

A Comparison Study of Urban Redevelopment Strategies in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area

Elizabeth Crager

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

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Dr. K. Crossney

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INTRODUCTION

In cities across the globe, many urban neighborhoods are experiencing an era of redevelopment and renewal. Residents and planners alike have witnessed first-hand the changes in communities and now want to take an active role in the continued positive movement towards a healthier and more sustainable landscape. The built environment plays a huge role in redevelopment, and more often than not, the removal of the existing urban landscape proves to be less sustainable, more environmentally harmful, and may negatively affect the communities' economy. Legnér (2007) explains that “the unique environment of the Industrial Landscape was finally preserved not through the actions of local government, but of architectural historians and curators representing government authority”. Urban redevelopment comes in many forms. Adaptive reuse, changing land use, and transition towns are just a few of the possible redevelopment choices and strategies that urban planners are considering.

Urban redevelopment can be defined as “the process by which large areas of derelict and industrial land and rundown housing areas are restored to become thriving communities once more” (Science dictionary, 2012). By involving the community and surrounding neighborhoods in the planning process, urban redevelopment can increase the standard of living in an area and reestablish pride of place. Redevelopment can take on many forms and renewal can have both positive and negative outcomes on a community. The concept of *adaptive reuse* uses older, usually vacant or abandoned buildings and lots, and uses them for a different purpose than the original use. Instead of removing the built environment, it is improved upon. This can also involve the process of *changing landuse*, where the intended land use is altered to benefit the human population. Together or separate, redevelopment, adaptive reuse, and changing landuse

all play a part in the creation and maintenance of a community that strives for economic, social, and environmental stability known as a *transition town*.

Most large cities, especially in the Northeastern region of the United States, grew from industrial and manufacturing trades. The cities were populated by factory laborers and immigrants looking for work. But when these industries were moved to suburban areas or contracted out overseas, the large factories and warehouses, once thriving, became empty and abandoned. Other structures such as libraries and hotels have also succumbed to changing neighborhoods and economic downturns. So the decision eventually has to be made to deconstruct and demolish the historic structures and accompanying land, or rehabilitate and reuse them. By redeveloping sites with existing historic structures, pride is restored to the community, urban sprawl may be decreased, and more affordable housing opportunities are created. Cantell (2005) states that “adaptive reuse should always be the preferred strategy for an industrial [structure] when no other industrial option is available, and should always be favored over demolition and redevelopment”.

In a majority of adaptive reuse projects historic structures are stabilized and converted into housing and retail properties. A factory might be divided up and re-zoned for loft and studio apartments. An old art deco-era hotel converted to high-end condominiums. An old bank transformed into an art gallery. The architecture and design of historic buildings display much more charm and culture than many new construction projects of present day. The craftsmanship of the older buildings far exceeds today's rushed construction and was often built with practicality in mind. The true meaning of “buy local” was demonstrated in the building of older structures that used indigenous materials that were climate durable, required lower transportation costs, and supported the local economy (Carroon, 2010).

It is accurate to state that all development, be it urban, rural, or otherwise, stems from changing land use. All land that has been developed, cleared, paved over, or otherwise altered, has been done for the benefit of the human population. However, in terms of redevelopment, namely urban redevelopment, changing land use benefits not only the human population but also the local ecological systems. As is often the case, dilapidated buildings and lots remain vacant and cause blight, as well as other hazards such as contaminants, reduced safety, and sanitation issues. By altering the land use, from an old fallen down factory to a green space offering an open air market, a change in land use brings about a healthy and positive change that often brings the community together by offering a public meeting space. Nallathiga (2010) charges that “changes in industrial land redevelopment is not only changing the physical and landscape contours of city but also underlying changes in property values, local economy and values. In terms of local economy it is important to consider how an increase in affordable housing to an area will in turn bring more revenue to local businesses.”

It is important to appreciate that changing the land use, while frequently a longer process due the conditions of the area, generally ends up being beneficial to all reaches of an urban area. The existing residents benefit from boosted commercial and retail opportunities, and new inhabitants bring new revenue to the neighborhood. The local government may offer and receive incentives and funding for the redevelopment. And the entire metropolitan area profits from tourism and urban migration do to the changing and redeveloping of an existing area.

A completely different approach to urban redevelopment relies not on rebuilding but on improving the built environment and creating a more resilient, self-sufficient community, the transition town. This concept requires residents to grossly change their material living standards and increase self-sufficiency mainly at the neighborhood/town level. Trainer (2009) identifies

that in order for a town to begin transition it must be “a grassroots process with ordinary people slowly developing the consciousness, skills, local systems and infrastructures to enable them to run their own local communities in cooperative and participatory ways, with frugal lifestyles”. This requires a variety of changes to transition from a traditional consumer-capitalist community to one of self-sufficiency. The idea of the transition town came about as a response to peak oil, climate change, and the always looming economic crisis.

Small changes in the community lead to big results when the residents show complete compliance. Making towns more walkable and bike friendly reduce the need and use of the automobile, thus reducing reliance on fossil fuel. The community relies on food cooperatives and farms for food and clothing materials. Because these do not require additional transport and the gardens/farms support the environment, it may be considered a response to the changing climate and the reduction of carbon emissions. Since everything is created, produced, and/or provided by the town itself, there is little fear for an economic crisis. While it takes some initiative to start the transition to a self-sustaining community, the results speak volumes in community bonding and changing consumer behavior.

Many of the benefits of urban redevelopment have been discussed in this paper. And many more exist, yet often overlooked are the disadvantages that are also associated with urban redevelopment (Table 1). Goldschalk (2004) discusses gentrification on the neighborhood level, saying that it “is a matter of maintaining small areas of lower-income households within the city versus redeveloping and up scaling them for higher-income households”. Gentrification can be a ramification of both adaptive reuse and changing land use. While on the surface it appears that the neighborhood is changing for the better, economically speaking, it excludes and eventually pushes out lower-income households that cannot afford to keep up with rising taxes and

increased amenity costs. Additionally, while striving to protect the history of a building, redevelopment often forgets the culture of a neighborhood and how an introduction of higher income households may change the values and principles that are rooted in the area. Often it may be viewed that preservation would be a better alternative to adaptive reuse or changing landuse. Perhaps a sixty year old school would fare better as a history lesson than an apartment building. An introduction of young renters to a neighborhood of older homeowners could cause generational clashes. Roseland (2000) brings to light a very important aspect to remember when considering redevelopment in that “government and corporate decisions should be reviewed for their effects on both natural and social capital”.

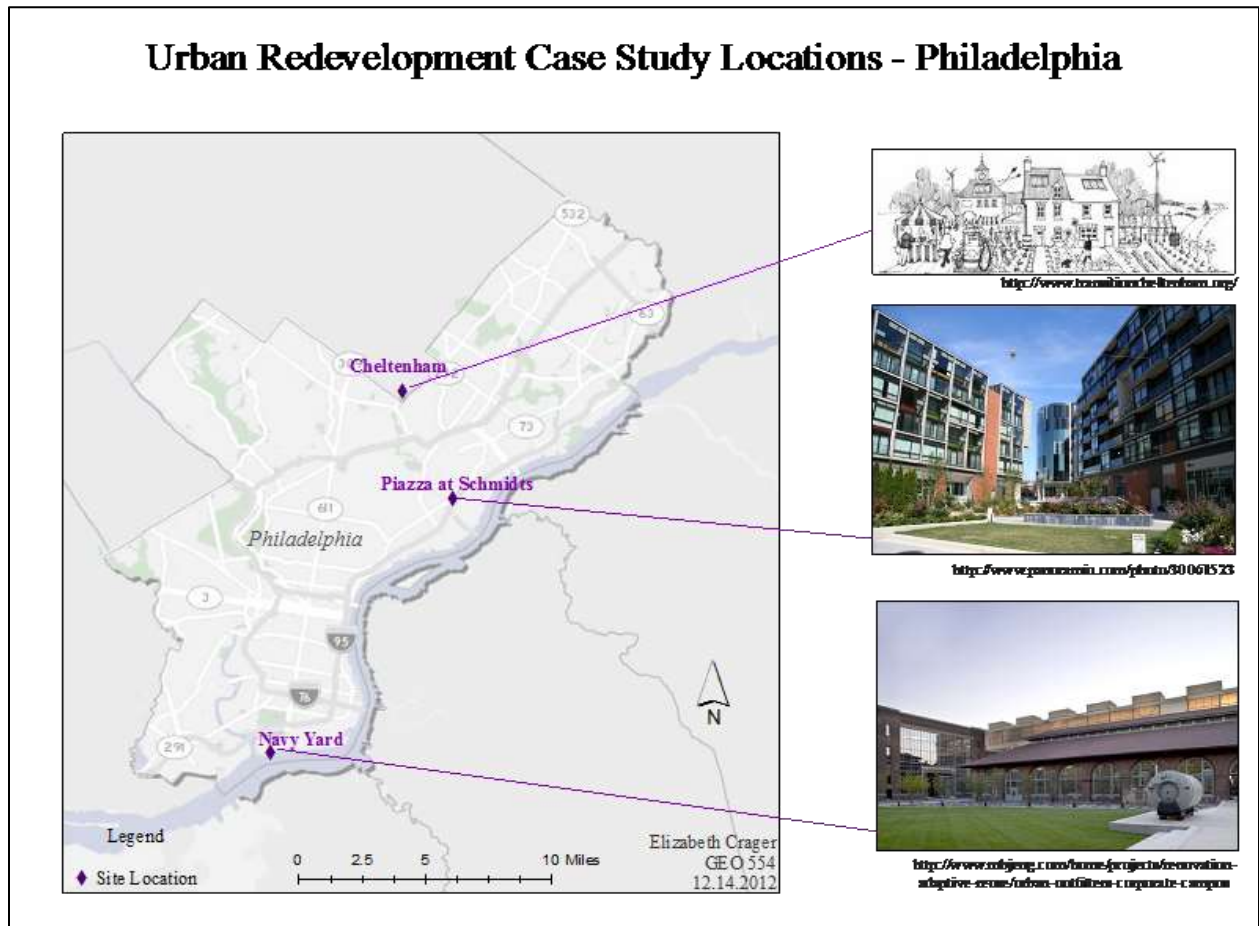
From the outside the notion of a self-sustaining transition town is quite appealing. However the plan can only be fully executed if all residents are in agreement to all aspects of transition. More often than not a transition town is initiated by an elite group of coordinators and the citizens are viewed as merely objects that consume. Kenis and Mathijs (2009) recommended that in order for a town to truly transition, it must recognize the residents “as citizens rather than as mere consumers”. Complete compliance leads to success, but is often thwarted by those that lack the ability to adhere to transition town standards and methods, i.e. the elderly couple that cannot maintain a garden or the family of 5 that require an automobile to transport their children.

Table 1: Benefits vs. Disadvantages of Urban Redevelopment

Redevelopment Type	Benefits	Disadvantages
Adaptive Reuse	Historic Preservation	Gentrification
	Economic growth	Generational gaps
	Removal of blight	Loss of Culture
Changing Landuse	Economic growth	Gentrification
	Removal of blight	Generational gaps
	Introduction/increase of greenspace	Loss of Culture
		Loss of History
Transition Town	Self sufficiency	Complete compliance required
	United community	
	Economic stability	

CASE STUDIES

The urban landscape of Philadelphia Metropolitan Area is growing and changing. But it is the way an area manages that growth and change that makes all the difference. As Philadelphia strives to become a more sustainable and green city, decisions involving new development and/or redevelopment are being handled far differently than in the past. Cities like Philadelphia are realizing how much tradition and history mean to the inhabitants of the area, and are favoring redevelopment strategies. Three redevelopment sites in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area were chosen as case study examples: The Philadelphia Navy Yard, The Piazza at Schmidt's, and Cheltenham, PA (Map 1). Site visits to each location were done to provide perspective and scale to this research paper.



Case Study 1: The Philadelphia Naval Yard

At the very end of Broad Street, where the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers meet, sits the historic Philadelphia Navy Yard. Considered the Nation's oldest shipping yard, this site has over 200 years history as an industrial and logistical center. After closing in 1995, the buildings, warehouses, and housing quarters remained empty for over 10 years (Fig. 1)¹. Today the Navy Yard has become a flourishing island of mixed industry activity due to the adaptive reuse of its land and buildings. Not only did it renew an area in decay, it strengthened the local economy by providing job opportunities during the redevelopment process, along with continued employment once the Navy Yard reopened.

The Urban Outfitters Headquarters building is one of many that have been transformed from a falling down warehouse to a corporate campus with over 250,000 square feet of mixed use space (Fig. 2)². The architects that revived the buildings preserved many of the existing structures and used salvaged materials to build stairways and similar additions. By conserving and reusing the original structures, the history and culture of the city was preserved while

Figure 1: Philadelphia Navy Yard



Figure 2: Urban Outfitters Headquarters



¹ http://www.architizer.com/en_us/blog/dyn/38905/philadelphia-naval-yards/

² <http://www.mbjeng.com/home/projects/renovation-adaptive-reuse/urban-outfitters-corporate-campus>

modern commerce was advanced. What was once desolate and abandoned land now serves as a think-tank for fashion and industry. The buildings exemplify the concept of adaptive reuse, and in 2007, were served with the National Preservation Honor Award, as well as, the Urban Land Institute Global Awards for Excellence (Meyer, Borgman & Johnson, 2012). Recently a shuttle service began running through the Navy Yard for employees and visitors to the many restaurants and business centers.

Case Study 2: The Piazza at Schmidt's

In the Northern Liberties neighborhood of Philadelphia sat a 15 acre lot that was once the home to Schmidt's Brewery. Production at the brewery ceased in 1986 after nearly 125 years as Philadelphia's largest brewery. The land was bought in the early 2000s, the old buildings were demolished and the lot sat vacant for quite a few years (Fig. 3)³. After many failed planning attempts and community opposition, the empty block was finally transformed into the Piazza at Schmidt's which opened in 2009.

What made the Piazza's plan stand out against all the others was the strengthening of the existing community. The plan included various sized rental and lease housing units, and provided mixed use at ground level including retail and restaurants, a fitness center, and an office building (Fig 4)⁴. It also included many outdoor areas to be utilized by residents: a swim club, outdoor dining, and the actual piazza, that hosts various events throughout the year for renters of the Piazza and surrounding neighborhood residents. Development across from the Piazza at Schmidt's, named Liberties' Walk, also includes mixed use retail, commercial, and

³ http://hiddencityphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/4826791135_85085323ac_b-1.jpeg

⁴ <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/30061523>

residential and is a nice tie-in to bridge the new development of the Piazza to the old homes of Northern Liberties. The neighborhood has grown not only in population but also in popularity. The Piazza at Schmidt's has become a destination for restaurants and outdoor events that draw in patrons from all over the city and region.

Figure 3: Blighted Buildings at the Schmidt's Brewery Site



Figure 4: The Piazza at Schmidt's



Case Study 3: Cheltenham, PA

To the Northwest of the Philadelphia city limits sits the area known as “Philadelphia’s first suburb”, Cheltenham Township. A few years ago this township set out to become recognized as an official Transition Town. In early 2011, Cheltenham became the world’s 350th transition town. Unlike the other urban redevelopment sites that were visited, Cheltenham didn’t have any obvious renewed architecture, or new mixed use properties. In fact it looked like any mid-sized mid-Atlantic town. But it wasn’t the built environment that changed in Cheltenham. It was the inner-workings of the community. By building community togetherness, the residents

of this transition town were able to change everyday practices to become a lean-energy, resilient, and sustainable community (Fig. 5)⁵.

Action groups were created to establish and recognize projects and events that would impact the community in a positive way. All information gathered and experienced will be combined to create Cheltenham's Energy Descent Action Plans, a participatory plan for all residents. The focus of the groups include: economy, food/gardens, transportation, and energy. Transition Cheltenham supports local green businesses and encourages the community to buy local. The township often holds power-down events that residents are not permitted to drive but instead must take public transportation, ride bicycles, or walk. They strive to be zero-waste so all utensils, flatware, and cups are to be reusable and brought by those in attendance. One very interesting concept utilized by this transition town is the concept of "time banks". This is where people are "paid" for taking time to do something for someone else in the community. The time banked is then reciprocated when needed. As of now, Cheltenham is still in transition but is working diligently toward a healthy, friendlier, more fulfilling way of life as a transition town.

Figure 5: Community Garden Tour



⁵ <http://www.transitioncheltenham.org/FoodGardensAndGreenspace/index.htm>

CASE STUDY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The three urban redevelopment case studies presented in this paper represent successful undertakings to redevelop an urban area. The Philadelphia Navy Yard has only just begun to change a derelict and abandoned area into a thriving island of commerce and sustainability. The Piazza at Schmidt's has helped revitalize a neighborhood riddled with crime and low home occupancy rates by generating a revival of the community. The township of Cheltenham is on the road to transition by transforming the actions of its residents to become more community-based and self-sufficient. The success of these three communities proves that urban redevelopment not only recovers a neighborhood, but builds the economy, progresses historic preservation, and establishes an alternative to demolition city-wide.

Future urban redevelopment case studies might include the changing demographics in and around a redevelopment site, including median age, median income level, highest achieved education level, and/or household size. Also of interest may be the analysis of the rate of gentrification and the resulting increase or decrease in the housing market for the affected area. And finally research could be conducted on towns that have "transitioned" and evaluate how self-sufficient the community truly is in comparison to sustainable communities and/or traditional communities and what makes the transition town stand-out.

CONCLUSION

Urban redevelopment comes in forms. The built environment can be rehabilitated and preserved to adapt to the changing need of the city. The blighted urban areas can be transformed into usable space that provide both social and economic growth. A community can come

together to decide what is truly best for them, their town, and their well-being. Adaptive reuse, changing land use, and transition towns are just a few of the redevelopment strategies that are being preferred over new construction and development. Urban redevelopment preserves the history and culture of a neighborhood, while providing a way for that neighborhood to grow in all aspects. Old spaces provide the framework for high density housing units, making both renting and homeownership more affordable. Creating mixed use areas negates the need for an automobile, thereby improving air quality and promoting public transportation. Bringing a residents together by providing education on becoming more self-sustainable creates a resilient and strong community.

“The act of preserving a site, a building, or a community is a gesture of respect for past decisions and a gift to future generations who may enjoy, or be curious about the physical manifestation of different times and cultures” Jean Carroon, 2010

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Photo Images:

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Map Data:

All map data retrieved from ArcMap10; Map composed by Elizabeth Crager, November 2012