

A design to save American cities

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Abandoned buildings in downtown Detroit

When Brent Ryan started doing academic research on Detroit, in the 1990s, he was immediately taken aback by the city’s plight: derelict commercial buildings, burnt-out homes and whole neighborhoods being abandoned.

“I was really struck by the amount of physical decay I saw there,” says Ryan, the Linde Career Development Assistant Professor of Urban Design and Public Policy in MIT’s Department of Urban Studies and Planning. “It was incredibly troubling to see a huge city laid to waste like that, and we didn’t seem as a society to be doing anything about it.”

And that was during a decade when the economy and auto industry were rolling along nicely. Then, between 2000 and 2010, Detroit’s population fell a further 25 percent to 714,000, the lowest it has been in a

century; *Time* magazine has dubbed Detroit the “vanishing city.”

It is easy to write off such places as basket cases belonging to a bygone industrial era — too easy, in the view of Ryan. “We can’t totally reverse the problems afflicting these places, but there is nothing lost by trying to improve matters with positive programs, rather than just demolishing more homes,” he says.

In this vein, Ryan has written a new book, *Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities*, published this spring by the University of Pennsylvania Press, that is a call to action for reviving troubled metropolises through a combination of better urban planning and innovative architecture. In his book, which uses Detroit and Philadelphia as case studies, Ryan argues against the architectural “suburbanization” of cities, maintaining that bolder, more distinctive civic projects can enhance the comparative advantages of cities as dense, diverse, lively places to live.

“Not every person in a shrinking city can relocate to a place with a better economy,” Ryan writes, adding that local officials must therefore find new ways to make “the lives of their constituents better.”

If you design it well, they will come

Ryan, who got his undergraduate degree from Yale University, received a master’s in architecture from Columbia University and a PhD in urban planning from MIT. Accordingly, he thinks innovative architecture isn’t just decorative, but integral to urban renewal.

“Good design provides a project with visibility,” Ryan says. That makes architects more eager to work on similar projects, and helps raise local backing. Without good design, Ryan says, “it’s harder for Detroiters to see a development in their city that leads the way forward.” Conversely,

Ryan says, “a sad thing in cities is that a lot of the leading-edge architectural projects are always either museums or buildings with million-dollar condominiums. We need to reunite a social agenda with a progressive design agenda.”

Design After Decline chronicles, in part, the design legacy that hinders urban planning today. In the first postwar decades, urban planning was far more ambitious — and better funded — than it is today, but stylistically, it became unhappily associated with 1960s-era modernism in the form of vast, inhospitable public-housing blocks, such as the infamous Pruitt-Igoe houses in St. Louis that were quickly demolished.

“We’ve generated a caricature of modernism that it was only brutal and inhumane public housing, got dynamited, and so much the better,” Ryan says. “Pruitt-Igoe has become shorthand for the follies of high modernism.”

But not all modernism was like that, Ryan argues in the book; in the 1970s, more subtle, livable forms of modernist public housing had evolved, some of which were implemented in Europe. It was too late in the United States, he says: Public support for urban renewal waned before better architecture could give urban projects a better reputation.

In reaction to this, as Ryan chronicles, from the 1970s onward urban projects occurred on a small scale, with undistinguished housing that represented the “suburbanization” of cities. In Detroit, this left lower-income people living in heavily car-dependent neighborhoods that were less appealing versions of suburbs, rather than in denser, more convenient areas that constituted a clear alternative to suburban life. In North Philadelphia, as Ryan details, small-scale redevelopment brought stability to some neighborhoods, but still demonstrated a “fear of experimentation” that limited its impact.

By contrast, innovative design has helped revive places such as Medellín, Colombia, which rebuilt public transit, schools, libraries and commercial districts while placing average-income residents in architecturally lively buildings. In turn, Ryan notes, Medellín's renewal was partly based on innovative 1990s projects in Barcelona and Rio de Janeiro.

Pursuing patchwork urbanism

Colleagues say Ryan's work helps bring a new perspective to the problems of urban renewal. Ryan's writings are "absolutely essential as regards shrinking cities; he is trying to imagine how they might be physically transformed," says Robert Beauregard, a professor of [urban planning](#) at Columbia University. "Much attention is devoted in these cities to erasing the signs of abandonment. Little attention is paid to how these places, having lost their 'urban' form, can be redeveloped so as to avoid simply becoming 'suburban.'"

Of course, redevelopment will be particularly hard for American cities in tight fiscal times. Barcelona's revival was based in part on funding for the 1992 Olympics; Detroit will never have that advantage. Still, Ryan argues that cities should pursue "palliative planning," in which some interventions are better than none. The resulting "patchwork urbanism," Ryan notes, by enhancing certain neighborhoods, may provide momentum for further change.

Such interventions are "going to have to happen at the city level, because there's no national urban policy anymore driving [design innovation]," Ryan says. "But in America you always have the chance for innovation anywhere. All you need is one innovative politician to say, 'This is the way I want to do things.'"

The [city](#) of Buffalo, he notes, currently receives \$18 million a year in federal money for housing. "That's not nothing," Ryan says. "But is

money in cities being spent well or poorly? I'm not seeing a lot of innovative projects coming out of our cities. Let's take the money we have, spend it well and use that as an argument to get more.”

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