

# {essays in history}

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## Beyond Bulldozers and Housewives: Rethinking Renewal in a Post-Renewal Age



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## Reviewed Work(s)

*The Great Inversion and the Future of the American Metropolis.* By Alan Ehrenhalt (New York: Knopf, 2012). Pp. 276. Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-307-27274-4, \$26.95

*Design after Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities.* By Brent D. Ryan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). Pp. 261. Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8122-4407-6, \$45.00

Urban renewal has long been sandwiched between two slices of paradigmatic bread: the Modernist “bulldozer” projects of Robert Moses and the “walking city” cherished by his nemesis and proto-New Urbanist Jane Jacobs. Scholars have depicted Moses and Jacobs as David and Goliath, with the diminutive Jacobs rallying her neighbors to block Moses’ arterial road through Washington Square Park. And Moses, whose power in New York was virtually uncontested, glibly judged his opponent as “just a housewife.” If the outcome marked a rare defeat for Moses, it also represented for his metro-vision a fateful warning. By the early 1970s, in part due to urban crises, “freeway revolts,” and the Nixon Administration’s erasure of federal funding for highway construction, renewal à la Moses lost traction in U.S. cities. The Moses-Jacobs dialectic, or what historian Robert O. Self-termed the “traditional centerpieces ... of renewal drama,” has obscured other actors, events, and phenomena in the continuing story of urban renewal. Alan Ehrenhalt’s *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American Metropolis* and Brent D. Ryan’s *Design after Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities*, while exploring demographics and policy, respectively, offer viewpoints that move beyond traditional polarity.<sup>[1]</sup>

Both authors praise Jacobs for defending “everyday urbanism” in the face of Modernist renewal. Their views on Moses differ, with the former asserting it is “impossible today to imagine a [Robert] Moses emerging anywhere” and the latter opining that “Modernist, centralized planning was not always bad.”<sup>[2]</sup> Ehrenhalt, a journalist and former executive editor of *Governing*, and Ryan, professor of urban studies at MIT, suggest these centerpieces require updating if not partial abandonment. Jacobs has garnered more fans since her 1958 West Village victory and was a champion of Main Street qualities until her death in 2006. But her

legacy currently is under revision, with some historians suggesting Jacobs' "admirers have gone a little too far" and that her near-universal canonization deserves closer scrutiny.[3] Moses, once regarded as a dictatorial genius, has also been reconsidered; instead of a destroyer of neighborhoods, historian Kenneth T. Jackson suggests that Moses' remarkable intellect, near-mythic organizational abilities, and unflinching determination warrant him a certain appreciation. With much of his work surviving in greater New York, Jackson points to the durability and timelessness of Moses' designs and how his bridges, roads, and civic spaces continue to serve their intended purposes.[4]

Moses and Jacobs aside, Ehrenhalt and Ryan argue that renewal itself needs greater elasticity. Rather than being bracketed by bulldozers and housewives, it should consider infusions of human, cultural, and monetary capital. These infusions, from "Latino-ization" in southern California to "yuppie-fication" on the Lower East Side, belong to a *post-renewal* era defined less by federal and state actors and more by private developers and citizens.[5] Scholars have demonstrated post-renewal is shaped by a piecemeal process of rebuilding and reinvestment and though by no means realized without contestation and occasional vitriol, the post-renewal city tends to bask in Jacobs' afterglow. Ehrenhalt and Ryan, focusing on different aspects of post-renewal, contribute vital traffic to this debate.[6]

Ehrenhalt visits cities from Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Denver to New York, Atlanta, and Phoenix. He argues that U.S. cities, once bound to urban-suburban divisions abetted by deindustrialization and white flight, are now witnessing demographic "inversions" that resemble late-nineteenth century configurations of Paris or Vienna. While poor minorities and recent immigrants settle in peripheral inner rings and beyond, educated, culturally omnivorous, and mainly white residents abandon cul-de-sacs and malls and choose to live in or very near the center.[7] The latter group contains college graduates, knowledge workers, and empty-nesters while the former visits the center to work or recreate. At the same time, property values in central areas have risen, driving some long-time residents and businesses out and completing the reversal of traditional postwar settlement patterns. This indicates a *de-whitening* of the suburbs and a small though significant white migration

into central urban areas, a trend acknowledged by practitioners of suburban history.[8]

What accounts for the inversion? Ehrenhalt stresses that “inverters” crave the Jacobian “sidewalk ballet,” seek respite from the “real or virtual gatedness of suburban life,” and hope to find the diversity gentrification once eliminated. Consensus among many Millennials indicates that the suburban locales of their youth cannot provide the cultural opportunities found in cities. The inversion has also been aided by the 2008 economic recession, rising fuel costs, the spread of technology/social media, and growing preferences for living alone and/or in smaller spaces. In some cases, cities themselves facilitate inversion; marketing and branding strategies, or what urban theorist Edward Soja labels the “cultural fix,” portray cities as capitalizing on heritage, art, or the creation of experiences.[9]

Summoning Jacobs’ ghost, Ehrenhalt notes that today, nearly every urban planner tries to incorporate mixed-use zoning to regain the street life lost in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Within the inversion, renewal appears in forms ranging from restaurants and cafes, coffeehouses, music venues, and art galleries to residential units, factory lofts, expanded university campuses, and New Urbanist enclaves. But battles persist; in a revealing chapter about Houston, Ehrenhalt profiles state representative Garnet Coleman, who from his congressional perch is trying to prevent “shotgun property owners” and developers from compromising the Third Ward, a historically black neighborhood just south of central Houston.[10]

Though the inversion appears nationwide, Ehrenhalt shows certain cities fare better in receiving and sustaining the trend. Success and scope depends upon job opportunities, cost of living, infrastructure, and how cities transition from industrial to postindustrial economies. Whereas Philadelphia’s and Boston’s built environments are inherently well-suited for those who cherish a walking city, Phoenix, Dallas, and Charlotte spent millions on pedestrian-friendly amenities to satisfy “downtown longings.” With car-dependency long dictating their spatial arrangements, repopulating thinned-out downtowns emerged an article of faith in those cities.[11]

Ehrenhalt warns that inversion is at best partial and nowhere has it fully corrected problems of poverty, crime, or structural decay. Center City Philadelphia's pricey condos, chic restaurants, and designer boutiques resemble renewal on the surface but in a greater metropolitan context, represent a healthy core and "badly decaying periphery."<sup>[12]</sup> Despite investments in Phoenix (sports stadiums, office buildings, and a light rail system), a recent poll revealed that thirty per cent of young Phoenicians felt their downtown provided little "twenty four/seven energy...or great food."<sup>[13]</sup> Nationally, an oversupply of new urban housing has trumped concerns about unmet demand, leading the author to conclude that the inversion is by no means a mass migration. The rapid spread of social media may obviate Millennials' need to decide on an urban, suburban, or even exurban base. Given both the potential and limitations of the inversion, Ehrenhalt's parting query calls on Jacobs: will the inversion "bring about the return" of the walking city or will technology substitute "regular social contact?" His answer seems ominous: with the proliferation of technology, "it hardly matters where they [Millennials] live."<sup>[14]</sup>

In *Design after Decline*, Ryan notes that urban renewal's demise brought both relief and disillusionment. Relief because it "treated existing neighborhoods with great brutality, and disillusionment because these developments also projected a vision of the future that was nothing if not optimistic." While recognizing the Moses-Jacobs polarity, he argues that renewal's demise had "no single actor to blame." This is not unfounded, as Ryan's second chapter measures and neatly summarizes the "sobering failure" of forty years of renewal concurrent with population loss in the nation's ten largest cities.<sup>[15]</sup> Though Boston and San Francisco could gloat about early post-renewal successes (Faneuil Hall and Ghirardelli Square, respectively) *Design after Decline* centers on Philadelphia and Detroit, two shrinking cities "left adrift" after urban renewal departed. Ryan's post-renewal actors are not the creative class, but mayors, architects, private developers, and bank presidents eager to transform the city. In a complicated and at times corrupt nexus, these actors heralded the post-renewal era and were determined not to repeat the mistakes of previous generations.

How were those mistakes avoided? Instead of *Plan de Voisin*-inspired housing or Futurama expressways, Ryan argues that renewal after 1970

contained neither brutality nor optimism. Projects such as Detroit's Victoria Park and Philadelphia's Poplar Houses were designed as small-scale, patchwork "subway suburbs" and emerged as islands in oceans of urban ruin.[16] Homes were built on small grassy lots, beset with picket fences and driveways, and contoured in curvilinear grids similar to suburban neighborhoods. Many residents were happy in homes they desired and found stable. Brutality was absent, for these developments did not resemble Le Corbusier's *zeilenbau* superblocks.[17] Instead, low-slung ranch and row house designs maintained degrees of human-scale, allowing common spaces between them to appear less forbidding. Lack of optimism is a trickier claim to make, for Ryan fails to include voices and actions of those who resided in these developments or how they responded to vestiges of middle-class suburbia in the city. In a material sense, Victoria Park and Poplar provided something better than the dilapidated structures on the perimeter. Where Ryan finds pessimism is not among residents, but in the germination and long-term effects of the projects themselves; the architecture lacked any real innovation, commercial establishments were not permitted within them, surrounding areas tended to devalue, and with "reductive strategies" dominating post-renewal, ambition and sensitivity had flown out the window.[18]

Ryan believes that post-renewal still has a long way to go.[19] As evidenced by projects in Detroit and Philadelphia, it has been plagued by glacial inaction, lack of communication between residents and planners, a deadened utopian spirit, and apathy among politicians and developers to remedy vacant lots and decrepit building stock. Ryan advances several solutions. Via "palliative planning," cities should take action even if full recovery is unlikely and that through "interventionist policy," the decentralized actions of previous generations would yield to more focused, centralized proposals. Also, residents, those most affected by post-renewal, need to be empowered by (if not directly brought into) decision-making. Finally, post-renewal should adhere to a block-by-block sensibility. With large-scale clearance dead Ryan posits that shrinking cities, though always incomplete and in flux, represent the "richest opportunities" for urban designers. As an exemplar of this "social urbanism," Ryan cites Sergio Fajardo's mayoral administration (2003-2007) in Medellín, Colombia. In less than three years, Fajardo and his coterie of planners and advisers built or renovated libraries, schools,

police stations, enterprise centers, and linkages between low-income areas and the city's metro system. These initiatives comprised an integrated urban project to benefit poorer districts. Yet Latin America, with its deep traditions of statism, is not the United States, where such actors have been pushed to the margins when it comes to post-renewal.

Ryan's conclusion imagines post-renewal into the mid-twenty first century. In 2012, social urbanism in Philadelphia and Detroit required significant financial participation from the state, as both cities were still repaying bonds from the demolition of abandoned structures. Private-sector renewal continued in affluent areas, for municipal governments prohibited the use of federal/state subsidies for housing other than for those with low- to moderate-incomes. Home designs were cutting-edge, employing lower-cost green and sustainable architecture and materials. By 2050, central neighborhoods would still experience the "inversion"—though some peripheral areas remained neglected—but new low- and moderate-income housing would be built with higher density along selected blocks and corridors, creating a more polycentric city. By 2060, Ryan supposes that shrinking cities would see their hemorrhaging stopped by considerate, democratic development. Yet optimistically predicting the future in Detroit and Philadelphia seems more a game of chance than a quantifiable undertaking.

Despite claims about inverters or more thoughtful planning initiatives, both Ehrenhalt and Ryan suggest that cities will always contain pockets of vacancy and vitality. For several decades, scholars lamented the decline of urban America, pondered the causalities of riots, deindustrialization, and capital flight, struggled with questions about reusing obsolete architecture, and even debated the relevance of cities.<sup>[20]</sup> Their conclusions tended to depress, sadden, and sketch out little hope; if American cities didn't opt for what Joel Kotkin terms the "glamor zone" approach or appeal to the creative class, they would shrink until the last vestiges of better days disappeared.<sup>[21]</sup> Quick-fix schemes such as casino gaming or sports venues, while briefly delivering suburbanites into town, failed to create sustained reinvestment in or reengagement with the city. Here, Ehrenhalt and Ryan enliven the debate: urban landscapes, if they are to become healthy and vibrant, require permanent residency, commercial invigoration, sound planning and management, reliable infrastructure, cultural offerings, and a pronounced degree of safety.



Amenities are only half the battle, for the psychological distaste many Americans possess about their cities needs to dissipate. As Ehrenhalt states, there is no abandonment of the suburbs in progress nor, as Ryan notes, is a purely democratic post-renewal future certain to take hold. Cities, despite their appeal, still face problems that previous generations hoped to escape. In the post-renewal age, as examined via demographics in *The Great Inversion* and policy making in *Design after Decline*, the polarity of the Moses-Jacobs feud now is subjected to multi-polar debates about the future of the American metropolis.

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[1] Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer: a critical analysis of urban renewal, 1949-1962* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Anthony Flint, *Wrestling with Moses: how Jane Jacobs took on New York's master builder and transformed the American City* (New York: Random House, 2009); Rebecca Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); Sam Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: the rise and fall of urban renewal in Cold War New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Roger Biles, *The Fate of Cities: urban America and the federal government, 1945-2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011); Raymond A. Mohl, "Stop the Road: freeway revolts in American cities," *Journal of Urban History* 30 (July 2004): 674-706; Robert O. Self, "The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn," *American Historical Review* 117 (Oct.2012): 1257-1258; Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the future of the American city* (New York: Knopf, 2012); and Brent D. Ryan, *Design after Decline: how America rebuilds shrinking cities* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[2] Ehrenhalt, 37; Ryan, 35.

[3] Richard White, "Jane Jacobs and Toronto, 1968-1978," *Journal of Planning History* 114 (March 2011): 114-138, 115; Max Page and Timothy Mennel, eds., *Reconsidering Jane Jacobs* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2011).

[4] Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Kenneth T. Jackson, “Robert Moses and the rise of New York: the power broker in perspective,” in Hillary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: the transformation of New York* (New York: Norton, 2007): 67-71. Other notable planners of the period, such as Philadelphia’s Edmund Bacon and Boston’s Edward J. Logue, have also received reconsideration; see Scott Knowles, ed., *Imagining Philadelphia: Edmund Bacon and the future of the city* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America’s Cities: Ed Logue and the struggle to renew urban America in the suburban age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

[5] Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos reinvent the U.S. City* (New York: Verso, 2001); and Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: culture, real estate, and resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[6] Alexander Von Hoffman, *House By House, Block by Block: the rebirth of America’s urban neighborhoods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Richard D. Lloyd, *Neo-bohemia: art and commerce in the postindustrial city* (New York: Routledge, 2006); David Grazian, *On the Make: the hustle of urban nightlife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Derek S. Hyra, *The New Urban Renewal: the economic transformation of Harlem and Bronzeville* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: the death and life of authentic urban places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: gentrification and the search for authenticity in postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: race and civility in everyday life* (New York: Norton, 2011).

[7] Ehrenhalt, 111; Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 46-48; Bernadette Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: inner-ring suburbs of the metropolitan United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

[8] Peter Siskind, “Reshaping the American Dream: immigrants, ethnic minorities, and the politics of the new suburbs,” in Kevin M. Kruse and

Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Matthew Lassiter and Christopher Niedt, "Suburban diversity in postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 39 (Jan.2013): 3-14.

[9] Edward Soja, "Regional urbanization and the end of the metropolis era," in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds., *The New Blackwell Companion to the City* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011): 679-689; Ehrenhalt, 162.

[10] Ehrenhalt, 8-9; Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: the extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 5; Avi Friedman, *Peeking Through the Keyhole: the evolution of North American homes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: how a city in crisis was sold to the world* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Dennis R. Judd and Susan Fainstein, eds., *The Tourist City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[11] Ehrenhalt, 184-186; William Graves and Heather A. Smith, eds., *Charlotte, NC: the global evolution of a new South city* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Andrew Ross, *Bird on Fire: lessons from the world's least sustainable city* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

[12] Ehrenhalt, 137.

[13] Ehrenhalt, 202.

[14] Ibid, 235.

[15] Ryan, 40.

[16] Robert A.M. Stern, "Subway Suburb," in John Montague Massengale, ed., *The Anglo-American Suburb* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

[17] Ryan, 138-139.

[18] Ibid, 178-179.

[19] For works that consider post-renewal debates and projects, see Nicholas Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy: 1960s new towns and the transformation of the American dream* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001); Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: the rise, fall, and*

*resurrection of an American city* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); Jon C. Teaford, *The Metropolitan Revolution: the rise of post-urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); and Paul L. Knox, *Metroburbia, USA* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

[20] Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Steven C. High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: the landscape and memory of deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: IRL Press, 2007).

[21] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: race and inequality in postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's seventy-year quest for cheap labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Rebecca Solnit, *Hollow City: the siege of San Francisco and the crisis of American urbanism* (New York: Verso, 2000); Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the fate of urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Howard Gillette, *Camden after the Fall: decline and renewal in a postindustrial city* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); James Wolfinger, *Philadelphia Divided: race and politics in the city of brotherly love* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Joel Kotkin, *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).



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