

# Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities

By Brent D. Ryan

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Reviewed by Jake Wegmann

Towards the beginning of *Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), the recent book by MIT urban planning scholar Brent D. Ryan, there is a reference to a paper by the urban economists Edward Glaeser and Joseph Gyourko (2001). Glaeser and Gyourko make a simple and yet profound observation about the growth and decline of cities: what goes up does not come down, at least not along the same trajectory. In other words, there is a structural asymmetry between growing cities, which add people, jobs and housing units pretty much in lockstep, and what have come to be referred to as *shrinking cities* (Häusermann and Siebel 1988). In shrinking cities, populations of residents and especially their housing units decline much more slowly than they arose, even long after the jobs that spurred the city's original growth have dried up. This disjuncture between a city's growth and shrinkage is at root a result of the comparative durability of housing stock, and it has profound economic consequences, not least of which is a low demand for newly-built or rehabilitated housing, which may persist over a span of decades. Otherwise perceptive urban studies and planning scholars have failed to account for this basic and maddening economic fact. But Ryan makes no such mistake<sup>1</sup>. That he does not is a testament to the foremost strength of *Design After Decline*: its fusion of his keen eye for urban design with his hard-headed and clear-sighted appraisal of the economic and demographic realities faced by shrinking U.S. cities such as Detroit, St. Louis, Buffalo, and others.

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1. For an example, refer to Gratz, 2010. In this opinion piece, the historic preservationist and urbanist Roberta Brandes Gratz uses the successful housing and population recovery of the South Bronx and other areas within now-thriving cities to argue against housing clearance strategies in Detroit, Philadelphia, and other shrinking cities. However, this line of reasoning fails to note the fundamental differences between a case such as the South Bronx, which was a distressed neighborhood within a metropolitan region and city that experienced a severe but temporary and relatively brief period of economic decline, and Detroit, the central city within a metropolitan region beset by decades of economic devastation wrought by the emergence of global competition to its signature industry. Ryan is also critical of Philadelphia's clearance-oriented Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI) and similar efforts in Detroit and elsewhere, but for reasons related to a shortfall in post-clearance strategy, not to an inapplicable counterfactual.

Ryan advocates an interventionist ethos that recaptures the audacity of High Modernism, yet one that is informed by a concern for social justice that mid-century planning in the US never had. This outlook is akin to what former BPJ editor Alex Schafran has termed “para-modern planning” (Schafran 2013). Ryan acknowledges the failings of design and other aspects of such High Modernist *grands projets* as Minneapolis’s Cedar-Riverside, but he applauds their unabashed ambition, which was nothing less than to halt the collapse of industrial U.S. cities of the period. He laments the premature end to a purposeful federal urban policy in the United States in 1973, when the Nixon administration converted urban renewal and other federal urban programs into decentralized block grants. The modernist program of urban intervention in the United States was beset from all sides and unable to withstand the attacks from critics on the left lambasting it for failing to incorporate the voices of the people whose lives it impacted the most, and from those on the right who excoriated it for lavishing on local governments federal taxpayer dollars and heavy-handed land assembly powers. Ryan argues that a round of healthy and productive critiques could have smoothed urban renewal’s roughest edges while leaving its scope and reach intact, as did in fact occur in the U.K.

Just such a reformed modernist planning program, set in motion during the extra decade of ambitious socially-oriented urban intervention in the United Kingdom that ended in the early 1980s, led to masterful projects, as exemplified by Odhams Walk in Covent Garden, London, which Ryan profiles in detail. Not only did projects such as Odhams Walk benefit from the insights of such critics of High Modernist planning as Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans, they were informed by input from residents of surrounding communities. Such an infusion of cantankerous yet vibrant local democracy had been wholly absent just a scant few years earlier, and Ryan argues that the results were dramatically the better for it.

By contrast, in the United States, the complete repudiation of urban renewal by both the political left and right represented a missed opportunity and instead led to decades of mediocre projects, located in declining cities, which lacked transformational potential. Such projects, Ryan argues, acquiesced to something of a milquetoast deference to the design sensibilities of developers and an unquestioned acceptance of market-driven logic. Ryan’s detailed analyses of two such cases, Victoria Park in the Jefferson-Chalmers district of Detroit, and Poplar-Nehemiah in Lower North Philadelphia, lie at the heart of *Design After Decline*.

Victoria Park and Jefferson-Chalmers are descended from a seminal project, Charlotte Gardens, which entailed the insertion of almost outlandishly incongruous single-story ranch houses into the rubble-strewn environs of the South Bronx, and became an iconic scene of urban blight when President Jimmy Carter toured it in 1977. To Ryan, developments of this

lineage represent a lamentable *suburbanization* of the city, which in this context has a meaning distinct from either a loss of population and jobs to outlying areas (Jackson 1987) or the intrusion of ostensibly anti-urban consumption patterns and cultural mores into an existing economically successful city (Hammett et al 2007). Instead, Ryan applies the term to East Detroit and North Philadelphia to describe something quite different: a physical reconstruction of existing nearly vacant neighborhoods according to a suburban design vocabulary signaled by the use of defensive street layouts and lowest common denominator housing types (such as gabled twin houses in the traditional flat-roofed row house redoubt of North Philadelphia). While the two projects he details are modestly successful in terms of sales (albeit with the help of prodigious local subsidies), he finds them wanting in their transformative potential. At best, they seem to spur modest growth in areas in which the real estate market has already shown some interest.

*Design After Decline* closes with an encomium for the Social Urbanism movement and some recommended principles for interventions in shrinking cities. These are brought to life at the very end of the book via an imagined scenario of a Rustbelt U.S. city that, decades hence, has succeeded in the laborious and lengthy task of nurturing its economy and urban fabric back to a modestly healthy “semi-topian” state through a strategy of concentrating investment within discontinuous “villages.” This is a transformation driven by emphases on homeownership and the encouragement (though not the requirement) of the inhabitants of the adjacent nearly empty areas to move either themselves or their houses to the new pockets of activity. Social Urbanism is an ethos born in the urban governance of Medellín, Colombia, in which highest priority is given to benefitting the city’s most deprived residents through the imaginative architectural and urban design of public facilities such as libraries, schools, and aerial tramways. To an extent, it is difficult for the reader to join Ryan in his conceptual leap in advocating the application of Social Urbanism to shrinking U.S. cities, which in their lack of population and economic growth differ markedly from cities such as Medellín, which have experienced robust growth, despite their classically “Third World” living conditions.

Additionally, some of Ryan’s policy recommendations are in direct conflict with each other. For instance, his plea for democratic decision-making, if implemented, might lead to the dispersal of scarce public resources to every corner of a thinly settled shrinking city, as was to an extent observed in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Such eventualities may contradict the call for patchwork urbanism, which lies at the heart of his semi-topian recovery scenario for a Rustbelt city.

In the end, contradictions such as the ones identified above are an inescapable element of the “wicked problem” that is the American shrinking city. Ryan’s willingness to grapple with the hard choices facing such places and to present critiques of the often-unquestioned assumptions animating urban interventions is, in the end, a credit to *Design After Decline*. With a robust literature beginning to accumulate on shrinking cities in the United States and elsewhere, Ryan has suggested a new and useful direction for scholarship on this topic. In addition to asking “why have cities shrunk?” he asks “what has been tried?” and “what should be done next?” With luck, more work along these lines will follow in the years ahead. For the present, we have *Design After Decline* to keep us occupied, a work of unusual reach and comprehensiveness infused with a clearly-articulated and provocative point of view.

## References

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