

Book Review:

By C.S. Kayatekin

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Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities by Brent D. Ryan, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, U.S.A, 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4407-6.

“Design After Decline” merits to be recognized as a rigorous addition to the larger literature concerning urban design efforts in post-WWII America. The author, Brent Ryan, by diving into the subject of urban collapse from an interdisciplinary lens, conveys a detailed history of the trials and tribulations that various urban networks were forced to face, when rapid deindustrialization set in on a widespread scale.

While the work addresses a variety of urban case studies, ranging from the Bronx, to London, to Boston, to Medellin, with admirable detail, the intensity of Ryan’s rigor is focused on two sites of urban collapse of a comparable post-industrial nature—specifically, Detroit and Philadelphia. In these two cases, the author revisits the apocalyptic history of how two once-considerable nodes of global-industrial production could tailspin into a truly unprecedented rate of urban disintegration. The depth of Ryan’s focus hones in on the efforts of those faced with this extraordinary era of collapse.

Although at times “Design After Decline” does fall into the snare of formal determinism, wherein successful urban revitalization seems to become synonymous with high-design aesthetics, as a historian, Ryan’s interdisciplinary contextualization of post-WWII urban collapse in America is worth recognition. He presents the reader with a truly schismatic moment in history: Prior to the early 1970s, there had been a synchronization of federal and municipal efforts in addressing urban design; at the peak of urban deindustrialization, however, this ceased to be the case. It was at this point that the Nixon administration effectively cut support for large, government-led, top-down approaches to urbanism. The lifeline of urban Modernism was effectively severed; centralized planning became an object of severe criticism; and the inherently projective, utopian nature of Modernism was buried, only to be replaced by the Postmodernist valorization of the current.

Following this devastating intersection of urban collapse and funding cuts, the actors involved in the revitalization efforts in Detroit and Philadelphia scrambled to address an unprecedented state of urban disintegration. Furthermore, they were forced to face this task with an unfamiliar set of tools that functioned, by their nature, on a smaller, more decentralized scale than urbanists were comfortable with. Even though the shedding of the heavy-handed approach to urbanism had

been regarded as progress, the void left by the gutting of centralized planning was incapable of being filled by the fragmented nature of decentralized development.

It is while focusing on this specific point in history, and how it subsequently unravels, that “Design After Decline” achieves critical mass. Ryan directs his analysis towards a series of urban-development case studies from Detroit and Philadelphia. These studies bear witness to the birth of new methods and approaches attempting to react to an inherently centralized collapse from a decentralized lens. Ryan’s accurate cataloging of these methods is significant, for through this process he effectively presents the contemporary urbanist with a set of tools and approaches, both pragmatic and discursive, that can be used in addressing the challenges of the modern city.

Palliative planning, interventionist policy, democratic decision making, projective design, and patchwork urbanism—these are the fundamental skill-sets that Ryan presents the contemporary urban designer. Using these recommendations, the author concludes with a projective vision for the post-industrial American city, set in the year 2061. The final image, composed of clustered densities amidst appropriated and reused vacant lands, is intriguingly one which has the capacity to bridge several of the schisms of current architectural and urban discourse.

Throughout the majority of the work, Ryan’s objectivity is noteworthy. In his analyses, he neither falls to historic nostalgia nor to historic amnesia. While he clearly outlines the failings of past efforts at centralized planning, he is similarly critical of the visibly impotent nature of the various decentralized methods and ideologies that contemporary urban and architectural discourses have often valorized. Effectively, Ryan’s argument seems clear—the challenges of the modern city are of a scale that urbanism cannot address if it continues to shun centralized methods, simply because of their past sins. In other words, the urbanist must learn from history, rather than bury it.

In the end, however, one is confronted by the question as to whether this is a book about urban design, or about housing design in the urban context. From this perspective, the main point of criticism that can be leveled against Ryan is that he seems too narrowly-focused on the subject of residential development, at the cost of other methods of urban revitalization. Although he does at times mention infrastructural, commercial, or mixed-use development efforts, his clear focus on housing, without clarifying that the book is about housing, gives the reader the impression that cities are nothing more than a collection of residential neighborhoods. Such a vision, especially in the case of post-industrial urban collapse, is a frightening one. The notion that a rapidly de-industrializing city, suffering massive population and economic losses—that such a city can react to the

disintegration of its urban fabric by merely building high-design housing projects, seems as fitting as reattaching the falling leaves of autumn, in order to avoid the coming storms of winter.

It is important to realize that many of America's cities, and to a large extent many of the world's cities, have still not been able to plan effectively for the potential or reality of rapid urban collapse due to sudden economic changes. As Ryan points out, Detroit and Philadelphia are poignant examples of this. Rather than assume urban collapse as inevitable, however, there is the potential to restructure urban economic networks and reposition the modern city as a point of productivity, once again, in the global economy.

It is through the revitalization of such productivity that the critical approaches outlined by Ryan can actually build upon and enforce deep urban reform. Without this foundational restructuring however, urban development faces the risk of operating as mere plastic surgery—hiding and beautifying, without actually addressing the issue at hand.