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URBANISM

for the Local Church

Urban Revitalization and
Mission to the City

Sean Benesh

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Epoch Center | Portland, Oregon

*Urbanism for the Local Church: Urban Revitalization and
Mission to the City*

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Contents

1. Back to the City	5
2. Urban Revitalization	9
3. The Story of Downtowns	15
4. The Appeal of the City	25
5. Missiological Implications for Urban Revitalization	30
<i>Bibliography</i>	34
<i>About the Author</i>	36
<i>About the Epoch Center</i>	37

Chapter 1

Back to the City

Inner-city Portland certainly lives up to its reputation as a cool, hip, trendy, bohemian enclave. This morning as I sit in Heart Coffee Roasters at one of the various epicenters of Portland bohemian culture, the indie music is pumping through the speakers from a converted old-but-new record player, I see traces and evidences of urban revitalization all around me. This city lives up to its hype of a vibrant central city, with its artisan economy, doable multi-modal transportation infrastructure, hipster populace, and a continuously growing trend of more people moving back into the heart of the city.

Portland is representative of numerous districts and neighborhoods within cities that are revitalizing. From Brooklyn on the east coast to SoMa in San Francisco on the west coast (and seemingly every city in between), there are seismic changes at hand that are reorienting,

restructuring, and recalibrating cities. Not only that, but there has been an overall cultural shift in the values of Americans when it comes to where to live and how to get around. “For the first time in modern history, the number of people living in the city’s downtown area grew faster than the population of its suburbs.”¹ These changes are felt and experienced more acutely in certain places over others, but it’s more than likely that your city is in the midst of this shift as well. In each city and district this phenomenon looks and feels different from the massive Inner Harbor revitalization project in Baltimore that has transformed the city, to the continued transformation of downtowns in cities such as Omaha or on a smaller scale like Mississippi Avenue in North Portland.

A life cycle of growth, stagnation, decline, and decay has been played out in numerous central cities, and in many cases we have now seen (or are seeing) new growth or revitalization in these same places. Brooklyn, which lost the Dodgers to Los Angeles in the late 1950s, now has an NBA franchise and a new stadium that are reflective of the reality that “Brooklyn is back.” Kay Hymowitz notes that Brooklyn’s transformation is the cumulative effect of numerous decisions, policy changes, and demographic shifts. In her article “How Brooklyn Got Its Groove Back” in the *City Journal* she writes:

¹ Case Western Reserve University, “Moving to the City? Join the Crowd.”

The third reason for Brooklyn's modern revival was the arrival of a new generation of gentrifiers, a large group of college-educated folks who, like the previous generation, found the urban, neighborly, and safer streets of the borough mightily attractive. The number of college-educated residents in Williamsburg increased by 80 percent between 2000 and 2008. Today, 30 percent of the residents of Park Slope, Cobble Hill, and Boerum Hill have master's degrees or higher.²

Sharon Zukin notes that this is a far cry from what Brooklyn used to be: "For most of the twentieth century Brooklyn had a sorry reputation as a place where artists and writers were born but were eager to escape from."³

The world we live in is influenced by what happens in cities. As Christians we dwell in cities around the world and wrestle with the implications of what it means to follow Christ in the city and plant churches. While there are numerous common denominators in place, there are also distinctive changes in cities that warrant a deeper look, exploration, analysis, and application for mission and church planting.

For the most part, I will narrow the focus of my analysis to cities in North American contexts. I will address specific issues, trends, and movements that are reshaping North American cities (as well as global

² Hymowitz, "How Brooklyn Got Its Groove Back," para, 20.

³ Zukin, *Naked City*, 39.

cities). Since space is limited, this will not be an exhaustive list. However, these are topics of relevance to our cities (and admittedly of personal interest to me) that need further theological reflection in order to extract the missiological implications for today.

Chapter 2

Urban Revitalization

Cities are not what they were even thirty years ago. Cleveland, at the turn of the twentieth century was the fifth largest city in the US, one of the epicenters of the steel industry, and had positioned itself to be a major influencer nationally and globally.¹ It was a city with a bright future; seemingly the only place to go was up. It was a proud city. It was a city on the move. However, as the steel industry waned, many of the steel mills closed, tens of thousands left the city, whether to the suburbs or to other cities, and Cleveland was hollowed out, a vacant wasteland of sorts. The urban core was laid waste with

¹ “Great industrial cities not only grew larger; as their boundaries expanded, they also became more complex, with distinct areas for work and homes and different residential areas for workers, managers and professionals, and capitalists.” Florida, *The Great Reset*, 20-21.

aging substandard housing, under-performing schools,² and a bleak economic outlook.

This once proud city had lost its pride and swagger and has endured a history of painful exoduses, whether it be the steel industry, the Browns leaving for Baltimore in 1995, or LeBron James taking his talents to Miami in 2010. *Washington Post* writer Michael Lee commented about the impact of just one player leaving an already vulnerable city: “James’s decision to leave became the latest letdown for a city that knows despair, having experienced several major disappointments.”³ Luckily, LeBron came back and brought hope (and a championship) back with him, not only for the franchise, but also for the city.

The India Street neighborhood in Portland, Maine, is the oldest residential neighborhood⁴ in the city that today sits adjacent to the downtown and waterfront. The small neighborhood was a blue-collar African-American community prior to 1840. It later became a Jewish and Italian neighborhood. Construction of the Franklin Arterial cut the neighborhood off from the downtown and the Old Port. Like a flower that’s been picked,

² Including the incident where the roof of one of the schools collapsed during the school day. CNN.com, “High school gym roof collapses in Cleveland.”

³ Lee, “LeBron James will leave Cleveland Cavaliers to join Dwyane Wade, Chris Bosh with the Miami Heat,” para. 10.

⁴ It got its start in the 17th Century and was called Broad Street. It was renamed India Street in 1837.

eventually the neighborhood began to wither as it was no longer accessible to the nutrients of the city.

It was and is a mixture of residential homes,⁵ commercial buildings, and an industrial area. Many of the homes are in disrepair, substandard, and/or low-income housing even though there are some destination restaurants and other signs of hope cropping up such as higher density residential units now under construction. Hopes were running high a few years ago when a politician and her billionaire husband moved into the neighborhood and bought up a bunch of property. To the dismay of many residents, however, these properties sit undeveloped as the neighborhood continues to slide downward. A few pockets of growth and renewal are happening but only on a small scale. However, the neighborhood, thanks to numerous initiatives, is on the verge of a great comeback.

Both these cases are examples of neighborhoods or cities that have gone through numerous life stages; from vibrancy to decay, from decay to blight, and now from blight to ... hope? They are on the comeback, each in their own way. Cleveland has gained a lot of momentum through its Gateway District initiative in conjunction with the baseball stadium that was built in the 1990s. This is an example of a city utilizing a sports stadium as a catalyst for redevelopment and reinvestment. In this

⁵ Greek Revival, Italianate, and Second Empire styles.

case, it proved to be one of the better initiatives. “Over 1,600 residents currently call the Gateway District home and take advantage of City living at an affordable price. Close to sports complexes, restaurants, downtown employment opportunities, theatre and nightlife, living in the Gateway District means you can walk to work or walk home after a night on the town. You’re in the heart of Cleveland, so an authentic, urban living experience is yours to enjoy.”⁶

From 1990 to 2010, the downtown population practically doubled, growing from about 4,600 to more than 9,000. As developers and government agencies pour more than \$5 billion into attractions, businesses and residences, young people are flocking to the city to become part of the increased activity. Looking for an affordable urban lifestyle, young people in their 20s and early 30s are on waiting lists for apartments. Old, empty offices are being converted to living space, and developers are having a hard time keeping up with demand.⁷

The India Street neighborhood in Portland, Maine, is poised to make significant leaps forward with mixed-use redevelopment underway and more to come. The neighborhood has become a pilot community of Sustain

⁶ Historic Gateway Neighborhood Corporation + Gateway District, “Live,” para. 1.

⁷ “Moving to the City? Join the Crowd.”

Southern Maine. “The India Street Neighborhood is a historically rich area of the Portland peninsula that has a surprising amount of space for development or redevelopment considering its proximity to downtown. We will be helping the City, the India Street Neighborhood organization and other interested parties develop a vision for the area that will embrace housing and job growth while respecting the area’s history, scale, and its current vibe.”⁸ The neighborhood is on the verge of a more thorough and transformative renewal.

These are two examples of a multitude of neighborhoods, districts, and cities on an upswing across the country. Some have been building momentum for decades while others are gingerly leaving the starting blocks. But one thing is certain: there is a growing rediscovery of downtowns across the country whether in large cities such as the Financial District in Manhattan that is gaining more residential housing as it transitions from a nine-to-five district to a 24-7 district, to projects in small cities like Uptown in Normal, Illinois.

As part of my work a couple of years ago on a sustainable cities project, we engaged with a cohort of cities across the country to help them implement sustainability plans which were centered around the theme of downtown revitalization. As a result I pored over quite a number of plans from these cities and others

⁸ Sustain Southern Maine, “Portland: India Street neighborhood,” para. 1.

both large and small. The common denominator, whether making downtown Waco, Texas, more pedestrian-friendly through infill and densification, or green infrastructure plans in the SoBro neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky, is that cities are involved in a new arms race of sorts to transform their cores. Which raises the question: What are the missiological implications of these changes?

Chapter 3

The Story of Downtowns

We cannot broach the topic of urban revitalization without addressing the topic of equity. Behind the veneer of these renewal projects are oftentimes lower-income ethnic minorities becoming even more marginalized. Joel Kotkin, in an article entitled, “The Hollow Boom of Brooklyn: Behind the Veneer of Gentrification, Life Gets Worse for Many,” writes about how, while the city is being held up as a bastion of coolness, there is also a pushed-aside reality behind the veneer. “So while artisanal cheese shops serve the hipsters and high-end shops thrive, one in four Brooklynites receives food stamps.”¹ Richard Greenwald, professor of sociology and history at St. Joseph’s College in New York, observes, “But, let’s be honest, this discussion of Brooklyn (the Brooklyn of culture and arts, where novelists sit in cafes; the Brooklyn that

¹ Kotkin, “The Hollow Boom of Brooklyn,” para, 13.

Colson Whitehead wrote about in 2008) really is not the borough, but only a few neighborhoods: Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Bushwick, Bed-Sty and Fort Greene/Clinton Hill. These neighborhoods have gripped our imagination for almost 20 years, while the rest are absent from consciousness.”²

How did we get to this point? How did Brooklyn, Wicker Park in Chicago, or Northeast Portland transition from what has been described as “seedy, unsafe, war zones” of substandard housing, crime, and social unrest to now the epicenter of what would be deemed as successful urban revitalization? This is a far cry from where these neighborhoods were at even just a few years ago. In 1997 Harvard economist Michael Porter wrote, “The economic distress of America’s inner-cities may be the most pressing issue facing the nation. The lack of business and jobs in disadvantaged urban areas fuels not only a crushing cycle of poverty but also crippling social problems, such as drug abuse and crime. And, as the inner cities continue to deteriorate, the debate on how to aid them grows increasingly divisive.”³ How did we transition from the downtowns as the economic and social hub of the city to urban decay and blight to revitalization and renewal?

² Greenwald, “The Lifecycle of a ‘Cool’ Neighborhood,” para, 9.

³ Porter, “The Competitive Advantages of the Inner City,” 284.

By the end of the 19th Century downtowns were still *the* place. They were the central focus of cities culturally and economically. This was where one went for shopping, the theater, to buy a wedding dress, and so on. It also housed the bulk of the city's economic activity. It was a chaotic conglomeration of business and residential.⁴ A lot of the heavy industry and warehouse districts sat adjacent to the downtowns or in close proximity.

While post-WWII suburbanization, an expanding freeway system, and a growing shift towards an automobile-centric lifestyle certainly began to diminish the role of the downtown, the out-migration began in earnest in the early 20th Century.⁵ Michael Burayidi notes that, "Since the 1920s, there has been a steady decline in the economic health of downtowns in the United States. The middle class and businesses that once provided the thriving economic force of cities have

⁴ "Most city dwellers tended to live where they worked: craftsman and artisanal producers lived on top of or close to their shops, lawyers and doctors used their homes as offices. Pubs and cafes became neighborhood social centers or meeting places for subcommunities within large and diverse urban populations, a purpose they still serve today." *The Great Reset*, 21.

⁵ "The traditional model used to describe downtowns is that of the monocentric city, which exhibited a hub-and-spoke streetcar system, centralized retail with commercial and industrial uses in the central business district (CBD) surrounded by compact residential areas. Since World War II, there has been a major shift in the composition of metropolitan areas to a polycentric form, with sprawling commercial strips and housing developments filling much of the space between cities and spawning new business districts." Faulk, "The Process and Practice of Downtown Revitalization," 630.

moved to the surrounding suburban fringe, leaving in their wake, lower income households, vacant lots, and abandoned buildings.”⁶

Burayidi goes on to explain the changing dynamics in American downtowns that caused them to hollow out and lose their revered status. Land in the city center was difficult and expensive to assemble for developers whereas suburban settings were wide open for development. And while downtowns were shaped by pedestrian activity and mass transit, the federal highway program and homeownership subsidies for the middle class accelerated suburbanization.⁷ Not only did people move out of the city center, but so did businesses and economic activity.

Initially there was little cause for concern as many assumed that suburbanites would simply drive back into the downtown,⁸ but the decentralization of economic activity from the downtown left in its wake a whole

⁶ Burayidi, *Downtowns*, 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fogelson, *Downtown*, 317-318.

litany of economic and social ills.⁹ As the middle class and businesses left the city those left behind tended to be poorer minorities.

These seismic shifts, like earthquakes ripping apart the urban landscape, began happening at an accelerating rate. All of these movements and transitions fed off of one another. As people moved out of the city in search of more space and better jobs, the people who were left in the central cities oftentimes were the ones who were not able to be as mobile. As a result, as Burayidi noted above, those left in the central cities tended to be lower-income ethnic minorities. Not only that, but the old urban fabric was deteriorating as buildings were falling apart due to age and neglect. This made the middle class move out with more rapidity. What was left behind were lower income minorities in deteriorating central cities.

⁹ “During the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, many Americans began to have second thoughts about residential dispersal. In their efforts to account for the sorry state of the central business district, they were struck by two unexpected (and extremely ominous) developments. One was that a large and growing number of people who had moved to the periphery were no longer going downtown – or were going downtown less often. Instead they were patronizing the outlying business districts, shopping at chain stores, doing business at branch banks, and relaxing at neighborhood restaurants and movie theaters. The other development was that the movement outward was highly selective. The upper and middle classes were moving to the periphery and the suburbs. But the lower class, many of whose members belonged to one or another of the nation’s ethnic and racial minorities, were staying put – some because they did not want to move, others because they could not afford to. More often than not, these people lived within a long walk or short ride of the central business district. But they had little money to spend in the downtown stores and specialty shops, little reason to retain downtown lawyers and accountants, and little cause to deal with downtown banks and insurance companies.” *Ibid.*, 318.

These transitions were coupled with a loss of tax revenues, so that the cost of amenities far exceeded what was generated through taxes.¹⁰ The result was a large segment of low-income minorities living in deteriorating central cities with limited access to jobs, good schools and the necessary amenities. This created the conditions for social unrest which further solidified the dichotomy that cities were “bad” and suburbs were “good.”

Alexander von Hoffman in his book *House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods* follows the storyline of the South Bronx. What was once a growing vibrant city of immigrants in the early 20th century had fallen so precipitously that by the 70s, “The South Bronx went on to become first the national, then an international icon of America's worst slum.”¹¹ Many local residents felt powerless to reverse the changes sweeping over the neighborhood and ripping it apart. Even emergency services such as police and fire had been cut off. It was anarchy and chaos.

David Harvey in his article “The Right to the City” writes:

The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire. We need to be sure we can live with our own creations (a problem for every planner, architect and utopian thinker). But the right to

¹⁰ *Downtowns*, 2.

¹¹ von Hoffman, *House by House, Block by Block*, 19.

remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights. The sheer pace and chaotic forms of urbanization throughout the world have made it hard to reflect on the nature of this task. We have been made and re-made without knowing exactly why, how, wherefore and to what end. How then, can we better exercise this right to the city?¹²

The city has always been a contested space and has never been free of “confusions, conflicts, violence.”¹³ For many in the inner city this was an everyday reality. In Harvey’s words, they didn’t have the “right to the city” in terms of equal and equitable access. Various programs to remedy living conditions only exasperated the plight of the poor. “Intolerable housing conditions in old and very old buildings in the growing cities, coupled with the wish to make ‘better use’ of central urban land and drive the poor out of sight, gave birth to the idea of slum clearance.”¹⁴

Too often what replaced the housing of the poor did not benefit them. Instead, many were displaced to make way for amenities catering to the middle class. “The slum areas were frequently replaced by shopping centers, office buildings, and cultural and entertainment centers,

¹² Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 939.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Carmon, “Three generations of urban renewal policies,” 145-146.

all of which were in high demand in the booming years that followed World War II.”¹⁵

It was when these inner city neighborhoods and districts hit rock bottom that things began slowly to turn around. Various attempts were made, and continue to be made, to remedy these ailing and blighted areas ranging from massive slum clearance programs to urban revitalization initiatives, and from public / private partnerships to small-scale private investment building by building and block by block. This is also coupled with the process of gentrification.

What changed was our perception of the city. Was it the realization that sprawling low-density automobile-centric suburbs were not as livable as we initially thought? Maybe there was something in those old buildings in the central cities that still housed appeal and an identity that we did not want to be divorced from. Jane Jacobs was certainly prophetic in this regard. “Williamsburg’s growing prominence as a hipster locale during the 1990s confirms Jane Jacob’s idea that old buildings with low rents will act as incubators of new activities.”¹⁶

It is interesting to see how cities are tackling the process of renewing their downtowns and central cities. Some cities are well ahead of the curve while others are

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁶ *Naked City*, 38.

just entering into the fray after decades of clearing old buildings only to replace them with super-block projects that are not pedestrian-friendly. The reality is that decades of neglect had rendered many of these districts and neighborhoods at risk. “As Jerrold Loeb, a Chicago architect and developer, pointed out in the mid 1940s, conditions in the central city were pretty bad. And nowhere in the central city were they worse than in old residential neighborhoods surrounding the central business district. Here were the slums and ‘blighted areas.’”¹⁷

To jumpstart many of these projects means that areas would have to be deemed “blighted” (eminent domain) in order to relocate residents, raze the properties, and start anew. In the hands of the right people this can be a helpful process, but in the hands of the greedy it became a way to make money at the expense of those who were forced to vacate. It all hinged on how one defined “blight.”

The definition remained imprecise and ambiguous because most viewed “blight” not as synonymous with “slum” but as a set conditions, often analogized as a disease or a cancer, that resulted in slums: A blighted area was “on the down grade, which has not reached the slum stage” or “a potential slum” or “an insidious malady that attacks urban residential

¹⁷ Downtown, 319.

districts ... first as a barely noticeable deterioration and then progresses gradually through many stages toward a final condition known as the slum.”¹⁸

Once the “blight” label was applied it became a green light for redevelopment, but it was not without controversy or mixed motives.¹⁹

As city after city, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, begin to shed their “industrial city” moniker as our economy continues to move towards Post-Fordism²⁰ or a creative economy, many of these cities continue to rebuild and renew their urban landscape. Many sites connected to steel or heavy industry closed down and for decades these old plants and mills stood vacant sort of like the fossils of an extinct dinosaur.

But it was precisely this economic change which was and is one of the sparks of urban revitalization. These economic shifts mean more and more of our economy is

¹⁸ Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 190.

¹⁹ “What makes such local discretion all the more troubling is the fact that the designation of blight often occurred on a proposal-by-proposal basis, at the behest of developers. Blighting, in other words, was driven not by objective urban conditions but by the prospect of private investment. In practice, this meant that investment was actually steered away from the most dismal urban conditions as private interests sought the ‘blight that’s right’ – an area with at least some of the conditions needed to make a plausible cause for subsidized redevelopment, but not so run-down as to put private investment at risk.” Ibid., 197.

²⁰ “Fordist affluence was increasingly manifest in suburban homeownership, not the inner-city neighborhood.” Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia*, 41.

being geared towards the creative, knowledge-based, or artisan economy. What is noteworthy here is that cities, in efforts to revitalize their downtowns and city centers, are specifically, strategically, and unabashedly throwing their lot in with the creative class. Whether Wichita, Waco, Louisville, or Portland (Maine), their revitalization plans are predicated on wooing this socio-economic grouping—variously described as the creative class, hipsters, yupsters, and bohemians—into their city centers.

Richard Lloyd, in his book *Neo-Bohemia*, writes, “the role of cities as generative milieus for innovations of all sorts is crucial to understanding the reemergence of spaces that appeared to have outlived their usefulness in the wake of deindustrialization and the expansion of telematics and digital communication technologies, from the high-priced skyscrapers of the downtown to a gritty neo-bohemian neighborhood like Wicker Park.”²¹

²¹ Ibid., 44.

Chapter 4

The Appeal of the City

While I have purposely leap-frogged large segments of history and a great body of literature, what is apparent is that downtown revitalization is accelerating. There are a myriad of reasons why, and I am only briefly touching on a couple of them, such as the economic changes wrought on by deindustrialization, a movement towards a creative economy, and how this growing creative class workforce is helping to reshape cities. Not only that, but cities are reshaping themselves to attract this group of people who are mobile, white-collar, and have discretionary income. “Over the last three decades schemes to attract the wealthy middle classes back to the inner city have become central to urban redevelopment strategies.”¹

¹ Lees, “The Ambivalence of Diversity and the Politics of Urban Renaissance,” 613.

These strategies are more than simply wooing this middle class back into the city, but also capitalize on their consumption, lifestyle, and spending habits. “Urban revitalization strategies are aimed not just at attracting middle-class gentrifiers as resident taxpayers, but also at bringing them back to urban areas as consuming, and in that spending, visitors.”² This offers some insight into the catalytic nature of how this class is transforming cities, or how cities are transforming themselves to attract and retain hipsters, yupsters, and bohemians. This ranges from creating entertainment zones or districts, new stadiums and surrounding developments, cultural amenities such as museums and art galleries, and new housing. “Cities compete by making themselves distinctive places of consumption in which to satisfy new upscale demands for commercialized leisure, recreation and other experiences.”³

Portland, Oregon, is seen as the poster-child of a vibrant city center with our robust artisan economy, hipster and bohemian neighborhoods and districts, foodie culture, and a transportation infrastructure that includes bicycles, light rail, and streetcar. I have lost track of how many downtown revitalization plans for other cities I have looked at that included pictures and scenes from Portland whether snapshots of our

² *Ibid.*, 614.

³ *Ibid.*

streetcars, redeveloped Pearl District, or bicycle lanes. It would appear that many cities are attempting to emulate Portland.

The ways in which cities are attempting to revitalize their city centers are manifold. Some cities create large entertainment districts while at other times there are ad hoc entertainment zones that develop more organically.

Sports stadiums are used as “a catalyst for the *physical redevelopment* of portions of the city’s core.”⁴ Another method to catalyze urban redevelopment is the use of major events. “Cities often use the opportunity of staging events to undertake large-scale regeneration projects.”⁵ City after city across the continent have deployed some variation of this despite the data that shows their actual economic benefits are dubious. It is argued that the creative class, those who the city is most trying to woo, are quasi-resistant to such forms of entertainment and recreation.

Emphasis on big-ticket items like athletic stadiums locates the production of new urban space solely in the hands of developers and political elites. It obscures more evolutionary process of cultural development, including the expanding role played by traditional patterns of urban subcultural affiliation and artistic innovation in the postindustrial

⁴ Chapin, “Sports Facilities as Urban Redevelopment Catalysts,” 194.

⁵ Smith, *Events and Urban Regeneration*, 16.

economy—both in terms of local consumption offerings and the concentration of cultural and design enterprises.⁶

What immediately comes to the surface are issues of equity. Before we completely dismiss these efforts, programs, and initiatives as running roughshod over lower income families in degraded urban neighborhoods, we also need to consider the implications of revitalization. Because many of the middle class had previously vacated city centers along with businesses there was a drastic loss in tax revenue. A shrinking business sector, empty offices, and depreciating home values means less money for city services. This impacts schools as well. This in turn creates an avalanche effect that as neighborhoods continue to decline those who can move out do so which results in even less capital flowing through the neighborhood. The neighborhood continues to spiral downward. Conversely, when more people move back into urban neighborhoods housing values rise, new businesses start, and there is a sense of a “stabilizing affect” as more capital flows back in.

Today the tables have turned in many city centers across the country. There is this in-migration as the appeal for an “authentic” urban life woos many back to

⁶ Lloyd, “Neo-Bohemia,” 217.

the city. In a podcast on *The Urbanist*,⁷ Sharon Zukin was being interviewed and the discussion centered around the term “authentic.” As she writes in her book *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* and as she explains in the interview, “authenticity” is a very subjective term that has been co-opted by developers to creatively market retrofits in older urban neighborhoods.

Gritty is in vogue. As cities continue to morph and move away from being manufacturing-centered the city that is emerging in its place is more about consumption than production. Indeed production still is prevalent, and in many ways just as imbedded into the fabric of the city as before, but it is more knowledge- or creative-based, from tech start-up companies to design and fashion to publishing and so forth.

To talk about urban revitalization is a large umbrella that encompasses much. It goes beyond creating or recreating the built environment of the city; it encompasses housing, race relations, economics, real estate, community development, justice and equity, architecture, education, politics, and so much more.

The changing city of the 21st-century is more about cultural consumption. “Authenticity” is highly valued. This is one of the arguments made to explain the allure of gentrification. To live in a mixed-use old urban

⁷ Episode 78.

neighborhood that is still racially and socio-economically diverse is for many a desirable reality. Their desire is not to see the neighborhood change because it was these dynamics which drew them there to begin with. This is also why advocates like Jane Jacobs fought development because she saw the value of these “authentic” urban neighborhoods.

Today this search and need for authenticity comes in numerous forms. Another episode of *The Urbanist*,⁸ which focused on the topic of sex and the city, featured a segment on Amsterdam’s red light district. In the interview several tech and fashion entrepreneurs explained why they chose to relocate or start their businesses among prostitutes walking the streets day and night. Their presence coupled with an abundance of adult shops certainly gave this district an “authentic” and “gritty” sense about it. These features were precisely the allure these business owners were looking for. It is part of the search for authenticity in the city.

Urban revitalization in many ways capitalizes on this appeal for authenticity by creating what Sharon Zukin alludes to as a *faux authenticity* in *Naked City*.

I have a front-row seat to the transformative effects taking place in my own neighborhood in Portland. The Hollywood District has gone through significant changes in the short time frame we have lived here. Two

⁸ Episode 74.

new apartment buildings feature studio and one-bedroom units with no parking spaces. The owners apparently assume they'll attract 20-somethings who get around via bicycle, mass transit, or car-sharing. The neighborhood still retains a quirky grittiness to it and a certain level of "authenticity" with rundown bars and billiard halls, an abundance of panhandlers, and architecture that is bland and uninspiring. But all around are signs of change from new businesses that cater to the younger generation including bike shops, coffee shops, hip pizza places, and fashion stores.

These are the cities that we dwell in. The follow-up question is ... how do we respond? What is the role of Christians individually and the church, whether locally or collectively across the city in urban revitalization? How do these changes impact and influence church planting in the city? Responses vary greatly.

A quick perusal of social media reveals all of the ways, roles, or capacity that people I know are engaged in or involved in responding whether they realize it or not. Many church planters I know are moving into revitalizing urban neighborhoods across the country to start churches. That is not merely a Portland phenomenon even though we have a growing cluster of new churches in the city center, but it is happening in your city as well ... Williamsburg in Brooklyn, SoMa in San Francisco, Belltown or Capital Hill in Seattle,

LoDo in Denver, Kitsilano in Vancouver, and so forth. Churches like these cater to and appeal to the creative class. They are certainly categorized as being hip, trendy, hipster, techy, and the like. These kinds of churches are needed as they are reflective of the changing dynamics of these neighborhoods.

Other friends on social media are responding in a completely different manner. They are purposely moving into still depressed urban or first-ring suburban neighborhoods. Oftentimes these are the catch basins for the migrating urban poor who are no longer in the central city. Or these are central city neighborhoods that have still yet to revitalize. Many of these sprawling older inner-ring suburbs are lower density, full of ugly strip malls and convenience stores, and generally unappealing. I see Christians and churches there embodying a more incarnational presence with the neighborhood, seeking its *shalom*, and being more organic in their liturgical expression. They are intentionally identifying with the poor and marginalized. These kinds of churches are needed because they reflect the dynamics of their neighborhoods.

Chapter 5

Missiological Implications for Urban Revitalization

What then are the missiological implications for urban revitalization? As cities change and continue to reinvent themselves, what role should the church play in the process? Do we identify with those who're lower income and the marginalized? Do we identify with the growing creative class that cities are recalibrating themselves for? How does a church planter answer those questions?

The changes taking place in our cities, whether in North America or globally, are simply the latest aberrations of the evolving nature of cities. What that means is that with each change we are thrust into a new environment which we must seek to understand and interpret within a theological framework. That theological framework then informs us how we are to respond. Urban revitalization must be held up and critiqued through this framework. When we do so we recognize that God cares for the flourishing of cities.

Those who have lived through such inexplicable events as the burning of the South Bronx, the Watts riot in Los Angeles, or watched the river burning in Cleveland, do not look back with nostalgia upon decaying urban neighborhoods. Physical and economic revitalization in and of itself is a preferred future for many, but the side effects (e.g. displacement, loss of identity) are what creates the most controversy. Theologically, does God favor urban revitalization? If we hold to the notion that God is the author of cities who set forth healthy blueprints for their functionality, and since Genesis 1:28 is about human flourishing, then we can contend that certain aspect of urban revitalization is healthy and God-pleasing.

Sitting adjacent to the campus of Portland State University is the mostly unknown South Auditorium Urban Renewal Area. Once a robust Italian community on the south side of what currently is downtown Portland, it was razed and redeveloped as Portland's first urban renewal project: "1,573 residents of South Portland, including 336 families and 289 businesses were pushed out, and 445 buildings were demolished."¹ Today, the only reminder of this former working class ethnic neighborhood is The Church of St. Michael the Archangel (1894) and St. Mary's Academy (1859) which served this Catholic community. These buildings are

¹ Tackett, "South Auditorium Urban Renewal," para., 1.

surrounded by newer modern buildings and are all that remain of area that had been deemed “blighted.”

This one example thrusts to the forefront equity issues surrounding urban revitalization. In most cases it involved historically entrenched ethnic groups (both white and black) and their displacement. Not only that, but in using eminent domain, these usually poor neighborhoods were labeled as “blighted” which gave the government the authority to forcibly remove its residents, raze their homes and businesses, and build anew. Most often the hipster enclaves that are so beloved today with their creative class, renovated homes, and the like, are the products of a dubious past.

One of the topics that the discussion on human flourishing addresses is the nature of a civil society. If God is about human flourishing, which includes such things as culture and cities, how should we define it? Is there even a one-size-fits-all template for a civil society? Also, who gets to define what a civil society even is? That is a point of contention when it comes to such topics as foreign aid to poverty-stricken places like Lagos, Nigeria. What Western or Northern Whites may deem as a civil society may be completely devoid of local expressions of life and human flourishing. Simply because not everyone is running around with iPhones or watching reality TV shows on 42-inch flat panel

televisions does not mean they are any less “civil” than we are.

Who gets to determine when an area is blighted and in need of renewal? A quick perusal of urban revitalization projects in the US reveals that there was much money to be made. Frequently this was at the expense of the poor who were “in the way” of development. City after city across the country and world we find this same phenomenon taking place whether in Brooklyn, Mumbai, or Beijing.

My intent is not to offer a long discourse on the nuances of a civil society, eminent domain, blight, and the economics of urban revitalization, but to simply point out that there are multiple actors and components involved in the process. It is not as clear-cut as an empty dilapidated urban neighborhood, devoid of people, being bulldozed, and in its place new housing or businesses going in. Each space and place in the city is contested, each with their own ethnic, economic, political, environmental, and spiritual undertones and overtones.

A common theme throughout Scripture is God’s preferential treatment of the poor. How do we reconcile this with urban revitalization? Are they mutually compatible? Are there such things as urban renewal projects that create space for the poor? The Pearl district in Portland has been an attempt to rectify this by setting

aside 30 to 40 percent of the new housing in this swank district for affordable housing.

The point is that urban revitalization is at the forefront of many cities' attempts to renew and revitalize struggling urban neighborhoods. On the surface this can be healthy and helpful to cities seeking to remake and reinvent themselves in a bid to boost their overall economic outlook. But there are also downsides in that these same projects usually tend to cater to the white-collar creative class which can make these new zones homogeneous and exclusionary.

How is the church to respond? For those of you who are planting in the heart of the city or in the process of moving there ... what will you do? How does this ebook help you better understand your city, how to exegete your neighborhood, and in turn plant a life-giving gospel-focused church that seeks the transformation of urban people and places?

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About the Epoch Center

We are a group of urbanists. Not only that, but we love and care about the cities we live in. As cities continue to go through metamorphic changes we are convinced that we need to bring to light how urban form truly does shape the experience and lives of city dwellers.

Because of that, why not be about influencing the built environment of our cities? That is what Epoch Center is all about.

More than that, we believe that the gospel has much to say about the role of the church in advocating for a just city and society. We have worked with churches in cities across the US and Canada through our Studios.

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