

# New England and the **SUBTRACTED** City

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mericans historically feel hard-wired for growth. When shrinkage occurs instead of growth, we are uncomfortable and want to ignore the reality.

No American region has longer experience with community shrinkage than New England. Massachusetts's Dukes County (mainly Martha's Vineyard) saw its population fall between the first and second national censuses, in 1790 and 1800. Maine lost more soldiers in the Civil War per capita than any other state, and its postwar population also dropped, with survivors leaving for better prospects. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, New Englanders repeatedly found more productive lands, fresher forests, and bigger foundries to work in elsewhere. The region's early industrial cities lost out first to the fast-industrializing Midwest and then to the cheaper, nonunionized South. At the time, such losses were not treated as a national problem. Today, however, urban shrinkage is drawing the attention of planners, policymakers, and the general public, and is beginning to be addressed.

## The Background

City and regional decline happens all the time. Places shrink over long stretches of history, and then sometimes growth begins again. With the 1821 construction of the Lowell mills in Massachusetts, New England farm children began fleeing to the new manufacturing cities. As the Midwest opened, New England farmers left their hilly, rocky soils for flatter, more fertile ones. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers like Sarah Orne Jewett, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Edith Wharton portrayed the region's small towns and countryside as deserted by the young.

The automobile's advent caused a turnaround. Partly because of outmigration from the rural areas of New England and elsewhere, Northeast cities grew and became wealthy enough to support middle-class, car-owning seekers of second homes and recreational settings. In turn, the vehicles made rural New England and its villages accessible and attractive. All-season tourism was born.

But New England's industrial cities shrank as its mills and its clothing, shoe, and furniture companies moved south. New England's heavier industries also began to falter. In 1978, Connecticut's Bridgeport, Norwich, and Waterbury were troubled enough to appear in Mary Procter and Bill Matuszkeski's path-breaking book *Gritty Cities*.<sup>1</sup> Even state capitals and college towns like Hartford, Providence, and Worcester saw populations and revenues fall, poverty and tax rates rise, and racial-ethnic relations worsen. At century's end, every New England state saw some formerly flourishing cities and towns become losers in the Industrial Revolution's later stages.

## The Subtracted City

Five of the largest and most prominent shrinking, depopulating cities now drawing national attention are New Orleans, St. Louis, Buffalo in New York, Flint in Michigan, and Youngstown, Ohio.<sup>2</sup> They feature vacant commercial, residential, and industrial sites, boarded-up buildings, and deteriorating open spaces. Detroit and New Orleans are the best known, particularly after Katrina and the near-collapse of the Big Three automakers.

But many New England small and midsize cities also have suffered: for example, Fall River, Holyoke, New Bedford, and Pittsfield, Massachusetts; Woonsocket, Rhode Island; Calais, Maine; and Rutland,

Vermont. And they are losing more than population. We call them subtracted cities because of the way houses, businesses, jobs, schools—even hope—keep getting removed. The losses have occurred without plan or intention.

Subtracted cities, whether Bridgeport, Connecticut, or Detroit, face crushing challenges. No wonder planners and policymakers prefer to focus on growth! Growth and its effects are easier to grasp and deal with. By contrast, subtraction is haphazard, unexpected, and risky. No American city plan or zoning ordinance anticipates it. A city can in theory buy a deserted house, store, or factory and return it to active use. But which use? If the city cannot find one, how long should the property sit vacant before it gets city razed? How common should such vacancies become before they demand systematic, not case-by-case, solutions?

No standard approaches exist. It is the measure of the problem subtracted cities pose that for at least 60 years—and longer in many New England communities—thousands of neighborhoods in hundreds of cities have essentially dropped behind the rest of America, and as a nation we have little idea how to respond.

## What To Do

Those affected rarely begin to work with the inexorable reality of subtraction until about half the population has left, which may mean generations pass between initial loss and real action.<sup>3</sup> Typically, both the local leadership and its hopes for growth must move on before there are substantial efforts to work *with* loss rather than against it. By then the local tax base, public services, and fiscal conditions are likely to be dismal.

Most initiatives today begin with community groups and with counting building and lot vacancies, testing soil, air, and water conditions—perhaps conducting brown-field cleanups. Cities may do aggressive razing and turn large chunks of newly open space into community gardens or parkland. For a city government, creating new amenities is partly to improve security and to provide services more efficiently. For the local people, the goals may vary. They get surveyed as to who they are, why they remain, and what they want. Usually they want jobs.

Subtracted cities need mindful shrinkage and enhancement. Our experience suggests that effective local policy has to start with attention to some of the following.

- **The local workforce.** Much of the country's recent economic boom was construction driven, but in subtracted cities, factories, shops, and homes emptied out. Local labor should now raze abandoned buildings or foster their reuse. Residents need training and jobs to value, salvage, restore, and market materials and sites. Local people can learn to do environmental assessments, including lab testing and the like.
- **Critical landscapes.** Local conditions must improve for remaining residents. Children who see debris-filled vacant lots and boarded-up buildings learn not to expect much from life. Along with drug-free school zones, schools should have subtraction-action zones. When empty properties around schools show neglect, they should get rapid responses. Landscaping, even planting a few trees, makes a deserted lot look cared for.
- **Community gardens.** Once space for gardens is available, plants can often go directly in the ground. Or people can truck in soil and build raised beds. Community gardens improve the food supply, provide a positive neighborhood project, teach small business skills, and offer chances at new enterprises based on common resources. Trucks, hoes, and backhoes, for instance, can become shared resources for home maintenance. Above all, community gardens rally people for tangible local efforts—rather than just against city hall.
- **Pushing what worked.** New England's subtracted cities still have midscale downtowns, main streets, and public works patterns that could become desirable again. The sprawl era, when businesses moved to urban outskirts for easier parking and highway access, hurt them. Old downtowns can revive as places for entertainment, retail, and services. Clearing vacant structures on the downtown's edge can provide new parks, outdoor amphitheaters, and sports facilities. When such measures work, nearby homes, often featuring solid architecture, become more desirable.
- **Retaining some old buildings.** All places need their history, however painful. But today, many of the once mournful reminders of past glory are creating new opportunities. The old Sprague factory in North Adams has become Mass MOCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art). Mills have turned

into restaurants, apartment buildings, and business incubators. Rail lines have become hiking trails. Old houses on Cape Cod, with their sad widow's walks, are snapped up for their great views. In Brunswick, Maine, the Frontier Café Cinema & Gallery has turned a former mill to new culinary and arts purposes. Without obliterating the past, the response to vacancy should be to seize the chance to move beyond it.

Subtracted cities appall us for what they have suffered while simultaneously daring us to do better. New England's subtracted cities are lucky in their size and proximity to one another. Compared with bigger cities in more dispersed regions, they can more effectively coordinate and learn from efforts to counter subtraction. Moreover, 21<sup>st</sup> century versions of New England town meetings—the blog, the listserv—can aid coordination.

The first step is to face the realities.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Mary Procter and Bill Matuszeski, *Gritty Cities: A Second Look at Allentown, Bethlehem, Bridgeport, Hoboken, Lancaster, Norwich, Paterson, Reading, Trenton, Troy, Waterbury, Wilmington* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).
- <sup>2</sup> Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, "Small Can Be Beautiful: Coming to Terms with Decline," *Planning* (July 2002): 20-23; and Popper and Popper, "Smart Decline in Post-Carbon Cities: The Buffalo Commons Meets Buffalo, New York," in *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st Century's Sustainability Crises*, eds. Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010): 314-321.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Henry J. Mayer and Michael R. Greenberg, "Coming Back from Economic Despair: Case Studies of Small- and Medium-Size American Cities," *Economic Development Quarterly* 15 (2001): 203-206.

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