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Shrinking Cities as the Next Healthy Cities **Utilizing Vacancy to Create a Walkable City**

The shrinking cities that dot the post industrial landscape have acres upon acres of vacant land that pose both questions and creative solutions to the cities' urban revival. These expanses of vacant land provide fertile ground (pun!) for creative endeavors in urban planning.

Opportunities exist for these cities to reinvent themselves as healthy cities that forego the problems of congestion or urban sprawl seen in Atlanta and Phoenix and instead embrace the density and walkability representative of Boston and San Francisco.

Vacant land in shrinking cities are an asset that can be capitalized upon, if the shrinking city in question acts in a comprehensive and well planned manner. These empty areas provide shrinking cities with the opportunity to strengthen their economy using modern planning strategies like creating dense, mixed use neighborhoods, walkability, and urban greening.

Healthy City

The term "healthy city" is used often, but has become a catch-all term that is rarely defined. For this paper, I will use the definition found in a peer reviewed article that developed said definition through extensive reviews on the literature pertaining to healthy cities. The review found that there are a number of essential components to the healthy city (Rydin, 2012) :

Clean Water and Good Sanitation

Clean Air

Clean Land and Soil

Safe Homes

Secure Neighborhoods

Car – Independence

(Rydin, 2012)

The last characteristic, that of car-independence, implies that a city must have the infrastructure that allows its residents easy access to public transportation or allows them to easily walk to places of employment or retail (Rydin, 2012). Car – independence is interlinked with clean air, water, and soil since car congestion can lead to high levels of pollution. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, a healthy city is one that can reduce its pollution levels through the implementation of diverse modes of transportation, the facilitation of walkability, and the creation of dense neighborhoods that do not require a car-centric lifestyle.

Dense City

Urban planners and architects assert the importance of density in the urban fabric, and there are distinct lines between too dense and not dense enough. It is obvious that shrinking cities do not host an healthy density of housing and retail : vacant lots and neighborhoods make a vibrant street life non –existent. But, when cities are building comprehensive plans, the type of density that is attractive is an important characteristic to keep in mind. Llyod Alter for *The Guardian* notes that cities should be dense enough so as to have bustling, vibrant streets with retail, housing, and bike and mass transit infrastructure. But not so dense as to need towering high rises (where taking the stairs are improbable), subways, and expansive underground parking garages. The former type of density promotes social interaction and a sense of community. The latter obliterates it and resorts to anonymity (2014) . The former description of density – medium rise buildings, bike lanes, and mixed use districts is the type of density affordable by a shrinking city. Shrinking cities have the space to build mixed use neighborhoods that meet the needs of current residents and attract new ones, and these type of neighborhoods obviously less expensive and more self sustaining (through local business activity) than an anonymous, high density, high rise neighborhood.

Walk-able City

A great definition of walkability can be found in Southworth (2005) : “walkability is the extent to which the built environment supports and encourages walking by providing for pedestrian comfort and safety, connecting people with varied destinations within a reasonable amount of time and effort, and offering visual interest in journeys throughout the network” (p 248).

Although providing for pedestrian safety and installing quality, connected walking paths are tantamount to making a city walkable, the city must be interesting enough to walk through in order to truly attract pedestrians. Big box shopping malls and vast parking lots hide the social structure of a city, and make it un-enticing for the pedestrian. Cities that embrace mixed use commercial development, narrow streets, trees, and aesthetically pleasing elements will create areas that pedestrians want to walk through (Southworth, 2005). Aesthetically pleasing commercial districts with limited parking entice urban dwellers and even out of town suburbanites to partake in “urban recreation”: walking the streets to enjoy the ambiance and atmosphere of the restaurants and shops. Walking becomes the goal, instead of the means to an end.

Walkability has more importance and significance today than it did a decade ago, thanks to the interest by the millennial generation in vibrant, social neighborhoods . Today, persons in their twenties make up 13.7% of the vehicle miles driven by Americans, which is a drop from 20.8% in the late nineties (Speck, 2012). This millennial generation more highly values the amenities provided by urban areas, such as walkability and access to restaurants and shops.

A testimate to the lucrative and desirable nature of walkable neighborhoods is the price premium of the housing in these types of neighborhoods. Christopher Leinberger, the economist

at the Brookings Institute, found that even in the Detroit area, housing in the “walkable urbanism” areas fetched a 40% price premium over similar housing in suburban, car dependent areas. The premium for Seattle is 51%, in Denver it’s 150%, and in New York City it’s 200% (Speck, 2012).

Creating Walkability in a Shrinking City

Walkability can be difficult for a car – centric city to achieve given the fact retrofitting existing infrastructure and traffic patterns can be difficult if not impossible to accomplish. On top of that, car owners may resist changes in traffic patterns that would promote pedestrian and bicycle traffic flow and that would take space away for vehicle traffic. “While it is not impossible to modify existing street networks to serve pedestrians and to insert some density and mixed uses into low density cities, it will require imagination and persistence” (Southworth, 2005, 254).

Shrinking cities have to their advantage their copious amounts of vacant space that can be used to introduce new traffic patterns for pedestrians and bicyclists. Vast vacant space – especially rows of vacant lots – inhibits walkability because of the overwhelming scale, monotony, and abandoned feeling (Southworth, 2005).

Because the space exists, shrinking cities can be creative in introducing infill to economically viable areas and new street infrastructure that accommodates the pedestrian and the bicycle as well as the car. Walkable areas also accommodate the pedestrian by requiring fewer parking spaces and parking lots, which can consume large amounts of space – space that widens the street and negatively impacts walkability. Manville and Shoup (2005) argue that cities should adopt parking maximums, rather than parking minimums, in order to restrict the amounts

of these “featureless terrains” that alienate and pose hazards (moving cars) to pedestrians (p 242).

Strategies for Shrinking Cities

Because of the abundance yet lack of strong market demand for vacant lots, shrinking cities have an unprecedented opportunity to incorporate pedestrian friendly infrastructure and green space networks into the urban fabric (Cleveland Land Lab, 2008). Master Plans from both Cleveland and Detroit outline strategies for vacant lots, urban density, and walkability.

Re-densification

A critical element of city redevelopment that can be a precursor to urban infill is economic growth. The Detroit Master Plan notes that the City of Detroit has suffered population loss as a result of an economic downturn, and the city intends to stabilize its economy for its current residents. One of the city’s policy points in the plan is as follows: “enhance financial and technical assistance programs that support small business and neighborhood revitalization in the underserved areas” (Detroit Master Plan, 2009). Promoting small business in downtown and in surrounding neighborhoods can increase the mixed use nature of an area, increases the vitality and social structure, and promotes stability for the city, the local business owner, and even the patrons who have access to goods, services, and social interaction.

Physical density is tantamount to walkability, since pedestrians need to feel safe (eyes on the street) and interested (by the diverse sets of structures). Shrinking cities may use vacant land to develop economically promising areas into dense, mixed use neighborhoods. The Cleveland Master Plan lists 11 criteria points that can be used to determine if a vacant lot is viable for redevelopment. Many of these criteria points take into consideration whether a lot exists in a

developmentally viable area:

The Lot is a Part of a Land Bank Hold Area

Proximity to Schools and Public Buildings

Proximity to Core Development Areas

Cleveland's Master Plan notes two different strategies for vacant lots based on the neighborhood vacancy rate. In those neighborhoods that have just a smattering of vacant houses / lots in the neighborhood, possible and encouraged actions are lot consolidation and side yard expansion. These strategies involve having existing property owners take responsibility for and ownership of the former vacant lots, which are now maintained and placed back on the city's tax rolls (Cleveland Land Lab, 2008). However, when a majority of a neighborhood's lots are vacant, the city must assess the future viability of the neighborhood. If the lots in this type of neighborhood have strong development potential within the next 5 years (refer to points above), and if the property owner has the ability to maintain the lot's landscape, the city will place a holding strategy on that lot. Holding strategies include maintaining the structure on the lot, mowing the lawn, and planting trees and vegetation on the lot to shape the perception about the neighborhood and lot. The city wants to portray these areas as cared for and maintained, so as to prevent future vacancy and even crime (Cleveland Land Lab, 2008).

Detroit's Master Plan calls for interim uses for and adaptive reuse of vacant houses and lots (Detroit, 2009). As mentioned earlier, vacant lot development can enhance the feeling of density in a city and can promote the walkability of an area. Wide streets with vacant lots can dwarf a pedestrian and impart a feeling of unease and boredom, whereas maintained vacant structures and vacant lots with interim uses can help narrow a street (if even just by perception) and make a walk more interesting for a passing pedestrian.

Commuter Corridors

The Detroit Master Plan looks to incorporate diverse modes of transportation in the city – including greenways, bicycle paths, and sidewalks for pedestrians. The plan notes that a city with an auto-centric transportation system has limited potential for other modes of transportation, imparts limited mobility and connectivity for its residents, and suffers ecologically from vehicular pollutants (Detroit, 2009). Due to the high vacancy rate in Detroit, the city does not face as many infrastructure restrictions as would a dense city. The city has the space for the bike lanes, green ways, and sidewalks, and it even has the space to reimagine the traffic patterns in the city.

Green Space: Urban Forests / Farms / Parks

As mentioned earlier, Cleveland’s Master Plan looks to green space as a solution for vacancy. Trees can be used as a holding strategy for vacant lots, and urban farms, green infrastructure, urban gardens, and even forests can be installed to increase the density of a city, promote ecological services, and provide restorative areas for the residents (Cleveland Land Lab, 2008). Detroit also makes mention in its Master Plan a goal to transform vacant lots into community and school gardens and urban agriculture plots. The city would like to work with non-profits to develop an urban agriculture policy in the city, and it would even like to see the development of urban agri-business and agri-tourism (Detroit, 2009). Although green spaces are not necessarily structures, maintained green spaces like gardens and farms help to narrow the street and bring interesting elements to the neighborhood, both of which increase its walkability

Conclusion

In light of the abbreviated definition of a healthy city developed for this paper—a healthy city is one that can reduce its pollution levels through the implementation of diverse

modes of transportation, the facilitation of walkability, and the creation of dense neighborhoods that do not require a car-centric lifestyle — shrinking cities have the opportunity to fit that definition through the utilization of their abundance of vacant land in the development of dense, walkable neighborhoods. Cleveland and Detroit, and surely others, have incorporated these ideas into their master plans, and now it is only a matter of time, money, and effort before shrinking cities use their stock of land to attract new residents and economic growth.

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