

Comment on James R. Cohen's "Abandoned Housing: Exploring Lessons from Baltimore"

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Abstract

Baltimore and the State of Maryland spend tens of millions of dollars to demolish the city's physical fabric—its row houses, which once constituted vibrant neighborhoods and which developers now spend millions to recreate in the suburbs. But the demolitions are often counterproductive and sometimes just bad policy. As Cohen relates, the demolition of a dangerous or crime-ridden row house is often followed by a vacant lot used for dumping trash or dealing drugs. The problems flowed not from the architecture, but from the surrounding social conditions. An alternate approach leaves behind the dangerous physical determinism that is at the heart of the demolition strategy and focuses instead on investing in peoples' lives and welfare.

Keywords: Development/revitalization; Housing; Neighborhood

Jacob Riis (1895), our first great urban renewal proponent, had a thing about demolition. Although he sympathized with the immigrants' plight and worked endlessly to improve housing conditions and develop new types of low-income housing, he also wanted to tear down decrepit tenements. To achieve this vision of "reform," Riis took the connection between environment and social condition, so central to Progressive reformers' beliefs, to a logical extreme. "There is," he insisted, "a connection between the rottenness of the house and that of the tenant that is patent and positive" (177). Mulberry Bend, and the other slums like it, not only created the crowded and dangerous conditions where human depravity could flourish, they became generators of that depravity. Riis anthropomorphised the tenements, making these configurations of real estate into base participants, rather than mere shelters for human activity. "Such a slum," he wrote about the infamous Mulberry Bend in New York's Lower East Side,

is itself the poison. It taints whatever it touches. Wickedness and vice gravitate toward it and are tenfold aggravated, until crime is born spontaneously of its corruption....Recovery is impossible under its blight. Rescue and repression are alike powerless to reach it. (Riis 1895, 177)

When Riis was asked whether the result of destroying Mulberry Bend was simply to scatter poverty, he insisted that "the greater and by far the worst part of it [poverty] is destroyed with the slum...something is gained in the mere shifting about; some of the dirt is lost on the way" (177).

I cite Riis' invective against the tenements of New York's notorious Five Points to make a simple but important point: The idea that demolition is the answer to deteriorating housing has a long history. A destructive logic pervaded 20th century urban planning in the United States despite the historic preservation movement, gentrification, Jane Jacobs, and the New Urbanism. Jacob Riis laid the groundwork in his 1890 *How the Other Half Lives* and inspired a generation of new planning ideals and legal tools, including excess condemnation, taking provisions, and limited dividend housing corporations. Robert Moses and his colleagues and protégés around the country acted with a half-century of cultural and legal momentum behind them when they pursued the massive re-making of American cities in the post-World War II world. Cohen makes strong arguments for the value of abandoned housing demolition policies in Baltimore, but my first reaction, a view from history, suggests that we be very cautious when demolition is offered as the centerpiece of a proposal for revitalizing a neighborhood and a city.

A great irony pervades Cohen's descriptions of the various abandoned housing programs in Baltimore. Ever since Jane Jacobs (1961) crystallized the disdain for modernist urban planning with her *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, planners have been leading the charge against demolition, against what Jacobs called "cataclysmic change," against creating wide-open spaces and high-rise towers. Instead, she raised the standard of "mixed uses," density, and street life in legible neighborhoods. Increasingly, Jacobs' vision (which had its roots in a real community along Hudson Street in Greenwich Village) has become a commodity for which people with money will pay large sums, in SoHo, or the South End of Boston, Seaside, or Kentlands.

And yet here are the City of Baltimore and the State of Maryland, spending tens of millions of dollars to demolish the city's physical fabric—its row houses, which once constituted vibrant neighborhoods and which developers now spend millions to recreate in the suburbs. The demolitions are often, at the very least, counterproductive and, at worst, caricatures of bad policy. For example, as Cohen relates, the demolition of a dangerous or crime-ridden row house is often followed by a vacant lot used for dumping trash or dealing drugs. It turns out—and it should have been no great surprise—that the problems flowed not from the architecture, but from the surrounding social conditions. Though it made for a convincing argument, Riis and the urban planners who followed his lead were wrong about the role buildings played in creating poverty. Similarly, the efforts to avoid "snaggle-tooth" demolition by securing the right to speed up demolition of a whole block (when 70 percent of the block is abandoned) is not likely to yield a new high-end development. More likely, as we have seen repeatedly in all kinds of cities, a vacant lot in an undesirable area will steadily be returned to a state of nature. The open grassy fields of Detroit or East St. Louis testify to this.

There are very good reasons for undertaking some of these demolition efforts, at least when we view them from close up, at the block or neighborhood level. But from the more distant perspective, a different truth comes out. Principles of the New Urbanism and Jacobsian mixed uses are planning approaches for the wealthy. For those in “undercrowded” areas with poor and usually minority citizens, the old ideas of building—or destroying—cities apply. In a way, we can argue that urban renewal has won twice in the neighborhoods of Baltimore described in Cohen’s article. Urban renewal of the 1950s led the way in emptying these neighborhoods of industry and people, and now, because of those policies, we have to demolish more, to solve the problems caused by the first wave of destructive planning. What does this perverse cycle of policy choices tell us about how we think of cities and their renaissance?

Many of the proposals Cohen describes and endorses are thoughtful and wise on the specific and immediate level. In focusing on the grand fallacy or contradictions of these policies, I do not mean to turn away from a dire situation that clearly demands immediate attention: the loss of a third of Baltimore’s population since 1950, the more than 12,000 vacant buildings (a number that doubles or triples if one includes all underutilized or excess buildings), and the nearly 14,000 already vacant lots. The physical degradation of Baltimore is, of course, perfectly and horribly matched by economic degradation and the disparity between the city and its suburbs. One of Cohen’s statistics is well-known in the abstract yet still stunning when made statistically exact: In 1950, the median incomes of the great American cities—Baltimore, Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis—roughly equaled the median incomes of their larger metropolitan areas. By 1990, those numbers had dropped by up to a half. Baltimore’s residents, a step above Detroit’s, make only two-thirds of what the larger metropolitan area’s residents do.

The wisest of the programs Cohen surveys are those that seek to prevent imminent danger to lives or to ameliorate the terrible conditions in existing row houses. The lead paint abatement program, or the rules allowing the city to rapidly take houses from felons, or the effort to quickly demolish dangerous buildings about to collapse are clear efforts in the short run to eliminate “nuisances” (to use the late-19th-century term for dangerous buildings). They represent investment in current inhabitants and their homes and run counter to overzealous demolition efforts.

One specific proposal—urging that neighborhood groups and individual property owners take advantage of state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits—deserves more skeptical scrutiny. It is true that Baltimore’s row houses represent something of a high point of this architectural form, which can be found in cities throughout the eastern seaboard. Similar row houses are in great demand in many places, such as South Boston, Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, Brooklyn Heights, and others. The unique quality of Baltimore’s row houses, which derives

from a ground rent system that made higher-quality homes a wise investment for developers, makes their loss all the more poignant.

Not surprisingly, then, much of the attention given to Baltimore's row houses in the national media has focused on the historic preservation issues raised by Baltimore's abandonment and economic decline. Architectural historians and urban planners have decried the loss of so many of Baltimore's row houses, which are not only individually of high quality, but are also impressive as urban ensembles, creating a fabric of blocks and stoops and corner stores that have come to define an ideal of urban planning. And yet preservation faces an uphill battle. Most of the policies Cohen describes, and the ones that achieved passage and funding in the state legislature, encourage and speed up demolition. Some 4,000 buildings have already been demolished, with city officials eagerly planning thousands more in the coming years.

But beyond the struggle that preservationists will have to wage against city and state policy makers are the problems in the way we do preservation in this country. While Cohen and others rightly urge preservation, the tools they advocate using—and nearly the only ones we have—are very weak. Gaining historic district status (the prerequisite for getting tax incentives from the state or federal government) costs money and time. Rarely do historic districts succeed without professional preservation consultants to prepare the nomination; and in the case of nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, the process can take quite some time, because it must pass through local and state preservation committees before moving on to Washington.

If a local community group manages to achieve historic status for its neighborhood, incentives will accrue to individual owners if they are willing to undertake expensive rehabilitations that live up to the standards of preservation officials. This is important to recognize: When all is said and done, the benefits of historic preservation always accrue to individual owners and not to the community as a whole. Although being called "historic" may be an honor for the community, the profits of being deemed historic in the United States flow very directly into the pockets of those who own. In essence, the rules and incentives for historic preservation on their own will do little to help restore many row houses and less to revitalize a poor community.

In the absence of far-reaching preservation incentives and investments, the "mothballing" idea, which Cohen briefly mentions, would be an important step in slowing the demolition of Baltimore's row houses. While hardly ideal, mothballing is a way of maintaining the buildings while waiting for a greater infusion of people, capital, and government subsidies and not losing forever the historic buildings and neighborhood fabric that were at the root of these neighborhoods' success and could be again. The demolition strategy is an act of historical hubris: In the

course of a few years, it will erase past decades and even century-long construction of blocks and neighborhoods. It also presumes to know the future, that is, a future of steadily declining population. The overzealous approach to demolition is the kind of “cataclysmic change” that Jane Jacobs (1961) identified as the greatest of the sins of the modern urban planning movement. It is now back in fashion in Baltimore.

At the heart of many of these proposals is a reification of the market metaphor of urban development, a metaphor that has come to dominate the way we talk about cities. In the proposals Cohen discusses, the goal is always to “lure” middle-class homeowners and to “attract” business with market “incentives” such as site preparation. The market logic is crystal clear: Only if undercrowded neighborhoods and abandoned row houses can be cleaned of their eyesores and only if the blights on the neighborhood can be eliminated will the “market” (those with money to buy and invest) respond. Some of the most “successful” programs Cohen alludes to are about privatizing what should be publicly controlled space.

The ugly truth that peeks out from behind the curtains in Cohen’s article is this: There simply will not be a market for real estate in these poor areas (and therefore there will not be a rebirth of these areas) until there are jobs and industries that draw workers from many classes. Only a relatively small number of middle- and upper-class professionals will return for the ambiance and convenience of inner-city neighborhoods. In most cities, the inner-city areas that have been revitalized and have received so much press are very limited in area and very sharply defined, with young professionals knowing exactly where the “good” area ends and the “bad” one begins. But in poorer areas, the exodus continues unabated. Here is a very simple example from Philadelphia: On the one hand, my in-laws in the East Oak Lane section of North Philadelphia have seen the population (and especially the population of white residents) and property values decline steadily over the 30 years they have lived there. On the other hand, their daughter and son-in-law, both young professionals, find the costs in Center City so high that they cannot afford to purchase a home there. The revitalization of Center City, which has been used wrongly in the media to suggest the revitalization of the entire city, is in fact not “trickling down” to other areas of the city. Indeed, Philadelphia has lost a hundred thousand people in the past decade.

Ultimately, Cohen’s conclusions—that these policies have real promise and that we should learn from innovative programs in Philadelphia and other cities facing the same abandonment problem—do not fit the evidence. The elephant in the room is the one urbanists have had to work around for years now: the lack of both urban and industrial policies on the part of the federal government. Just as the root cause of this abandonment lies in the massive white flight and deindustrialization supported and encouraged by federal government dollars and policies, so

too the root of the improvement will lie there as well. The most successful effort Cohen describes—Sandtown-Winchester, which received nearly \$70 million in public and private funds—is deemed an anomaly because the investment that it was built on is not replicable. Instead, we need to recognize that large public subsidies and a commitment to poor communities are essential for true success stories that last beyond today’s elimination of an eyesore.

An unsettling aura surrounds this article. Although Cohen does a fine job of summarizing the comprehensive approach that David Rusk (1996, 1999) advocates, in the end Cohen insists that “there is very little likelihood of any major new federal initiative for urban revitalization” (445). Although this may be true at the moment, it does not justify advocating policies that simply have no chance of achieving the serious transformation of these abandoned row houses and their neighborhoods that the situation demands.

Shouldn’t housing specialists be insisting, in a loud chorus, that demolition is a short-term action that offers little possibility of changing the situation and represents a long-term theft of valuable physical infrastructure? Shouldn’t housing specialists be offering much more far-reaching suggestions in the place of housing demolition? Shouldn’t they stress, as David Rusk (1993) has argued, that the annexation rules preventing cities from gaining some measure of aid from secessionist suburbs must be revisited? Shouldn’t they advocate for a massive investment program in the city’s abandoned neighborhoods, offering to sell the homes for nothing and providing good loans to assist homeowners? Shouldn’t they push for massive investments in the human and social capital of these neighborhoods (especially schools), rather than simply hoping to lure wealthier people there?

The alternative approach I am suggesting is about leaving behind the dangerous physical determinism that is at the heart of the demolition strategy and that has long roots in American urban thought. There has always been something comforting and inspiring to modern architects and planners in thinking that changing the physical environment—either by building or by destroying—will change people and their lives fundamentally. But the battles that may actually bring about a transformation in Baltimore are not those being waged specifically around these buildings. The successful fight for a living wage law (passed in 1994 and passionately discussed in David Harvey’s recent [2000] *Spaces of Hope*), for example, is one piece of a much larger effort to raise the conditions and homeownership possibilities for those living in cities and to lure inhabitants back to cities. It is these kinds of investments that will be the real engines that will help rebuild Baltimore’s row houses and neighborhoods, and “recrowd” the city.

That is, if there are any buildings left.

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