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## **Design after decline : How America rebuilds shrinking cities**

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## Book Review

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Brent D. Ryan. *Design after decline: How America rebuilds shrinking cities*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 288 pp. \$45.00, paperback. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4407-6

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In *Design after Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities*, Brent Ryan argues for well-designed, large-scale redevelopment as a means of slowing population loss. Ryan contends that the end of urban renewal brought both a sense of relief and disillusionment. He shows that despite the flaws, urban renewal and Modernist architecture provided a vision for the future not found in today's piecemeal, infill development approaches. To support his points, he provides extensive examples of failed and successful redevelopment efforts in Philadelphia and Detroit.

Ryan recommends five design and planning principles that are meant to establish a new trajectory for shrinking-city rebuilding. Unfortunately (except for a brief mention in the preface), he does not explicitly discuss these principles until 200 pages into the text. Until reaching the last chapter, it was not always clear why Ryan was discussing housing development after housing development, other than to point out what worked and what did not. Likewise, it was hard to see the broader purpose until reading the final chapter. Notably, the final chapter is well written and visionary, seeing that Ryan provides an engaging scenario of what could be possible through the year 2061. Nonetheless, while the prospect of a stabilized and partially rebuilt Detroit is alluring, I question how practical Ryan's approaches will be without tremendous amounts of state and federal funding. That is not to say that we should not advocate for such funding to make his vision possible.

Ultimately, I agree with Ryan that we must rebuild parts of shrinking cities; we must show that we are not only able to demolish the city; we are also able to renew it. However, I am concerned by his argument that we should build large developments in what are essentially no market areas. He tries to justify the idea by stating that the most distressed neighborhoods are the ones where residents are most likely to leave. Therefore, to prevent further population loss, we should invest in these areas. But in the most distressed neighborhoods, the people who *could* move have already left. When dealing with a city like Detroit, it is entirely feasible that some areas could be "too far gone" to be a prudent use of scarce resources. We,

as a research community, do not know if it is more effective to stabilize areas that are relatively healthy and viable, or if it is more effective to invest in the most distressed neighborhoods. The answer certainly depends on how you define "effective." From a social justice and equity standpoint, Ryan's recommendations make sense. But from a market feasibility standpoint, I am not so sure. How many people will actually move to a distressed, seemingly middle-of-nowhere neighborhood with few services? I would think that building near viable market areas with assets would be the preferred strategy.

At a smaller scale, Ryan laments suburban style housing developments in shrinking cities. While design is important, I feel that the author overemphasizes the power of good design. An attitude of "If we build it (and design it well), they will come" permeates the book. I am not convinced that design and scale alone can overcome push factors like poor quality schools and high unemployment, especially in cities that are located in metropolitan areas that are not growing. He notes that "... reactivating shrinking cities with new neighborhoods is too important—and too expensive—a task to be achieved with meaningless architecture" (p. 212). While in theory I agree, from a practical standpoint if "reactivating" neighborhoods can be achieved with vernacular architecture that appeals to the masses, I see few problems with it. In many neighborhoods, the urban fabric is already gone. Considering that cities like Detroit are hemorrhaging people, we need to be open to new forms of development in the city—even if that means lower density, suburban-style housing. The reader might wonder "Well, why not New Urbanism?" Ryan discounts New Urbanism as being a vision of the future as past. He negatively refers to New Urbanism as a "... slightly more urbane version of vernacular suburbia" (p. 198).

But of Ryan's arguments, I am most perplexed by his definition of severely distressed neighborhoods, and by his belief that demolitions are undesirable unless the resulting vacant land can be quickly redeveloped. Ryan defines severely distressed neighborhoods as those neighborhoods that have lost more than 20 percent of their population and housing. If population loss results in abandoned buildings, I would argue that neighborhoods that have lost significant population but *have not* lost housing are the ones that are most distressed. Who wants to live by vacant buildings? How many houses are we supposed to preserve while waiting for redevelopment? Ryan claims that demolitions do not improve the quality of life for remaining inhabitants. I have to respectfully disagree. Research has shown that vacant houses are associated with criminal activity and lower property values (Skogan 1990; Spelman

1993; Temple University 2001; Immergluck and Smith 2006). I have attended plenty of public planning meetings where residents are thrilled to see vacant buildings demolished, even if no redevelopment is in its place. Furthermore, Ryan's arguments against demolition are not congruent with his stance on redevelopment. If new development is meant to keep current residents in the city—that is, residents move from older housing in distressed neighborhoods to new housing in new developments—what is to be done with the houses that the residents leave behind? Ryan does not provide answers for what we should do with the housing stock as people move from one part of the city to another.

Despite my misgivings with some of Ryan's recommendations, this book is a welcome addition to the literature on shrinking cities. He successfully challenges notions that design in shrinking cities should focus on landscaping and maintaining vacant lots that result from abandonment. It is about time that we consider design in these cities from a rebuilding perspective. As planners, we need to be both reactive and proactive

in our policies. If all we do is consider what to do with vacant, unimproved lots, it may not be enough to spur optimism and innovation.

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