Preservation as the Movement of Yes
The Tao of Urban Rejuvenation: Lessons from Lowertown

WEIMING LU

Editor’s Note: Weiming Lu has earned international recognition for his work in American cities; for his consulting work in cities around the world; and for his writings and lectures on city design, urban conservation and development. Lu was born and raised in China, where his father practiced and taught architecture and planning, and he studied engineering there. Lu continued his education in the United States, studying engineering at the University of Minnesota, then earning a master’s degree in regional planning from the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill.

Lu’s career took him to planning positions in Minneapolis, Dallas and Saint Paul. As chief urban designer for Minneapolis in the 1960s, at the height of “urban renewal,” he helped develop Minnesota’s Heritage Preservation Act and establish the city’s preservation program. His activities as director of urban design for the City of Dallas in the 1970s helped revive urban neighborhoods and save the Texas School Book Depository. In Saint Paul, he served as president (1981–2006) of the Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation. Under his leadership, this became a national model of successful central city revitalization through public-private partnerships, recognized nationally with a Presidential Award for Design Excellence (1985) and a National Trust Honor Award (1995).

Lu is known for his expertise in blending old and new design. He has served as a consultant and advisor on numerous public and private projects in the United States and abroad, including the Beijing Olympics, Taiwan’s Planning Program, Singapore’s Chinatown and the reconstruction of south central Los Angeles after the 1992 riots.

In his recent book, The Tao of Urban Rejuvenation: Building a Livable Creative Urban Village (2013), Lu draws on his long career to present both visionary and practical guidance on how to revitalize and enhance urban areas.
Some perceive preservationists as people who merely hold back change and say, “No, you can’t do that.” I believe preservationists can be the ones who advocate for change, say “yes,” find appropriate ways to adapt and reuse historic buildings, attract new development that complements the old, and give new life to cities.

For many years, I have been privileged to participate as a planning and development professional in rejuvenation projects making use of public-private partnerships in cities in America and Asia. While preserving the old and attracting the new, I make certain they complement each other. While every community (and country) is unique, and there is no one process or solution for all, I have witnessed what works—and what doesn’t—in many scenarios.

Approaching each new city and project with an open mind, I have found new opportunities and challenges. I draw from past experience and envision the future. What I learned in Minneapolis informed my work in Dallas, and what I learned in Minneapolis and Dallas and elsewhere informed my work in Saint Paul. What I have learned in America has informed my work in cities across the sea and vice versa.

I’ve learned through experience that it is possible for visionary and dedicated public and private partners to turn disinvested and deteriorated urban areas into vibrant urban villages—as our work in Lowertown in Saint Paul has shown.

**THE REJUVENATION OF LOWERTOWN**

**An Ambitious Start**

In 1978 Saint Paul Mayor George Latimer sought the McKnight Foundation’s support to create a partnership to rejuvenate Lowertown, which covers 16 blocks of historic buildings, abandoned rail yards and riverfront, making up one-third of downtown Saint Paul. He asked for $10 million and promised to generate $100 million in investment, adding housing and creating jobs—which were ambitious goals, as the area had attracted only $22 million in investment in the 10 previous years. Nevertheless, the foundation generously set aside $10 million of program-related investments (PRI) as loans to support these social and economic development goals and wisely
asked for the creation of an independent corporation to lead this effort. Thus, Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation (LRC) was established, and in 1979 I was asked to join.

**Preservation of Architectural Heritage**

Preserving Saint Paul’s architectural heritage was one of our basic missions, though historic designation was controversial. Some opposed it; they were concerned that imposing design review would impede development.

We quietly surveyed the historic buildings in Lowertown and had the area designated as a National Register Historic District. Afterward, we immediately publicized the historic tax credits for which building owners now qualified. This quickly attracted developers from near and far.

In one case, we hosted the visit of a development team from Philadelphia. We gave them a tour, shared with them our market survey and introduced them to our mayor. Soon after, they bought three buildings, investing $65 million without any financing from the city or LRC. A number of other developers followed. Thus, many empty warehouses were rehabilitated to provide a variety of housing for diverse ages and incomes, including low and moderate incomes. Today a variety of businesses, large and small, have also moved here.
Restoration of Union Depot

Behind every Lowertown building there is a story. Its rejuvenation is a complex dance of design and development. How the Union Depot was finally restored after 40 years of vacancy is a long story that began with historic designation, which saved the building from demolition.

The building was threatened by the proposed expansion of the post office, which had acquired the Union Depot land earlier. We prevented this with the help of an aggressive media effort. Our next challenge was to relocate the post office to a suburb. Our first effort to do so ran into strong opposition, which almost killed the depot project. Fortunately, our partners on the County LOCATE Task Force didn’t give up. With the assistance of a visionary congresswoman, we continued the fight, and the post office finally found a site.

Following fundraising at local, state and federal levels; acquisition of the depot concourse and the depot site; and the rehabilitation of the depot head house and concourse building, the Union Depot was finally restored. At the same time, we worked with Amtrak and Light Rail Transit to finally return Amtrak service to the depot and to initiate light rail service there connecting Lowertown with downtown Minneapolis.

Creative Community

From the beginning we were concerned about whether we would chase away artists when redevelopment proceeded, as has happened in so many cities.

We made three attempts to build artist housing and failed three times for different reasons. However, we didn’t give up, and finally succeeded on the fourth attempt, creating a 30-unit artist cooperative on the riverfront. After that, three other projects quickly followed. Today more than 500 artists are living and working in Lowertown.

Since then we have attracted many arts organizations to Lowertown, including the Jerome Foundation, State Arts Board, Public Art Saint Paul, Springboard for the Arts, Zeitgeist Quartet and Nautilus Theatre. More recently, through the LRC Future Fund...
(described later), we helped the **Baroque Room**, the **Bedlam Theatre** and the **Minnesota Museum of American Arts** to join Lowertown.

Through our Cyber Village vision, we encouraged the expansion of our fiber optic network and attracted internet service and content providers. We successfully recruited **Twin Cities Public Television (TPT)** and helped it design and build headquarter and studio facilities in Lowertown. With its successful fundraising, TPT has completely renovated and upgraded its facility and greatly expanded its program. The super-computer firm Cray and a number of biomedical firms have also chosen to locate in Lowertown. All these efforts have helped us to build and nurture a creative community.

**Livable Community**

Building a variety of housing to meet diverse needs and achieving rejuvenation without gentrification were our goals. Through collaborative efforts with partners, we succeeded in keeping 25 percent of our housing affordable. Providing a variety of places for people to meet, play and exercise was important—such places have helped us create a livable and equitable community.

Mears Park, neglected for many years, was known as an “abandoned brickyard,” attracting only winos and the homeless. We surveyed residents, recruited a nationally known sculptor, worked with the park staff and the community to develop a creative new design, raised needed funds, and rebuilt it. People really love it as a place to walk, to meet, to hold concerts. Many volunteer gardeners took over much of the park space along the creek. The transformation has generated $250 million in investment around the park, including new offices, housing, restaurants and a YMCA.

With the McKnight Foundation’s support, LRC worked with Saint Paul’s East Side neighborhood and created the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary. Actively working with 25 partnering organizations in the East Side and Lowertown neighborhoods, we jointly engaged in
visioning efforts, raised $8.5 million and reclaimed a former rail yard to create a large, beautiful park joining the two neighborhoods.

The Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary was developed on land that is part of a vital bird flyway and a sacred site for Native Americans. The land had been used for rail operations, and in the 1970s the area was largely abandoned and contaminated. After working with other partners, we secured federal funding to purchase the land and sponsored cleanup events to remove tons of debris. A federal brownfield cleanup grant and other sources provided funds to remove contamination and cover the area with four feet of clean soil. We have since connected 85 miles of regional trails through a hub there, and acquired the land and a building next to the sanctuary. The joint task force is now actively envisioning possibilities, raising funds, and building a new interpretive center in the sanctuary to showcase the natural and cultural history of the area.

Connecting the sanctuary to Lower Landing Park along the Mississippi River is another important goal. When the two are linked, it will truly beautify the Mississippi, making the two neighborhoods even more livable and attractive.

**Sustainable Community**

Preservation action helps us build sustainable communities. A 1999 General Services Administration study found that thick-walled historic buildings, properly rehabilitated, consume 27 percent less energy than their modern counterparts. A study for the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation found that constructing a 50,000-square-foot building uses 80 billion BTUs or 640,000 gallons of oil. Its demolition creates 4,000 tons of waste requiring 26 railroad boxcars for removal to already overflowing landfill sites.

Through sustainable conservation measures, LRC preserved 3.3 million square feet of warehouse buildings, equivalent to saving 5,280 billion BTUs or 42 million gallons of oil. The demolition of those buildings would have created 264,000 tons or 1,716 boxcars of landfill waste.

Besides extensive rehabilitation of existing buildings, LRC also worked with the city government in the establishment of hot-water district heating and in supporting the production and sale of locally
grown food by finding a site and seeking funding for a farmers' market. The hot-water district heating system has since expanded to downtown and the state capitol building, serving more than 31 million square feet of buildings or 80 percent of downtown and adjacent areas. Given that success, a district cooling system was launched in 1993; it now serves 60 percent of downtown buildings.

LRC, from the very beginning, wanted to build a new urban village, rather than just work on discrete projects. Through visionary and persistent public-private partnership, LRC overcame the disinvestment challenge and generated $1 billion in new investments by 2012. The result, as Twin Cities Public Television called it in its new film, is *Lowertown: The Rise of a New Urban Village*. In 2006 the LRC board, believing our mission was largely completed, decided to close the corporation and used its remaining funding to create a grant program, the Lowertown Future Fund, to nurture the community we have built.

**SHARING OUR EXPERIENCE**

Our work has attracted national and international interest. Urban affairs specialist and syndicated columnist Neal Peirce wrote a column, which appeared in 150 newspapers, projecting Lowertown as a national model for building the urban village. Our work was also cited in several books in English, Chinese and Japanese, including *Reinventing Government* by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Global Environment and Metropolis* in Japanese, and *Building Cities with Shan Shui (Mountain and Water) Spirit* in Chinese.

LRC won a number of awards, including the Presidential Design Award, which we happily shared with our partners. We have hosted mayors, planners and foundation executives from many cities and countries, including Margaret Thatcher’s advisor, French commissioners and Mayor Zhu Rongji of Shanghai (who later became premier of China).

Four governments and foundations in four U.S. and Canadian cities expressed an interest in forming partnership instruments similar to LRC. We were happy to share with them our experiences and see them raise a combined $52 million for the rejuvenation of
their downtowns and riverfronts. One of the cities has since generated $300 million in investment in its downtown and riverfront.

President Obama paid a visit to the Union Depot in February 2014 and announced a $300 billion national transportation plan. He praised the restoration of Union Depot as a good national model of a multimodal terminal. His plan has since won congressional approval.

**EXAMINING THE PROCESS**

Before the closing of LRC, I was asked by my board to share our experiences by writing a book. Building livable, creative, equitable and sustainable cities is a common community goal, but drawing from several disciplines to achieve it may pose a considerable challenge. Public-private partnership is popular today, but making it work in a complex world is difficult. Therefore, it is worthwhile to share what we have learned.

In my book, I trace LRC’s experience in creating a vision, in marketing an area that has suffered decades of disinvestment, in taking calculated risks to attract new investment, in negotiating complex loans and guarantees, and in leveraging resources—every dollar LRC supplied in gap financing generated $20 of public and private investment in Lowertown, on average. I explain how to form complex partnerships with many in the public and private sectors. We tried to avoid competition while fostering collaboration, sharing common goals while marshaling diverse resources. I describe our multidisciplinary approach in guiding diverse project designs and creating a sense of place. I cite many specific cases of envisioning, marketing and financing efforts and the lessons we learned in these cases over the past two decades.

In the book, I also share the difficulties—LRC’s successes and failures—of working to advance the long-term interest of a community. Having seen the destruction caused by “urban renewal”—in which some cities have become formless and their people rootless—we strived for urban rejuvenation without gentrification (as stated earlier, 25 percent of Lowertown’s housing is affordable); for balancing economic development with social advancement; for preserving the old while welcoming the new; and, above all, for
building livable, creative, equitable and sustainable cities.

With my bicultural background, I owe much of my understanding to both the East and the West. While I treasure Kevin Lynch’s teaching on city design via many fine books including The Image of the City, I also value the wisdom of Lao-Tzu’s teaching. For example, he spoke of Tao as “creating without possessing, acting without expecting, guiding without interfering.” I believe this philosophy can also help us deal with the complex process of planning and development.

I titled my book The Tao of Urban Rejuvenation: Building a Livable Creative Urban Village. Tao means “way” in Chinese. I tried to share how the two cultures have profoundly influenced my works.

Seeing the rapid growth and changes in China, I was pleased to be invited to Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai to share with their planners and political leaders our planning and development experiences in America. I urged them to take measures to address the environmental challenges while guiding the explosive development. Serving as planning advisor to the mayor of Beijing, I was invited to be a jury member for the International Design Competition for the Beijing Olympics; I urged the city government to respect the Shan Shui (mountain and water) spirit of the Chinese city by protecting the environment and saving the courtyard houses and architectural heritage.

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THE NEXT URBAN VILLAGE

The building of a healthy, vibrant and sustainable city or neighborhood has no completion date—as one phase ends, another has already begun. We are happy to see the continued growth and development of Lowertown, including new housing, new development. The Tao of Urban Rejuvenation: Building a Livable Creative Urban Village draws examples and insights from the redevelopment of Saint Paul’s Lowertown.

IMAGE COURTESY OF BENTZ/THOMPSON/RIETOW AND LOWERTOWN REDEVELOPMENT CORPORATION.
businesses, art galleries, new high tech and a new stadium, even when the nation is in recession. Annual art crawls, music and other events draw large crowds.

A new generation of leaders has emerged from Lowertown and in the city of Saint Paul. Through the LRC Future Fund, we helped them envision the future in the Greater Lowertown Master Plan, which was approved by the city council in 2013. The future is only limited by our own imagination.

To sum up, I believe that preservationists can lead preservation action and support urban rejuvenation through sensitive envisioning, creative marketing, disciplined financing and collaborative public-private partnerships—thus giving new life to our cities and building livable, creative and sustainable communities. FJ

WEIMING LU is a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners (FAICP), an Honorary Member of the American Institute of Architects (Hon. AIA) and a Fellow of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. Currently he is a member of the International China Planning Network and the Chinese American Committee of 100 and an advisor to the Metropolitan Design Center of the University of Minnesota's College of Design, the U.S./China Friendship Association (Minnesota Chapter) on the Chinese Garden Project, the Saint Paul Foundation on the Lowertown Future Fund and the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota. Lu is also an accomplished Chinese calligrapher whose work has been exhibited in China, Japan and the United States. Excellent sources for further information about Lu's career include Antoinette J. Lee, “An Interview with Weiming Lu,” CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship 5, no. 2 (Summer 2008) and archival collections of the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota Anderson Library.

TAKEAWAY
Click here for an Interview with Weiming Lu in CRM Journal