How to not only arrest the decline of cities constituting the American Rust Belt, but also reposition these former prosperous metropolises for future success is one of the most vexing and significant issues facing urban design and planning professionals. Brent Ryan’s work, Design after Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities, is an excellent addition to this incredibly relevant and growing literature. Using two case studies – Philadelphia and Detroit – Ryan details the precipitous decline of two of America’s former industrial giants and their attempts to halt what amounts to an inescapable spiral of population loss, crumbling infrastructure, and economic hardship.

While the individual particulars may be different, the history of post-urban renewal development and design within Philadelphia and Detroit detail two cities without the sufficient means or resources to dramatically reshape their respective urban environments. For Detroit, a metropolis whose “post-urban renewal neighborhood redevelopment represented the nadir of post-decline urban design and urban policy,” the depleted housing stock and large vacant parcels created a perfect storm for rapid and comprehensive urban decay. In Philadelphia, with a more proactive municipal government and resilient housing stock, the situation was not quite as bleak, but, nonetheless, the city struggled to arrest it’s urban decline. Besides a few successful projects, the story and nature of development in Philadelphia mirrored Detroit: without available funds to purchase the land necessary to comprehensively redevelop struggling blocks and without the financial incentives to entice private developers to pursue projects, neighborhoods in desperate need for wholesale redevelopment continued to deteriorate.

According to Ryan, the failures evident in the cities of Detroit and Philadelphia are equal parts unimaginative, stale design and absent government policy and direction. The end of urban renewal marked the decline of lucrative federal government financing of large-scale urban projects, funding which was critical to any municipal redevelopment effort. Rather than exacerbating the deterioration of shrinking cities, Ryan poignantly argues that the imaginative, visionary zeal of modernism and the federal funding and political commitment associated with urban renewal was exactly what cities like Detroit and Philadelphia desperately needed. According to Ryan, post-urban renewal development in these cities relied too heavily on non-profits and private developers who, for very real financial reasons, could only manage projects with very limited footprints. Even more, their respective designs were rarely daring and innovative, instead importing the conservative, but financially lucrative suburban model.

Ryan’s solution is that small-scale projects should be replaced with larger, more sweeping developments with the potential to substantively change the character and impression of an entire neighborhood, not just a small block or group of parcels. Instead of reprocessing hackneyed suburban models, Ryan demands that projects commit to designs that transform, inspire, and actively project a better, more optimistic future. This solution, especially given the current financial austerity and political climate, may be more fantasy than reality, but it presents a compelling and attractive paradigm that stresses both the necessity of realistic, participatory planning, but also projective, inspiring design. What Ryan calls “palliative planning,” or recognizing that the conditions that have created cities like Detroit are beyond the scope of any development effort is critical.

For those interested in America’s former industrial landscapes, and what can be done to reimagine and reposition these cities, Brent Ryan’s informative, and provocative work is a must read.

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