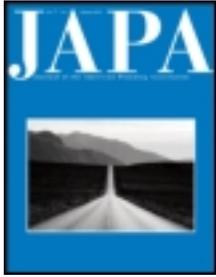


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### A Review of "Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities"

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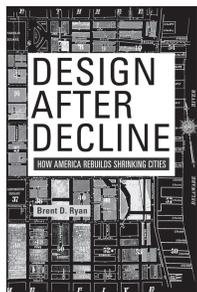
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## Community Development and Neighborhood Planning



Brent D. Ryan. (2012). *Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 288 pages. \$45.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Karina Pallagst, *University of Kaiserslautern*

With his book, *Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities*, author Brent D. Ryan offers insight into America's design history (modernism in particular) and its impacts on today's policies for shrinking cities. In doing so, he vividly describes cases of old and new revitalization processes, with a particular focus upon the cities of Detroit and Philadelphia. The book will likely be of use to practitioners, policymakers, and academics with interests in urban policy, as it bridges the gap between planning history and planning practice, while offering lessons from past urban policy failures.

In the first part of the book, Ryan explains in great detail and with real insight how and why prominent planning approaches in the frame of urban renewal failed. Using the historic cases of places like Jefferson Village and Victoria Park in Detroit and Poplar, Yorktown, and Ludlow in Philadelphia, Ryan demonstrates how suburban planning principles failed in efforts to rebuild and remake shrinking cities. While these cases offer planning and policy insights of a high caliber, their range is limited. What about the policy responses of smaller shrinking cities, their design failures, and problems these places face? While the Detroit and Philadelphia cases are somewhat limiting, otherwise, this a well-rounded book.

The most telling contribution of the book centers on Ryan's core principles for policy responses for America's shrinking cities, what he labels *social urbanism*. Ryan offers the term palliative planning to capture the primary policy approach required in shrinking cities. These places need to be improved through revealing their potential, and under this model it is the community's responsibility for articulating this potential. To promote palliative planning Ryan also calls for an interventionist approach by the federal government. As shrinking cities' problems have impacts beyond the community's boundary, federal policies must come into play to contribute to long-run social stability.

Palliative planning must also be supported by democratic decision making, one that embraces the needs and desires of affected populations. This principle is well supported in contemporary planning practice, and it is well understood that in all communities it is essential that planners consider the requirements and housing needs of the poorest populations, specifically their housing needs.

Ryan makes clear that democratic decision making is of the utmost importance for a shrinking city response strategy.

One of the successes of the book is how Ryan brings a design point of view to the problem of shrinking cities. Throughout the book he argues for shrinking city strategies to be about more than just right sizing. Ryan argues for the need to provide visions of desirable redevelopment forms that are supported by redevelopment guidelines that can achieve these visions. Urban design and architecture must play important roles in developing these visions and guidelines.

A final key concept, one that illustrates Ryan's marriage of urban policy and design, is the idea of patchwork urbanism. This principle recognizes the need for changes in the urban fabric, in ways that embrace vacancies and abandoned places as a means to create new urban patterns and forms. When patchwork urbanism occurs successfully, places do indeed look different from their historic past; yet, these changes embrace better planning and design standards and ultimately yield more attractive and more economically viable redevelopment projects.

Taken as a set, these core principles are valuable and they reinforce the idea that in order to successfully deal with urban shrinkage and cities in decline, flexibility and realistic policies are paramount. Moreover, Ryan's principles go beyond design, as they also address policymaking and participatory processes. The most controversial principle from a U.S. planning point of view might be Ryan's call for greater interventionism. In Europe, federal and state planning responses are taken as a given in places where problems are severe and affect not only single communities, but entire regions. Unlike Europe, federal and state planning interventions are relatively rare in the United States, and U.S. urban policy remains largely the domain of the cities themselves. As Ryan makes clear in the text, should more aggressive planning interventions occur in shrinking cities they must be justified and tailored to the needs of the specific communities and planning situations being addressed.

Overall, *Design After Decline* is a great read, a valuable contribution to current planning discourses on shrinking cities. This is a book that will be noticed not only in the United States, but also abroad.

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