

## URBAN RENEWAL

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### Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Background
  3. Monterey's Transformation from a Derelict Industrial Landscape into a Prime Tourist Attraction
    - 3.1 Lessons Learnt
  4. The Making of Savannah's Historic Downtown
    - 4.1 Lessons Learnt
  5. New York: Manhattan's Chinatown
    - 5.1 Lessons Learnt
  6. Conclusion
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### Summary

For over a century, many American cities have experienced urban flight which, in turn, has transformed their downtowns into derelict environments. These areas contain infrastructure that would be costly to recreate elsewhere. As a result, many organizations and communities have tried to take advantage of these amenities by revitalizing their city centers. The following article analyzes three strategies for urban renewal, with possible lessons for the design of urban renewal in cities in other parts of the world.

In Monterey, California, urban design professionals and city managers have discovered history's potential for the rejuvenation of their cannery district. Following the fictional landscape as described in John Steinbeck's Cannery Row, they redeveloped the canning district with major attractions such as an aquarium, retail outlets, restaurants and hotels, all in close vicinity to each other. Today, Monterey once again enjoys a vibrant streetlife throughout the entire week, attracting customers and visitors from the surrounding suburbs as well as from other cities.

The city of Savannah, Georgia, has also profited from the success of a popular book. John Berendt's Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil rekindled tourist interest in Savannah's historic downtown and strengthened the city's resolve to continue preserving its fabric. In addition, the city government teamed up with a private arts college, the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), to revitalize its historic

fabric. Not only did SCAD restore and reuse old buildings, but its faculty and students have brought a sense of vitality to downtown as well.

The immigrant population in Manhattan's Chinatown has successfully appropriated older neighborhoods for their community with little interference from the city government. An ever-increasing number of restaurants and stores have opened their doors to the public and begun to attract many professionals and tourists. Today Chinatown's diverse spectrum of schools, churches, stores, restaurants and entertainment centers enlivens and economically supports the district.

## **1. Introduction**

Today, over half of the world's population lives in urban centers. Some of the highest rates of urban growth can be found in South America and Asia at the same time that cities in North America and Europe are rapidly losing their population. During the last two decades metropolitan area on these continents have experienced counterurbanization, a migrational trend toward the suburb and rural areas. This exodus from the city proper is largely due to major improvements in transportation as well as to environmental attractions that set exurban locations apart from the city. As a result, urban sprawl has replaced the high-density compact urban forms of the pre-automobile age. Today, almost one-third of the urban land area in North America is being used for car-related purposes.

It stands to fear that many of the newly developing centers around the globe will experience a similar trend in the years to come. In order to prevent exurbanization, which will render much of the current investments in infrastructure and buildings obsolete, we should focus on urban renewal as a means to restore the appeal of the city. The following case studies analyze the different strategies for revitalization used by American communities and discuss their applicability for the rejuvenation of other cities.

## **2. Background**

For over a century, most of the American populace turned its back to the city in its search for a simpler, more harmonious style of life. According to Nancy Stieber, "the desire to fashion a retreat from the unruly world of power and gain" drove many from the city proper to its outskirts, where they sought tranquillity in a natural setting. As planners, architects, and developers expanded the metropolitan envelope further and further into rural areas, they created the almost seamless sprawl that characterizes the contemporary American landscape.

This led initially to low-density suburbs with lots of open space, little traffic and unimpaired vistas. These very amenities, however, evaporated as more and more people left the city in pursuit of them. Once an area was developed to 70 percent of its capacity, residents once again experienced crowded and congested neighborhoods, limited opportunities for their children, and many of the vices traditionally associated with urban centers. Recent data suggests that some suburbs are struggling economically, and that they experience an increase in crime, traffic congestion and the cost of living. As a

result, the cycle of flight, renewal and decline might begin again in a yet more remote location.

The continued migration in search for a better place to live has reduced many downtowns to little more than an endless array of chain restaurants, brand-name department stores and a sea of faceless office towers. This sameness, experienced by every traveler, has suppressed the once unique character of any given city, thus creating a sensation of placelessness.

Many downtowns bypassed by this commercial development have experienced urban blight instead. Nevertheless they remain equipped with valuable utilities, amenities, and infrastructure that would be costly to recreate elsewhere. They offer a range of housing and employment opportunities for a diverse community, as well as the historical, cultural, educational and nostalgic associations that most suburban downtowns and neotraditional suburban communities have been unable to acquire.

For this reason, there has been a renewed interest in the urban core of many cities. In the small city of Monterey, California, urban design professionals and city managers have rediscovered history's potential for the rejuvenation of their cannery district; in the mid-size city of Savannah, Georgia, they have teamed up with public and private institutions to reclaim the entire historic districts for new uses; and in the major metropolis of New York, New York, immigrant populations have successfully appropriated older neighborhoods for their community. The following case studies analyze the different strategies for revitalization used by these communities and discuss their applicability for the rejuvenation of other cities.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Udo Greinacher** teaches courses in architecture and urban design at the University of Cincinnati. Born, raised and educated in Tuebingen, Germany, he holds a first professional degree in architecture from the Fachhochschule Stuttgart and a Masters Degree in architecture from the University of California at Berkeley, where he studied with Lars Lerup, Spiro Kostof, Stanley Saitowitz and Dell Upton. He has lectured on urban issues in Europe and throughout the United States, and has participated and placed in several international and national design competitions in America and in Germany. Published works and designs include *Fear and Dreaming in the American City: From Open Space to Cyberspace* (Princeton Architectural Press; 1997), *The New Reality: Media Technology and Urban Fortress*, (JAE; February 1995), *The Fence* (Competitions vol. 3; Fall 1993), *Berlin: The Wall of Shame*, (Center of Environmental Design Research, Berkeley; 1991) and *Staedtebaulicher Ideenwettbewerb Lahr* (wettbewerb aktuell no. 9; 1988).