

Ryan, Brent D.: Design after decline: how America rebuilds shrinking cities

**University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2012, 288 p,
ISBN 978-0-8122-4407-6, \$45.00**

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Brent D. Ryan first visited Detroit in 1993. Describing this experience, he says: “The sense of emptiness was overpowering. ... I felt as if I was walking into the ruin of America.” In his book “Design after decline—how America rebuilds shrinking cities,” Ryan tries to understand why so many American cities have been losing population, what was and is done to change the fortune of these cities and why many projects or plans have not worked out as intended. He also gives some guidance about how planning and design can help cope with shrinking.

The first chapter describes the role of urban design at the time of large scale urban renewal. Many poor neighbourhoods were demolished, with new often high rise estates being built in their place, after modernist design principles. As existing neighbourhoods and the people living there were often treated with brutality, the end of urban renewal in the mid-1970s brought a sense of relief. However, with urban renewal and modernist design, also a vision of the future that was in itself optimistic had gone. For a short time, reformed modernist urban renewal, that was more small scale in its building efforts and that was open to the opinions of the people living in the areas concerned, took over, at least in some cities. London (UK) is an example of this. But, before this new style of urban renewal could flower, federal or national funding had all but stopped, and in the London case, the regional authority responsible for planning (GLC) was even abolished by a conservative government.

Because of the opposition from community groups to large scale demolition, and bad living conditions in some of the more notorious new estates, some people have argued that urban renewal in a way caused or at least sped up urban decline. However, as Ryan shows, the end of modernist urban renewal in no way interrupted the downward trajectory of many large cities. The causes of urban decline were others, like the relocating of people and businesses to the suburbs, where more space was available and land was cheaper. Social and technological development, like the spread of car ownership, made it all possible. When (white) higher income groups left, their place was at least partly taken over by lower income (ethnic minority) groups.

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The book then follows the fate of two cities that have experienced a consistent loss of population from the 1950s: Philadelphia and Detroit. Esp. the latter city featured widespread devastation, with many dwelling and plots of land becoming vacant. Unless Philadelphia, where one can find decline in some areas and growth in others, shrinkage here is hardly spatially confined.

In the Detroit case study (chapter 3), this is partly explained by the city's housing stock, which consists mainly of nondescript detached dwellings. Being also a flat city, without many interesting topographic features, extensive high-income neighbourhoods that might better resist decline, hardly exist(ed). The extended highway network not only improved the city's accessibility by car but also encouraged suburbanisation. Mid-century urban renewal started with substantial displacement, sometimes destroying still vibrant communities, which was quite often not followed by the building of new homes. For most of the time, the city had no centralised, independent housing, planning or urban design policy. Instead, developers were attracted to build market-rate housing, which they were only willing to do when they received (sometimes large) amounts of city subsidies, and when they were allowed to build the low density suburban style neighbourhoods that they supposed people wanted. Some evidence of insider deals and nepotism is also given in this chapter. Although projects in the 1990s were quite successful, later attempts miserably failed, with local opposition to forced relocation causing delays that lasted until the housing market crashed in 2007.

Philadelphia seems to have been more successful in intervening in the hardest-hit neighbourhood of Lower North Philadelphia. Here at least the city had a spatial planning strategy, which made it more or less independent from for profit developers. Still, at least from the 1990s onward, densities in redeveloped areas were low and there design can be described as uninspired.

So what to do next? As many cities are still shrinking and as cities are not autonomous, some realities have to be taken for what they are. Continuing suburbanisation, and weak federal policy and funding, are some of the preconditions within which the city authorities have to operate. According to Ryan, reformed modernism, reconciling design excellence with the social expectations of shrinking-city residents, should be given a second chance. As urban decline cannot suddenly be stopped citywide, efforts should be focussed on creating neighbourhoods that are able to retain their residents. Interventionist policy should be scaled and designed to make an impact: the areas that are improved must be big enough to become attractive in their own right and should attract attention by excellent architecture. Also the least able and least empowered residents, that form a large part of the population of shrinking cities, should be the central concern of the planning process.

With "Design after decline," Brent D. Ryan has produced a well-written and well-researched narrative about the development of many older American cities. Especially, the case studies about Detroit and Philadelphia are equally interesting to read as they are well documented. Ryan clearly feels involved in the subject, which is good, but occasionally, he is stating opinions about people or events, where the facts could better have spoken for themselves. The London case study ends with the abolition of the GLC, while after 1997 successive (New) Labour governments introduced new policy tools and funding to improve living conditions in cities and indeed to fight shrinking (although the 2010 new coalition government stopped many of these policies and funding). It would be interesting to extend the comparison between English and America's cities beyond the demise of modernism and the GLC, but maybe that is something for the next book.