degradation of the environment, and the undermining of community spirit through an increased focus on competition are all examples of the negative effects of globalization. These issues can happen immediately or over time — slowly shifting the priorities of a

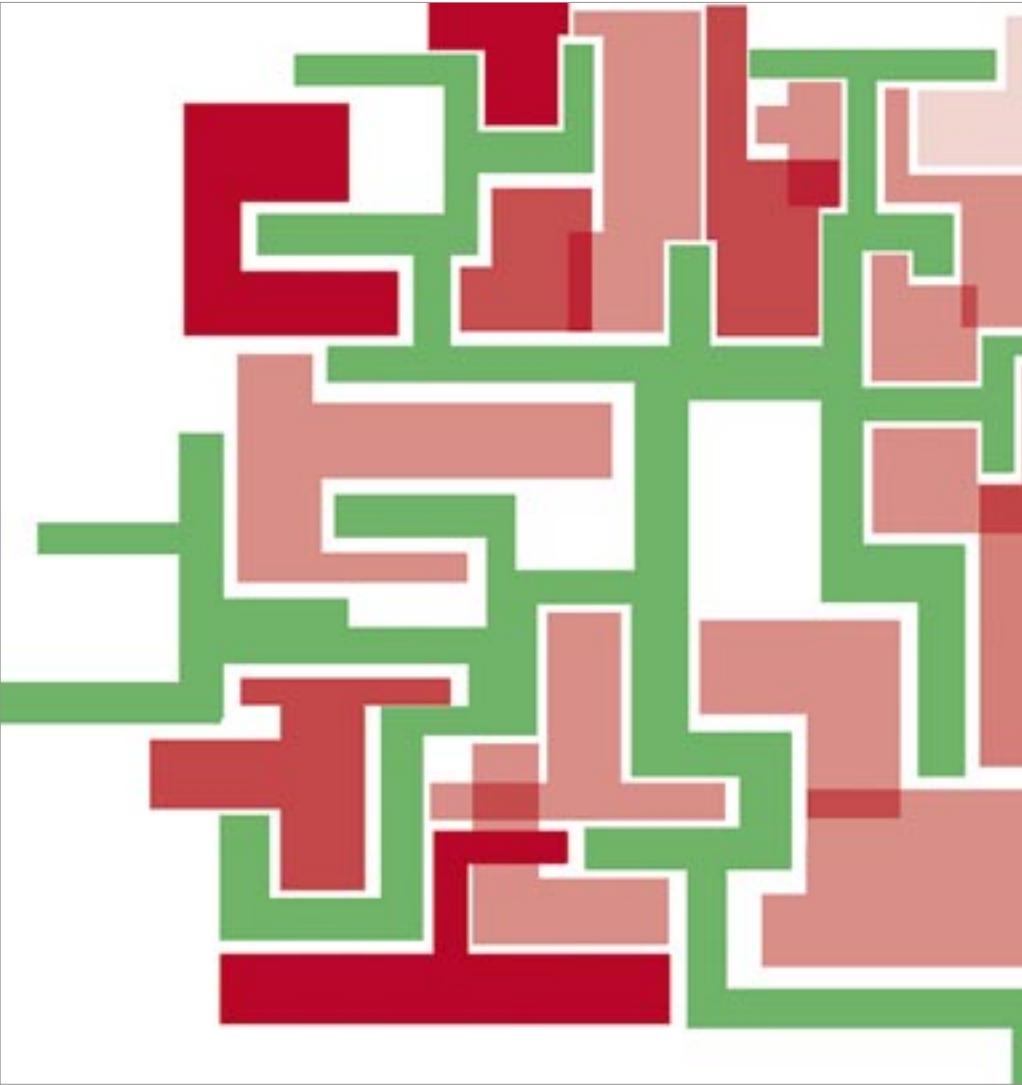
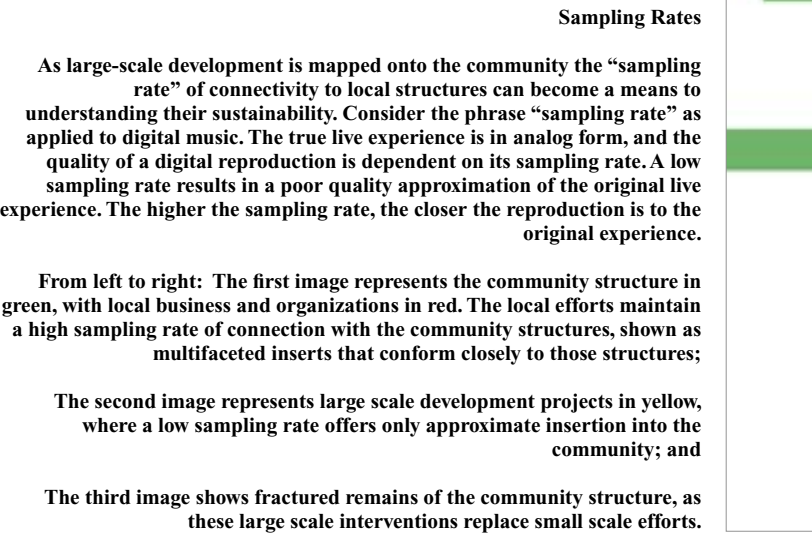
community and the subtle relationships that hold it together.

In the context of this article, we are using the term *community* to describe a network of people and businesses connected by similar goals working together to sustain each other in a variety of ways. Examples of this in Kansas City include the Crossroads, East Crossroads, the West Side, the Columbus Park area, and to a large extent, The River Market. This differs from say, Crown Center in that these areas grew slowly through the accumulated efforts of many rather than being planned and implemented. A good example of local business relationships reinforcing a sense of community occurs throughout the art galleries in the Crossroads District south of the downtown loop. One simple, but telling, action on the part the galleries is that they display exhibition cards that advertise for other galleries. These are businesses that must make a profit to survive. They support their competition because their survival is dependent on each other’s success, and because a large part of what makes the gallery experience unique and profitable is the intangible air of community that actions like this create. This balance could be easily undermined but is wholly necessary for the community to thrive.

The need for grocers in the downtown area provides another different but good example of the dynamics between development and community. There have been many discussions between developers and city government about the need for a grocery store in the downtown loop. They, of course, are thinking about a large

supermarket capable of servicing large numbers of people in ways that they are used to. This would probably include a large parking lot to facilitate drivers from all over downtown. Building a large supermarket in downtown could facilitate the needs of the community adequately. It would do little, however, to create the street activity, sense of community, and urban living that many talk about as the goal of this redevelopment.

Scale differences here seem to be at issue. For example, Local Harvest, a small neighborhood specialty grocery, did not show up on the radar in terms of a type of solution. Local Harvest moved into the Crossroads area with the promise of large increases in residential population in the area. It provided locally grown organic produce to people in the Kansas City region. Participating in downtown development, providing a quality product to consumers and hopefully generating profit, Local Harvest also chose to focus on providing local producers with a viable market to sell their produce.



In fact, in a similar vein to the gallery cooperation of the Crossroads, the owner of Local Harvest planned and instigated a “farmer’s market” in the area. On the surface, this market seemed to be in direct competition with the store, but its intent was to build a broader base of involvement and extend the connective threads between farmers and community. The efforts of Local Harvest created networks of people within the community supporting each other and sustaining themselves while enriching a sense of place.

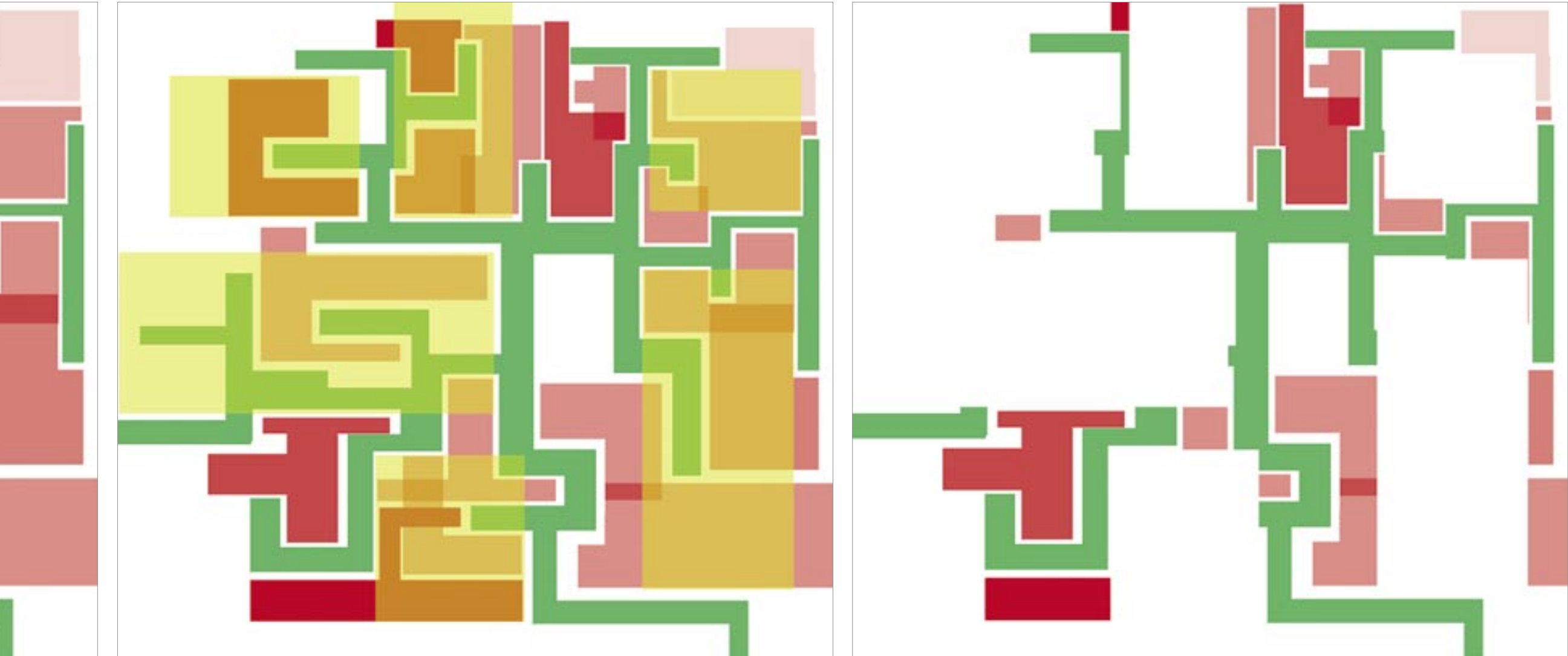
As a result of a number of economic issues, Local Harvest did not survive the transitions now taking place in the area. In part, its closure had to do with the long time spans involved with larger development. It simply could not hold out long enough to reap any benefits from increased population in the area. But the ideas behind the store have merit. Why not try to develop a network of small-specialized grocers, like Local Harvest, dispersed throughout the downtown area? Part of the reason this option does not register as a solution

is that it would be necessary for consumers to realign their thinking about how to fully utilize the small specialty grocer as a resource. For instance, we have to adapt to what foods are in season and what is on hand from the recent harvests. We also have to gain a respect for more personally crafted foods and accept that part of the higher cost is to keep a local network of thoughtful producers healthy and viable. We have to learn.

What is at issue here is not the repression of large-scale development. It is about making integrity, at least, equal to profit or status. The maintenance of local relationships in-concert with development will promote mutual accountability and preserve our integrity as a place. If, for example, a large supermarket is placed in the downtown area how will it interact with existing local business? Will its management give credence to businesses like Local Harvest, or will it develop a “Local Organically Grown” department in an attempt to gain market share? These types of questions are very pertinent

as development continues and the “entertainment district” moves into downtown.

The difference between large and small-scale development is both subtle and glaring. Both Local Harvest and the national chain grocery store would be operating within the rules of capitalism, so what is the difference? The differences arise in the approaches to the use of capitalism. Local business, explicitly trying to generate profit, is mostly concerned with sustaining itself and its employees and providing a product or service it sees that the community lacks. Its sampling rate, or degree of connection, to the local community is very high. National chains, providing a service or product, are mostly concerned with accumulating profit in order to gain market share and increase stock prices — that is the reason they exist. The problems with capitalism arise when the accumulation of profit becomes the end in itself, rather than simply a means of allowing people to have control



over the fruits of their labor. The local store is tied to the community that provides and purchases its products. It wants to insure the health of that community. The national chain gets its products from all over the world and has little responsibility for, or connection to, its producers or its customers. Its connections come in the form of surveys and statistics, its sampling rate of connection with the community is much lower. This makes questionable behavior more likely as a result. How does that affect the quality of your apples? Maybe it doesn't. But the consequences are very real and much more important than the quality, or cost, of apples.

The city government has a number of tools at its disposal to influence development, such as eminent domain and tax incentives. A basic question seems to be, should city government blindly support national chains and large-scale development with these tools if it comes at the expense, directly or indirectly, of local business? If small business reinforces models that are beneficial for building and sustaining communities that thrive and support each other, why cater to businesses that dissolve that sense of community and fellow feeling?

Further, what is the effect of this development on culture? Kansas City's place in the Midwest, on the periphery of coastal influence gives us who live here a distinct, yet incomplete, perspective. Developing a sense of *culture* has often centered on the idea of keeping up with the coasts. This inferiority complex cripples our sense of self and compromises our judgment. It is in this approximation of correctness in urban planning that we risk losing our specific identity and integrity as a place.

On a large scale, globalization and its relationship to culture might be best seen through a postmodernist view. This view most succinctly describes this relationship as culture that has been enveloped by capitalism. This is evidenced by issues like the retailing of hip-hop culture, the encapsulation of graffiti art by the gallery establishment, and the quick commodification of sub-cultures of all types into the mainstream. The speed with which commerce engulfs culture as a medium of exchange has ultimately led to a situation where diversity is the norm. But this is a false diversity relying too heavily on surface and style. It imitates subtlety and true multi-culturalism, re-enforcing separations of class and race through tactics such as life-style marketing.

In a postmodern world, this misread of culture often leads to top-down attempts at defining places and populations, replacing a true sense of identity with the *Disney-fication* of environments. These top-down attempts of local community definition ring hollow because they are based on market force manipulation rather than true local identity. These concerns may seem out of scale to current changes taking place in Kansas City, but when charted onto the community level the effects can be damaging. The new *entertainment district* slated for downtown Kansas City will offer national chains in an effort to provide cultural iconography that is familiar to us through media exposure. How these elements merge with or replace local efforts is a big question. Another local example of this is the nickname for Kaufman Stadium — *The K*. Introduced as a marketing strategy, it was hoped that this nickname would provide an immediate local sense of familiarity, but its essence is vacuous. It seems to be a feeble attempt to connect along

the lines of *Micky D's* or *Buck's*. Will these top-down attempts to define a sense of place operate in concert with the grass roots, organically formed communities, or will they overwhelm and fracture these networks?

As a practical example, a general definition of culture could be "the production, circulation, history, and interpretation of representation." In Kansas City, this takes the form of art galleries, venues for theatre and dance, bars, restaurants or clubs in which live music is preformed, and publications which discuss these events. All of these rely on affordable rent to sustain their programming. If property taxes rise as a result of development, these businesses will be forced to go elsewhere resulting in a loss of culture.

As a community, Kansas City should call on city government to enforce restraints upon unfettered capitalism and put the needs of its local networks in the forefront of the conversation concerning development. The problems that arise from globalization and capitalism on the world stage ultimately come down to a matter of ethics, and those problems affect things from terrorism to disease and poverty. Sweatshop labor, a common effect of globalization in the third world, is in the end a product of human indecency rather than, "a problem with the system." In other words, the problem is with us — not the system.

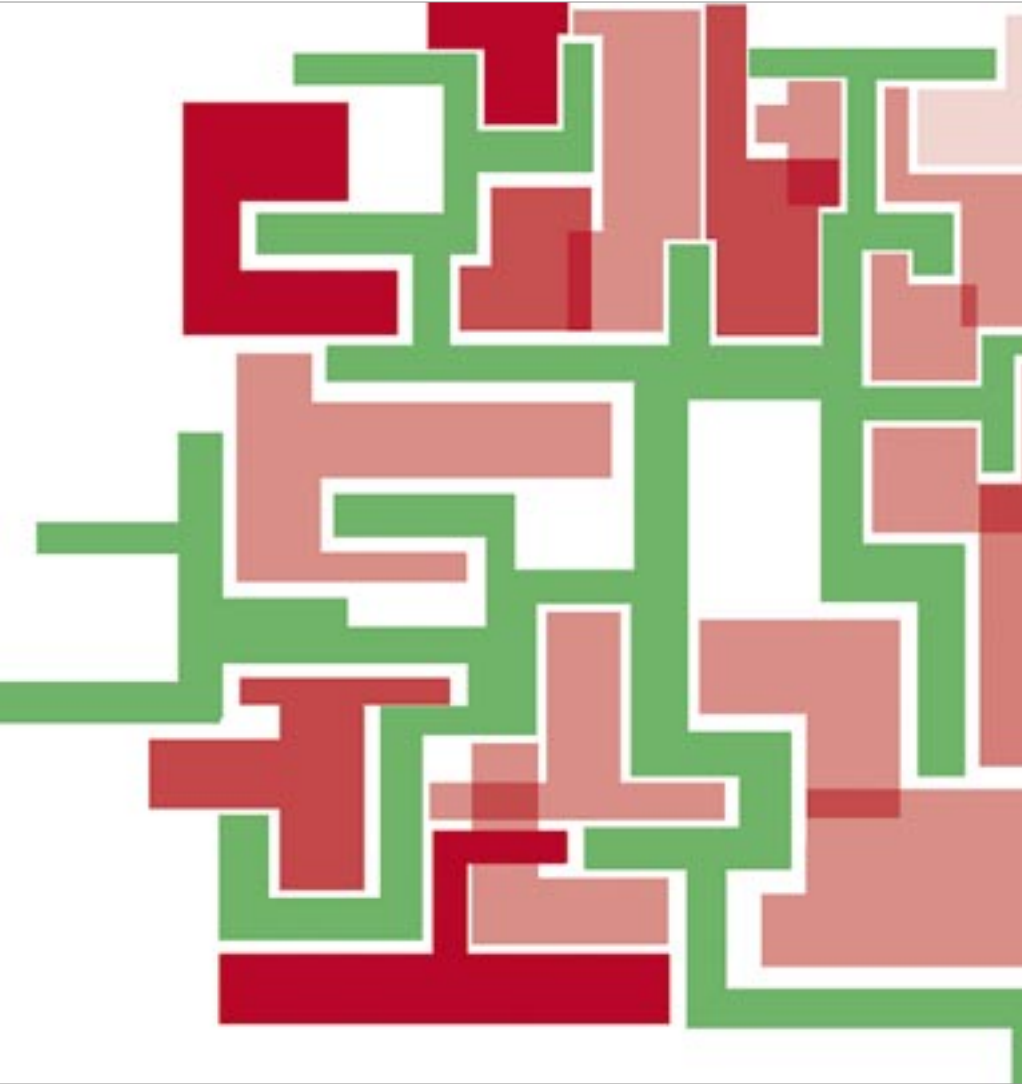
In Aristotle's view, ethics is the study of human desire. Because desire is the motive behind all our actions, the task of an ethical education would be to re-educate our desires so that we reap pleasure from doing good acts and pain from doing bad ones. Since the implementation of this shift is ultimately political, it needs to come in the form of punishing behavior that is so often rewarded in the capitalist system through higher profit margins and rewarding behavior that super-cedes those harmful impulses. This would consist of punishing a business with fines for exploiting illegal immigrants to do dangerous jobs at low wages, and rewarding a business for providing day care for the children of its employees. The implementation of this rests decidedly in the political arena.

In this reassessment, ethics is about excelling at being human, and nobody can do that in isolation. Moreover, nobody can excel at being human unless the political institutions, which allow it, are available. In other words, humans can't flourish unless the environment in which they live is equipped with certain fundamental things like basic order, safety, and rules that everyone lives by. The implementation of this situation is politics.

Many truly ethical actions seem to require that we act against our own best interest, but the goal is to move our internalized

desires into a broader social context — thinking more about the ways we are connected than about the ways we are separate or individual. It is not just a matter of gritting our teeth and capitulating to some imperious law that states we should be nice; we need to learn to enjoy being just, merciful, and independent. We need to think about each other's happiness as a means to our own.

Issues of consumer choice and personal freedom also require re-assessment in the context of this article. Consumer choice is simply a product of excessive production rather than a means to personal freedom or individual expression. Individuality is an autonomy we forge for ourselves on the basis of our shared existence. Freedom is thus a product of our dependency on each other acting well rather than our independence from each other. Moreover, it means creating for others the kind of space in which they can flourish. Individuality means finding freedom in the freedom we



Left to right: As before, The first image represents a pre-development state with community structure in green, with local business and organizations in red;

The next image indicates a more careful insertion of large scale development. Its sampling rate remains low, but careful restraint allows for a better fit within the community structure; and

The last image shows the original structure left more intact, with both high and low sampling rates acting more in concert with each other.

create for others. To be granted this particular kind of freedom is to be able to be at your best without undue fear. It is thus the vital precondition of human flourishing. In this scenario, we realize our nature at its best in the fulfillment of others, and because of this we are not at liberty to be violent, dominating, or self-seeking.

We see this sense of freedom in the community-based efforts mentioned earlier with the art galleries and farmer’s market. Can this situation withstand the interjection of large-scale market forces in the area?

A firm direction for Downtown Kansas City’s future is being established with a number of large-scale projects in the works. The development is exciting, and the economic benefits are real, but there is a great deal of anxiousness within the local communities surrounding the area. Because our city government has chosen to support large-scale development, we are presented with an opportunity for renewed emphasis on local politics

and power structures. How these local elements perform is at issue here. Are we as a community determining our own identity, or are we allowing ourselves to be swallowed into a homogenous stew? A new focus on these local relationships with the intent of preserving and further uncovering our specific identity as a place is the goal. Strengthening our sense of community and thus our sense of place, safety, and freedom within that community and within the larger context of America and the rest of the world is the desired result. Local communities need local government to step-up and support them. As a community, we can call on non-local, large scale interests to respect and cooperate with local interests and community structure or we can bend over backwards to facilitate them and sacrifice our identity.

The current development situation in Kansas City reveals many more nuanced changes than just those represented in this article. The situation presents an opportunity for us to respond to the problems of globalization

from a truly unique position. By responding to globalization with a renewed emphasis on local issues and communities, we can reverse the longstanding trend of looking to see what works elsewhere and mapping it onto our own environment. Further, we can lead a new discussion about how smaller cities can respond to globalization and its influences in ways that preserve and amplify a strong, self-confident sense of place.

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