…It's Complicated: Planning's Relationship With Urban Infill

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The practice of infill carries with it many connotations. Over the years it has had many names, too. Urban renewal, redevelopment, and brownfield development are only a few. Many names signify many attempts to solve the problems of the decline of some cities in the wake of suburbanization.

Blight is the cancer of cities. It erodes a healthy tax base, spreads to nearby areas, contributes to population decline, and isn't easily eliminated. Cities such as Pittsburgh saw how this condition drags the rest of the city down. The mobility of people is a quality cities will never know. Municipal planners must face empty buildings and hollow center cities and figure out how to change it.

Almost as detrimental, lack of a vibrant downtown to anchor people and communities can leave a city adrift. The City of Phoenix emerged from the Second World War as a rapidly growing suburban town. Interestingly, it was suburbia with no discernable urban center. Now, planners have worked hard to reshape the city into a more sustainable design that focuses on density and infill. (Sunnucks, 23) Much of this effort is occurring along the Valley Metro light-rail transit line, which opened as recently as 2008. That city has identified six critical themes as part of its Reinvent PHX initiative: land use, mobility, economic development, housing, green systems, and health.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary, Julian Castro, has said, "affordable housing and thriving communities are the foundation of strong cities." (Kanovsky, 27) His statement exemplifies the connection economic and cultural prosperity has with housing policy. Since the turn of the 20th Century, planners have worked to ensure that

their communities do thrive. As we will see, though, the profession of American Planning has learned more from its mistakes over the last 125 years than perhaps anything else.

Historical Attempts

Since the beginning of cities' decentralization following the Industrial Revolution, municipal and state governments have struggled with how to bring human capital back to city centers. One of the first examples of government initiatives was the Housing Act of 1949, which created the Urban Renewal program. Title I of the Act was meant to provide federal funding for projects in cities in order to bring urban renewal to areas of depressed economic opportunity. This program saw the injection of billions of federal dollars into local redevelopment projects in order to revitalize urban communities.

Fifty years later in 1992, Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) was passed. HOPE VI began by HUD during the Clinton administration. Congressional Reports detailed the deteriorating quality of a large number of public housing units nationwide. Seizing this opportunity, HUD used the report to inform lawmakers about the coming tidal wave of repair costs as more units slipped into disrepair or needed long-overdue upgrades. While the percentage was relatively low, just 6%, of all public housing in the nation, the sheer quantity, an estimated 86,000 units, was enough to get the attention of lawmakers and inspired them to act (Hanlon, 82).

The HOPE VI grant program was competitive, so awarded proposals necessitated higher quality. It operated by creating 'mixed-finance' partnerships between public, private, and non-profit sectors. Its goals were to replace housing projects with mixed-income communities and rebuild then in ways that bore no resemblance to traditional public housing. In doing so, the

program hoped to avoid the physical and social characteristics and poor managerial experiences

that caused so much public housing to become "severely distressed" (Gibson, 6).

Cities, regions, and states have also used containment policies to not only preserve

wilderness and countryside, but to funnel development into town as well. Several states such as

Washington, Tennessee, and Oregon have mandated that some or all of their cities use them. In

particular, Adequate Public Facilities Ordinances (APFOs) and Urban Growth Boundaries

(UGBs) have seen widespread use. Oregon's Land Conservation and Development Act of 1973

requires the planning for and allocation of land for development anticipated to supply demand

for 20 year time horizons.

APFOs limit the speed and extent development spreads based on utilities and other public

services available to support it. UGBs have the purpose of preserving land unable to compete

with urban development (like agriculture) and increasing cost-efficiency in developing and

existing infrastructures. They also encourage reinvestment in under-performing urban land and

incentivize higher density developments with a mix of uses.

The City of Pittsburgh, and many others, has experimented with tax incentives as a way

to channel developers into the city. In Pittsburgh, a nearly 50% population decline since the

early 1950s has had the understandable consequence of significantly increasing the city's number

of unoccupied buildings (Chintalapalli, et al., 4). Pennsylvania's Act 42 was designed

specifically to remediate this.

Act 42, Pennsylvania's Local Revitalization Tax Assistance (LERTA), provides a 10-

year abatement from tax increases that would result from additions and remodeling. Its purpose

was to enhance residential sales and rental in 28 specified neighborhoods to occupy more

existing buildings. This residential LERTA incentivized hotels and residential use, such as condominiums and lofts, in former commercial or industrial sites.

Pittsburgh anticipated its expenditures to be matched by income tax on new residents and increased property taxes above the abatement level. Downtown residents were expected to have a financial impact of $90 million over the 10-year abatement period. Two hundred new or rehabbed units would appear over five years, adding $55M to property value. Compared to the property tax loss of less than $50,000 over the same time period, the city hoped to see a property value growth of over three times its investment (Chintalapalli, et al., 3).

History's Success

These programs had positive impacts on the communities in which they were implemented. Growth was often funneled to where towns and governments wanted them and sprawl was contained to great extents in several cities. Such programs and policies were without a doubt controversial and lacked consistent success, as will be discussed later. However, they undeniably shaped cities and regions for decades to come.

When Urban Renewal programs succeeded, it typically involved the incorporation of the existing city form and buildings into its plans. Maintaining street patterns that integrated the development into surrounding areas more seamlessly also contributed to success. Baltimore and Philadelphia, for instance, utilized existing structures into their plans, which created an integrated development that did not seek to completely erase historical significance. Chicago rigidly enforced its zoning in order to manage effective balance between renewal projects and existing neighborhoods. Similar projects elsewhere had "good" endings also, typically whenever wholesale destruction was prevented.

The HOPE VI program learned from many of the mistakes made from Title I Urban Renewal projects and was implemented accordingly. Even competing for HOPE VI grants requires a Community Supportive Services plan to address needs of residents, a key failing of earlier programs. Two developments in particular, Park DuValle in Louisville, Kentucky and Columbia Villa in Portland, Oregon, are often cited for their effective design.

Part of the Louisville Metro Housing Authority, Park DuValle utilized many New Urbanist design and planning principles and has had widely accepted success. Its 125 acres of 1100 mixed-income housing units replaced 1116 traditional public housing units. Residents include owner-occupants and renters as well as some of the original pre-development public housing tenants. It also includes commercial areas, green spaces, and social support facilities for job training, continuing education, and after-school programs (Hanlon, 87).

It successfully attracted investment from more than just HUD. For every dollar contributed by HOPE VI funds, $10.87 was provided by other public-private sources. For every dollar of public money, regardless of source, $1.09 of private investment was raised signifying a better than one-for-one ratio. Its efforts to attract mixed-income families has brought the area's percentage of persons living below the poverty level down from 61.0% in 1990 to 11.5% by 2000 (Hanlon, 86).

Population Percentage Below Poverty Line in Park DuValle
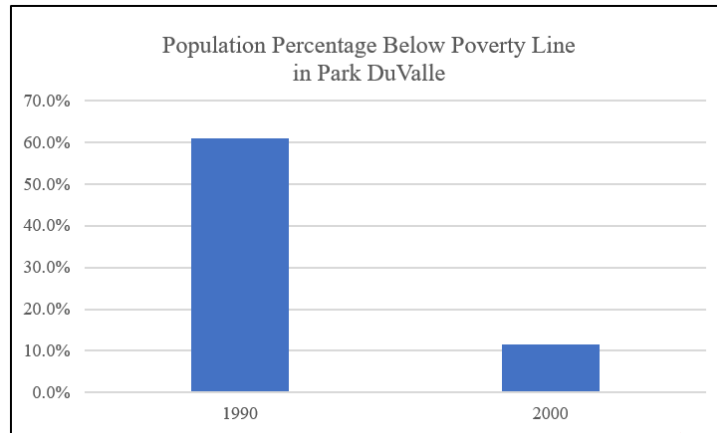
*Decrease in residents below poverty resulting
from Louisville public-private partnerships*

History's Failure

The successes of infill development have not been without great expense to both communities and people, however. The legitimate and wisely pursued practice of rejuvenating center cities has subsequently rebranded itself with every failure of government and market. No small wonder when development is desired where buildings and residents already exist. What often resulted was wholesale disregard for the disadvantaged.

The U.S. government first actively waded into the housing situation with the National Housing Act of 1934.   Among others, this created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which enabled millions to become homeowners and anchor economies in the midst of the Great Depression. However, it also created the practice of "redlining" as a part of its insurance practices, anchoring minority communities to their circumstances in a much more sinister way for decades.

The first grand venture of federally sponsored redevelopment, Urban Renewal, came at great cost. Begun in the 1940s, these programs often did more to displace residents than renew the cityscape, with some exceptions. Conflicting priorities and commercial influence often stagnated projects for years, which resulted in an average span of 10-13 years for a project to be completed (Isaacs, 449). Cities who received Title I grants could also begin demolition of existing structures easily, often before contentious final plans had been approved. The result was often an empty development area leading to the conclusion that the city had no desire to renew, only demolish.

This poor performance certainly had another damning effect. Residents were forced to relocate in such a way that their former community was dispersed across the city, disintegrating established social and support networks. These were resources often indispensable to the low-income people who relied on them. While some renewal projects did successfully reintroduce portions of an area's original inhabitants, other projects languished for years. For the displaced, this surely left the impression that their city saw these networks as so insignificant that replacing it once destroyed was hardly worthwhile. It is no wonder that the Urban Renewal name earned such harsh connotations.

HOPE VI has likewise not been without its criticism. Even when successful, HOPE VI projects like Park DuValle require significant costs in public funding, to speak nothing of the costs to the informal social and support networks of families. As described by Hanlon, the displacement of residents often comes with little to no, if not worse, improvement in the lives of the resettled, regardless of whether the new development is a success (Hanlon, 94).

Columbia Villa of Portland, once the largest public housing community in Oregon, housed 382 households. Redeveloped under HOPE VI, it differed from other redevelopment neighborhoods for its open and low-density design. Columbia Villa suffered from unshakable stigmas of drugs and gang violence that it developed in the 1970's. The City of Portland effectively resolved these problems by the mid-1990s. The stereotype persisted, though. This combined with housing stock over 60 years old made it an easy decision for the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) to submit it for HOPE VI redevelopment (Gibson, 8). Gibson found that the displacement of public housing residents often results in greater financial hardships, separation from established social support networks, and placement in unfamiliar and often unsafe new neighborhoods.

Indeed, low-income neighborhoods are not the only ones susceptible to relocation in the name of redevelopment. In 2000, the City of New London began acquiring properties on which it intended to allow developers to build a commercial center after the land had been transferred to them. It used a combination of purchases and eminent domain to achieve this. Using precedence established in *Berman v. Parker*, the town classified the moderate-income neighborhood as blighted in order to justify their acquisition (Mandelker, et al. 76). The bungled development that followed the *Kelo v. New London* decision only further alienated renewal initiatives.

Containment policies and zoning ordinances have likewise been a double-edged sword. While their success in managing growth is widely acclaimed, they can easily be ineffective in implementation.

Greenbelts, though encouraged by such planning torchbearers as Frederick Law Olmsted and Jens Jenson, have shown to actually encourage sprawl. Satellite cities leapfrog outside the

original city's growth boundary, thus not effectively containing growth. This has been the experience in Korea and the United Kingdom, two countries with researched effects of coherent greenbelt usage. This has also been the case in Colorado around Boulder's "Blueline" containment policy. There, the combination of aggressive urban containment policies, without effective regional coordination, has encouraged the creation of satellite communities of job commuters. (Pendall, et al., 19). In fact, 55% of that city's workforce now lives outside the city limits as a result of the property costs and urban build-out.

"Pull" techniques such as Adequate Public Facilities Ordinances (APFOs) are also susceptible to poor effectiveness. Lack of coordination between ordinances occurs leaving loopholes for developers to exploit unless an overall urban service area strategy is developed. The 1976 Municipal Planning Act established the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Metropolitan Council regional authority. Though heralded for being a pioneer in regional cooperation, it has failed to contain the sprawl within the metro area. Pendall highlights a study by James Poradek in 1997 of how ineffective use of authority allowed the Metropolitan Urban Service Area (MUSA) to grow by more than 18,000 acres over five years during the 1980s. Meanwhile, Portland's growth boundary grew by only 2,515 acres during the same period (Pendall, et al., 27).

While zoning is an essential component of public health and welfare, especially in densely populated urban areas, it can be an unnecessary barrier to needed development. It can also avoidably drive up the costs of housing. Strict adherence to standards set in *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty* can limit options to planners. Mandated setbacks, parking requirements, and lot sizes may be beneficial in less dense outer areas. In the city center, however, they can make property values prohibitively high. In their study of regulatory barriers, Knaap, et al.

found that maximum units-per-acre zoning was a primary hurdle to affordable housing in Boston

(Knaap, et al., 727). The small jurisdictional size in this metropolitan area also meant that great

variations in land-use regulations existed over a large area.

Tax incentives with great expectations can prove ineffective, too. Counter to the belief in

Pittsburgh that increased property values would provide the taxes to match abatement

expenditures, median income actually declined slightly in 18 of the 26 participating

neighborhoods. The $55 million increase to property value from new units never materialized.

Instead, property values actually fell substantially in 23 of 26 neighborhoods. (Chintalapalli, et

al., 16)

Chintalapalli also concluded that the use of tax abatement programs increased during

prosperous times, but decreased in hard times (Chintalapalli, et al., 24). If this is the case, it calls

into question the utilization of this method in areas typically already economically depressed.

Additionally, the hope of outside development can easily be stifled by economic downturns.

Surprisingly, government predation can also strip development agencies of their

capability to drive development. In California, the government turned its sights on the assets of

local Redevelopment Agencies (RDAs) to help alleviate its financial woes. When the state

Supreme Court upheld a law that dissolved all local RDAs, what resulted was the slow death of

over 400 RDAs across the state. Collectively, they managed almost $5 billion in tax revenues

each year for community-driven redevelopment (Krohe, 1). In-progress projects were allowed to

finish, while others on the design table were squashed. Even more significantly, the legislation

abruptly killed countless projects that depended on public-private partnerships for investment.

This sudden vacuum left initiatives dead in the water without the necessary funding needed to

become reality. Money earmarked for specific, concentrated affordable housing was dispersed to various local agencies, usually housing authorities to use as they wished. Now, because the RDA dissolutions redistributed funds used to repay RDA debt, cities are left to service debt payments. Although the tax increment financing that funded the RDA is still in place, the cities are often left without financial buffers to mitigate any variations in revenue. Suddenly, municipal general funds would be on the hook (Krohe, 7).

Such examples of inconsiderate and incomplete land-use control beg the question: do we know what we're doing? As previously stated, however, the planning profession is nothing if not good at learning from its mistakes.

Looking Ahead

How does a city invigorate itself and remain competitive while acknowledging the effect on lower-income communities. These communities nearly always bear the brunt of such redevelopment. Unfortunately, this isn't likely to change much as the forces of property rights and market reality greatly dictate where such development is possible. Cities must reconcile what invigoration means to so many of its citizens.

The use of consolidated public housing concentrates poverty and joblessness into one area, which often prevents those residents from being able to move beyond their economic situations. However, breaking up existing communities destroys the close-knit support networks many of these people need. So how are such concentrated areas of the economically depressed broken up without being at the expense of the generation of residents who experience it?

New trends in mixed-income developments often replace neighborhoods of concentrated low-income housing. This serves to both raise the area's prosperity as well as break up dense

centers of poverty. It also inevitably reduces a city's stock of low-income units as more units intended to appeal to moderate-income families are built.

What about this loss of housing? Simply replacing a low-income unit with a moderate-income one doesn't likewise lift an impoverished family into a higher tax bracket. New Jersey recognized this in 1975 and again in 1983 with the *NAACP v. Mount Laurel I & II* decisions. How does a city balance its new developments with its obligation to general welfare, i.e. access to affordable housing? The answer is in infill housing.

As Landis states, infill housing has three primary benefits. It relieves development pressures on outlying areas. It can slow the increase in vehicular traffic when placed along transit routes or in areas deemed highly "walkable". Finally, it focuses investment into communities who likely suffer from long periods of under-utilization and potential neglect (Landis, et al., 682). He also found in his study of potential infill sites in California that statewide stock of potential lots was nearly enough to satisfy the state's housing needs for 20 years (Landis, et al., 701). These included lots either vacant or candidate for adaptive re-use.

Lot-by-lot analysis would likely find approval from Sir Patrick Geddes by preventing the wholesale demolition of neighborhoods, which has characterized government renewal efforts and made infill efforts untrusted. Blighting whole neighborhoods, such as in *Berman*, may be less necessary. It could also minimize the number of people facing relocation.

When relocation is unavoidable, human dignity must be respected. In Portland, HAP instituted relocation services for Columbia Villa residents using money from the HOPE VI grant. This helped families identify reasonable new homes as well as provided for moving expenses

and access to a network of other social support services. It also dedicated $20,000 to assist

residents with paying utilities there were unaccustomed to (Gibson, 13).

Design, too, is essential. Historical references help tie new development to a

community's past. A neighborhood's intangible character and appeal can be preserved in this

way by connecting past emotions to the present. In Portland, Oregon, where fire destroyed many

wood-frame structures 140 years ago, cast iron architecture became a staple of design for fire

prevention. This material became so engrained with residents that its aesthetic use is still utilized

today. However, now instead of cast-iron, many developers use plaster or fiberglass, which look

exactly the same, only visually discernable by using magnets (Corbell, 3). This example

demonstrates how builders connect their new structures to the emotional memories of the past.

Awareness of historical significance could compliment federal regulations as well, and

potentially support funding requests. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of

1966 requires federal agencies to consider the impact of programs on historical properties.

Tying renovation to preservation could be one way of encouraging renewal that not only

maintains aesthetic characters, but could argue for new funding sources as well.

The involvement of higher levels of government, however, should be carefully

considered. Typically, development achieves better results when the principle of subsidiarity is

applied. Spaans, et al. explain this term as allocating resources, to include competencies and

control, at the lowest possible level where citizens might benefit the most (Spaans, et al., 29). As

a project's scale and collaborative requirements grow, however, the introduction of state or even

federal involvement may be necessary.

However, Spaan's study in the Netherlands demonstrates one aspect where our two continents differ. European countries are diverse and in close proximity to each other. The impact of cities' economies at the national level there is also proportionally high as compared to U.S. cities. This makes big government participation more common. This can be understandable where the inter-city competition often means inter-country competition. The U.S., however, with its greater scale and smaller proportionality of cities, has less at stake in the competition of her cities beyond the general prosperity of all citizens.

When considering containment policies and zoning ordinances, it is essential to realize that there is no silver bullet. Additionally, they need periodic review to determine if they need to be changed to reflect contemporary needs. The City of Phoenix is a great example of a town realizing that ordinance review was needed just as much as imaginative development.

Development occurs along lines of transit, a fact older than what we consider "transit" today. Throughout history, civilizations have grown along trade corridors and road intersections. Indeed, it is this fact that produced the urban cores we value so greatly now. Colonial port cities were founded in harbors to facilitate transportation of goods and people to and from the founding country. Many downtowns are the products of grown-up intersections of trade where people went for commerce, socializing, and government.

Phoenix recognized this and leveraged it to create sustainable and coherent places of space. Transit is used to link essentials of employment, education, and commercial retail to high-density residential areas serves to encourage greater interaction, commerce, and exchange of ideas.

In order to encourage concentrated development in its downtown, Phoenix revised its zoning and planning rules to make infill and adaptive re-use projects more appealing. It provided greater flexibility in satisfying parking as well as updated public rights-of-way and utilities rules that promoted greater density (Sunnucks, 23).

Urban containment policies work better at the regional, rather than local, level. This is because coordination over a wider area is possible and leapfrogging developments can be prevented. Key examples of this are Portland's effective regional authority, Metro, as compared to Boulder's solitary use of such practices within its county. Additionally, this provides greater legislative backing for implementation and enforcement.

Similarly, APFOs can be effective. Linking APFOs to a comprehensive plan coordinates their effects and prevents sprawl from slipping through the cracks. As was the case in *Golden v. Ramapo Planning Board*, a city with long-term capital improvement plans can more effectively administer APFOs to successfully prevent sprawl. Generally, linking any land-use control to comprehensive planning is solid practice, as demonstrated in *Haines v. City of Phoenix* (Mandelker, et al., 649).

The practice of tier systems can help supplement APFOs. Prominent Tier Systems for urban service areas are utilized in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area and San Diego, for example. These systems identify where development should and shouldn't occur through studying a mix of infrastructure capacity, current levels of development, and assessments of rural resource viability. Doing so produces a better understanding of sustainable growth over a given time period (Pendall, et al., 25).

Significantly, though, lot densities were found to have greater impact on housing than the use of boundaries or service areas (Knaap, et al., 744). As identified in Boston, this was the greatest impediment to infill even when compared to positive impacts of Portland's UGB and Florida's state mandates for housing.

Tax incentives and fiscal policy can be effective also, despite their poor performance in Pittsburgh. Omaha and Lexington are two cities that don't use abatements. Instead they provide loans and grants to encourage construction and renovation by developers and citizens. During the same 10-year period that Pittsburgh was having lack-luster results attempting to grow their city, Omaha and Lexington's growth rates were 10.95% and 13.54%, respectively (Chintalapalli, et al., 19). If development is desired in areas of lower economic activity then access to credit and stimulus grants are needed, not tax abatements.

In Conclusion

The articles and recommendations in this study reveal certain things.

First, implementation has a larger effect on land-use than the policies themselves do. Urban Renewal and HOPE VI projects all shared the same respective legislative origin. It was the method in which they were implemented that led to success as well as the decent treatment of former inhabitants. The consistent exercise of authority granted to planning commissions provides weight to the initiatives desired. As demonstrated in Minneapolis/St. Paul, simply having ordinances isn't enough if they aren't enforced.

Second, combinations of methods work more effectively than any one practice. This requires calculated assessment through survey to make the determination of what is needed where. As unidentified in Pittsburgh, but effectively used elsewhere, residents of low-income

neighborhood need access to credit, not tax incentives. The latter would be more effective in areas with upper-income renovators whose credit is already available. Municipalities and regions must also periodically review their zoning ordinances and their implications. Doing so will help prevent them from becoming more hindrance than help.

Containment policies are not utilized everywhere, or in the same manner. The area in which you live could be a big determinant of whether your town uses them. In general, cities in the Northeastern U.S. are more likely to have low maximum-allowable densities while those in the Western U.S. are not. Municipalities in the Mid-Atlantic had a higher percentage of UGBs than elsewhere in the U.S. while those in the Northeast had a much lower percentage (Pendall, et al., 10). These figures were found during a 1994 metropolitan survey conducted by Rolf Pendall, whose trends were reconfirmed in 2001 by the Brookings Institute.

Third, relocating people requires a committed, holistic effort from the housing authority. As shown in the case of Portland's Columbia Villa, residents found the one on one efforts made by relocation specialists to be critical in finding appropriate new housing. It is benefitted by the efforts of un-relocated citizens as well. The ability of new neighborhoods to receive and integrate new residents impacted the more long-term qualities of stability and "belonging".

In the end, satisfying the essential needs of financial stability and sense of community could be the two greatest factors in creating acceptable infill. Not easily achieved, it requires collaboration, imagination, empathy, and community. The last of these is the crucial requirement. It is community that gives a place meaning and accepts others into it. Infill is not simply recreation; it is the invigoration of communities.

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