

Reconsidering Rustbelt Revitalization

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Dieterich-Ward, Allen. *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 360 pp. \$39.95, ISBN 9780812247671.

Cowan, Aaron. *A Nice Place to Visit: Tourism and Urban Revitalization in the Postwar Rustbelt*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016. 236 pp. \$29.95, ISBN 9781439913468.

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Two recent books by Allen Dieterich-Ward and Aaron Cowan reappraise how actors in declining industrial cities worked to shape fates that have often been presented as preordained, even inevitable. These accounts reveal the nuanced ways in which local stakeholders negotiated the impact of structural economic shifts that reached far beyond city borders. To be sure, their successes were only partial. But the ways in which resident elites proactively collected financial, legislative, and electoral support while remaking the built environment are instructive. Their efforts remind us how critical policy and planning were in sustaining cities through difficult decades.

As structural and demographic shifts became apparent in the midst of the twentieth century, urban elites worked to assure the economic future of their cities by creating new revenue streams. Regardless of exact location, their courses of action bore some similarities. Changes to the urban environment were usually motivated by survival in the relatively near term, even as plans alluded to broader visions for the future. In addition, those modifications nearly always privileged the desires of middle-class residents or visitors while offering few provisions for working-class and poor populations. Lastly, revitalization efforts were supported by creative financing that combined public appropriations, bond issues, dedicated tax revenues, and private support in a multitude of ways.

Many of the redevelopment tools in these stories will be familiar: public-private partnerships, convention centers, stadiums, freeways, festival marketplaces, and brownfield redevelopment. Yet the regional and comparative accounts provided by Dieterich-Ward and Cowan enhance our understanding of how those tools were deployed with varying results depending on the particular local actors and geographic setting.

These books incorporate insights from several areas of planning history but speak most directly to the literatures on urban renewal and image-making. Contemporary accounts of urban renewal were often laudatory, while historical scholarship has emphasized the destructive, discriminatory nature of such campaigns. Regardless of perspective, the story usually ends in the 1970s. Dieterich-Ward and Cowan aim to provide a more balanced account of renewal impacts, taking seriously how they benefited some local constituencies even as they cost others dearly. Meanwhile, they carry their expositions of urban renewal forward in time toward the end of the twentieth century. This extended time frame reveals more continuities in renewal strategies than is commonly acknowledged. *Beyond Rust* and *A Nice Place to Visit* join recent works by scholars such as Neumann, Taft, Highsmith, and Gillette in reframing our conceptualization of twentieth-century-urban revitalization strategies.¹

Another body of emerging literature has highlighted the role of image-making and marketing in postwar cities, acknowledging the centrality of public perceptions in drawing residents, businesses, and visitors to urban locations. For Dieterich-Ward and Cowan, image-crafting was a near constant prerogative of urban elites. While their ability to forestall or reverse urban decline was limited, Rustbelt officials did whatever they could to control public narratives about their cities. The longitudinal perspectives on image-making offered in *Beyond Rust* and *A Nice Place to Live* complement other scholars' consideration of knowledge professionals and mid-century metropolitan growth. Work by Vitale, Sayf-Cummings, and Geismer on Pittsburgh, Research Triangle Park, and Boston, respectively, is in ready conversation with these books.^{2,3,4}

Dieterich-Ward's *Beyond Rust* recasts our conception of Pittsburgh's historical trajectory by firmly embedding it in the regional context of the Steel Valley. By considering the larger hinterland, Dieterich-Ward clarifies the advantages that Pittsburgh had in weathering major economic shifts compared to smaller entities such as Wheeling and Steubenville. In a manner similar to Needham's account of Phoenix, he incorporates an environmental history approach that interrogates human impact upon the land as well as linkages within a metropolitan area.⁵ Accordingly, Dieterich-Ward uses a geological metaphor to interpret the region's evolution as a story of adaptation with "new economic layers deposited on but never fully erasing the old" (p. 290). His main focus, though, is on human efforts to steer urban change, a narrative which features "many heroes" but "few clear-cut villains" (p. viii).

Dieterich-Ward demonstrates how revitalization efforts met only partial success, limited by the lingering presence of "social and physical landscapes of the industrial age" (p. 4). For example, some communities' continued, if tenuous, reliance on remaining industrial employment limited their options. In other places, topography dictated the possibilities for new structures and transportation routes. Combined with the variation of political and financial resources across the region, similar approaches to revitalization produced vastly different outcomes. In turn, those outcomes further exacerbated regional disparities.

The Steel Valley was initially defined by a confluence of navigable rivers that provided a circulation system for goods and people. Sites across the region shared confining geographic features: relatively narrow river valleys squeezed between steep hillsides. As the area industrialized during the late nineteenth century, a "nexus of coal, steel, and rail" emerged (p. 23). Relative to other industrial regions, the Steel Valley was more dependent on basic manufacturing that was concentrated in the hands of a few large companies like Carnegie Steel. Vertically integrated corporate structures knit together the mining of raw materials, their transportation by rail, and their transformation into finished products.

The sharp topography of the Steel Valley combined with waves of migration and employers' prerogatives to produce extreme and persistent political fragmentation. In some smaller communities, workers depended on companies not only for jobs but also for housing and municipal services. Across the region, ambivalence toward environmental impact and hostility toward organized labor prevailed. Pittsburgh's larger population and greater wealth offered city officials powerful leverage with state government and the resources to construct ambitious urban infrastructure such as a civic center in the neighborhood of Oakland. Policy makers in Wheeling, West Virginia, and Steubenville, Ohio, on the other hand, struggled to gain assistance from their state governments and improved their built environments much more gradually. A short period of city expansion in the early twentieth century consolidated borders here and there. Generally, though, popular resistance to further annexation and continuing social divides created an unwieldy number of political entities—130 in Allegheny County alone.

The crisis of the Great Depression disrupted existing power structures in the region, to the benefit of both organized labor and local Democrats. Corporate executives increasingly sought to influence, rather than oppose, government action. By 1945, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development had emerged as a significant player in Pittsburgh's public policy. This partnership between business and government quickly moved to implement smoke control and prevent future floods.

Successful pollution regulations in Pittsburgh, though, eroded the willingness of companies to implement smoke control in other parts of the region. Similarly, flood control near the point relied upon the construction of distant dams.

The Conference's subsequent redevelopment of the Golden Triangle solidified public-private cooperation and added to the heroic narrative of "The Pittsburgh Story" that officials marketed to a national audience (p. 83). During this first phase of Renaissance, redevelopment consciously erased mixed-use structures from the nineteenth century. The modern facilities built in their place furthered the "compartmentalization of land use" made possible by road construction (p. 84). Many of the Conference's projects essentially used government power to transfer property between private owners under the auspices of urban renewal. Meanwhile, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy used a similar approach to create recreational park space on the city's outskirts and eventually in the Laurel Highlands region at Ohiopyle. Renaissance's success prompted imitation throughout the region, yet Pittsburgh's financial resources and personal networks proved difficult to duplicate in other locales. Determined elites in Wheeling and Martin's Ferry, Ohio attracted sufficient government funding to accomplish renewal goals on a smaller scale.

From the 1950s forward, highway construction benefited portions of the Steel Valley while bypassing others. New roads such as the Penn-Lincoln Parkway enabled Pittsburgh to pursue a suburban-oriented development strategy that catered to companies' preferences for large, flat sites that were a blank slate. Road construction also opened higher elevations and more distant tracts like Monroeville to middle-class residential development. To the west of downtown, construction of the Greater Pittsburgh Airport anchored a nascent industrial corridor modeled after Boston's Route 128. Elsewhere in the region, resurgent demand for coal in the 1960s made some communities more reliant upon extractive industry and generated heated controversy over surface mining.

The particular vision of economic development embodied in the Renaissance approach resonated with specific segments of the population, especially middle-class suburbanites. But other constituencies, including African American groups and long-term city residents, increasingly challenged indiscriminate demolition and advocated for funds to be redirected to struggling neighborhoods. In Pittsburgh, such sentiment fueled community organization and experiments with social programs and historic preservation. In Wheeling, lagging public enthusiasm for large-scale renewal doomed a proposed downtown mall.

In the late 1970s, a reinvigorated public-private partnership emerged after a brief hiatus. Faced with a tough economic climate, the Allegheny Conference pivoted toward private foundation support for the bulk of project funding. Practical assistance from government officials, though, still proved crucial in the creation of attractions such as the Cultural District and Station Square. These amenities represented part of a strategy to attract and retain a highly educated workforce in the wake of steel's demise. Various partnerships between Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, city government, and business interests emerged. By the early 1990s, the Pittsburgh Technology Center aimed to harness the resources of local universities toward profitable innovations on a former steel mill site. Other brownfields found new life as retail or recreational space.

Such transformations were halting and incremental. For years, many Pittsburgh residents held out hope for the reanimation of an idle steel mill on the South Side. Others sought to honor the area's industrial past through sensitive redevelopment and heritage tourism. Elsewhere in the region, meanwhile, limited steel production and mining continued to tie residents to basic industry. In subsequent years, high-energy prices reignited interest in tapping the region's natural gas supplies through hydraulic fracturing. By that time, successive waves of revitalization campaigns had produced uneven development and exaggerated income disparities both within Pittsburgh and across the Steel Valley.

Dieterich-Ward offers both the Steel Valley and his regional approach to urban history as exemplars. Because it experienced major economic transformations earlier than other areas, the Greater Pittsburgh area served as a bellwether for other metropolitan regions. Using Pittsburgh as a

reference point also reveals more continuity in revitalization strategies than has generally been acknowledged. Specifically, “many of the features urbanists ascribe to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s had long been part of the Renaissance model” (p. 12). A broader geographic perspective clarifies the extent of the “uneven revival” that occurred in central cities versus hinterland areas (p. 2). Meanwhile, the structure of *Beyond Rust* provides a “new model for writing about metropolitan regions that combines the scope and analytical framework of existing regional studies with the emphasis on metropolitan political economy, social movements, and spatial inequality that has defined urban and suburban history” (p. 6). Hopefully, scholars will accept his challenge to marshal insights from too often separated subfields.

Cowan’s *A Nice Place to Visit* recounts two overlapping eras of tourist-oriented development by drawing examples from Cincinnati, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore. As “one of a limited number of potential avenues for urban renewal,” Cowan argues that tourism-related development eventually became “vital” to these Rustbelt cities (p. vii). By focusing on the importance of tourism in less expected places, he aims to show how policy makers worked to create attractions from scratch. His comparative approach finds “remarkably similar patterns” indicative of national trends (p. viii).

At midcentury, city officials grew increasingly anxious about the loss of population and tax revenues in addition to a host of other urban problems. To many, solutions for cities’ social ills seemed ephemeral and expensive. Facilities for tourists, on the other hand, had the distinct advantage of offering “tangible physical development . . . that provided seemingly instant results” (p. 7). Put simply, many of these officials believed that if they built the right infrastructure, visitors would come. Once they arrived, the money they spent on hotels, meals, and incidentals would boost the local economy.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, policy makers worked to attract large, professional meetings to declining downtown areas. In doing so, they sought to craft a generic, placeless aesthetic that would allow travelers to focus on the business at hand. A veritable arms race of convention center construction ensued. These centers were generally built with public funding for the use of visitors who lived elsewhere, as opposed to earlier civic spaces which served significant local functions. They were also intentionally nondescript, often taking the form of a “box with docks” (p. 66). In addition to providing meeting space, cities scrambled to provide sufficient lodging. Perceived conventioner demand for new, standardized accommodations fueled the growth of national hotel chains and the concomitant decline of historic hotels in the urban core. In some cities, skywalk systems that conveniently connected hotels to meeting spaces also segregated visitors from the surrounding environment.

In St. Louis, officials hoped to build on the popularity of the Gateway Arch by adding a convention center to their long list of urban renewal projects. But public support for a convention center was tenuous at best. Particularly in African American communities that bordered the proposed site, voters pressed instead for attention to more immediate neighborhood needs. Despite the failure of an initial bond measure, policy makers pressed ahead with the project, completing the center in 1977. In Cincinnati, meanwhile, chasing the convention market hastened the demise of historic hotels like the Gibson. When compared in terms of room size, total capacity, maintenance costs, and amenities like air conditioning, older properties struggled to compete with new construction by the likes of Hilton, Sheraton, and Hyatt.

A second phase of tourism-related development began during the 1970s. In this era, projects aimed not only to serve visitors but to draw residents from the immediate region as well. Changes to the structure of federal aid also removed many categorical restrictions on how such money could be spent, with the goal of giving cities greater budget flexibility. Many local officials subsequently used that flexibility to direct public funds toward tourism projects. In contrast to generic convention centers and hotels, later infrastructure projects such as stadiums and retail developments were more likely to highlight unique, local assets. By this time, industrial decline freed additional land for development, especially along waterways.

Pittsburgh, for instance, hoped to forestall the potential loss of its major-league sports teams by footing the bill for a multipurpose stadium sited near the confluence of the city’s three rivers. After

the stadium's completion, the success of the Pirates and Steelers showcased the city on national television throughout the 1970s. Similarly, Baltimore encouraged recreational use of its Inner Harbor through the construction of a festival marketplace. Like Faneuil Hall in Boston, Harborplace aimed to provide specialized goods and a lively shopping experiences for middle-class consumers. Meanwhile, local youth staked their own claims to Harborplace, as it became an important site in the city's early hip-hop scene.

Cowan concludes that tourism-related development "provided an important transitional economy" that helped formerly industrial cities survive as they converted to a service base. That lifeline, however, was always partial. Tourist projects sometimes failed to generate expected revenues and offered no help to the marginalized populations most impacted by deindustrialization.

Three central themes emerge from considering these books side by side. First, urban elites consciously operated in a competitive framework. In Dieterich-Ward's narrative, Pittsburghers worked to buoy the city's national image, while smaller cities within the Steel Valley region struggled to emulate the changes crafted in Pittsburgh. In Cowan's account, cities clamored for convention and tourist business while shrewdly aware of their rivals' efforts.

Second, regulatory and financial support from the state and federal levels remained a critical component of urban revitalization throughout the twentieth century. Narratives of neoliberalism have exaggerated the reduced role of government in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Dieterich-Ward and Cowan provide a plethora of examples of legislation that enabled urban revitalization projects. And while the scale of government funding sources decreased, public coffers still provided critical matching funds and dedicated tax increments to for many of those same projects.

Third, resident mobilization mattered. Whether it was the construction of a convention center in Saint Louis, the expansion of coal mining in the Egypt Valley, or the fashioning of a recreational district at Ohiopyle, everyday people made local elites painfully aware of their objections. While such opposition usually did not thwart project completion, it often did result in significant concessions.

Overall, *Beyond Rust* and *A Nice Place to Visit* show how thoroughly Rustbelt elites recognized the high stakes of their revitalization efforts. These are stories of hard-fought struggles waged against large structural forces. It is not surprising they only met partial success. Yet Dieterich-Ward and Cowan remind us of other limiting factors. Shaping outsiders' perceptions of cities often trumped improvements for existing residents. And over the course of the twentieth century, a handful of revitalization strategies predominated. Overall, these broad patterns improve our understanding of the possibilities for change in struggling cities.

Notes

1. Tracy Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Chloe E. Taft, *From Steel to Slots: Casino Capitalism in the Postindustrial City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). Andrew R. Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan and the Fate of the American Metropolis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Howard Gillette Jr., *Camden after the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-industrial City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
2. Patrick Vitale, *The Atomic Capital of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).
3. Alex Sayf Cummings, "'Brain Magnet': Research Triangle Park and the Origins of the Creative City, 1953-1965," *Journal of Urban History*, published electronically November 3, 2015, accessed November 15, 2016, doi:10.1177/0096144215612065.
4. Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
5. Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).