

**REVITALIZING DOWNTOWN**

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CONGRESS  
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**Bio:** Roberta Brandes Gratz is an award-winning journalist and urban critic, lecturer and author of *The Living City: Thinking Small in a Big Way* and *Cities Back From the Edge: New Life for Downtown* (both John Wiley & Sons). A former staff member of *The New York Post*, Gratz has also written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Newsday*, *The Nation* and others. She is on the Board of the New York State Preservation League, is a founder of *The Writers Room*, an urban writers' colony, and a former Trustee of the Village of Ocean Beach on Long Island. Ms. Gratz was born in New York City's Greenwich Village, spent her teenage years in a Connecticut suburb and attended both Skidmore College in upstate New York and New York University, where she graduated with a B.A. degree. She is a resident of Manhattan.

Our next speaker is a great figure. And some of us actually know while you are alive, Roberta. Sometime in the future, when the history of people who understand cities is written, Roberta Gratz will be right there with Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford and all the other great thinkers about the city. She's written, of course, "*The Living City: Thinking Small in a Big Way*". She's written other books and many articles. She's a New Yorker. She's a real New Yorker. She lives on the Upper West Side in New York, and is a member of the Democratic Party. I just thought I'd throw that in. We've had a few Republicans. I just haven't identified them yet.

But, it's my pleasure to introduce, Roberta Gratz.

Roberta Gratz: It's really a pleasure to be here, and not the least reason of which is to be, coming from a New Yorker—some of you will understand this—to be in a city where the mayor really understands urbanism.

A lot is being written and said these days about the renewal of cities. Surely considerable new construction is visible in many people. Surely the number of tourists, commuters and daily visitors is up, along with the national economy. And surely the press attention to all of this and the dropping national crime rate has changed a perception that more than anything else kept people away from downtowns. But, does the return of tourists, commuters, and suburban visitors mean a rebirth? Does the construction of big, headline grabbing, costly projects represent rejuvenation? A distinction must be made between downtowns rebuilt and downtowns reborn. Rebuilding. Reborn. Bad news. Good news. Both are happening.

The so-called comeback cities heralded in the national press have at least one of the latest magic bullet grand project. A stadium, sometimes two. A convention center. A gambling casino. An entertainment complex. A grand waterfront redevelopment scheme. An enclosed mall. You know the picture.

But, the cities' population is often still diminishing. The promised tax revenues from the big project rarely materialize. The school system is often in shambles. Maybe even bankrupt and taken over by the state. School and public service budgets are still being cut as if the national economy is experiencing a depression. These are the cities rebuilt, not reborn.

Rebuilt according to expensive plans. Bankers' plans. Planners' plans. Politicians' plans. Developers' plans. All, what I call, project plans. The result is a collection of expensive, big, activity places. Visitor attractions connected to each other and the suburbs by a massive auto based network reinforcing an already excessively car dependent built environment.

Some of these projects, by the way, are beautifully designed. And a few even connect reasonably well to what remains of an urban fabric. But a well-designed project plan is still a project plan. When the elusive goal is mainly tourism, perceived efficiency, and big copycat civic projects, little real energy in downtown life follows. Just single activity places. The complex, multi-dimensional urban fabric has been effectively replaced, not renewed. A collection of visitor attractions does not add up to a city.

Project plans always require huge capital investments that cost taxpayers dearly one way or another. And detract attention from complicated fundamental difficulties. Such projects are about politics and development profitable for a few. Not about developing local economies, enlivening downtowns or stimulating meaningful and enduring revitalization. Downtowns compete for these headline grabbing, budget straining projects, but overlook the actual complex cities in which they sit. Project planning should not be confused with problem solving.

Baltimore, for example, with one of the most celebrated, well-designed new stadia, still has an excessively high crime, school dropout and drug use rate. In Cleveland, where more than \$2 billion has been invested in big projects, the population is still diminishing. The promised tax revenues from the projects needed for essential services have not materialized. The school system is in bankruptcy, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum is experiencing falling attendance and a financial deficit. And if you didn't know how consuming of financial resources the glitzy, big projects are, Lincoln Center, barely 40 years old, has just announced a refurbishment need of half a billion dollars.

But positive change and sustainable growth are occurring in many American downtowns. Neighborhood commercial streets and big city business districts. From New York's Corning, to Michigan's Holland, to California's Pasadena, San Francisco South of Market, and beyond, rebirth is clear. New York's neighborhoods spun off from the rejuvenated Soho. Denver's lower downtown. Pittsburgh's Manchester neighborhood and Crawford's Square. Cleveland's warehouse district. Milwaukee's warehouse district. Detroit's Harmony and Stroh's districts. The streetcar neighborhoods of Atlanta. Grand Rapids. Charlotte. Milwaukee's Brewer Hill, we saw yesterday. And almost every size city that has any prewar streetcar neighborhood left, these are the reviving neighborhoods. Often the only site of new population growth in cities still losing population overall.

Enduring, positive change evolves... slowly. In fact, it is the only way it occurs. Period. As H.L. Mencken said, for every complex, difficult problem, there is simple, easy solution. And it is wrong. So much time, money, energy and attention are focused in directions and on projects that are big, visible, simplistic, and wrong, that few notice or heed the unconventional breakthrough. Few learn lessons from the unpredicted success. And few revive their attitudes to reflect that reality. Where citizen initiatives or resistance to official oversize plans occur, and where existing resources and character of place are added onto instead of substituted, positive rebirth occurs.

Sometimes it is civic leaders and elected officials who resist excessive plans, and even aim to tear down pieces of highways. Either way new life, excitement, economic activity and out of the ordinary occurrences have a chance. New life spreads to adjacent areas where the cycle can repeat itself organically, building on existing assets. The fabric is renewed. I call this urban husbandry.

Urban husbanders are succeeding in many commercial downtowns and residential neighborhoods around the country. Despite the project planners who control the lion's share of resources and direct them to big projects. The bad news is that only a dramatic downturn in the economy, I'm afraid, is going to diminish those excessive visions. The good news, at least, is that the real rebirth is occurring where no project plans interfere.

Many reasons account for the rebirth. not the least of which is the growing realization of the wrong headed direction the country has been going in since World War II. In this regard, new urbanist, as diverse a group as it is, along with the anti-sprawl groups, historic preservationists, community based developers, main street renewers, transit advocates, and other forward thinkers,

must be credited with leading the fundamental challenge to the status quo. That it's helping reshape popular thinking about development issues among both the general public and government leaders.

As I noted in my book, the new urbanists have helped direct a critical spotlight on the automobile centered development path this country has followed since World War II. They have reshaped public expectations, broken through conventional planning dogma and shaken up developers rigid standardized assumptions. No small task. New urbanists have revived features once so common in prewar neighborhoods planned around the streetcar. And now so understandably popular again.

But, many of the components of rebirth are not design issues. New York's Bryant Park, for example, is one of the most successfully revamped parks in the country. It was, first and most importantly, revamped, according to the principles as Johnny mentioned, by writer, William White's astute observations of how people use public space. And I'd like to stop here for a moment, and say if any of you have not read Holly White or Jane Jacobs, as much as I would love you to read my books and Johnny's books and Ray and Neil and the mayor, if you haven't, first and foremost, read Holly White and Jane Jacobs, you don't have your fundamentals in place.

The park was magnificently redesigned accordingly. But, the most successful feature, as Johnny showed, are the cheap, moveable chairs, that enable people to personalize the space. Some of the most important wisdom, I do believe, comes from the likes of White and Jacobs, whose ideas stem totally from the observation of how people use places. And from figuring out what works and what doesn't.

Some of the dearest places are beautifully designed. As Holly White noted, it is difficult to design a place that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished. This is by no way meant to imply that good design is not important. Let me repeat. Good design is important. But too many design professionals do not give enough weight to non-design issues critical to the functioning of a viable city. Let me cite a few.

Public schools. No more important agenda exists then in investing in public school systems. In any city, if schools were the only target of public investment, considerable improvement would follow. Especially if you want to retain or attract the generation between what was just shown on the chart. Between the generation x-ers, who allegedly leave the city when they have children or the baby boomers grown older, who come back after they've raised theirs. I have to say I raised mine in the city.

Two, importance of local economy. There is not enough appreciation and understanding of what is a local economy, how it can be nurtured, and it's significance to all other issues. The importance of locally owned businesses committed to and rooted in the community is neither understood nor valued sufficiently. This issue requires considerable study. But, suffice it to say, it is critical to all other rebirth issues. No chain based downtowns can anchor a real community. Give it character or shape a sense of place.

Three, density is key. The issue I most want to stress. What is significant is not whether you have an urban growth boundary, but what and how dense you build in it. In death and life of great American cities, Jacobs berated orthodox planners for confusing high-density and over crowding, and for assuming they always goes together. Her brilliant chapter, "The Need for Concentration," illustrates the fallacy of the confusion, observes the overcrowding frequently found in low density neighborhoods, and shows how the liveliest and safest city streets are often the densest. She wrote, everyone is aware that tremendous numbers of people concentrate in city downtowns. And that, if they did not, there would be no downtown to amount to anything. Certainly not one with much downtown diversity.

I must interrupt here to note she wrote this in 1961. Unfortunately, there are plenty of downtowns that have not followed that prescription and don't have that density.

But this relationship between concentration and diversity is very little considered when it comes to city districts where residents is a chief use, she wrote. Without help from the concentration of people who live there, there can be little convenience or diversity where people live and where they require it, she added. And I would add, neither the local neighborhood shopping nor transit service are feasible without the density.

The awareness that downtowns and urban neighborhoods need the concentration of tremendous numbers of people to amount to anything was surely lost in the years since 1961, when her book was first published. The lack of concentration marks some of the celebrated rebuilt, not reborn downtowns. And it is the distinguishing feature of their failure as urban downtowns. If anything, Jacobs' second observations that few people realize the similar need for density in residential districts is even more true today than when she wrote it. Quote, the exuberant variety inherent in great numbers of people tightly concentrated, closed quote, is still for the most part unrecognized. Thus, de-densified, suburbanizing residential neighborhoods are following behind the already suburbanized downtown commercial districts. Eventually, the results will be equally deadening. After the newness wears off, problems will set in. The regenerative potential that comes with concentration and density is absent. The next generation of serious problems will be upon us.

Suburban density in a city, even if well designed in compact, walkable communities, can not support vibrant retail streets, populate local schools, or activate public spaces. Suburban density was never meant to support local business and uses. Shopping centers reached by car was supposed to do that, and they do. The corner store and integral commercial streets are urban phenomenon. Downtown and neighborhoods were a short walk or trolley car ride away. Sprawl cannot be contained adequately without redensification of existing and new communities. Mass transit, as well, is a pipe dream without density.

Fourth, and last, I hear a lot from the design community about working with and educating the community. But not enough about being educated by the community. Important lessons can be drawn from the complex assortment of successful communities rebuilding themselves from the inside out. From the bottom up and with a community based process that will endure long after a developer completes a new community. Sells out the real estate and moves on.

Civic engagement and community process, in fact, are much more important to the long term success of places than either the architect who designs or the developer who builds them. They are the ones that stay, contribute, and continue to make a community viable. The vision of civic rebuilders emerges from a deep understanding of the diversity they live with and the vitality that comes from that diversity. The community based rebirth movement is a loose network of very individualized places with common challenges and similar experiences. This is a very broad community with a lot to teach all of us.

In closing, let me suggest, design and planning precepts are not enough to bring about the full, very rich vision of the new urbanist. An alliance with the racially, ethnically and economically mixed neighborhoods of existing cities would produce a social and economic substance of the broadest value to American society. Thank you.