

STRONGER NEIGHBORHOODS THROUGH STRATEGIC DECISIONS

Relocal tool



Legacy cities face many diverse challenges, with limited resources available to address them. Making strategic decisions about how to allocate those resources is essential for shaping neighborhoods that are more vibrant, stable, and sustainable—and creating a healthier city.

The Relocal tool provides a data-based framework for tackling vacant and abandoned properties. Drawing on information from the parcel level to the citywide scale, Relocal lays out sustainable long-range strategies for neighborhoods. And it makes targeted, practical recommendations for how vacant buildings and empty lots can be transformed from liabilities to neighborhood assets.

Relocal quantifies distinctive neighborhood strengths and challenges with 78 metrics across 8 categories. Every category measures a different neighborhood quality, using information from municipal and county governments, federal and state databases, and field surveys. The resulting framework highlights existing strengths such as walkability, quality building stock, and resident engagement, along with challenges such as falling property values, unemployment, and crime. A community priority survey is used to gather resident input on their neighborhood and influence categories' importance.

The results chart a course for each neighborhood that builds on local strengths and emphasizes long-range stability and sustainability. A neighborhood with committed residents, strong neighborhood character, and community amenities will likely be recommended for long-term residential use at current or increased densities. A neighborhood that is located close to natural features but plagued with widespread vacancy and foreclosure may be recommended to return to natural habitat over the course of years or decades. Still other

Relocal gets results

- ▶ Property-level strategies
- ▶ Decisions based on real, comprehensive data
- ▶ Community input on neighborhood priorities
- ▶ Efficient allocation of time and funds

Strong neighborhoods support a strong city. Making decisions about vacant properties in a way that responds to a neighborhood's current context, sustainable future use, and community priorities—and the properties themselves—is a huge step forward for municipal governments and their partners.

Category	What it measures
Real estate	Past disinvestment and prospective reinvestment
Stability	Population trends and related quality-of-life issues
Neighborhood character	Sense of place through the built environment
Walkability	Proximity to community assets and condition of bike-ped infrastructure
Fiscal	Economic costs and contributions of neighborhood elements to City
Economic opportunity	Wealth-generating opportunities for residents
Engagement	Resident participation in neighborhood
Environment	Past land uses, natural resources, and current quality-of-life factors

neighborhoods are appropriate for lower-density residential uses.

Targeted reinvestment can happen in neighborhoods along the entire spectrum of sustainable uses. Yet resources should take different forms and have different goals in each neighborhood. Public funds should not go toward building new houses in a neighborhood when a range of data suggests that the neighborhood is trending away from residential use. And demolishing vacant houses that are in good condition in a neighborhood with stable population and strong community amenities is not an effective way to spend public dollars. Resources—money, time, and partnerships—are too scarce to use inefficiently.

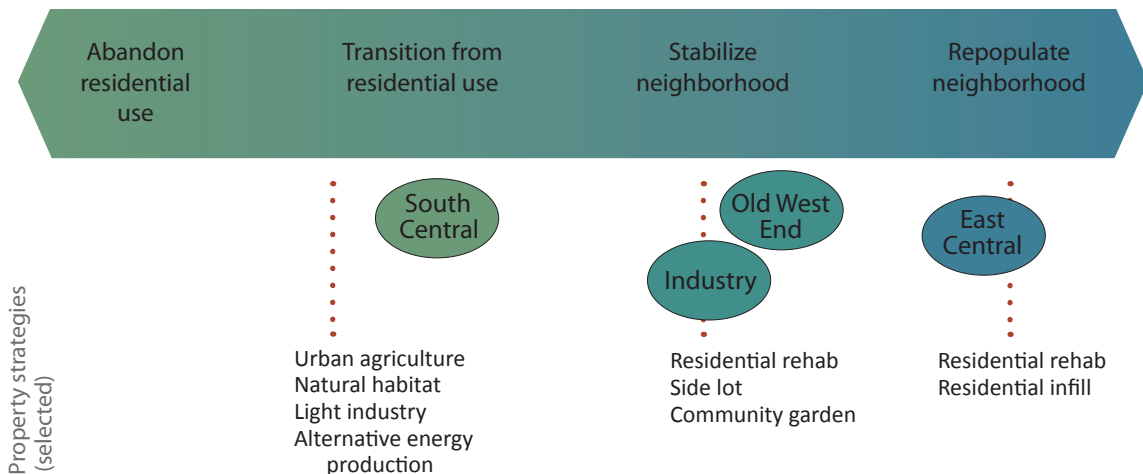
MAKING NEIGHBORHOODS STRONGER

Muncie, Indiana, was the site of Relocal’s initial field test. The tool was applied to four residential neighborhoods with older building stock in a range of conditions. One neighborhood, a prosperous area next to Ball State University, was used as a benchmark.

In Muncie, the study neighborhoods fall along the spectrum of sustainable uses, each with distinctive opportunities and challenges.

- **East Central** is a historic neighborhood north of downtown. Its stability, walkability, and character make it well suited for more dense residential use. Strong neighborhood associations and community development organizations are likely partners for attracting new homebuyers and helping to redevelop and repurpose a large amount of vacant land.
- **Old West End**, an older neighborhood adjacent to downtown, has high architectural character, well-maintained buildings, community amenities, and an active neighborhood association. These highlight the opportunity to stabilize the neighborhood.
- **Industry** is a historically working-class neighborhood notable for its committed residents and walkability, though population loss and declining property values make high-density

▼ Spectrum of sustainable neighborhood strategies



residential use unsustainable. Lower-density uses like homesteading would allow current residents to stay in place with expanded land holdings and help ensure that vacant properties are stewarded.

- **South Central** is recommended for gradual transition away from residential use, due to a number of major challenges: population loss and high vacancy rates, few homeowners, high crime and fire rates, low-quality buildings, and widespread tax delinquency. South Central residents should be meaningfully engaged in planning the neighborhood's future, with particular attention to job-creating uses.
- **Westridge** was not recommended for changes due to its benchmark role.

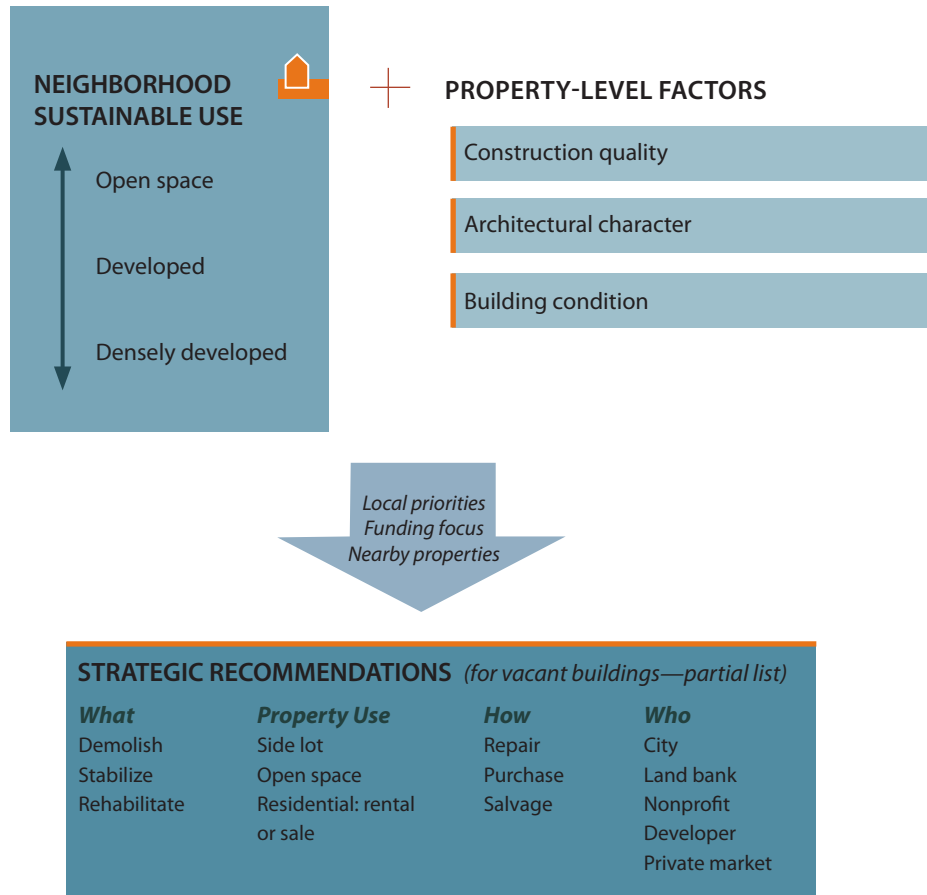
STRATEGIC DECISIONS FOR VACANT PROPERTIES

Property-level strategies vary according to the neighborhood's long-range plan. Construction quality, architectural character, and building condition inform specific recommendations at the property level.

For example, take a building of average construction quality and medium architectural character that is in fair condition. In a neighborhood like Muncie's East Central, the building would be recommended for stabilization or rehabilitation to support more residential density. In South Central, the same building would likely be recommended for demolition and replacement with a garden or natural habitat, to contribute to the neighborhood's gradual transition away from residential use. Strategies for the same building in Industry or Old West End would vary according to local priorities and plans for nearby properties.

Clockwise South Central, East Central, Industry, Old West End





Relocal provides an array of strategic recommendations at the parcel level for every vacant property in the study neighborhoods. Local decisionmakers select specific strategies based on other plans and available funding.

Targeted recommendations lay the groundwork for coordinating multiple entities with different roles and priorities. Relocal is suited for use by local, regional, and state governments; nonprofits; civic groups; and private partners. In situations with complex challenges and limited resources, collaboration is key—and Relocal provides a solid framework for effective partnerships.

Relocal is designed to work in cities where planning, reinvestment, and demolition decisions can be highly politicized. It recommends tools to capitalize on every neighborhood’s strengths. It incorporates community priorities into long-range thinking about neighborhood strategies. And it sets a course for every neighborhood to be more stable and sustainable through targeted decisions at the property level.

Relocal is a flexible, forward-looking framework for making local decisions—not a static set of prescriptive orders. And it is based on local data and resident feedback, making it uniquely grounded in a city’s current conditions and opportunities. Contact PlaceEconomics if you are interested in using Relocal in your city.

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