

Precincts: Urban Renewal

Many total urban designs such as the Barbican or Rockefeller Center can be regarded as urban renewal projects and in the 1960s many 'slum' clearance and mass housing schemes certainly were. The concern here is for the schemes that involved the all-of-a-piece development of an existing urban precinct under one aegis without wholesale demolition. Such urban renewal processes generally involve the selective acquisition of properties by a municipal agency using the government power of eminent domain, the accumulation of small parcels into larger ones, and the selling of the parcels to a number of property developers for redevelopment according to specified guidelines. Sometimes, however, it is a private developer who has organized the accumulation of sites.

The power of governments to lead such activities varies from country to country. Much depends on the laws specifying how land is owned and can be acquired. In democratic countries the government power to acquire land is very much restricted by law but in totalitarian countries it is absolute. In many places a *laissez-faire* attitude towards development prevails. The two examples included here, however, represent coordinated efforts to enhance the quality of urban precincts.

The first case study is of a superblock scheme and the second the upgrading of a traditional suburban downtown. The first, Charles Center in Baltimore, is important because not only did it show what can be done in American cities in crisis but also because it had a major catalytic effect on the development of central Baltimore. The second, Glendale in California, shows what can be achieved by a couple of tenacious people with a vision of what might be and the stamina required to push ahead to fulfil it. It is also part of a larger phenomenon.

Many metropolises during the last quarter of the twentieth century experienced the development of the new suburban downtowns or 'edge cities' (Garreau, 1991). These developments were spurred by changes in accessibility based on new highways in particular, but also subway systems and now, reputedly, e-mail. Some of them have involved the redevelopment of suburban shopping streets into major centres (e.g. Bethesda, Maryland, and Walnut Creek, California). Others have seen the intensification of existing suburban shopping malls until they have the mixed-use attributes, and even the density, of existing downtown centres. Glendale is an example of an all-of-a-piece transformation of a decaying suburban centre into a lively 'downtown'.

Major references

- Frieden, Bernard J. and Lynne B. Sagalyn (1991). *Downtown, Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Garreau, Joel (1991). *Edge Cities: Life on the New Frontier*. New York: Doubleday.
- Melnick, Scott (1987). The urbanization of the suburbs. *Building Design Construction* 28 (3): 70–7.