

The Vacant Building Syndrome

More and more cities see demolition of old buildings as an easy fix, but the wrecking ball can create more problems than it solves

By Roberta Brandes Gratz

In this new column, award-winning journalist and author Roberta Brandes Gratz reports on urban development crises around the country and the opportunities they present for positive action.

Demolition as a planning tool is back in vogue. Not since the discredited postwar urban renewal policies of the 1970s have political leaders embraced so wholeheartedly the idea of bulldozing vast tracks of vacant residential structures—and consequently, demolishing existing urban fabric, undermining local initiative, derailing organic regeneration, and displacing longtime residents and local businesses. When no productive policy exists, demolition is the easiest way to look like the problem is being addressed. The vacant building syndrome is simply planning by default.

This state of affairs comes at just the time when many older, deteriorated neighborhoods offer the best opportunity for urban regeneration and the best resource for addressing the national affordable housing crisis. This is not the 1970s, when so many cities hit bottom and the urban exodus was in full swing. The tide has clearly turned. Cities are increasingly enjoying a renewed popularity among middle- and upper-income groups. Real estate values in historic neighborhoods are accelerating beyond property owners' wildest dreams. Artists and other members of the

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“creative class” are seeking out abandoned or underused industrial neighborhoods. People who can afford to do so are moving into less car-dependent neighborhoods, meaning the car-free life is beginning to replace the suburban dream of the 1950s through the '80s. The opportunity for people with limited income to seek

the same urban lifestyle, however, disappears when low-income neighborhoods are bulldozed.

Yet demolition of vacant structures is widespread. Philadelphia exhibits the problem in its most severe form, with nearly 60,000 vacant parcels (the highest per capita in the country). Small investments have been made in reclamation efforts, but the bulk of budgeted money is going for further demolition. Last fall, the city of Buffalo, New York, said it planned to tear down a record number of vacant buildings in the 2006 fiscal year, around 1,000 deteriorated properties, nearly three times higher than the average number of annual demolitions since 2002.

Demolition Exacerbates Problems

The total number of vacant structures in the country is unclear. (According to the Brookings Institution, there have been no comprehensive, systematic assessments of the total number of abandoned buildings in more than a quarter-century.) But what is clear is that vacant buildings are often declared irredeemable too quickly. The basic quality of many older vacant structures is often higher than anything new built today. Most cleared sites, moreover, remain vacant for years, accelerating the deterioration of border, marginal communities and exacerbating the affordable housing shortage in almost every American city.

The politically saleable rationale for aggressive demolition is that drug addicts illegally occupy vacant buildings, which then become a scourge on their neighborhoods. Despairing neighbors can be the strongest constituency for demolition when they think no alternative exists. But demolishing buildings does not solve social problems. It just displaces them to another locale.

East Liberty, once a thriving trolley-car suburb of Pittsburgh and home of such luminaries as Gene Kelly and Billy Strayhorn, became a poster child for failed urban renewal tear-down-and-rebuild policies. The city's Urban Redevelopment Authority demolished thousands of homes and buildings in the '50s and '60s. Residents left, and crime rose. In 2001, East Liberty Development, Inc., a grassroots group, demolished vacant '60s-era low-density mistakes, taking down 1,000 units in high-rise public housing or suburban single-family houses, building 200 affordable and 256 market-rate tight-knit urban houses. At the same time, it started taking possession of tax-delinquent vacant homes in the historic district adjacent to the commercial core, cleaning them out, patching the roofs, and boarding them up for future renovation. Fifteen vacant houses have been renovated and sold, with 30 more in the works.

“Vacant properties are the location of most of any area's crime,” notes Ernie Hogan, East Liberty's Director of Residential Development, “but if you just demolish, the crime moves to the next easy place or it gets pushed onto the streets.”

The Solution is Local

The antidote to this sad state of urban affairs is positive reoccupancy—in other words, the small-scale reclamation of vacant housing by grassroots groups, followed by new infill of vacant lots. Community populations where this takes place wind up stabilized and ready for new infusions of people.

As far back as the 1970s, for example, Baltimore initiated a cutting-edge homesteading program that turned over city-owned properties to citizens committed to living in them for three years. The homesteader paid a nominal rent (usually \$1 a year) and got a twenty-year, federally financed rehab loan at 3% interest. This was an early, if not the first, of the sweat-equity initiatives that revitalized many Baltimore neighborhoods, accomplished by the resident investors themselves. And yet today, instead of learning from the homesteading program, Mayor Martin O'Malley has chosen to replace redeemable urban housing with less dense suburban housing, further eroding the city's urban fabric. On the western edge of downtown Baltimore, boarded-up rowhouses and vacant lots mark the edges of what was once the vibrant neighborhood of Poppleton. One of O'Malley's top priorities for this year is to demolish hundreds of these vacant homes to make way for a new \$300 million community of single-family homes, townhouses, and apartments.

In Salt Lake City, three vacant buildings and one apartment house (150 units in total) were built in an abandoned industrial neighborhood, the Gateway District, paving the way for further upgrades and new construction.

The result: a repopulated and growing mixed-income neighborhood with a new identity and name, the Artspace District, where experts thought demolition was the solution. “The few people who saw the potential and became champions over time were key,” says artist Stephen Goldsmith. He and other artists needing cheap live-work space initiated the effort, joined by arts-related businesses and several non-profit users that now occupy the mixed-use buildings.

Almost every city that still has remnants of its industrial heritage contains SoHo-style conversions of warehouses and former manufacturing neighborhoods. This phenomenon—the SoHo syndrome I call it in my book, *Cities Back From the Edge*—has gotten considerable attention because of its chic quality. But the same process is visible in modest-income neighborhoods. In Houston's Third Ward, artists, led by Rick Lowe, an Alabama-born painter

and sculptor who moved to Houston more than two decades ago, started buying and upgrading derelict, vacant shotgun houses in 1990. The neighborhood of one-time tenant shacks built in the 1930s is now a vibrant downtown arts district confronting the reverse

problem of gentrification.

Abandoned Buildings Are an Old Problem

New York City was at rock bottom in the 1970s, losing 36,000 residential units a year over a decade; abandoned buildings seemed more plentiful than occupied ones. In 1976, the city's housing commissioner, Roger Starr, put forth a policy called Planned Shrinkage to address this seemingly intractable problem. The theory went like this: investing in neighborhoods where few people lived and restoring the old, deteriorating buildings there was a waste of limited resources. The city was shrinking, and

so it made more sense to invest in populated neighborhoods with healthy commercial districts, letting the older neighborhoods die systematically. Today, this is called “Creative Shrinkage,” and the model is Youngstown, Ohio, whose population dropped from a peak of 170,000 to 80,000 today. The plan calls for razing vacant buildings, cutting off sewage and electric service, and converting vacant land into pocket parks. According to a recent *New York Times* article, Youngstown's 35-year-old mayor, Jay Williams, has received many phone calls from other cities, asking how they can pursue similar plans.

When public officials advocated Planned Shrinkage in the '70s, the people remaining in these beleaguered communities resisted. In the South Bronx, a star example of local grassroots efforts, they occupied and renovated the abandoned buildings, turned rubble-strewn lots into parks, scraped together small grants and meagerly funded city programs, and began to rebuild. Citizens chose to improve, rather than move, one building, one block, one neighborhood at a time. Wise city officials eventually recognized the momentum, accepted the challenge of local activists, and responded with innovative programs to support these local regeneration efforts.

Citizen efforts made areas in Northeast Philadelphia and downtown Detroit attractive to developers who, with generous financial incentives, built suburban-style housing and took credit for the renewal visible today. But organic urban neighborhoods are self-generated, not developer-built. “Lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration,” Jane Jacobs

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wrote 46 years ago in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. This is true of troubled neighborhoods across America. Those seeds need the chance to germinate and flower, to be nurtured and fertilized, not plowed under and lost. □