

BOOKS

Nook, Google, Sony, and Kobo, will offer “those working on environmental issues the opportunity to share their latest research and ideas quickly and efficiently in forms that have the greatest reach and impact.”

E-books will be published about once a month and are intended to be “short enough to be read in a couple of hours, but long enough for genuine complexity,” the press says. The authors are to be leaders in “ecosystem conservation and management, the built environment, energy, health, and other areas.” ♦

The Economics of Place

The Value of Building Communities Around People

Edited by Colleen Layton, Tawny Pruitt, and Kim Cekola

The Michigan Municipal League, 2011, 175 pp., \$14.95 paperback

REVIEW BY ROBERT STEUTEVILLE

The first decade of the 21st Century was not kind to Michigan. In 2000, the state ranked 18th in per capita income. By 2009, Michigan was 37th — a virtual free-fall. Speaking of which, Detroit lost 25 percent of its population, or an estimated 237,000 residents, during the decade.

The auto industry has recently made a comeback and Michigan’s budget is in surplus. Nevertheless, no one expects the state or Detroit to return to their former days of industrial glory. A new plan is needed.

Dramatic shifts in economic fortune can get leaders to think outside of the box. That may be why Michigan has emerged as a national leader in recognizing the potential of placemaking for economic development.

In April, Gov. Rick Snyder launched the state’s MPlace Initiative (mplace.org), which ties place to economic development. The Michigan Municipal League published *The Economics of Place: The Value of Building Communities Around People* in late 2011.

The Economics of Place consists of 10 essays from leaders in Michigan and throughout the US that wonderfully pull together diverse aspects of placemaking



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHIGAN MUNICIPAL LEAGUE, THE ECONOMICS OF PLACE

Main street in Petosky, Michigan, above, is what authors in the book call “Place” with a capital “P.” At right is an intersection in Woodbridge, Michigan — a place without attractive qualities.



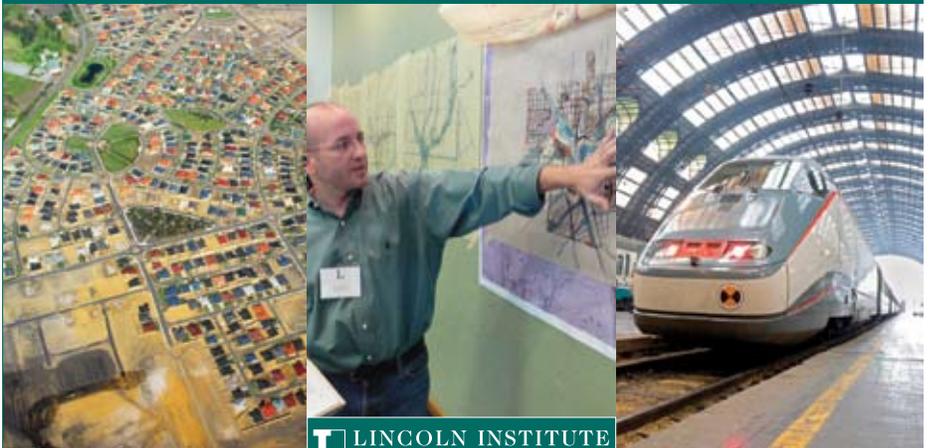
— from transportation to tourism, from entrepreneuring to arts and culture, from real estate investment to economic

development.

The subject is momentous. As land-use strategist and developer Christopher

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Leinberger notes in his essay, the built environment is the largest asset class in the US economy, more than double the size of the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ combined.

Many of these assets are contained in what Leinberger calls “drivable suburban” development. “To the present day, it is the only legal way of developing real estate in the vast majority of jurisdictions throughout the US,” he says. “But drivable suburban development has recently become overbuilt. The demand is substantially satisfied for possibly the next generation.”

The pent-up demand is for “walkable urban” development, he says. Since it involves integrating uses rather than separating them, walkable urban development is more difficult and complex, Leinberger explains. Walkable urban development centers on what this book calls “placemaking,” a lost, or at least misplaced, art in many communities. Placemaking is the key to future prosperity, according to Leinberger and other essayists in the book.

PLACE WITH A CAPITAL ‘P’

There’s a difference between “place” and “Place,” explain Soji Adelaja, professor in land policy at Michigan State, and Mark Wyckoff, expert in Michigan land use law. “An intersection between two streets is a place,” they write. “Add red-brick buildings, shops, and trees between the street and the sidewalk and it is a place with specific characteristics. Add transit, bicycle paths, a park, a few restaurants with outdoor seating, and pubs, and people will come there because they want to be there and enjoy being there, and one has a special Place.”

That’s the kind of setting that will draw cultural tourists, a growing industry, as educated, prosperous Baby Boomers have more time on their hands. *The Economics of Place* takes a broad view of what constitutes a “Place.” Such settings can enliven every part of the urban-rural Transect. Examples include a downtown with museums and opera house; a main street with historic buildings and restaurants; and a coastline with lighthouses. Michigan boasts more lighthouses, 120, than any other state, and more coastline than any state save Alaska.

Arts and culture are critical to placemaking. Artists are among the coveted first wave of “risk oblivious” new residents in a revitalizing neighborhood. They are followed by developers and investors, the “risk aware,” and finally by the risk averse, sometimes described as “dentists from New Jersey.” When the latter arrive, the artists are long gone, revitalizing other neighborhoods.

Artists are part of the broad range of talented people who contribute to economic revival, notes Joe VanderMeulen, executive director of the Land Information Access Association, a Traverse City, Michigan, nonprofit. “If we want our communities to succeed in the new economy,” he says, “we must make them attractive to the young, the educated, and creative people. The knowledge workers and entrepreneurs that move to our communities will be our next economic engine.”

Strong placemaking creates the conditions in which entrepreneurial activity

can thrive, writes Rob Fowler, president and CEO of the 10,000-member Small Business Association of Michigan. Good places require better transportation policy, others argue. Streets that carry more automobile traffic are currently rated higher by transportation officials, says John Norquist, president and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism. Consequently, “federal and state funding flows to street designs that actively undermine the community’s efforts to create valuable, livable, and sustainable communities,” he says.

In the last four decades, cities and towns focused considerable effort on trying to get a larger piece of the federal pie, Norquist observes. “The mostly unsuccessful effort to extract more money from the federal government should perhaps be replaced with an effort to remove obstacles that the federal government has placed in the way of urban development and redevelopment.”

What people want today is not simply

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Making Great Communities Happen

Photo by Joe Szurszewski

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places, they want Places, write Adelaja and Wyckoff. These are created through the conscious act of “placemaking” in order to achieve social, economic, environmental, and other objectives. As *The Economics of Place* makes clear, the public, private, and nonprofit sectors will have to learn to work together on this task. But nobody said building a new future would be easy. ♦

Design After Decline
How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities

By Brent D. Ryan

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 277 pp., \$45 hardcover

REVIEW BY PHILIP LANGDON

Brent D. Ryan teaches urban design and public policy at MIT and is at heart a modernist. His modernist inclinations might tempt some new urbanists to dismiss his newly published book as yet another attempt by a hostile

academy to show that New Urbanism is socially or aesthetically retrograde.

But it would be wiser to approach *Decline After Decline* with an open mind. There’s a lot to learn from it. Ryan, who has worked as an urban planner in New York, Boston, and Chicago, possesses one of the more nuanced understandings of New Urbanism that I’ve encountered among academics from outside our movement. His book, while in some respects critical of New Urbanism, has instructive things to say about the challenges of fixing broken cities.

Ryan examines two of America’s toughest cases—Detroit, which lost more than 150,000 housing units between 1950 and 2000, and North Philadelphia, which in the same period hemorrhaged more than 300,000 inhabitants. He probes these two scarred big-city expanses in careful detail, trying to determine which revitalization strategies have a strong likelihood of delivering long-term benefits.

As Ryan sees it, the experience of

urban renewal left Americans unduly fearful of radically new approaches. Modernism as practiced in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s is partly to blame, he acknowledges. “Perhaps the most reprehensible aspect of High Modernism,” he writes, “was the sense it provided that cities and their inhabitants were simply a grand experiment, a canvas for designers, planners, and social policy makers to lay out schemes for the improvement of human well-being.”

He asserts, however, that there exists a “reformed modernism” that is not at odds with human scale, street walls, and other comforting urban elements. A prime example of reformed modernism, he says, is Odhams Walk in Covent Garden, London—a “visually delightful,” low-rise, brick-clad complex built by the Greater London Council in 1982. Modernism of this sort, he says, can accomplish things that lie beyond the what’s likely to be achieved by planners and designers adhering strictly to tradition.

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CRITIQUE OF THE GRID

In his view, the street grids of Detroit and Philadelphia have the benefits of regularity and predictability, but those are offset by a host of disadvantages: “monotony, confusion, lack of hierarchy, and overexposure to traffic.” Planners, he says, should stop being so conservative, so reluctant to introduce different patterns. Cities that have lost many of their buildings should seize the opportunity to reimagine the street network—“with streets closed, blocks aggregated, or new streets added.”

There’s something to his argument about grids being monotonous when they go on mile after mile. Some neighborhoods, or portions of them, might be given more complex layouts containing new parks and open spaces, varied streetscapes, and perhaps a limited number of streets that prevent through-traffic by cars and trucks. Opportunities for altering portions of the grid have been heightened, in places like North Philadelphia, by widespread abandonment; with so many buildings already razed, why not think about reorganizing the streets?

Varied configurations—breaking away from a seemingly endless grid—