THE REINTEGRATION OF THE CITY

An urban design proposal for the
City of Newburgh New York

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In recent decades most older American cities suffered a dramatic decline. The quality of urban fabric diminished; as a result many of the institutions which comprised the core of American cities and American culture faded, failed, or fled. Urban blight typically began at a tiny spot and, like a bruise on an apple, spread outward. Sometimes it became so pervasive that entire urban sectors were deemed unsalvageable. When we could no longer ignore these areas they were routinely ignited or bulldozed. Subsequent efforts at revitalization were often proposed, sometimes executed, but rarely successful.

A new vitality in the urban center suggests that areas where the urban fabric collapsed might at last become viable parts of the city. How may the city reclaim these so-called "bombed-out" sectors? What strategies should guide redevelopment of such areas? To what extent can past patterns be revived, and where must new patterns be introduced? When is it feasible to create a new locus, and when is it wiser to extend the influence of adjacent (surviving) centers into the area of blight?

These issues are crystallized in the present state
of Newburgh, New York (pop. 24,000, once 32,000). The city suffered a classic rustbelt collapse: loss of urban vitality, white flight, poverty, crime, and despair. By 1969 Newburgh took drastic action: a new federal "urban renewal" program funded the swift condemnation, acquisition, and clearance of most of its dilapidated downtown, the land along the Hudson river from which the city grew.

Developers were expected to leap at the potential of the empty riverfront property; they did not. Besides one superblock of clustered public housing, the land remains mostly fallow, a testament to the nadir of a once-thriving city. Meanwhile Newburgh's commercial heart fled inland, eventually abandoning the city entirely in favor of adjacent suburbia.

Despite this grim sequence of events there are reasons to expect improvement. Area land values have skyrocketed in the past five years; riverfront land has grown particularly scarce. Adjoining the empty zone, an historical district has been established and is experiencing a dramatic resurgence. The park Olmsted designed here is also being rehabilitated. These improvements have spurred new interest in riverfront development. A condominium project was built at the
fringe of the fallow zone in 1980. Townhouses, a marina, and a regional bank headquarters are under construction. There are proposals to convert closed factories into condominiums.

In his *A Theory of Good City Form*, Kevin Lynch enumerates three approaches which have guided the study of urban design: planning, functional, and normative theories. Planning theory focuses on the process and politics of decision-making and upon the societal concentrations of power which allow their implementation. Functional theories seek a correlation between the way a city operates and the forms it employs. Normative theories seek an active awareness of the value-systems upon which our cities are based.

Lynch recognizes that branches of this triad must support one another, but he focuses on normative theory. Rather than attempt a positivistic, objective approach, he recognizes the inevitability of human value-systems informing all decisions regarding urban form. Lynch finds planning and functional theories insufficient: in and of themselves they fail to engender good city form.

Lynch's indictment of planning and functional theory is grounded in Jane Jacobs' writing. In her *The
Death and Life of Great American Cities, she traces a continual historical trend in modern urban planning that Lynch calls a disregard for (or an ignorance of) underlying value-systems. Organization, consolidation, zoning, and categorization of use, concepts which have consistently informed city theorists, were usually advanced as objective goals. Hence they mask the values these concepts embody: tidiness over diversity, clarity over multiplicity, division over interpenetration, unity over plurality.

Jacobs' proposals are primarily tactics; she stresses diversity and close-grained, dense interpenetration of forms and uses. She identifies successful interventions as small-scale, almost ad-hoc, with order and clarity suggested by emphasis and suggestion rather than rigor. These goals are not achievable solely at the scale of the comprehensive plan and with only the tools of zoning.

Lynch shares Jacobs' concerns, but he responds to them not with tactics but with strategies: a set of "performance dimensions". These dimensions (vitality, sense, fit, access, etc.) are generalizations about the relationships of pluralistic values with urban form. In keeping these dimensions general Lynch escapes
performance characteristics, which risk reoccurring the tyrannies and absolutism of traditional planning. But Lynch's generality also sacrifices applicability in this case, as is evidenced in his own test of these ideas. He can draw no insight from his dimensions with which to establish normative criteria for optimal city size.

There seem as many theories of urban form as there are theorists. Jacobs and Lynch share a concern for an awareness of the values that motivate decisions regrading urban form. But their responses to that concern are wholly divergent: specificity and particularity in one case, universality and generality in the other. This divergence and others suggests that there may not be a theory which is at once general enough to apply to any city and specific enough to guide decisions about a particular city.

Cities may well be as complex and diverse as people. We have no universal consensus on how human beings work; why then should we expect universal theory for our cities? An alternate approach would be to attempt as complete as possible an understanding of a particular city to inform our decisions about that city. The history and logic of a city may be unique;
thus its form and design criteria may be correspondingly individual. There are still valid reasons to study many cities and many general theories: there are certainly analogous conditions among different cities. There may also be more complete theories of particular components of cities in general. But the general must often yield to the specific, and only when the analogy between cities is strong is it logical to apply the solution for the one to the problem of the next.

Ultimately, then, Newburgh itself is the first resource; its history and its present will directly inform its future patterns. Secondly, cities in the vicinity, particularly those which share the Hudson as a principal influence on their form and history, and other rustbelt cities which share common social and economic patterns, are fertile grounds for study. Lastly, there is still much to be gained from the continuing attempts at a general theory of cities and urban forms, regardless of their degree of universality and direct applicability.

There is a real opportunity in Newburgh today: a unique site in an urban context amid a real estate boom. The question is not whether redevelopment will
occur, but how: it has finally begun. Undirected, it will surgically dissociate itself from the remaining urban fabric and an antiurban noose will finally complete its heretofore unfinished circuit around Newburgh. The results of such dissociation would be catastrophic and permanent: Newburgh's recent past is testimony to the blunder this has proved.

The Hudson is more than just the historical eastern boundary to a city like Newburgh: it is its reason for existence. It was the initial link with the rest of civilization, the heart of commerce, the communicative link with neighbors north and south. The river's edge was the point of social and economic interface of all strata of Newburgh's population. The urban morphology of the city reflects this life-force relationship with the river. The Hudson serves, for example, as visual terminus for each east-west street as it scales the slopes along the river's edge; many north-south streets skirt across the face of these slopes and are thus punctuated with vistas of the river at each intersection.

It is undeniable that the passage of time has robbed the river of many of its associations with the everyday life of the city. It no longer serves as the
primary link or the primary thoroughfare (and has not
for over a century, since the advent of the railroad).
Nor is it the primary arrival point for newcomers, nor
the lifeblood of shipbuilding and even whaling that it
once was. The visual link remains inescapable, of
course, but the functional links have ebbed. Clearing
away the dilapidation was the 1960's response; its
result was a surgical separation of the city on the
hill from the river below. That in turn spurred the
rest of the city to decline.

The strategy that can save Newburgh is one which
reunites it with its reason for being. Physically, of
course, the city must reextend its urban pattern back
down to the water's edge, but this in itself is
insufficient. Economic uses which once provided
close-grained, small-scaled, vibrant diversity have
left; new uses compatible with urban density and scale
must be encouraged. New uses must provide for use by
all sectors of the city's populace once again, or any
proposal will fail to generate the civic consensus
essential to its realization. And finally, the
historical connection of river to city must once again
be clear to inhabitants and visitors alike.

Undirected redevelopment would serve only to fill
the physical gap between the city and its river. It is likely to segregate itself from the city in an attempt to avoid the urban problems Newburgh faces. In so doing, it will follow the suburban model of disassociated pieces along transportation routes. Urbanistically, it will not be a part of the fabric at all. Newburgh and its reason-for-being would be more than just separated; the two would be permanently obstructed.

Properly directed, the riverfront can once more integrate the parts and populace of the disassociated city of today. The visitor, the inhabitant, the shopper, and the businessperson can be directed to understand the new development as a part of Newburgh, and only then would revitalization of the waterfront have an opportunity to spur the revitalization of the remainder of the city. Newburgh must demand more than the refurbishment of its waterfront: it requires a social, economic, cultural, and historical self-reintegration.