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Reinventing America's Cities: The Time Is Now

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THE country has fallen on hard times, but those of us who love cities know we have been living in the dark ages for a while now. We know that turning things around will take more than just pouring money into shovel-ready projects, regardless of how they might boost the economy. Windmills won't do it either. We long for a bold urban vision.

With their crowded neighborhoods and web of public services, cities are not only invaluable cultural incubators; they are also vastly more efficient than suburbs. But for years they have been neglected, and in many cases forcibly harmed, by policies that favored sprawl over density and conformity over difference.

Such policies have caused many of our urban centers to devolve into generic theme parks and others, like Detroit, to decay into ghost towns. They have also sparked the rise of ecologically unsustainable gated communities and reinforced economic disparities by building walls between racial, ethnic and class groups.

Correcting this imbalance will require a radical adjustment in how we think of cities and government's role in them. At times it will mean destruction rather than repair. And it demands listening to people who have spent the last decade imagining and in many cases planning for more sustainable, livable and socially just cities.

The changes needed may seem extravagant, but they are not impossible. Many of those who see the current economic crisis as a chance to rebuild the country's infrastructure have pointed to previous major government public works projects, like Franklin D. Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration in the 1930s and 1940s and Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, as a reminder of what this country was once capable of.

Although the W.P.A. is mostly associated with rural dams and roadways, there's hardly a city in America where it didn't leave its mark, from riverfront parks to schools and housing projects.

Eisenhower's investment in highways was equally audacious, but its effect on cities has not always been positive; in many ways the Highways Act set the stage for decades during which suburban interests trumped urban ones.

Inspired by the German autobahn, which Eisenhower saw firsthand during World War II, the program was an attempt to retool the country's immense military-industrial complex for a peacetime economy. Creating thousands of miles of intercity highways, the program fueled America's postwar car culture and suburban sprawl, in addition to changing permanently the way towns and cities have evolved.

Most notably it accelerated certain seismic cultural shifts born of the cold war and the civil rights era by creating the means by which middle-class families would flee perceived urban threats — racial friction, potential Soviet bombs — for the supposed security of the suburbs. In many cities intracity highways became dividing lines between white and black.

In New Orleans, for example, the 10 Freeway bulldozed through one of the city's most vibrant African-American communities, becoming a psychological barrier between the black middle-class Treme neighborhood and the tourist-infested French Quarter. The Santa Monica Freeway, built around the same time, walled off poor African-American areas like Crenshaw and South Central from the rest of the city to the north.

By the early 1980s, when both President Obama and I were in college, the anti-big-government, pro-privatization rhetoric of the Reagan years was catching on, and the entire notion of public spending, let alone spending on large public works projects, was becoming passé.

In many major cities this void was filled by private developers, who began refurbishing parks and old historic quarters. The result was sanitized versions of real cities organized around themed districts, convention centers and sports complexes. Meanwhile the roads, bridges and sewer systems that held these cities together were allowed to disintegrate.

At the same time Europe and Asia began to supplant America as places where visions of the future were being built. The European Union spent decades building one of the most efficient networks of high-speed trains in the world, a railway that has unified the continent while leading to the cultural revival of cities like Brussels and Lille. And environmental standards for new construction were not only encouraged, they became the law — and have been for more than a decade.

This investment in traditional large-scale infrastructure projects is increasingly being coupled with serious thinking about the future of cities themselves. The Swedish government recently began a promising competition for a design that would replace a decrepit 1930s-era bridge in the heart of Stockholm with a seamless system of locks, roadways and shops. In Madrid the government is completing a plan to bury a four-mile strip of freeway underground and cover it up with parks and new housing. And only a few weeks ago the French government concluded a nine-month study on the future of metropolitan Paris. The study, which included some of Europe's most celebrated architects, is the first phase in a plan to create a more sustainable, socially integrated model of "the post-Kyoto city."

Even China, a country where centralized planning often looks like a grotesque parody of American postwar development, is beginning to move toward more sustainable, dense urban models. The government recently announced an $88 billion plan for freight and passenger trains that will link every major urban center along the country's coast, from Beijing to the Pearl River Delta. And it is building miles of subway lines in booming cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou.

The problem in America is not a lack of ideas. It is a tendency to equate any large-scale government construction project, no matter how thoughtful, with the most brutal urban renewal tactics of the 1950s. One result has been that pioneering projects that skillfully blend basic infrastructure with broader urban needs like housing and park space are usually killed in their infancy. Another is that we now have an archaic and grotesquely wasteful federal system in which upkeep for roads, subways, housing, public parkland and our water supply are all handled separately.

With money now available to invest again in such basic needs, I'd like to look at four cities representing a range of urban challenges and some of the plans available to address them. Though none of the plans are ideal as they stand today (and some of them represent only the germ of an idea), evaluated and addressed together as part of a coordinated effort, they could begin to form a blueprint for making our cities more efficient, sustainable and livable.

New Orleans

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina architects and urban planners all over the country began a spirited investigation of how to make New Orleans safer and more sustainable. The nonprofit Urban Land Institute, devoted to

urban issues, presented a report a few months after the storm, based purely on the city's topography, that proposed returning some of its most devastated low-lying areas to wetlands and concentrating more housing on higher ground — a plan that would, among other things, reduce the burden on the levees and canals that protect the city from storms.

At the same time local architects and preservationists began a campaign to preserve the layers of historical fabric that had been damaged by or lost in the storm, including downtown's Art Deco Charity Hospital, some early Modernist schools, New Deal-era public housing and the Ninth Ward's shotgun houses, as well as the Spanish-influenced architecture of the French Quarter.

Even some private developers seemed to understand the importance of balancing social and environmental concerns. Sean Cummings, a local developer, has proposed a master plan for a six-mile-long park on a site along the city's riverfront, currently a strip of decrepit wharfs, abandoned warehouses and parking lots.

Designed by a formidable team of architects that includes Enrique Norten, George Hargreaves, Alex Krieger and Allen Eskew, the proposal is a model of how to knit together conflicting urban realities. A matrix of public parks, outdoor markets and mid-rise residential towers is woven through the existing fabric of old warehouses. Landscaped boulevards would extend from the park into a mix of working-class and gentrified neighborhoods. What's more, concentrating more housing on high land along the river fit nicely with the Urban Land Institute's vision for a more sustainable city.

So far none of these initiatives have achieved much traction. Local communities attacked (understandably) the institute's plan as insensitive to the populations it sought to relocate. Subsequently the idea of adjusting the city's footprint in any way became politically toxic, and Mayor C. Ray Nagin quickly made it clear that the city's redevelopment would be left in the hands of private interests.

Mr. Cummings has received $30 million in federal funds for the first phase of his riverfront plan. But the money is solely for park construction, and so far the project doesn't include the subsidized housing that would prevent it from becoming an enclave for upper-middle-class whites.

Meanwhile the Department of Housing and Urban Development recently began bulldozing thousands of units of New Deal-era public housing over the objections of many local activists, while the Army Corps of Engineers is shoring up existing canals and levees as if the city were going to grow back to its original size — something no sane person believes.

Even so, the fate of New Orleans has yet to be determined. Many of the city's low-lying areas are as barren now as they were a week after the storm. And it's still possible to imagine a more sustainable, socially inclusive city, one that could serve as a model as powerful and far reaching as the American subdivisions of the 1950s. For that to happen, however, a range of government agencies would need to work together to come up with a more coordinated plan.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles has not suffered the trauma of New Orleans, but it is a city famously devoid of a functioning public transportation network and public parkland. These deficiencies will only become more glaring as the city's population continues to boom.

As far back as the 1930s Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. proposed digging up parts of the Los Angeles River's concrete bed and transforming its banks into a necklace of parks that would extend most of the 51 miles from the San Fernando Valley through downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach and provide green space for some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Almost 70 years later the Los Angeles City Council, prodded by a mix of local advocates and architects, revived that vision. Recognizing that the river has become both an industrial blight and an impenetrable barrier between the Latino neighborhoods of East Los Angeles and the white enclaves of downtown, the council developed a plan that would tear out part of the concrete bed and return it to its natural state, while repaving other areas in stone. At some points the sides of the riverbed would step down to allow for landscaped walkways. Parks and bike paths would be built along the banks.

So far, however, there is little money to pursue the plan. About $6 million in state grants to help develop the greenway were postponed in December. And so far the federal government has allotted only enough money for the Corps of Engineers, which oversees the river, to continue a feasibility study for concrete removal.

According to Ed P. Reyes, a member of the City Council and a major sponsor of the plan, an investment of $100 million would allow the city to complete a significant section of the plan near downtown, which would provide valuable parkland to one of the city's poorest neighborhoods and also offer the public a tangible example of the project's transformative power.

Wilshire Boulevard is another favorite cause for the architects and city planners of Los Angeles. In the early 1990s Frank Gehry and I took a drive down the city's once-great commercial spine, which stretches 16 miles from downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica.

Mr. Gehry guided me through the range of communities that the boulevard intersects, from the Latino neighborhoods near MacArthur Park to Koreatown to the many cultural institutions that include the Wiltern Theater, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Hammer Museum. The philanthropist Eli Broad is currently planning yet another museum at the corner of Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards in Beverly Hills.

Mr. Gehry suggested that by concentrating more public transportation and cultural institutions along this thoroughfare, Los Angeles might finally find its center, both geographically and socially.

He is not alone in this fantasy. Los Angeles has the most talented cluster of architects practicing anywhere in the United States, and at one point or another most of them have invested significant brain power in figuring out how to remake Wilshire Boulevard. Michael Maltzan has looked at how new public school construction could be connected to the public transportation network along Wilshire, a plan that not only would be cost effective but also could begin healing some of the city's deep class divisions.

There was an ideal moment, about a decade ago, when this vision might have taken hold; the county's Metropolitan Transit Authority was just then in the midst of constructing a federally financed multibillion-dollar metro system, including a line that would have run the length of Wilshire Boulevard. The Los Angeles Unified School District was building scores of new schools. And the city's rapid growth had led to a boom in new development.

Work on the metro ground to a halt several years ago after costs spiraled out of control, and when it was discovered that the district's flagship school had been built on a toxic waste site, the agency quickly scaled back its goals.

Now a new mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, is trying to revive the idea of expanding the metro. Without an overhaul of the city's transportation network it is only a matter of time before the city breaks down, a victim of pollution and overcongestion. A citywide plan that anchored Los Angeles along two major axes — the green river and the asphalt boulevard — could save it from becoming a third world city.

The Bronx

Smaller projects too can have a powerful impact on a region's identity. In the South Bronx the nonprofit Pratt Center for Community Developmenthas been fighting to demolish parts of the Sheridan and Bruckner Expressways. The Sheridan, which forms a barrier between poor Puerto Rican and Dominican communities in the South Bronx and the Bronx River, was a particular brutal example of Robert Moses' urban renewal projects. Had it been completed, it would have torn through part of the Bronx Zoo.

When state officials unveiled a plan in 1997 to expand the expressway's entry ramps, easing truck traffic to the city's commercial food markets, the community rebelled, and Pratt began to develop a counterplan that would dismantle the expressway altogether and free up 28 acres of land. More specifically, the plan would extend local streets across the site to a new riverfront park, provide up to 1,200 units of affordable housing, create a new sewage facility and restore wetlands along the river. Commercial development could be linked to a planned commuter train station.

Not long ago the state agreed to consider the plan. But even if the plan is adopted, it is not yet clear who would pay for one of its most critical components, the housing, which in the past would have simply been turned over to private developers. What is more, the plan essentially remains a sketch; it still lacks the design elements that could bring it fully to life.

Buffalo

Perhaps the most intriguing test case for reimagining our failing cities is in Buffalo, where the federal government is pressing ahead with a plan to expand its border crossing facilities. The city was once a center of architectural experimentation, with landmarks by virtually every great American architect of the late 19th and early 20th century. Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., the father of American landscaping, created a string of elegant public parks intended for the city's factory workers.

Like other Rust Belt cities, Buffalo began its decline more than a half-century ago, a victim of failing industries and suburban flight. Large sections of Olmsted's parks and boulevards were demolished; an elevated expressway sliced through one of these parks, cutting it off from the riverfront; many of downtown's once-proud buildings were left abandoned.

Yet rather than reverse that trend, the government now seems determined to accelerate it. The Homeland Security Department is planning to expand an area at the entry to the Peace Bridge to make room for new inspection facilities and parking. That plan would require the demolition of five and a half blocks in a diverse working-class neighborhood with a rich architectural history, from late-19th-century Italianate mansions to modest two-family homes built in the 1920s.

Local preservationists argue that protecting the city's historic neighborhoods is fundamental to the city's survival. Pointing out that bridge traffic is steadily shrinking, they are pressing the government to upgrade the train system and dismantle parts of the elevated freeway to allow better access to the riverfront. Not only would they like to see Olmsted's late-19th-century vision restored; they would also like to see it joined to a more comprehensive vision for the city's future.

At this point there is no concrete plan to counter the government's, but the potential is great. The city's architectural fabric is rich. It has an active grass-roots preservation movement. And few sites better sum up the challenges of trying to save a shrinking city. I for one would love to see what a talented architect could accomplish if his imagination were given

free rein over such a promising site.

Getting the projects I've described off the ground is not as impossible as it may seem. Only last week the federal Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development announced the creation of an urban task force that would promote the development of sustainable communities linked to public transportation — a small but encouraging step in advancing a more integrated approach to urban growth.

In September the White House and Congress will also have a rare opportunity to rethink the antiquated transportation authorization bill, which comes up for review once every six years and funnels hundreds of billions of dollars each year into highway construction and repairs.

Given that the administration has already made sustainability a priority, that money could be redirected to other projects, like efforts that reinforce density rather than encourage urban sprawl. It could be used to replace crumbling expressways with the kind of local roads and parks that bind communities together rather than tear them apart.

I am also a fan of a National Infrastructure Bank, an idea that was first proposed by the financiers Felix Rohatyn and Everett Ehrlich.

The bank would function something like a domestic World Bank, financing large-scale undertakings like subways, airports and harbor improvements. Presumably it would be able to funnel money into the more sustainable, forward-looking projects. It could also establish a review process similar to the one created by the government's General Services Administration in the mid-1990s, which attracted some of the country's best talents to design federal courthouses and office buildings. Lavishing similar attention on bridges, pump stations, trains, public housing and schools would not only be a significant step in rebuilding a sense of civic pride; it would also prove that our society values the public infrastructure that binds us together as much as it values, say, sheltering the rich.

A half-century ago American engineering was the envy of the rest of the world. Cities like New York, Los Angeles and New Orleans were considered models for a brilliant new future. Europe, with its suffocating traditions and historical baggage, was dismissed as a decadent, aging culture.

It is no small paradox that many people in the world now see us in similar terms.

President Obama has a rare opportunity to build a new, more enlightened version of this country, one rooted in his own egalitarian ideals. It is an opportunity that may not come around again.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 5, 2009
Because of an editing error, an article last Sunday about projects that would reinvent American cities misstated the name of Franklin D. Roosevelt's public works program. It was the Work Projects Administration, not the Works Projects Administration.