ReUrbanism: Past Meets Future in American Cities
Introduction: The American City in 2017

DAVID DUDLEY

For several years, the fastest-growing metro area in the United States has been a master-planned retirement community in central Florida called the Villages. In almost every way, the Villages is entirely unlike a city. More than 100,000 people live there, all older than 55 (the average age is 70), all planted in single-family homes that snake around golf courses and swimming pools on what was once a humid expanse of farmland an hour north of Orlando. There’s no downtown, no public transportation, no low-income housing, and no diversity—more than 98 percent of the residents are white.

But, as it grows, the Villages takes on certain urban-like dimensions. Its developers have built three “town centers” full of shops and restaurants to serve as main streets and de facto downtowns. Architecturally, the buildings that line the central squares sometimes hint at a civic purpose: There’s a grand-looking city hall–type structure in one of these town centers, though inside you’ll find only sales offices for the development. The buildings are mostly handsome Spanish Colonial–style structures, and several of them feature historic plaques that attest to their 19th-century use as hotels, taverns, and blacksmith shops.

These plaques, authored by local groups such as the Lake Sumter Landing Historical Preservation League, tell elaborate, yet blandly plausible, yarns about various characters from the towns’ founding decades in the 19th century. It’s not easy to...
tell, since they’re so boring, that the stories are pure fictions; the league doesn’t exist, the throwback buildings it supposedly protects are new construction, and any history their sites might have once harbored has been wiped free by this substitute heritage. The current residents seem to enjoy this make-believe, just as they are drawn to the downtown-like shapes of the faux-historic town centers. Like the golf courses and swimming pools, a manufactured heritage is a community amenity engineered into the landscape. Even here, in a planned community of new cul-de-sacs inhabited by retirees who have chosen to live in an invented place, there’s a residual appetite for authenticity, density, and human contact. At the end of every day, they point their golf carts toward these town squares, drawn to the oldest-looking, “realest,” and most urban space they can find.

AUTHENTICITY AND IMBALANCE
A somewhat similar version of this story—minus the wholesale fakery—is happening in cities across the country. Even as the forces of suburbanization and sprawl continue apace, underused urban areas thrum with new life. Many older cities hollowed out by a storm of forces in the 1960s and ’70s—from white flight to de-industrialization to “urban renewal”—are seeing once-abandoned downtown business districts refill with converted housing. Resourceful developers have managed to carve new living spaces into derelict banks, churches, libraries, and schools; others have remade the hulking artifacts of the manufacturing age, turning toxin-laced factories and warehouses into high-end condos. There’s a reason why the people who built the Villages went through some effort to conjure fake histories for their city: Authenticity—the elusive realness that the timeworn quarters of American cities display in spades—can be a very valuable asset.

The second coming of such spaces has also exposed some of the challenges and contradictions of the American city in 2017. There’s so much energy and attention devoted to the comeback stories of places such as Pittsburgh and Detroit that it can be easy to forget that, overall, more Americans are still choosing to live in suburbs.
The fastest-growing parts of the country are new communities on the fringes of Sunbelt metros like Phoenix and Denver, not the character-filled residential hearts of older cities. And the economic benefits of surging urban areas are not being distributed equally. Indeed, we’re seeing the opposite. For every former working-class neighborhood that refills with life, energy, and places to go for brunch, there may be a dozen pockets of deepening poverty a few blocks away, where the lack of economic activity and resources are exerting a different kind of pressure. And gentrification itself, whether it occurs in Los Angeles’ Boyle Heights or New York City’s outer boroughs, continues to be a friction point for communities desperate for new investment but wary of destroying the authenticity and character that made their neighborhoods valuable in the first place.

A similar sorting effect is notable on a larger national scale. In his new book, *The New Urban Crisis*, economist and urban scholar Richard Florida (a co-founder and contributing editor at *CityLab*) explains that, while cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle have boomed with talent and affluence, they’ve also grown perilously unbalanced. Housing costs have skyrocketed, political divisions between city dwellers and their suburban or rural neighbors
have opened wider, and resentments have festered. A handful of winning cities are absorbing most of the benefits of the post-recession economy, with too many others left behind.

CLOSING THE GAP
Closing that gap promises to be the great urban challenge of this century, and the role of historic preservation is the focus of this issue. The articles that follow outline the ReUrbanism initiative, an effort by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to marshal the formidable powers of the preservation community in the battle against inequity. The aim is to help older American cities activate their historic fabric without displacing existing residents, deepening structural racism, raising socioeconomic barriers, or limiting opportunities for future city dwellers.

To do that, it’s important to know what demographic trends are currently shaping America’s metropolitan areas—including understanding where populations are growing and why. All American cities are facing an affordable housing crisis of various degrees, and it’s particularly critical in surging places like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle, where the need to build more—and more dense—housing has created a controversial political issue. The debate over land use, zoning, and density has divided neighborhoods and sometimes pitted affordable housing advocates against historic preservationists. It’s an issue with curious battle-lines and bedfellows, and one that should give even the most rock-ribbed of preservationists cause for reflection.

The question of what, exactly, cities and neighborhoods are determined to preserve when they throw up barriers to new development in historic areas is equally fraught. Many of the most treasured residential neighborhoods in older American cities were shaped by baldly racist real-estate practices. So-called redlining policies determined where investments were made and who had the opportunity to benefit from them; those lines have proved to be durable determinants of today’s residential segregation patterns. Meanwhile, the communities of color that absorbed the brunt of the 20th century’s most destructive renewal schemes, from urban
highway construction to “blight removal,” are still struggling to overcome the legacy of those policies. Confronting the deep-seated racial injustice embedded in the historic built environment is a core principle of ReUrbanism—and one that may prove the most challenging to achieve.

This issue doesn’t have all the answers, but it represents the National Trust’s commitment to talking frankly about these problems and to its own role in solving them. The final article proposes policies and strategies that can create solutions for cities and communities determined not to repeat the last century’s planning mistakes.

There are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for success on that front. New technologies, especially transit options, may be offering American cities a huge opportunity—a do-over for all those urban places that once chose to accommodate automobiles instead of humans. The rise of self-driving, shared vehicles, transportation experts hope, could dramatically reduce the amount of real estate currently devoted to parking lots, highways, and other auto infrastructure. It’s hard to overstate how transformative that would be, especially for older cities with roots in the pre-automotive era, where the construction of that infrastructure has done the most grievous damage to communities and public spaces in general. Remove the cars—and liberate the massive private and public investments they require—and the human scale of these places will snap back into focus.

NAVIGATING REAL HISTORY
I live in Baltimore. From my front porch, one can observe the principles of ReUrbanism play out, messily, in real life. The sturdy old 18th-century bones of the city have been tested in the decades since de-industrialization, white flight, car-centric planning, and a confluence of other factors stripped the city of jobs, population, and resources. Some 30,000 vacant structures are left behind, acres of handsome red-brick row homes in neighborhoods that were systematically starved of resources, even as waterfront development rose a few miles away. Derelict industrial areas are now coming back to life—mills to apartments, a brewery-turned-
office-space, a magnificent concrete grain silo cleverly reconfigured into a high-rise condominium. Like many cities of its vintage, Baltimore is a lively laboratory of adaptive reuse. But those pockets of rebirth can’t disguise an inconvenient truth: Too often, the economic benefits from this activity are concentrating in the hands of a relative few residents and businesses. And there’s a stark color line between the winners and those left behind.

Preservation needs to be a tool for chipping away at these inequities, not a weapon that the affluent wield against the less powerful. “Every community has stories and places that matter,” one of the principles of ReUrbanism declares.

It should go without saying that these stories need to be true. In our fever to celebrate heritage and bring life back to long-dead places, some developers can fall prey to the same enthusiasms that the builders of the Villages displayed. Famously, a Virginia golf club owned by President Donald Trump features a historical marker recalling a non-existent Civil War battle. Less famously, a developer recently attempted to bestow a new name upon a Philadelphia neighborhood (that already has a name) by affixing bandit signs to light posts proclaiming it a “modern historical district.” A similar recent example in my own city reveals a more subtle manipulation of facts. One of Baltimore’s most heartening adaptive reuse stories of the last year involves the Fells Point Recreation Pier, an ornate brick structure built by the city in 1914 as a community center and warehouse in the heart of a waterfront district that has grown increasingly spiffy over the past decade. The rec pier’s last legitimate usage was as the pretend police station for the 1990s TV series Homicide: Life on the Street; after the show ended in 1999, the hulking building stood vacant. This March, after a $60 million restoration, it began a new life as a smart-looking boutique hotel.
In general, this is a happy story. Local tycoon Kevin Plank, founder and CEO of the Under Armour sportswear firm, is one of the developers of the new hotel, which has already proven to be a major neighborhood amenity. But the hotel is also hosting a minor controversy. In their accounts of the building’s history, the owners have claimed that it was once a **landing and processing point for waves of early-20th-century immigrants**—and that Fells Point was “the country’s second largest point of entry, surpassed only by New York’s Ellis Island.” This, a local historian or two have noted, isn’t true. Plenty of immigrants did come through Baltimore, but across the harbor, on another pier, in another neighborhood entirely.

Perhaps the symmetry of playing up a chic hotel’s hardscrabble immigrant-welcoming roots is apparently irresistible, especially in this era. And maybe the broad outlines of the story appear realistic enough to be true. But those immigrants are not props in the colorful backstory of a newly redeveloped building, but rather a real and vital part of Baltimore’s history. ReUrbanism holds us to a higher standard of authenticity—both in recounting our shared American story and in taking on our contemporary challenges. FJ

---

**DAVID DUDLEY** is the executive editor of CityLab.

---

**VIDEO**

Watch Stephanie Meeks speak about equity and inclusion in growing cities at the Urban Land Institute 2017 Fall Meeting.