

# Shrinking Cities: Urban Renewal Revisited?

Monday, April 19, 2010 - 5:00am PDT by

[Roberta Brandes Gratz](#)

The theory that shrinking ailing cities is going to cure them is unproven and wrongheaded, says Roberta Brandes Gratz -- and is fueled by the same forces behind the urban renewal practices of the mid-20th century.



Valuable lessons and tips can be gleaned from this article. - cjk

First came urban renewal, destroying more residential units than replaced by towers in the park.

Then came the highways through the cities, piggybacking on the massive clearance of urban renewal, demolishing more whole neighborhoods. Thousands of industrial and small businesses and the jobs that came with them were lost, along with countless housing units.

Then came "planned shrinkage," the idea that cities should close down failing neighborhoods, shut off the infrastructure built to accommodate density and concentrate investment in neighborhoods still worthy of middle income investment. Places like the South Bronx were left to burn.

Then came the endless number of parking lots to accommodate all the cars driven by the commuters who fled the urban wreckage for the suburbs and were now driving on the highways that drew them out of the city. Countless recyclable buildings of all periods and architectural styles -- not to mention historic structures -- were lost.

Then came Hope VI which has destroyed more low-income public housing units than it has replaced, all in the name of creating economically integrated projects instead of warehouses for the poor. A worthy goal achieved at the expense of the poor, resulting in even fewer affordable housing units. Invariably, a smaller number of low-income units replaced what was demolished. The displaced families not re-housed in the new units were sent with Section 8 vouchers to already marginal neighborhoods guaranteed to create the next "blighted" district worthy of "replacement."

Then came urban agriculture which -- although a good idea for backyards, empty lots and modest-scale community gardens -- suddenly scaled up to whole neighborhoods whose remnants are often old houses which even in their deteriorated condition are built more solidly than any of the flimsy new structures replacing them today.



*Demolition in Detroit, image courtesy of Flickr user [ChrisMRichards](#).*

Now comes the "theory" that the salvation of distressed cities is to once again "shrink," as if shrinking had been tried before and succeeded somewhere but who knows where.

Can anyone point to one city, just one, where any of these "renewal" schemes that dedensify cities have worked to regenerate, rather than further erode, a city? Just one. No theory please; just real on the ground success.

When does a city become a "non-city," in fact a town or a village? And, if we recognize that regions are only as strong as their strongest city, what sustains that region when the city resigns itself to the status of an outpost.

Conventional wisdom today clearly notes that a key to a successful city is density. New small businesses, old big businesses, innovative start-ups, street life, public transit, walkability, community connections, diversity and appealing indoor and outdoor entertainment attractions only emerge from or follow density. Endless examples of success – not theory – of the opposite strategy DO exist, from the dollar houses Baltimore initiated in the '70s and the regeneration of the South Bronx by the community efforts that successfully fought 'planned shrinkage' to the current efforts from Buffalo to New Orleans to Houston to Portland. All these efforts represent innovative strategies to bring people back, to regenerate instead of shrink, to build on observable successes instead of following simplistic theory.

Yet, the theory that troubled cities need to face reality and plan for shrinkage proliferate.

The question is why.

Reasonable sounding rhetoric seems to accompany the "creative shrinkage" (hard to know what is "creative" here) theorists. But let's look at some of the actual implementation differences between following the demolition path and the regeneration path. Clues to the real motives and who benefits become apparent.

Demolition money is easy to come by, often CDBG money provided by the federal government. Demolition contracts are simple, often big and, of course, given to the familiar cast of politically well-connected characters. Mayors get photo ops with local headlines about cleaning up blighted districts. Area residents are thrilled to see the rats and garbage gone, clueless of guaranteed continued decay unless something positive is added.

In contrast, one community rebuilder notes, "You are always penalized when you go to renovate. No one has to put up half the money for demolition." Money for stabilization and/or renovation has to be patched together from multiple sources. Lenders don't like the look of dilapidated old buildings, even if they are historic and architecturally beautiful. They do, however, understand demolition and formulaic building projects.

Bureaucrats have little or no experience handling such rescue and regeneration projects. Renovation doesn't easily conform to today's building codes, and building inspectors don't have enough experience to understand how to deal with earlier construction they were not trained to understand. Similarly, most well-placed contractors don't know how to renovate an existing structure, only how to build new. Money doesn't exist for just cleaning out, stabilizing, securing and landbanking worthy structures. And, sadly, remaining residents are under the illusion that demolition of the next door vacant nuisance solves crime, cleans up neighborhoods and improves the community.

Instead of promised renewal, the land lies fallow for ages. Eventually, if suddenly the idea of "shrinking" is no longer the pop theory of the day, a developer comes along to build a very suburban-like new community of garage-front, look-alike dwellings with a smaller number of occupants than could ever be characterized as urban. Without the density, no public transit is viable, no local stores and community-serving businesses develop. Instead, more car-dependent shopping malls and business centers get built, if anything gets built, and thus is created an anti-urban enclave detached from the remaining city adding no strength to the existing urban fabric.

Despite the many obstacles and the complexity of the process, tried-and-true strategies for regeneration exist, sometimes in the same cities where shrinkage by demolition is occurring. But the successful efforts share a common characteristic. In each case, something positive is being added; nothing is being taken away, except the occasional building beyond repair. Demolition is strategic and determined by people who know how to judge the remaining strength of neglected buildings. Even in the neighborhoods where vacant lots are offered to remaining residents next door for a garden, an extension or something else, something new gets added. In some community-led efforts where non-profits retrieve and renovate abandoned structures, new small investments become visible. Garbage strewn lots get cleaned. Small gardens get planted. Streets and sidewalks get repaired. Remaining property owners, now feeling a glimmer of hope, paint and fix up their forlorn property. Block parties and street fairs get organized. A sense of community evolves. The new and old residents gain confidence and open small businesses.



*Boston's North End, (Flickr user [riacale](#)).*

Areas where artists are currently moving into cheap or free spaces seem to be the most noticed successes reflecting this process. Here, as expected, the addition of the positive drives the regeneration.

If one looks at the history of some of today's most desirable urban neighborhoods and recognize what a staggering number of them were once deteriorated neighborhoods, if not outright slums, then a truly "creative" path reveals itself. Georgetown in D.C. Society Hill in Philadelphia. The Victorian Districts in Savannah and San Francisco. The French Quarter and Garden District in New Orleans. New York's Upper West Side, Harlem and almost every neighborhood in Brooklyn. North End in Boston. King William in San Antonio. All were dramatically deteriorated residential areas at one time. The list is endless. Clearance was never the path to rebirth. The same holds true of industrial neighborhoods. SoHo in NYC. LoDo in Denver. SoDo in Seattle. SoMa in San Francisco. SoHu in Chicago.

Even Detroit, the tragic capital of Shrinkage Theory, has productively revived areas that defied official city policies. The old Stroh's Brewery and adjacent buildings on the waterfront,

conversion of assorted pre-war downtown office and loft buildings, the Harmonie Park mixed-use district, the Cass Avenue corridor and an assortment of neighborhood-based rebuilding efforts are all examples of innovative, citizen-based regeneration that is possible almost everywhere.

Cities, even the so-called shrinking ones, don't seem to have a problem spending public money for demolition and then giving incentives and tax breaks to developers to build new. Why not first give incentives and tax breaks to individuals willing to reclaim vacant buildings and commit to occupancy for a minimum number of years? That recipient must promise not to resell for a minimum number of years, as well. In addition, give the resident or local business owner the vacant lot next door, assuming there is one, on which to either use as open space or eventually expand onto or build another dwelling on. This could be a modest investment to stabilize a declining area.

And with the collapse of big industries, why not encourage with modest incentives the small, ad hoc trend of new artisanal producers, remembering the 85 per cent of new jobs are created in businesses of 100 people or less. This is happening now in many regenerating neighborhoods even during the recession and it requires far fewer public dollars than the big, one shot deals. Small measures always exceed their expectations; large ones never meet their expectations.

This is about building on existing assets, not erasing them, about recognizing precursors of rebirth, instead of ignoring them and believing in the organic process instead of relying on unsustainable project building.

This is also about observable fact, not wishful theory. The real issue is how to learn from success instead of putting forth wishful thinking.

---

**Roberta Brandes Gratz** is an urban critic whose newest book is [\*The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs\*](#)

Tags:

[Urban Development](#), [United States](#), [Shrinking Cities](#)

## Comments

•

### Density

# Submitted by [Rex](#) on 19 April 2010 - 15:58pm

“Conventional wisdom today clearly notes that a key to a successful city is density.” I have a “yes, but” for you.

As a hobby for the most part, I have been researching density for almost a year. Its value is something that everyone in our experience agrees upon; the problem with 'density' is that it is yet to be recognized as who and what we are.

Historically our observation of rural area transmigrations from poor, yet subsistent cultures into urbanized poverty or wealth cultures is very broad. The relationship between food producing land and community-based consumption practices is less about migration than an exercise in invention and innovation. Architectural historians describe the image of the early "city" on the alluvial Mesopotamian plain as "sacred mountains" projected onto the landscape. Sumerian and Egyptian temples do not simply mark the transition to communal celebrations they demonstrate a compelling human interest in managing change through technology. Urbanization continues to be the prime expression of this interest. It has been continuous for a consistent reason, the opportunities reflected in city living offer more opportunities to explore advancements. I don't think the conventional wisdom is working very well. It is time we readied ourselves in a way that will make this very early vision of "the city" recur.

The first bit of readiness is to get a handle on the big picture in the sense that Bruce Katz puts it at Brookings. It is practically perfect. We have a complex mega region/city problem on our hands. Unless we find a way to define 'density' better (and Bruce knows this all too well) we will all be making involuntary, "Chicken Little" sounds. Taking a critically hard look at what we are doing to our landscape continues to gain momentum but it remains insufficient, but we have time to plan a viable urban agenda following the 2010 Census.

The second is the preparation of a ready attack on the belief in "city as failure". This is not deep down emotion, it is right there on the surface and carries the civility of a T-Party rally and I know why. American's believe they live in or near "the frontier", have a 'manifest destiny', and a constitutional right to a stand alone 'dream house' complete with ramparts if necessary. We cannot blame the victims here. The "frontier, manifest destiny, and dream house" is beginning to vaporize so rapidly that the ghostly remains still seen quite tangible and very, re-marketable in the short term.

Third, remember how Mike Pyatok, FAIA went off on the New Urbanists as "neither new nor urban", and remember the term "urban frontier"? Maybe you did not coin it, but the stories were vital and positive. They were about sweet, idealist young people caught up in their desire to stay and fight for a place to live. Back then, law or no law to support them, people who made policy or law and a few planners/architects helped to make it happen for them. Each project was the right thing to do whether they succeeded or failed. Where are those people today? They are scattered all over the planet, the urban frontier has become the earth.

Mike Davis in "Planet of Slums" and the free Rockefeller Foundation book on "our urban future" both pointed out people from all over the world working in this frontier. These and similar examinations predict two distinct destinations for urbanism. There is the high quality of a dense urban life in relatively small parts of nearly every city in the world, and there is the deprivation associated with urban life in the majority of the outlying areas, many a mere stones throw away. Even dense, high standard of living states like New Jersey with an adjacent New



York City, or the suburbs of Chicago, and Los Angeles all suggest similarly large suburban tracts with potential similar to what Mike Davis describes, but in wealth relative terms.

For a century the American people have been taught to prefer “out not up” and this actively confronts attempts to implement “anti-sprawl” policies that promote “up not out”. The point that remains unmade is about the tragic circumstances of maintaining the status quo. It is no longer possible to have both, it is what we have now, and it does not work. Maintaining it is a false choice found in a weak premise.

What would I have us do?

I would build a tenaciously firm line around our cities, shrinking or not, and examine the dire consequences not stopping growth at that line. The tools are available for the detailed work of monitoring where and how the line is broken. Given these tools, I would also prove that these consequences are not as calamitous as they are imaginable at first blush.

To get started I would plan a “what if” exercise. It would be a place chosen for its practical potential and openness to new ideas. Remember, the ongoing breakdown of the Maryland and Oregon efforts to contain growth is still forming a body of law for new choices. Just 27 counties out of 351 in MA went for the state’s growth management zoning deal, but there are now 27 to understand. In the Euclidian sense, this is all good for testing various forms of implementation.

After all, the appearance that we have plenty of land available is not a mirage, we have Glaeser and Porter, et. al. for the economic proof, and we have a lot people like Bob Yaro to help sharpen our senses to the aesthetic of urban life in rural settings.

Two questions, the body of work is growing exponentially on the first. "Will we continue to transform of the American landscape the way we have for the last century?" We are already capable of proving the weaknesses of it as a national development policy. In getting to the second question, I believe we have just one more generation to discuss the probable results of the current trend and select countervailing action.

The second question is therefore whether we can draw density as our line in the sand of a successfully urbanizing world. This is why. Inside of that line, I believe we can promote development to an unknown upper limit, and outside of it, I would promote the lowest possible density sufficient for effective stewardship, with both places held fully accountable to future generations.

•

## **Drawing Lines has unintended consequences**

# Submitted by [Wodehouse](#) on 23 April 2010 - 21:45pm

Rex, the problem with "drawing a line around the existing urban area" is that it drives the price of land up so much that many of the other ideals you wish for, become impossible to achieve.

"Save Our Suburbs" movements are nowhere near as much of an obstacle to redevelopment at higher densities than land that is so expensive that only one tenth as much of it can be purchased for redevelopment (in comparison to the lower-cost, non-urban-limited model). I can direct you to some other threads where this topic was discussed at length:

<http://www.planetizen.com/node/43096>

<http://www.planetizen.com/node/43160>

<http://www.planetizen.com/node/43255>

<http://www.planetizen.com/node/43388>

<http://www.planetizen.com/node/43543>

•

### **Cost is Relevant but...**

# Submitted by [Rex](#) on 19 May 2010 - 10:23am

Regardless of cost, this line exists, it is already very well drawn and gaining in strength and purpose in many places. Those on one side will do well for one another and those on the other may succeed in their own way. Both sides face unthinkable changes in the structure of their societies. This knowledge, paradoxically, can be incapacitating. The fact remains, it is very difficult to believe that non-catastrophic resolutions to the existing condition for so many are even conceivable. As this century ends, the key question is which side to prefer for investment. It remains possible to gain insight into the conditions leading to this choice. It is my passion, as it is with many of means. I advise an expeditious review of the novelty of the present situation and decide if you have a choice of sides.

New Zealand Wodehouse, I am grateful for the threads. My best to Jeeves and Wooster.

•

### **Seriously?**

# Submitted by [urban explorer](#) on 21 April 2010 - 11:04am

"Yet, the theory that troubled cities need to face reality and plan for shrinkage proliferate.

The question is why."

Why? Why??!! Places like Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Rochester, Flint, Cleveland et al. have been losing population for two generations. In many cases, it's not just the city losing to nearby suburbs; the whole metro area is losing warm bodies.



Despite the scattered success stories that you reference, where in the world are all the artistic/creative/"sweat equity" types going to come from to rehabilitate the great swaths of these cities that need help?

City planners who advocate for strategic demolition and carefully planned shrinkage are facing reality. The reality has been there for 40 or 50 years already. Hoping that people come back to re-invest in and re-populate all of these places, no matter how cheap the houses or how wonderful the historic architecture is what is delusional.

•

## **Urban Renewal**

# Submitted by [Wodehouse](#) on 23 April 2010 - 21:36pm

Very interesting article. Couple of comments.

Colin Clark's books "Population Growth and Land Use"

and "Regional and Urban Location"

are very unfortunately neglected books today.

He actually advocated subsidies for "renovation" in urban blight situations; this is very interesting coming from an economist who was strongly in favour of free markets and "natural" urban evolution.

Heather MacDonald has written many authoritative essays and books about the importance of policing crime, if urban blight is to be reversed. If I remember rightly, she regards crime as the main obstacle to reversing urban blight, and even suggests that urban renewal will occur if the defeat of crime is the ONLY thing done.

Colin Clark discusses at length the natural process by which metros grow, densify, implode, and renew. One stunning insight I got from him, was that there is a strong correlation between the density attained by an urban centre, and the network of roads provided to begin with by the city planners. Ironically, it would seem that the densities that support public transport, are a consequence of the provision of roads. The required densities do not occur in their absence.

One factor in the implosion of urban centres, is that the price of land, which peaks at the centre, can reach a level at which a new "node" in the Metro area (which node of course has cheaper land) can suddenly become a natural competitor to the centre, for businesses and offices and so on. It is true that Metros with a blighted centre generally have thriving "nodes" elsewhere.

I agree with the author of the above article, and with Colin Clark, that letting the blighted area "renovate", is the best course, including subsidy by tax breaks.

Oliver Marc Hartwich, "Success and the City", is also a very interesting read on this subject:

[http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Success\\_and th...](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/pdfs/Success_and_th...)

One fascinating thing he advocates, is that in blighted areas where industry and employment has collapsed, residents should be assisted to purchase, for next to nothing, their next door properties, so as to double the size of their own properties. One could imagine this working well in Detroit. Why don't the Auto Workers who still have jobs at \$40 per hour, simply buy up the super cheap properties all around them now?

One consequence of this, is that large properties become a new attraction for the area.

Another point to consider, is that when implosion and urban blight has occurred, there is abundant opportunity for the low cost conversion of land to inner city parks and reserves, and for purchase of land for needed public infrastructure and buildings. The very centrally located nature of such land makes it highly serviceable of the public good.

•

### **Detroit: a fundamentally different situation**

# Submitted by [jakewegmann](#) on 24 April 2010 - 09:02am

I very much respect this author's past work, but I think that she is coming from a "strong market" perspective. All of her examples of successful urban revitalization (except for Detroit, which is appended to the end of her list) are of once-deteriorated neighborhoods that are either located within economically thriving metropolitan areas (DC, San Francisco Bay, Boston, Seattle, Denver, San Antonio) or are situated close to nationally or even world-renowned tourist attractions (Society Hill, Phila.; Garden District, New Orleans; Savannah). Detroit neighborhoods have neither attribute, and nor do their counterparts in Cleveland, St. Louis, or similar locations. These places pose a fundamentally different type of problem: lack of market demand.

Careful planning and sensitive historic rehabilitation can accomplish a lot, but they cannot create demand where it does not exist. Rebuilding the South Bronx was wise and appropriate, because it was a neglected portion of a thriving metropolitan area -- even when New York City was flirting with municipal bankruptcy, it was still a legitimate contender for the title of financial and cultural hub of the world. The South Bronx has now been nurtured back to a reasonable degree of vitality, and now once again fulfills an important function within the metropolitan area of housing many working class and middle income residents in a close-in location.

A lot of the appeal of Detroit to artists, urban farmers and other risk-taking types at this moment, a phenomenon that is receiving so much media attention, is that it offers lots of cheap land with a great deal of freedom for experimentation. Clearly density is not the motivating factor here; if anything, its absence (something novel in the core of a metro area) is what is appealing.

The author is correct that from density flows many of the benefits of urban life (except perhaps to artists reconfiguring buildings or to urban farmers). But the only possible hope of achieving pockets of density in a location such as Detroit is to remove some of the surplus building stock from the market. Otherwise, revitalization will occur in a widely scattered pattern, rather than concentrated in areas where it can feed on itself and begin to produce synergistic results. This is a situation where planning, if done wisely, can actually make a difference, even amidst weak overall market demand.

I was and continue to be against the planned abandonment of the Lower Ninth Ward and other devastated low-lying areas in New Orleans. Local residents were and remain desperate to rebuild their homes, and Ivor van Heerden and others have demonstrated that it is technologically feasible to make all of New Orleans reasonably safe from future storms.

But the situation in Detroit is different: residents have been voting with their feet for 50 years, as one of the other commenters pointed out. There are just too many abandoned houses waiting for too few people. Planned shrinkage is one of the few urban revitalization theories that I am aware of that addresses this implacable reality head on.

Jake Wegmann

•

## **Shrinkage and Preservation (<--thanks moderators)**

# Submitted by [gdhallman](#) on 9 May 2010 - 21:12pm

Obviously some of you on here, and I'm talking about those of you who have also responded to Mr. Connelly's semi-rebuttal, are forgetting a handful of realities that absolutely need continuous discussion, not pseudo-intellectual circumnavigation that proceeds down a path of tit-for-tat, peacocking inter-textual discourse filled with exponential hyperlinking (<-- a little bit of sarcasm here):

Foremost, oil is peaking throughout much of the world. How can such be understated here? Hopefully, avoidance of such a staggering reality is tacitly understood here, therefore always in play throughout any such discussions on here - but I'm simply not sure.

Secondly, shrinkage and preservation work hand in hand, it's a concurrent reality, thus practice; not some dichotomous, linear, us versus them nonsense that seems to have surfaced here (some of you have noted avoiding such polarization, thank you).

Third, the national public debt-GDP ratio is insanely high and rising, thus there is limited time for "either or" positions because securing available funding and accountable measures should remain any city's modus operandi.

Lastly, city-regional planning will always run on a relative scale, culturally-speaking, thus comparative modeling can only go so far. This "not-so-brilliant" observation is de facto natural

law of culture. Study some anthropology if you don't get me here. In other words, what works for cities in the Northeast or England just don't translate effectively, overall, to a place like Detroit which continues to develop out of consequences steeped in "Federal Highway Act 1956" planning.

Detroit needs both shrinkage and preservation, a ton of financial support and most importantly, cooperative social action that will ultimately operate on pro bono actions from its everyday citizenry. Like most any city, the key to Detroit's identity is to maintain its most feasible zones of commercial-residential sustainability, i.e., preservation. As for the vacant dead-zone brown-fields - if no viable commercial-residential solutions of the inhabiting sort are financially possible, arable park land is a must for infinite reasons. There is absolutely nothing wrong with vacant fields of greenery that either serve as a retreat for nature-seeking city dwellers or are ready-ripe for smart development, say agricultural practice, even if limited.

As for how to pay for all of this: you got me. But let's not proceed down the path of heavy-leaning intellectual polemics without at least understanding the four points I described above: preservation and shrinkage are more simultaneous than opposing, national debt-GDP concerns limit funding sources - thus force creative partnerships, peak oil means shrinkage & preservation are necessary, and lastly, cultures are relative, thus comparative modeling has limitations.

PS My editor is off today, pardon grammatical injustice.