



BOOK REVIEW

Brent Ryan, *Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

George Galster, *Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in the Motor City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

These two books, from different urban series published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, offer contrasting perspectives on the deindustrialization of America's twentieth-century manufacturing centers. In *Design After Decline*, Brent Ryan focuses on the efforts of Philadelphia and Detroit to rebuild after decades of population loss and economic decline. He places both cities in the broader context of urban decline of twentieth-century industrial centers. While the collapse of Detroit is better known, Ryan documents the parallels between that city and Philadelphia, including the loss of jobs in a dominant industry (textiles in Philadelphia, automobiles in Detroit), population decline, housing abandonment, and racial change. Although Philadelphia's overall decline is less dramatic than Detroit's, the two cities are well matched.

Ryan traces Philadelphia's and Detroit's largely ineffectual rebuilding efforts from the urban renewal era to the present day. Although both cities have had some successful projects, these have been limited and insufficient to revitalize rapidly declining areas such as the Near North End in Philadelphia or Detroit's East Side. As Ryan notes, the extensive demolition programs in both cities were effective in producing vacant lots, which, in the absence of viable development markets, have generally remained vacant. Overall, Philadelphia has fared better than Detroit, largely because of residential growth in the city center and the retention of a substantial middle-class population. (There is surprisingly little mention, however, of the contributions of the University of Pennsylvania to inner city redevelopment. *Fixing Broken Cities* by John Kromer [2010] helps to close this gap.)

Ryan contrasts the role of the city governments, and their local planning and development agencies, in the two cities. While critical of the Philadelphia planners' urban design standards, which are seen as too suburban, Ryan finds a more cohesive and comprehensive redevelopment model than he does in Detroit. The Philadelphia City Planning Department ensured that redevelopment investments were concentrated and that both the architecture and urban design of the new development was not incompatible with the existing context. Changing street patterns to better integrate the new and old developments was also a factor. These efforts were effective, to a great extent because much of the new development consisted of assisted housing. Ryan sees Detroit's rebuilding efforts as having been considerably less successful because of a lack of adequate design controls and an over-reliance on the private market to decide where and what to build. Detroit was willing to provide deep subsidies to market-rate housing developments that ignored market realities. The strategy has been largely ineffective; abandonment continues to outpace redevelopment.

Design After Decline also describes other approaches to rebuilding shrinking cities, including landscape urbanism and new urbanism. Each of these options can be expected to have only limited effect, however. As a better approach, Ryan offers social urbanism, modeled after revitalization efforts in Medellín, Colombia. To be effective, social urbanism would require acceptance of a different future for a smaller city, better political leadership, a more democratic process and a great deal of patience. If these elements can be assembled and sustained, in 50 years America's shrinking cities could become new "semi-topias"—not the places that they once were but better than they are today. Ryan assumes that the private market will complement public efforts to redevelop low- and

moderate-income neighborhoods. This assumption has been validated in center city Philadelphia, but not in Detroit.

Ryan's book should be of interest to a broad academic and professional readership. It is well researched and carefully documented. The references are extensive and the graphics are helpful.

In *Driving Detroit*, George Galster (my colleague for a dozen years in Wayne State University's Urban Planning Program), explores the reasons for Detroit's dramatic decline over the last 50 years. *Driving Detroit* is an interpretation of Detroit through psychological, sociological, and historical perspectives. It presents Detroit's history (at least the part in which Europeans play a role) replete with examples of capitalist greed and racial conflict. Racist attitudes and policies in Detroit have been documented by other scholars such as June Manning Thomas, Reynolds Farley, and Olivier Zunz. *Driving Detroit* focuses on the deep divisions in Detroit's metropolitan fabric that are the result of ubiquitous racism and unremitting capitalist exploitation.

The frame of *Driving Detroit* is the "dual dialectic" of conflict—between capital and labor, black and white—responsible for Detroit's decline and current distress. But this is not a Hegelian dialectic that is resolved at a higher level; rather, there are only temporary ascendancies by one side or the other. Currently, capital and blacks are ahead in these struggles.

Galster defines the respect that all Detroiters are seeking in a truncated version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The omission of the two highest levels, esteem and self-actualization, perhaps explains why he sees Detroit as "a metropolis that fundamentally disrespects its residents by systematically frustrating their quest for respect" (p. 273). The deep divisions in Detroit limit the value of belonging to a group when that group is widely disrespected. Detroit may not offer a glimpse of "the end of the world" (Binelli, 2012), but rather a view of the demise of the blue-collar middle class.

Galster set himself a difficult task—to write an accessible, entertaining book about a difficult subject. Tables, formulas, footnotes and citations are kept to a minimum to increase the book's appeal to a general audience. The book is interspersed with poetry and song lyrics (from Eminem to Mendelssohn), historical anecdotes, examples of the quirks and foibles that make Detroit unique (from how words are pronounced to how left turns are made), and personal history. The result is an easy read. This is achieved at the cost of a lack of analytical rigor. Nevertheless, the discussion of Detroit's housing market collapse is perhaps the best chapter in the book.

Design After Decline offers a broad perspective on shrinking cities, and its overlap of subject matter with *Driving Detroit* provides interesting comparisons. Ryan and Galster agree on a number of important points: (1) the physical geography of Detroit allowed the uninhibited expansion of urban development, (2) the automobile industry has played a major role in both the ascendancy as well as the decline of Detroit, (3) race relations have been important, (4) local government's attempts to deal with the problems of decline have generally been ineffective and often counterproductive, (5) Detroit has sought to redevelop declining areas with a suburban model, and (6) Detroit has lacked effective political leadership and a vision for the future. (Several of the latter points apply to Philadelphia as well.)

Despite these points of agreement, the two books portray a very different Detroit. For Ryan, Detroit is an extreme example of urban decline, one that can provide a precautionary model for rebuilding other urban areas that are experiencing a similar downward cycle. Despite a history of mistakes and misplaced hopes, Detroit, and other shrinking industrial cities, may realize an improved, if different, future. Ryan expresses the traditional optimism of city planners. *Design After Decline* concludes with a description of how shrinking cities can be rebuilt over the next 50 years into "semi-topias."

Ultimately, neither book is completely satisfying. *Design After Decline* does not tell us how America actually rebuilds shrinking cities; Ryan only draws lessons from the attempts that have been made by these two cities. What about cities in the South and West? Ryan's design-based strategy is oversimplified; neither Philadelphia nor Detroit is where it is today solely, or even primarily, because of inadequate urban design. Rather, there are a host of problems—racial, political and economic—that impede their recovery. The piecemeal and incremental changes of recent decades have had little effect on Detroit's East Side or Philadelphia's Near North End. Ryan acknowledges that the rebuilding process will be long, and the result will be very different cities.

Galster, on the other hand, maintains the dismal prospect of the economist. *Driving Detroit* outlines the many things wrong with the “Mortopolis” of Detroit, and, implicitly, why its residents’ quest for respect has failed. In Galster’s view, Detroit wagered its fortune on the wrong horse (corporate capitalism that fostered racial conflicts) and now the city must suffer the consequences (poverty, insecurity, and dysfunctionality). Ironically, *Driving Detroit* includes a quote attributed to Henry Ford: “Don’t find fault—find a remedy. Anybody can complain” (p. 278). Yet there seems to be no remedy and little hope.

For Galster, Detroit is a mess and improvement seems unlikely. The rampant racism and capitalist exploitation that define the city simply cannot be overcome. Ryan concludes that Detroit and Philadelphia (along with other deindustrializing cities) are a mess but, with patience and better urban design, these cities may recover. Although appealing, Ryan’s formula for rebuilding may not be adequate for Galster’s Detroit.

REFERENCES

- Binelli, Mark. (2012). Riff: How Detroit became the world capital of staring at abandoned buildings. *New York Times Magazine*, November 11, 2012, 58–59.
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