THE ABCs OF URBAN REVITALIZATION

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abandonment/blight: While abandoned or blighted properties may appear to be the antithesis of urban revitalization, they are in fact necessary preconditions: creating a situation in which investments by real estate and finance capital can produce profitable returns.1

artists: A community of artists can be instrumental in the revitalization of a city, adding energy, expression, and beauty to the environment. Artists can also play an important role in the process of gentrification by colonizing deteriorated areas where they find affordable live/work spaces and transforming them into fashionable neighborhoods that attract investors and businesses.2

authenticity: For a city to be competitive, it must emphasize and celebrate those characteristics which make it "unique" and "real." Claims of authenticity can be made for cultural, historical, or geographical features that are exclusively available in that city, such as regional cuisine, historical landmarks, or access to the waterfront. Celebrating authenticity is a smart and effective place-making strategy.3

beautification: The aesthetic improvement of the pedestrian landscape; often involving new sidewalks, street lamps, planters, newspaper box corrals, and the removal of graffiti and illegally posted fliers.4

brownfields: Vacant industrial and commercial properties where redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination caused by past activities. Brave developers with the vision to intervene at these sites can turn eyesores into engines of economic rebirth.5

creative class: As Richard Florida argues in his influential book, The Rise of the Creative Class, attracting and retaining workers in knowledge-based fields such as writers, graphic designers, computer programmers, and artists is a key factor for the growth and economic development of cities in the post-industrial era.6

culture: In many ways, culture can be a catalyst for urban revitalization. Cultural facilities such as museums, art galleries, theaters, and academic institutions draw people to the city and enhance the urban experience with beauty, sophistication, lively performances, and radical ideas. Supporting cultural initiatives is also an easy and inexpensive way for private interests to secure their investments in real estate and business while presenting themselves as philanthropists. One creative approach is to convert under-utilized or abandoned buildings into galleries and artist's studios. This can be done at a low cost and will in turn generate a hip and contemporary atmosphere in the surrounding areas. Cultural development will increase property values and stimulate economic growth by signifying an active, thriving city.7

diversity: In one of the classic texts on urban renewal, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs champions diversity as the essence of a vibrant and successful city. Against the homogeneity and conformity of modernist architecture and urban planning, Jacobs argues for ethnic and cultural diversity; mixed-use commercial/residential streetscapes; a combination of old and new architecture; intimate, walkable neighborhoods that encourage spontaneous interaction; and a heterogeneous range of retailers.8

experience economy: In their provocative book, The Experience Economy, Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore identify a new paradigm of production in which the manipulation of affect and sensation becomes central to the profitable business. Since cities increasingly operate like businesses—competing for residents, investors, and consumers—they can benefit from the application of these principles.9

festivals: Under most circumstances, large masses of people in public spaces present a danger to authorities, as they are unpredictable and potentially destructive. However, in a controlled situation this mass can be mobilized to generate great profits. Festivals function this way while also promoting a celebration of community.10

expressways: A product of the post-war period when many cities experienced conflicts between different populations, expressways were constructed to serve a dual function: they provide a direct route for cars to travel between the suburbs and the downtown business and commercial districts while bypassing dangerous slums and act as a physical barrier that further enforces these social boundaries, discouraging the poor from venturing into the revitalized center of the city.11

gated communities: Driven by the legitimate fear of violent crime and burglary, many urbanites choose to live in luxurious gated communities designed to keep undesirable populations out. These communities offer their residents a comforting sense of security with amenities such as high perimeter walls, surveillance cameras, and armed guards.12

green space: A major factor for families and young people searching for a place to live is access to green space. Cities must make efforts to accommodate the active lifestyles of these critical markets or they will be lost to the suburbs.12

historic preservation: Historic buildings and monuments give cities a sense of heritage, identity, and prestige. We must therefore do all we can to preserve these landmarks for the appreciation of citizens, tourists, and future generations. Historic preservation is a sound economic strategy that also promotes civic pride.13

homeless: The presence of homeless people in our cities is an unattractive and persistent problem for revitalization efforts. No respectable person wants to live, work, shop, or vacation in a city filled with vagrants sleeping on benches, urinating in public, and aggressively panhandling for money. The public should be encouraged to resist the compassionate impulse to give to panhandlers, as it will only perpetuate the problem.
and enable drug-addictions. Instead, cities should pass legislation that criminalizes panhandling and camping in public to get the homeless off our streets and away from businesses.

**image:** One of the most crucial aspects of an urban revitalization campaign is the cultivation and promotion of a positive image of the city. Cities must aggressively counter negative representations with savvy marketing and public relations strategies aimed at administering positive public perception.

**jail/prison:** With massive unemployment in our inner-cities creating a surplus population of poor young people with no productive outlet, jails and prisons take on a new function in relation to revitalization: they not only incarcerate dangerous criminals, but also manage and contain this potentially explosive class that threatens the stability of city life.

**kid-friendly:** While attracting young adults is a top priority for growing cities, this group alone will not support a thriving economy. The city depends on the patronage of families for survival and must therefore promote a kid-friendly image of safety and fun.

**litter:** A clean downtown evokes a sense of pride and safety for those who live, work, and play there. Unfortunately, litter remains an unglamorous feature of many cities. To combat this problem, teams of street-sweepers should be assembled that exploit the no-cost labor provided by the criminal justice system. This solution enhances the appearance of the pedestrian landscape while simultaneously teaching criminals the value of community service.

**main streets:** As an alternative to the predictable homogeneity of malls and big-box retailers, many consumers desire a more personal and authentic shopping experience. Downtown commercial districts should recognize this trend and embrace their own distinctive regional architecture and unique, independently owned local establishments.

**mixed-use:** Many young urbanites want to live in dynamic mixed-use communities that combine office, retail, and residential spaces within a safe and convenient village-like environment. Such accommodations are increasingly in demand as traditional distinctions between “work” and “life” become blurred through liberating advances in communications technology.

**neighborhood branding:** For a neighborhood to attract residents, investors, businesses, and consumers it must establish a unique identity that distinguishes it from other parts of the city. One of the easiest and most effective ways to do this is by inventing a catchy name or slogan for the area. Advertising this name or slogan on banners and billboards hung throughout the neighborhood will create a buzz, suggesting that something exciting is happening there.

**outdoor dining:** Outdoor dining enhances the quality of urban life, creating a “café culture” which projects an ambience of affluence and conviviality onto public spaces. The presence of outdoor diners also facilitates a form of casual surveillance that discourages street crimes by producing what Oscar Newman calls “defensible space.”

**poverty:** Because the elimination of poverty in our cities would require a revolutionary restructuring of society that no business leaders or government officials are prepared to undertake, a policy of social exclusion and spatial containment is recommended to manage this unsightly problem.

**restrooms:** Public restrooms are often dangerous places that attract forms of deviant behavior such as drug-use and prostitution. Once a central part of urban life, believed by social reformers like Frederick Law Olmsted to promote cleanliness and discipline, these facilities have become obsolete in the revitalized city.

**Starbucks:** The fast-growing coffeehouse chain has become synonymous with the sophisticated urban lifestyle. An essential ingredient in the recipe for revitalization, Starbucks is a “must-have” amenity for upwardly mobile urbanites.

**tolerance:** Cities must position themselves as inclusive and tolerant places where alternative lifestyles are welcome. By embracing difference and transgression they can gain a progressive edge and become more exciting places to live, work, and play.

**tourism:** Many North American cities have experienced significant economic decline in recent decades as industrial manufacturing jobs moved overseas in search of cheap labor. In response to this loss, some cities have reinvented themselves as centers for leisure, recreation, and entertainment by building convention centers, luxury hotels, sports stadiums, shopping malls, aquariums, and themed restaurants. These attractions not only draw visitors to the city, but also generate rewarding new jobs and additional tax revenues that benefit the entire community.

**urban renaissance:** The rebirth of a culturally and economically depressed city. More than just an improvement that can be measured in statistical or economic terms, an urban renaissance is a shared ideology of progress and success that transforms the way a city sees itself... and the way it is seen by others.

**video patrol:** A network of exterior surveillance cameras used to make citizens feel safe, deter crime, and serve as an investigative tool. Studies show that high visibility increases the efficacy of video patrol as a crime deterrent by raising awareness of police power and making individuals internalize the laws and codes that govern behavior in public spaces.

**white-flight:** The mass exodus of white middle-class residents from U.S. cities during the post-war period. White-flight was primarily attributed to an increased fear of crime and racial tension that followed the immigration of lower-income African Americans into urban centers. Ever since, cities have struggled to bring back this critical demographic from the safety and comfort of the suburbs.

**youth:** The cities that are branded as “Cool-Towns” and “Talent-Centers” will be best positioned to attract and retain the valuable youth market, a key growth factor.

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2 Gary O. Larson, American Canvass, National Endowment for the Arts, 1997. See in particular, Mary Anne Mears’ comments on the relationship between artists and urban revitalization in Baltimore, quoted on pages 128-9.


4 See The Downtown Partnership of Baltimore’s “ Beautification Initiative” at http://www.godowntownbaltimore.com/clean_beautification_initiative.html

5 Steve Johnson, EPA Administrator, quoted at www.epa.gov/region4/waste

The Downtown Partnership of Baltimore recently introduced legislation that criminalizes panhandling in Baltimore at night. See http://www.godowntownbaltimore.com/clean_panhandling.html


For more information on the prison industrial complex, see http://www.criticalresistance.org

The Downtown Partnership of Baltimore’s team of “Clean Sweep Ambassadors” benefits from the City’s Community Service Program, which “provides workers to the Clean Team as a supplemental, no cost source of manpower.” See http://www.godowntownbaltimore.com/clean_safe_team.html


For several examples of dynamic mixed-use development projects in Baltimore, see www.harboreast.com, village-lofts.com, and Twelve09Living.com


http://www.godowntownbaltimore.com/clean_video_patrol.html

http://www.cooltownstudios.com

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