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Berkeley Planning Journal

Title

Regenerating Older Suburbs Edited by Richard B. Peiser and Adrienne Schmitz

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/71n9h2tz>

Journal

Berkeley Planning Journal, 21(1)

ISSN

1047-5192

Author

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Publication Date

2008

DOI

10.5070/BP321112740

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEW

Regenerating Older Suburbs

Edited by Richard B. Peiser and Adrienne Schmitz

Urban Land Institute, 2007, 217 pages

Reviewed by Anh Nguyen

Regenerating Older Suburbs is a compilation of articles written by academics and practitioners in design, planning, and real estate development. The primary objective of the book is to propose a set of guidelines on improving public private partnerships aimed at regenerating older inner-ring suburbs. The editors posit that since the 1960s there has been much effort and concentration of resources towards the renewal of inner-city neighborhoods, and a general neglect for improving decaying older suburban neighborhoods at the same time.

The book highlights 12 case studies from around the world. The case studies were selected for their range in geographical location as well as their variety in income statistics. The authors claim that each one of these cases presents a unique set of contextual conditions with correspondingly different levels and types of public-private partnerships. They insist that this wide array in the types of projects is necessary, as different factors are important for different cities and suburbs. The book hinges on the argument that redevelopment occurs spontaneously in wealthier neighborhoods where there is less financial risk yet larger profit margins. Conversely, economically depressed inner-cities attract government sponsored redevelopment efforts and therefore do not substantially benefit from further study and analysis. New York City's Harlem is provided as an example of the latter point.

Architecture professor Richard Sommer writes a chapter on the fundamentals of urban design, as if to prepare the reader for the case studies in the second part of the book. Sommer points out two main tenets of urban design: to conceive of new relationships between existing parts of suburb that are too isolated from one another and the rest of the city and to "reconceive" the nature of the parts themselves. By way of conclusion, the editors comment on the ideal role of the public sector. The public sector can create nodes of development activity at strategic locations so as to generate buzz for development and thereby spur additional investment by private developers. The public sector also plays an important role in providing leadership in the development process.

However, investment in the urban fringes comes at a cost to worthy central city investment, detracting from initiatives which might be directed towards the development of urban infill sites. Although the authors recognize this problem, they claim that central city renewal has had its time in the sun and now is the time for older suburbs. Based on the title of the book and the general high-quality of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) magazine, I expected to find projects which integrated innovative uses of green technologies and creative use of spaces in such a way that enriches the urban fabric of old and decaying suburbs. I was left feeling unsatisfied with the quality and content of the case studies and the book overall.

The book addresses transportation infrastructure in only a marginal way. Yet, when discussing suburb versus inner-city investment, transportation should take center stage. Similarly, the design principles provided tell us about the look and feel of a section of street adjoining the proposed commercial development, but not the overall flow and volume of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Also absent is any substantive discourse on green development technologies and the environmental sustainability of projects. I expected ULI to be substantively engaged in the discussion and I would suggest, "show me the Green."

In the final analysis, the book was neither thought provoking nor innovative. Where it lacks in analysis, it does not compensate with inspiration. It is a collection of articles from ULI magazines, shiny covers and pretty pictures; though I would add that the newspapers often publish more appealing GIS maps than those found in this book. The book has fluff but not insightful. As I was reading the book I was constantly nagged with the question of who their target audience was. My first and final impression of the book is that it tries to engage such a wide audience that it ends up minimally appealing to a developers who want to learn a little about planning and planners who want to learn a little about development. It is a book that tries to do too much in such a small amount of pages. Sadly, in its attempts to please so many people, the book fails to please this student of planning and architecture.