THE ADRR ADVISORY BOARD EMAIL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION: No 2

Is Bringing in a Lot of Affluent Residents the Right Way to Revitalize a Neighborhood? How Much Should Needs and Concerns of Existing Residents Be Considered and Responded to?

Commentators:, Mike Berne, Dave Feehan, Richard Florida, Paul Levy, Andrew Manshel , and David Milder.
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Manshel. On Feb 23, 2021, Andrew posted this link https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56048812 to an article titled: "Over-The-Rhine: Is this a model for urban renewal or a warning sign?" He then noted: "This story is exactly the problem we're facing. Where is the data on displacement? Where is the actual evidence of anyone being harmed by the most remarkable revitalization effort in the country?"

Milder: "Andy, when I only see high price units going in I am not as confident as you about no displacement or no lack of attention to local needs. I ABSOLUTELY DO NOT FIND CREDIBLE AN ASSUMPTION THAT AFFORDABLE UNITS WILL BE PROVIDED BY TRICKLE DOWN MECHANISMS. Moreover, it's politically insane to do that — what better proof that only the privileged are being served when only high priced, unaffordable units are seen being produced? The locals get served by putative indirect means, but the newcomers get served by direct observable means. The locals use their eyes, not trained analytical skills to discern impacts. And they feel they know what's happening in their neighborhoods a lot better than outside observers do.

I think those arguing against gentrification arguments will lose politically very often because of that.

Manshel: " How does new housing production at any price point affect existing residents?

Why do existing residents have a "right" to move into new developments? What is the source of that right? And why do they care -- THEY ALREADY LIVE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD. "

Florida: "This post caused a lot of debate when I wrote about it at CityLab." https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-31/zoning-reform-isn-t-a-silver-bullet-for-u-s-housing . The article's headlines read: "Does Upzoning Boost the Housing Supply and Lower Prices? Maybe Not. A new study of zoning changes in Chicago finds that they led to higher, not lower, local home prices, while having no discernible impact on local housing supply."

Manshel: “1. High rises don't make for great neighborhoods or great places. The best neighborhoods are made up of mid-rise MDUs (he said sitting on West End Avenue). Think Paris.

2. Only cities written about by Richard Florida have affordability crises. If Rich wrote about more places, prices would go down everywhere. In all seriousness, we need more cities with more great places -- more low price cities with the amenities and quality of life people are seeking.”

Manshel: “David, we live with a property system that has well defined rights. It allows people to buy and sell property.

It generally, DOES NOT give your neighbors the right to circumscribe how you use your property. That's how the system has worked for about 800 years.

As Borat would say, in socialist country, not so good.

Milder. “What if they are in substandard units? Or just want to be able get a better place, with affordably more features, and stay in their neighborhood?

And who has the right to say they have no rights? Your argument essentially boils down to financial might defines rights.

You note we live in a political system where social need and wants are supposedly responded to, and no rights in our system, to my knowledge, are absolute. Yes, people can buy and sell their properties, but according to rules. And even then, there are public takings, of which many downtown revitalization projects have depended. I doubt the developers of these projects were in modest income households, or even put much of their own money into the projects.

Berne: “I think that Andrew makes a good point and poses a legitimate question:

* All of these stories proceed along the same predictable path irrespective of whether or not there is any data to support the narrative. There is zero data in this BBC piece -- just a lot of anecdotes or, actually, just one anecdote from the head of a local advocacy group. There is a reference to one supposedly controversial development, but also, to the roughly 300 affordable units (20%) of the 1,500 units that 3CDC has developed (a pretty good %, all things considered). There is mention of a small grocer that was closed and a new one that opened a few blocks away -- a really dumpy, an undersized, outdated Kroger that was replaced by a larger, modern Kroger (and by the way, NO, not every neighborhood can have its own grocery store, not in the year 2020). And yet, what's the takeaway? Our cities are being given over to *them*.

* There is a philosophical question of whether anyone has an innate right to live where they do forever after. I would say, NO. Is that financial might makes right? Yes. Is there a better way? If so, please tell me what it is. To me, the churn of neighborhoods is ultimately good for regions, as they beget new stories of revival elsewhere (e.g. Brooklyn, from Manhattan; Oakland, from San Francisco; etc.). Now, this is admittedly a philosophical, and not an empathic, line of reasoning -- I did get my graduate degree in philosophy, after all -- and the reality is that such dislocation is extremely painful to individual households and businesses. I get it. But from what I have seen, most of what we try to do by way of mitigation makes things even worse in the aggregate (e.g. rent control).

Cincinnati does not strike me as a city that needs *more* affordable housing; rather, it could take all the market-rate that it can get, wherever it can get it. And while I agree with you, David, that trickle-down does little good for the renters next door who are ultimately priced out, basic math says that more tax revenue does have its upsides, for poor folks more generally. Which raises another philosophical question: what is good government? Is it being responsive to voters? Yes. But is it also thinking more broadly, about the good of the whole? The way we have it designed, the former takes precedence, but does Jeremy Bentham not deserve a seat at the table as well?

I am certainly open to a new approach, though.

Milder. ” Mike, as someone who also has a graduate degree in philosophy, I welcome the intrusion of a values discussion here since I recently came to the conclusion that they are slung around all the time in our field in a rather unnoticed and unconsidered way. What do we mean when we say a downtown is revitalized, or improved? Is it just better quality buildings? More fun things to do? Greater wealth? A better quality of life? If so, for whom? For property owners? For just those who live and work in the downtown? Or also for the residents in the rest of the city?

I do not think that the question of "is there a better way?” really answers the critique of the financial might makes right argument — indeed, it first has an implicit rejection of it, but then accepts our current inability to come up with a better way as a rational for acceptance. We accept not because its good but because we are incapable. So not only does might make right, but incompetence does too. But that also assumes that nothing can be done to mitigate the bad effects of the might makes right approach, and I don’t think that is credible. I think arriving at that point is not only analytically wrong, but morally wrong as well.

More firmly, I really like your statement that you are open to a new approach. So, let’s start thinking about that. Let me make few seemingly weird observations that got me going:

— Looking at politics it is often useful to look at who gets what, when and where? The benefits of revitalization projects are usually direct, and easily discernible for those who are financially well off, but indirect and less certain for those with less means

— Piketty's work plainly shows how advantageous being able to invest is
— I see no reason why there has to be such huge socio-economic churn in a revitalizing neighborhood that old residents cannot also share in some meaningful way TO THEM, NOT JUST WHAT SOME ANALYST COMES UP WITH. That's just good politics — and ethics. I really do not think that if we planned things right that would be hard to do. Here in Kew Gardens we have multi-million dollar homes, and far more modest homes and apartments. And the mix of races and ethnicities is large. I also lived in the 17th arrondissement in Paris, and there too there was a significant mix of income groups. I'm told that pre- WWII that was a characteristic of many major cities in Europe.
Curmudgeonly yours….

Berne. "I am curious, Richard: what do you say to the thesis that no matter what we do, superstar cities are always going to have an affordability problem? Take the Bay Area. Even if one were to wave a magic wand and suddenly have in place that "broad mix of strategies and solutions" of which you speak, would the housing there be "affordable" in the way that people here seem to be striving for? Not only do most superstar cities face significant physical barriers to expanding supply, but lots of people actually want to live there -- something which, I believe, will once again hold in the post-COVID era. I am typing this on my Berkeley, CA porch, in 76-degree weather -- in the middle of February. Climate change and intermittent smoke notwithstanding, that ain't changing anytime soon...

Which leads me to my second point. I have grown so tired of the constant drumbeat of stories about everyone -- people, employers, etc. -- fleeing the Bay Area because it is too expensive. Which brings to mind the famous Yogi Berra quote: "No one goes there anymore, it's too crowded." Cities and regions do not unravel because they are too expensive. Certain populations and industries might migrate elsewhere (though I am not yet convinced that that's actually happening or will happen with tech, where the agglomeration effect seems quite strong), but the local economy as a whole does not sink for that reason. Now, David, I know what you might be thinking now -- "no, Mike, they're not leaving because it is too expensive... they're leaving because it is such a mess." Well, I actually believe that to a certain extent, that's already baked in. No one moves to San Francisco thinking that it is going to be clean and pristine. Does anyone like smelling piss while walking down the street? No. But for a great many people, I am not sure if it is a deal-breaker. (And not for nothing, but did you notice that several of the high-profile individuals and companies "fleeing" California in recent months are, shall we say, ideologically misaligned with the state's left-wing politics? Peter Thiel? Elon Musk?)

Levy. "This is a great conversation, so excuse my glib remark, regarding Texas. I'm a confirmed old city (born in Newark NJ) east coast, walking and bike-riding urbanite (though married to an Angelina who is always trying to get me to retire to Marina Del Ray or Santa Monica) but I remember the first time I landed at an airport in Montana, we walked past the closed Hertz desk to our rental car sitting in the lot with the keys in the transmission with no one worrying whether anyone would steal it. No check out, no license confirmation. Got out on the open

road where the posted speed limit was somewhere between 75 and 80 MPH, and everyone was doing 90 and I remember having the heretical thought "America! The way it used it to be!" That is the appeal Texas. Go to Houston and there a few rules governing development. Go to Austin and they encourage development and have for the last decade enjoyed the fastest job growth of any American city. It's messy, bad urban design, bad for the environment, but don't under-estimate the appeal of "America! The way it used it to be!"

Feehan. I bring the perspective of a Midwesterner (growing up in Minneapolis) who has mostly lived in rust belt cities (Pittsburgh, Detroit, Kalamazoo) and midwestern smaller cities (Des Moines and Aberdeen.) I've worked for long periods in San Antonio, spent time in other client cities (offered a job in Santa Monica, another in Davis, and could have had the Denver job at one time.) I spend a fair amount of time in Brooklyn and still visit Pittsburgh regularly. So given that perspective, and a fair amount of international travel, I would make the following observations:

Pittsburgh is today better off for losing the steel industry and its 200,000. Jobs. As painful as it was, and it caused a diaspora of residents to the south, the city is better off than it would have been if it kept the steel industry. I could live very comfortably in the Pittsburgh of today.

My son and his family live in Brooklyn. My wife hates New York. It is a constant headache, just planning an ordinary trip. If you have kids, spontaneity is a luxury most families cannot afford. I handle the NY hassle much better than she does, but as I get older, I find Silver Spring offers a much better quality of life. I have a real downtown just minutes away. I have more museums, galleries and historic sites that almost any city - and much of it is free. The weather is more tolerable than northern cities, and while expensive, housing is not as expensive as New York or California. And if you know how to route yourself, traffic is not the challenge it is in either NYC or California. This week, it will be near 60 all week - in mid- February.

Most people can be relatively happy in Texas. I could live in San Antonio, or Austin, or even Fort Worth. But artists are moving from New York to Detroit and Pittsburgh for a reason, and finding what they need. Californians are moving to Boise and Boseman and Missoula for a reason, and finding what they need. If market forces or family reasons or jobs induce me to look elsewhere, thanks to Richard Florida, there is a "creative class" in Des Moines and Omaha and Oklahoma City, and Birmingham and Mobile.

Maybe I have what the Irish call "wandering feet." But I don't feel I have an inalienable right to a particular street or neighborhood. If I'm opposed to gentrification, I am a community organizer. In know how to fight with developers. (We just won such a fight in the campus district in Minneapolis.) So, David, enjoy Kew Gardens, Michael, enjoy Berkley, and Paul, enjoy Philadelphia. You've earned it. But don't think you would die in Boise, Missoula, or Nashville. You would all survive - and thrive - because of who you are.

Milder. I've lived in Gambier, Blanchester and Columbus in Ohio; Charlotte, NC: Ithaca, NY; Carnoustie and Dundee in Scotland; Paris, France, as well as NYC. I did often feel like I was dead in Blanchester, and back then, as if I was dying in Columbus. But recently I have told several friends and relatives that if I were younger I would leave NYC — it's overly dense for comfortable walking, commuting, and enjoying its far too crowded museums and parks (MoMA, MMoA, BP and CP can be packed to extreme unpleasantness, TS even more so). Its world class opera, ballet and symphonic assets are blasphemously ten-percenter expensive. (World class means local folks have a tough time getting in because of crowds and affordability – financial might makes right again, I guess.) I would perhaps go back to Charlotte, or chose Cincinnati or Cleveland, or maybe Portland ME, or Providence, RI, but some smaller major city.

Regardless of where I lived or where I live now or where I might prefer living, *I think the meaning of revitalizing a downtown or city or town and its policy implications have not been sufficiently thought through.* To my mind, this conversation about OTR shows that.