

## *Editor's Introduction*

# **Did Neighborhood Life-Cycle Theory Cause Urban Decline?**

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Early 20th-century American sociologist William I. Thomas argued that “if men define the situation as real, [it is] real in its consequences” (1928, 31). The concept is simple. Our world is organized as a series of defined situations where many of our actions depend on the nature of the definition. Some contend that the same holds true for neighborhoods. That is, if we define neighborhoods as declining, then, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, they will decline (Jacobs 1961). This issue of *Housing Policy Debate* presents a Forum on what has become a rather controversial topic: the role that theories of neighborhood change played in causing neighborhood decline.

Modern theories of neighborhood change date back to the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. Urban sociologists such as Robert Park (1916), Ernest Burgess (1925), and Lewis Wirth (1938) all commented on the nature of neighborhood change, often drawing analogies to natural systems. From these writings emerged an ecological theory of urban development, which described neighborhood change as a life cycle ending with inevitable decline. The life-cycle theory of neighborhood change influenced thinking on communities for much of the 20th century. As the following articles demonstrate, the debate over the significance of this theory continues. We hope this Forum generates discussion on the forces that led to neighborhood decline and the strategies we should pursue to revive distressed communities.

John T. Metzger, author of the main Forum article, argues that theories of neighborhood change developed by Anthony Downs and others facilitated the decline of many inner-city, low-income, African-American neighborhoods. Metzger claims that these theories (or the general thinking derived from them) caused financial institutions to avoid those neighborhoods defined as “declining” because they constituted risky investments. Lack of capital, according to Metzger, led to a self-fulfilling spiral of decline in credit-starved places. Metzger’s most controversial assertion is that many of the people who developed and acted on neighborhood life-cycle theories consciously understood that the abandonment of many urban areas would ensue. Metzger contends that lenders and policy makers generally had a stake in seeing such places fail: Lenders would profit and policy mak-

ers would gain political clout from “improving” cities. He argues that had an alternative paradigm of neighborhood theory that emphasizes collective action on the part of community residents been followed, many urban neighborhoods would have avoided decline and abandonment.

Anthony Downs, in a comment on Metzger’s article, takes exception to the idea that theories of neighborhood change, in and of themselves, greatly affected communities. Rather, as Downs argues, the demographic, social, and economic forces that existed in the postwar years caused the decline. According to Downs, the “replacement of working-class and middle-income households by households with much lower incomes, on the average, was the single biggest cause of neighborhood decline.” Downs contends that Metzger ignored this fact as an alternative explanation for why many neighborhoods deteriorated. He also finds it highly implausible that his theories, and those of other urban experts, had such a strong impact on the public policy, building, and finance communities. He argues that even if his model of neighborhood change had never been developed, the same actions would have occurred, because people were responding to real conditions.

Kenneth Temkin’s comment on the article echoes many of Downs’s critiques. Temkin finds fault with Metzger’s assertion that life-cycle theory destroyed neighborhoods. To Temkin, “it seems more likely that the racial stereotypes used by lenders, politicians, and government redevelopment officials had more influence on urban policy than Downs’s theory.” He also takes issue with Metzger’s claim that triage theory (an outgrowth of life-cycle theory) always makes bad urban policy. While Temkin agrees that the “legacy of the neighborhood triage approach is very disturbing,” a modified form of triage where policies are aligned with residents’ preferences can be used to better target scarce housing and redevelopment resources. In addition, Temkin finds that “Metzger contradicts himself as to whether the neighborhood life-cycle theory actually affected policy.” At one point, Metzger argues that the ideas in the theory were used to develop policies, while in other parts of the article, he says that they were used to legitimate policies that would have been implemented anyway. Despite these critiques, Temkin does agree with one major facet of Metzger’s argument: Neighborhood life-cycle theory “did not emphasize the possibility of residents’ acting and taking steps to improve local conditions.”

In a third comment, George C. Galster argues that Metzger’s historical and political analysis of neighborhood life-cycle theory is flawed for several reasons. Failing to provide clear definitions, Metzger lumps together clearly distinguishable concepts such as life-cycle theory, public choice theory, triage planning, and filtering. Metzger also assumes life-cycle theory to be a monolith dominated by Downs’s

thinking, with others playing supporting roles. Galster notes that despite what he says, Metzger never provides an alternative theory to life-cycle theory. Instead, he implicitly suggests that “community development” suddenly sprang forth as if by magic. Galster finds that a lurking conspiracy theory pervades the article: It seems that everyone in the urban policy establishment was an insider privy to an effort to force the abandonment of low-income neighborhoods against residents’ will.

Metzger provides readers with an interesting historiography of post-war urban policy. His detailed narrative personalizes a story that usually leaves out the individuals who play central roles. For example, Metzger documents the important role that specific community activists played in resisting and redirecting the mainstream approach to neighborhood change.

The article’s storytelling style is both its strength and its weakness. While Metzger constructs a compelling history of ideas, his narrative reads a bit like a Hollywood script. Downs plays the bad guy, while those who resist life-cycle theory are the good guys. This story has few shades of gray. Metzger ascribes motivation to his characters solely on the basis of their relationship to neighborhood life-cycle theory.

The problem is that motivation is hard to prove. Metzger assumes that people who share family or institutional ties automatically think alike. He has developed his own version of the popular game “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon,” where it is claimed that any film actor living or dead can be connected to Kevin Bacon through a chain of movies. In Metzger’s version, anybody in the urban policy world can be connected to Anthony Downs, whose ability to shape urban policy is due in large part to his central position in a vast network of powerful people. In reality, however, connections do not always translate into influence, motivation, or action.

Metzger also considers how ideas such as neighborhood life-cycle theory influence society. He sees their influence as organized, specific, and even conspiratorial. Others find the relationship between ideas and social change more complex. Sociologists developed the concept of the *zeitgeist* (German for “the spirit of the times”) to help account for why some ideas seem to capture a particular moment and drive events. (For example, see Weber [1958].) Mostly what they find is those ideas that confirm and reinforce conventional wisdom gain influence. While revolutionary ideas do come along and sweep away existing orthodoxy, much social change can be attributed to an ongoing refinement of conventional thought.

Consider the *zeitgeist* in which Downs developed his ideas—civil rights—era America. The real estate and public policy establishments

held many preconceived notions about how neighborhoods worked that were informed by contemporary thinking on race and community change. Downs proposed several solutions to the nation's urban problems. Some met resistance, while others were accepted at once. It is interesting to consider where Downs had his biggest impact. As he notes in his comment, his call to open up America's suburbs to minorities was never very popular or influential. But his thoughts on neighborhood change were very persuasive and were immediately incorporated into public policy. It seems likely that Downs connected better with conventional thought on neighborhood change than on diversifying the suburbs. The power of his ideas to persuade may have been driven more by a general receptiveness to his thinking than by the specific content of what he argued, or even how well connected he was.

The mid-20th-century idea that certain neighborhoods were fated for inevitable decline was hardly limited to a few urban experts. Even the great liberal author John Steinbeck, whose works include *The Grapes of Wrath*, commented on the process:

When a city begins to grow and spread outward from the edges, the center which was once its glory is in a sense abandoned to time. Then the buildings grow dark and a kind of decay sets in; poorer people move in as the rents start to fall, and small fringe businesses take the place of once flowering establishments.  
(1981)

Given that the concept of the neighborhood life cycle had filtered into the popular culture, it is easy to see why policy makers, lenders, and planners were so open to Downs's interpretation of why certain places declined.

Metzger's analysis follows the tradition of sociologist C. Wright Mills, who developed the "power elite" concept (Mills 1956).<sup>1</sup> Like Mills, Metzger links influential individuals in government, industry, and academic institutions to a set of coordinated actions that advance the interests of an elite. Metzger and Mills also share a method of uncovering elite relations by examining "interlocking" relationships (Mills 1956). The resulting analysis is often quite compelling. The network of people who influence an area of the economy or public policy can be quite small because important people tend to have institutional affiliations that overlap or in some way connect.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Mills developed power elite theory to explain the rise of the military in Cold War America, his ideas on the importance of understanding the connectedness of elites and their thinking have been extended to all power in society. See Kornhauser (1966).

Power elite theory, like other elite theories including Marxist sociology, tends to divide the world sharply between the powerful and the powerless (Wallace and Wolf 1995). But unlike most Marxist theory, power elite theory does not divide society solely on the basis of property relations (Kornhauser 1966). More precisely, power elite theory is part of the American populist tradition, which includes such works as Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Coser 1977). Populism is a Midwestern political and intellectual movement that sought to redress concentrations of wealth and power in late 19th-century America (Trachtenberg 1982). Populists focused much of their effort on documenting and exposing concentrations of power as a way of emancipating the powerless (Hofstadter 1976).

On the surface, power elite theory is an intriguing concept. Those of us who work in Washington often marvel at what a small world we inhabit. It seems as if everyone knows everyone else. Using the power elite method, Metzger can link Anthony Downs to just about everybody in Washington's urban policy community, not to mention Chicago's real estate industry, including the corrupt Teamsters union that bankrolled Las Vegas casinos. But, and this is a general problem with power elite theory, connections among the powerful are not synonymous with a commonality of interests. Elites are seldom monolithic or single-minded in their purpose. They are both less efficient and more conflicted than Mills or Metzger assumes. Thus, while Metzger can show that Downs is plugged into powerful institutions the way few others are, he cannot demonstrate convincingly how Downs exercised influence beyond giving a coherent, analytic voice to thought that was already driving postwar urban policy.

Metzger continues the important social commentary of the populist tradition. He raises the same concerns that have occupied populists since the turn of the 20th century: that concentrated power is inherently antidemocratic. Like all theoretical work that focuses on power relations, the article is often controversial. Whether one agrees with his analysis or not, his account of how Downs and others have come to shape U.S. urban policy will likely stimulate more debate on the forces that drive neighborhood change.

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