

BOOKS

places, they want Places, write Adelaja and Wyckoff. These are created through the conscious act of “placemaking” in order to achieve social, economic, environmental, and other objectives. As *The Economics of Place* makes clear, the public, private, and nonprofit sectors will have to learn to work together on this task. But nobody said building a new future would be easy. ♦

**Design After Decline**  
How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities

By Brent D. Ryan

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 277 pp., \$45 hardcover

REVIEW BY PHILIP LANGDON

**B**rent D. Ryan teaches urban design and public policy at MIT and is at heart a modernist. His modernist inclinations might tempt some new urbanists to dismiss his newly published book as yet another attempt by a hostile

academy to show that New Urbanism is socially or aesthetically retrograde.

But it would be wiser to approach *Decline After Decline* with an open mind. There’s a lot to learn from it. Ryan, who has worked as an urban planner in New York, Boston, and Chicago, possesses one of the more nuanced understandings of New Urbanism that I’ve encountered among academics from outside our movement. His book, while in some respects critical of New Urbanism, has instructive things to say about the challenges of fixing broken cities.

Ryan examines two of America’s toughest cases—Detroit, which lost more than 150,000 housing units between 1950 and 2000, and North Philadelphia, which in the same period hemorrhaged more than 300,000 inhabitants. He probes these two scarred big-city expanses in careful detail, trying to determine which revitalization strategies have a strong likelihood of delivering long-term benefits.

As Ryan sees it, the experience of

urban renewal left Americans unduly fearful of radically new approaches. Modernism as practiced in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s is partly to blame, he acknowledges. “Perhaps the most reprehensible aspect of High Modernism,” he writes, “was the sense it provided that cities and their inhabitants were simply a grand experiment, a canvas for designers, planners, and social policy makers to lay out schemes for the improvement of human well-being.”

He asserts, however, that there exists a “reformed modernism” that is not at odds with human scale, street walls, and other comforting urban elements. A prime example of reformed modernism, he says, is Odhams Walk in Covent Garden, London—a “visually delightful,” low-rise, brick-clad complex built by the Greater London Council in 1982. Modernism of this sort, he says, can accomplish things that lie beyond the what’s likely to be achieved by planners and designers adhering strictly to tradition.

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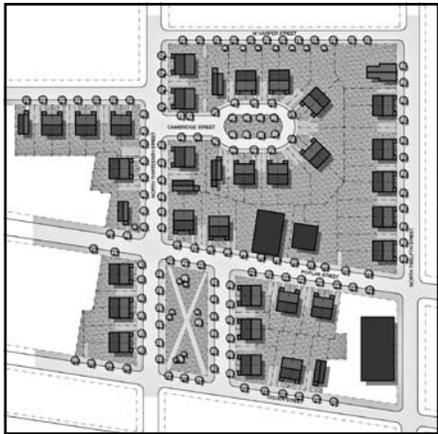
CRITIQUE OF THE GRID

In his view, the street grids of Detroit and Philadelphia have the benefits of regularity and predictability, but those are offset by a host of disadvantages: “monotony, confusion, lack of hierarchy, and overexposure to traffic.” Planners, he says, should stop being so conservative, so reluctant to introduce different patterns. Cities that have lost many of their buildings should seize the opportunity to reimagine the street network—“with streets closed, blocks aggregated, or new streets added.”

There’s something to his argument about grids being monotonous when they go on mile after mile. Some neighborhoods, or portions of them, might be given more complex layouts containing new parks and open spaces, varied streetscapes, and perhaps a limited number of streets that prevent through-traffic by cars and trucks. Opportunities for altering portions of the grid have been heightened, in places like North Philadelphia, by widespread abandonment; with so many buildings already razed, why not think about reorganizing the streets?

Varied configurations—breaking away from a seemingly endless grid—

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**A north Philadelphia development plan**

might appeal to a segment of the population that's willing to live in the city but not sold on the relentlessness of the existing grid. Depending on the specifics, I don't think New Urbanists would necessarily object. Even in the early 1920s, a period that produced many community plans admired by New Urbanists, some neighborhoods, like Ladd's Addition in southeast Portland, Oregon, were designed to depart strikingly from the larger urban grid, thus emphasizing the neighborhood's distinctiveness.

Because "shrinking cities" have more land than there's currently demand for, Ryan advocates what he calls "patchwork urbanism"—concentrations of buildings in some areas, alternating with low densities or even open land elsewhere. Such contrasts, he says, make more sense than trying to maintain the consistent, even levels of density and development that spread across many big cities during their industrial prime.

Realistically, municipalities that have lost hundreds of thousands of inhabitants would be better off "composed of interspersed areas of fabric and open space, with varying levels of density and types of fabric to meet the needs of a diverse populace," he suggests. He further argues that urban regeneration won't spur strong federal support unless public officials can enthusiastically point to new developments that depart dramatically from those of the past. "If the future of shrinking cities is to be in any way better than the present," he asserts, "urban design innovation will have to play a role."

Some of Ryan's claims strike me as only half-right. He's correct, for instance,

that quite a few modernists have learned from their own mistakes or those of their predecessors. Yet architecture schools, architectural critics, and juries for architectural awards continue to prize novelty; can cities count on being treated sensitively by a profession that's tilted toward the likes of Morphosis, Frank Gehry, and Rem Koolhaas? Ryan's faith in "reform modernism" would be more convincing if he cited more examples on this side of the Atlantic—and begun after 1982.

I'm skeptical of the idea that a dramatic, novel turn in urban design would attract a large infusion of federal support. It's not self-evident that "innovation" deserves to be our goal. As James Howard Kunstler says in his new book *Too Much Magic: Wishful Thinking, Technology, and the Fate of the Nation*, "innovative things by nature have no track record of long-term success, and sometimes don't work out ...."

A signal virtue of Ryan's book is that it is not very theoretical. It tells,

clearly and meticulously, the stories of what Detroit, Philadelphia, and to a lesser extent other cities, did in the last 30 years to try to climb back from ruin. If you want to know how cities can go about engineering their recovery, you'd do well to familiarize yourself with the history that Ryan has compiled.

I appreciate his insistence that the redevelopment of decayed areas "should keep the interests of the poor in mind even if new construction cannot always benefit the poor directly." Part of the repertoire he recommends is "palliative planning"—efforts aimed at improving the quality of life in areas "where population loss and housing abandonment are steepest." A hunger for social justice informs *Design After Decline*. The same instinct played a major role in HOPE VI public housing redevelopment, which was shaped by new urbanists. Ryan and new urbanists have more in common than the modernism-versus-traditionalism squabble would suggest. ♦

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