HOW COMMUNITIES CAN SAVE THE AMERICAN CITY

JACK K.

What makes a community dysfunctional? What causes urban decline and decay in American cities? How can we revitalize urban decay and dysfunctional neighborhoods without displacing existing communities, cultures, and people? I considered all of these questions when creating this work, a large-scale map to depict the issues with urban infrastructure and communities of the United States.

I utilized relief printing, which allowed me to work at an overwhelming scale, to convey my belief that the problems we face with American cities seem utterly inordinate. The three colors represent three stages a city must experience to heal. The first stage – black – represents death or decay, the beginning state of a dilapidated community, neighborhood, or city. Black provokes an acceptance of death and decay, instead of an ignorance of its presence. The second stage – red – represents hope and good fortune, and the infusion of new life. The third stage – yellow – represents clarity, optimism, and enlightenment, the juncture a neighborhood reaches when its residents partake in the growth of its community.

The print image is a road map of a historic community south of Atlanta, named College Park, which has experienced wave after wave of troubles. But that doesn't mean it is forgone. Just like a dying organism, new life sprouts from the nutrients of its old life. Forging new life is the job of the people – us – not the government or corporations. The power to instill change is with every American; we just need to realize the power we have.

Jack K

In this paper I explore the question: Is the revitalization of urban decay and dysfunctional neighborhoods possible without displacing existing communities, cultures, and peoples? I begin by exploring the history of cities and how they influence the human race from the beginning of our history up until the modern day. I then look at many of the problems facing American cities in the past few decades and many of their causes. Afterwards, I discuss many of the possible solutions to these issues and how we can fix them. Finally, I look particularly at a decaying community in Georgia that has suffered from disinvestment and white flight. I bring together a number of sources to support my claims and eventually evaluate the possibility of a sustainable and functional neighborhood for all socioeconomic classes, with the focus on how "community" can help to create it.

Cities in General

    A city is just a basic agglomeration of people into one large urban area. In theory, it is a simple concept, but in practice they become complicated and extensive. They have been the centers of the human world for thousands of years, and they have hosted many problems including squalor, crime, sickness, and oppression. When thousands, even millions, of people are living in one area, naturally an abundance of complicated conditions with planning, safety, and organization will come out of the situation.

    The history of cities is separated into a few different periods, the first one starting with the creation of cities in roughly 10,000 B.C. mostly in Mesopotamia and the Indus River Valley. These early cities began with the first animal domestication and settled agriculture. Transportation systems were simple in early cities, including horses and wagons. For the most part they would barely be considered towns in today's terms. There were a few exceptions; at its height, ancient Rome contained over a million people; but for the most part, cities were just small settlements protected by walls, towers, and castles, built around a walking radius of a twenty minute walk from the city center.[1] The percentage of people who lived in urban areas across the globe was extremely small, often below 10 percent. Since most people were focused on subsistence farming, the human population was focused in rural areas, making it difficult to have very many people living in one place, especially when compiled with the of the issues of rampant disease in the days before modern medicine. Fundamentally, there were too many limiting factors restricting humans from settling in nearly as large of urban agglomerations as we have today. The first period of cities, that had lasted thousands of years, abruptly ended with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the early years of the nineteenth century.

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    During the second period of cities, population exponentially increased, doubling the world's population twice in less than two hundred years. Before the Industrial Revolution it took more than 500 years for the world's population to double once. Industrialization and global

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[1] TEDx talk by Kent Larson: "Brilliant Designs to fit more people in every City"

urbanization only swelled populations.[2] In 2008, for the first time in human history, the global human population was living half in urban agglomerations and half in rural areas. Of course that number varies from country to country, but as much of the world lived in cities as did in rural areas.[3] At roughly the same time that this occurred, the world population doubled for what is projected to be the last time – possibly ever, at least for a long time. Thus begun a new third era of cities. Cities have already been the focus of people for a long time, but it is now – literally now – that they really have to function effectively and produce fruitfully to endure. With the constant influx of world populations moving into or being born in cities, cities will need to be able to flourish with diminishing inputs from outside agriculture and manufacturing. To do this, the world's cities need to produce more local consumer objects in a non-polluting way and they need to produce more food to reduce the amount of food that needs to be shipped long distances to urban and suburban centers. If we continue to ship all the food we eat across the country, the transportation costs – the real costs, like fuel – will not be viable.

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Cities began to focus themselves around automobiles, as opposed to public transportation, during the years after World War II, which changed the composition of American cities even more quickly and drastically than the previous Transportation Revolution. Now people could move tremendously quickly from the far reaches of a city's surrounding areas to the center in a matter of minutes. Alongside the automobile revolution, the construction of the Federal Highway system, starting in 1956 with the Federal-Aid Highway Act of that year, changed American cities in unseen capacities, due to the fact that American interstates were constructed to get people in and out of city centers without any resistance. The Federal Government did not focus on maintaining the existing framework of American cities; instead, they often bulldozed it,[4] separating urban neighborhoods and creating new boundaries in the name of progress towards the suburbs.

Automobiles and Interstate highways gave many Americans a new option for their transportation that seemed far better than the plight of urban public transportation and urban housing. New lovelier horizons in the suburbs led to a phenomena known colloquially as white flight. Any American who had the wealth and social mobility to do so, almost all of which were white, quickly escaped the urban neighborhoods of the Industrial Revolution to the new interstate suburbs of the postwar economy. Seeing that minority populations increased as rapidly as white populations, there was a strong need for urban housing for people of minority races. "The changing nature of the inner city and the problems it brought lent urgency to the need for urban renewal" in the eyes of the federal government.[5] This was largely illustrated through the housing

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[2] Angel, Shlomo. The data from this section came from Chapter 6 of the Angel's book *Planet of Cities.* It brought a detailed perspective on population growth.

[3] *Human Population: Urbanization*

[4] Weiner, Edward. Pages 27-29 of *Urban Transportation Planning in the United State: An Historical Overview* give history of the creation of the Eisenhower Interstate system.

[5] "Urban Renewal." This article comes from a book about the sixties in America and provides an unbiased perspective on some of the issues of the era.

acts of 1949 and 1954 that focused deeply on removing urban slums, redrawing inner city communities, and rebuilding downtown areas. In an effort to follow the guidelines set forth by the housing acts of the late 40's and early 50's, the production of large, homogenous housing projects began in the United States. In an attempt to find housing or escape the displacement of the Federal housing projects, many Black and Asian Americans looking for new dwellings encroached on predominantly white neighborhoods, exacerbating the flight of white Americans from the crumbling intown areas to the greener pastures of adjacent counties. Institutional Racism was basically one of the leading causes of suburbanization in the United States. Because all of the wealth was with the fleeing white Americans, massive disinvestment from the intown neighborhoods left behind exacerbated the plight of black Americans.[6] This meant that despite the massive populations, communities, and cultures of these neighborhoods, there was not nearly enough money to keep businesses, cultural centers, and even public transportation funding intown.

The American transition from a manufacturing to a service economy in the post-war years facilitated this urban to suburban shift. Americans who could afford it were happy to live far out of the city and drive long distances into work every day. No one was driving to a crummy factory in an industrial area of the city. The average middle-class, white American was driving to an office right off of the interstate in downtown, with a massive parking structure, allowing them to completely ignore the problems of crumbling urban America. The only Americans who had a real opportunity to instill change were blinded from the need for it. Massive disinvestment continued for decades as American cities continued to grow further and further outwards.

Urban Decay in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The most prime example of the white flight phenomenon is the "sun-belt" city of Atlanta. The city has nothing but thrived in the post-war economy, but the intown neighborhoods have struggled deeply until recent years. The city that was "too busy to hate" did just that: It ignored its segregated past as it plowed forward into a new, segregated future. It was easier to ignore the segregation because it was not easily visible after white flight. Atlanta is such a prime example of the phenomenon of white flight because it managed to pave the way for white flight in other

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[6] Digby-Junger, Richard. This article directly defines the concept of white flight

American cities. Before the Black Power movement of the late 1960's that assuredly made many white Americans too uncomfortable to stay in urban neighborhoods, the Atlanta white flight was in full swing. Atlanta's suburbs formed a new form of conservative idealism that "became the new politics of the new suburban nation."[7] White Atlantans did not see black neighborhoods, and black Atlantans did not see the white neighborhoods north and east of them. As the city grew, this wide segregation of people became much less intentional, it was no longer legal segregation, like preventing blacks from using bathrooms and lunch counters, but general segregation controlled by the flow of people; pulling whites to a specific neighborhood and blacks to a specific neighborhood. It was so entrenched that the segregation just continued itself. The baffling numbers of people that moved into the Atlanta area because of job opportunity and the readily available "American Dream" lifestyle – which increased the size of the city from just over a million people in 1960 to above 6 million in 2010 – only moved to the widening suburbs. Neighborhoods, even within the new parts of the city, remained split by race. Naturally, the entrenched low-income communities of the city remained dis-invested and ignored.

White flight and urban disinvestment have been long-ignored issues in the United States, but in recent years, they are beginning to be addressed. Sure, there have always been low-income housing projects or urban redevelopment projects, but nothing effective. Low income housing has always ignored the person actually living there. All these redevelopment projects generally accomplish is the minimum requirements for a human living space, but that does not account for the mental and social implications of a giant development that ignores small business, community space, and cultural significance. New urban development projects do something different, but they are still not the solution. They often create spectacular locale for upper income residents but often remove the culture that attracted development to the area in the first place. The existing nature of cities plans for large, auto-centric arteries and efficiency of travel, but they ignore the walkability factor, the power of people instead of numbers, and the potential of nature.

A new era of cities is being ushered in. Yes, one in which they control a majority of the world's population, but also one where we invest and care about their future. One where they house most of the world's population. One where they produce the majority of the world's pollution, garbage, goods, knowledge, and culture. One where they could make or break the entire planet. Our focus needs to be on improving cities so the world can thrive instead of fall apart.

Problems with American Cities

The United States has proven itself adept in almost every sense during its brief history. It has grown to be a global superpower uncommonly quickly and has thrived to a point at which much of the world's economic power is built upon American consumerism. This decentralization of power that the American economy is built upon has made it easy for cities to sprout up quickly and flourish at rates never before seen. But on the downside, the American free-market

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[7] Nelson, Bruce. The specific phenomena of white flight in Atlanta and how it shaped the city is discussed in this article.

system makes it remarkably easy for American neighborhoods, towns, and cities to dive deep into decline. All it can take for an American city to fall out of power is the movement of a single factory or disinvestment from one major company.[8] It is said that capitalism follows the path of least resistance.[9] Companies can painlessly find themselves ready to move on from a city that is too resistant, only because the taxes are just too high, the people want just too much pay, the land is just too expensive, or even the movement of other companies making it more logical to go elsewhere.

Detroit perhaps best fits the identity of an American city in decline. Despite its common stigma today as a crumbling city after its issues were brought to light with the 2013 file for bankruptcy protection, it was once one of the most impressive cities in the entire world – the motor city, the Paris of the Midwest, the Comeback City. It was only fifty years ago that the American Midwest had two close leaders: Chicago and Detroit. The two cities were in the same position; they had similar populations, income dispersions, property values. The difference was Detroit's continual loss of income per capita. The loss of investment of a few decades basically caused the continual downfall of one of America's greatest cities – Houses were abandoned, parks fell into disrepair, schools saw students dropping out earlier and earlier before graduation, eventually falling into disrepair as well.[10] This may seem like an outlier to the average American city, but it is not. Its issues are just the most obvious. All American cities have similar problems that are as bad, if not worse.

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The issues American cities are facing today are dire. These include the lack of public spaces, dilapidated school systems, out of control traffic, rising rents and housing costs, brain-numbing affordable housing projects, health concerns, food deserts, out of control pollution, organized and unorganized crime. Basically, American cities are facing problems that it would take the American military budget to fix – with the budget of the Luxembourg military to actually fix them. Despite the overreaching economic barriers, throwing money at a city's problems is not nearly enough to fix them. They need to be remedied with care. Not just by one city planner, or an ambitious mayor, but by all of the citizens. People need to take care of their communities and urban planners need to help facilitate it when people finally get to a point of awareness about their city's issues. Cities need to do more than look like they work well. We need to take the time to make sure the deep levels of a city's functions are operating properly. Just because a city's problems are not plainly visible, in no way means they are not there. The issues with the American city are so deep sewn that they are part of the planning that the cities themselves are built upon. Fixing the many issues that cities face with a few glimmering new buildings or a fancy new park will not suffice, but that does not mean we should not try to improve the situation.

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[8] Rybcynski, Witold. "Suburban Decline" includes predictions about what is to come in the future of American cities as well as some insight to the past causes of decline.

[9] Fainstein, Susan S.

[10] Guerrieri, Veronica. Detroit's issues are illustrated through this scholarly article.

The United States has a long history with public spaces. After the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, "American cities built grand parks to improve their residents quality of life:" projects like Central Park in New York City and Grant Park in Chicago.[11] Beginning during the Great Depression and continuing into the postwar years, public investment in parks began to fall as middle and upper class Americans left urban neighborhoods for suburbs that rarely included public space of any kind. A long period of time began where parks fell into such a state of dilapidation that many Americans saw them as too unsafe to even visit. Coupled with increasing crime rates, this issue only worsened. Despite their ignored nature in the United States, parks have been proven beneficial to American neighborhoods; not only increase land values, but also providing space for activity that helps citizens remain healthy. One of the greatest success stories for the benefits of public spaces was the construction of Centennial Park in downtown Atlanta for the 1996 Olympic Games out of formerly industrial areas. Before the park existed, adjacent land was valued at two dollars a square foot, but by the end of the 1990's, the value had risen to one-hundred and fifty dollars per square foot, proving the power of the park and its influence over people.[12]

Centennial Park in Downtown Atlanta, Georgia

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Education has been a pivotal part in providing Americans with the ability to improve their situation for as long as this country has existed, yet the American public school system has been falling behind for decades now. Disinvestment and a lack of new thinking occurs as a nationwide problem, causing dilapidated school infrastructure and an entrenched education style that focuses on testing rather than learning. A problem definitely exists with the American education style, but most professionals studying the issue say that the real issue is the variation between schools. There is a major distinction "between suburban school districts and urban school districts" in the United States according to a University of Maryland professor, William

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[11] Sherer, Paul M. Published by the Trust for Public Lands, this paper discusses the issues with public space in the United States
[12] See above.

Galston.[13] "In every city across [the United States,] there [is] a huge variation in the outcomes" for students.[14] In a country where equality is a constant battle, the inequality among American citizens is present even in our school system as funds are not equivalently dispersed between urban and suburban schools.

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The rising costs of housing in the United States makes it more difficult for Americans to afford simple housing. The below graph illustrates the percent change in rent prices for this year, 2016. It shows that even though the United States rents are rising extremely quickly, certain American cities have even faster rent rising rates.
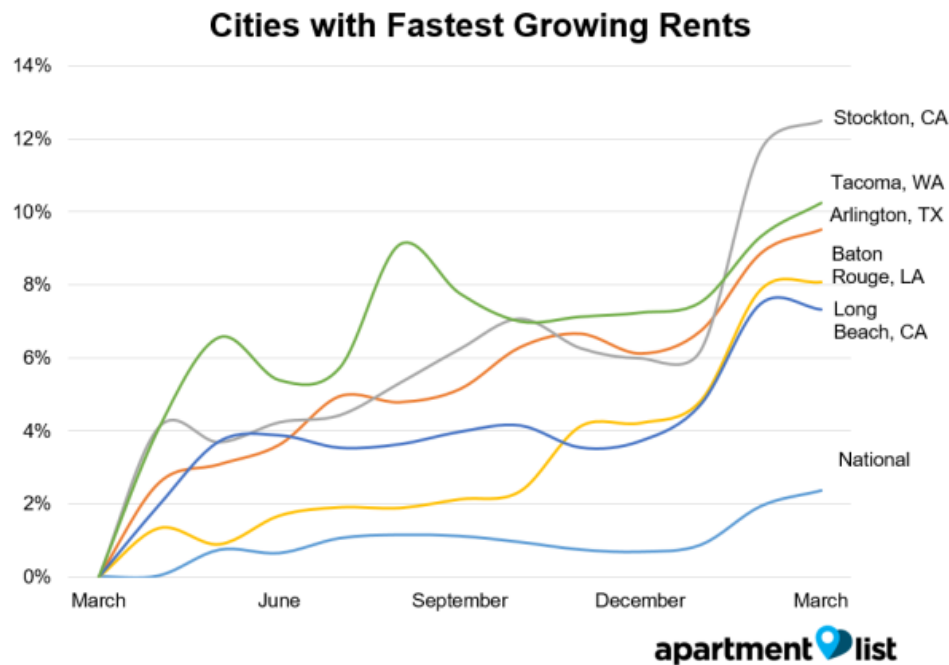
A graph showing percent change (%) in rent over months of 2016 in American cities with the largest change

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When city planners and architects come into neighborhoods in need of help, they often attempt to instill their own utopianistic visions on the projects. Meanwhile, there are millions of personal stories going on at once in a city simultaneously. People are not numbers – they have lives, feelings, and actions – all of these need to be considered when planning a city. Urban redevelopers say they can fix the lives of all those living in the struggling area, but they never really consider the stories and identities of these places. Government housing developers tear down people's homes in the name of progress so they can give them everything they need in public housing projects.[15] If an area is not functioning properly it is most likely not because everyone is living without expansive apartment complexes that give the ultimate sense of

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[13] "How bad are public schools? Is there a problem?" This quote is by William Galston, a Professor at the University of Maryland. It was published in an article with the above title by PBS.

[14] "How bad are public schools? Is there a problem?"   This quote is by Crew, the executive director of the University of Washington's Institute for K-12 leadership.

[15] Jacobs, Jane. I took inspiration from her story about an East Harlem project in the first chapter of her book.

homogeneity, it is most likely because the residents are not given the opportunities they should be. That does not mean we should find a way to make everyone in a poor neighborhood rich, we just need to give everyone equal access to education, public spaces, and healthy food. Urban areas that are struggling the most are at the same time the most adaptable. They have the strongest ability in their current form to become well functioning communities, while on the other hand the recently developed suburbs that are currently thriving the most in America will have the most difficulty adapting to further changes in American urban culture.

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I cannot complete this paper without touching on the concept of gentrification in American cities. Gentrification is the "revival of urban areas by a set of interrelated demographic, economic, social, and spatial changes" that usually include "new investment in housing, an influx of highly educated, culturally aware residents and consumers, and the shift from an industrial to a service economy with jobs in the city center for professionals and artists."[16] I personally do not like the term because of its uniform connotations. The phenomena is not uniform, different cities experience unique forms of it depending on their specific environment. When researchers, activist, and even gentrifiers talk about gentrification, they speak in the same way as developers in reference to urban redevelopment projects. They do not consider every part, every level, every story. They look at the areas that are gentrifying and just make wide generalizations about the people living in these neighborhoods, the people moving in, the buildings being redeveloped, and the long term effects. I am not denying that many of the facts that make up gentrification are happening, I just think that the issues are much more complicated than what is being said.

Gentrification often begins when middle class people, commonly artists and gay couples, move into derelict urban communities because they are attracted to the low housing costs, social diversity, aesthetics of older buildings, and cultural vitality of the streets. When people of a certain opportunity move to these areas they take a risk by investing in them, but they usually outweigh the impact of displacement and community destruction with the cultural amenities they will benefit from. Displacement of existing residents in gentrifying areas is hard to record accurately and varies heavily from city to city. One phenomenon that often occurs is the movement of long time residents that want to take advantage of their home value before they die to leave more money to their children, but that is also just a reason for people that cause gentrification to justify their actions. Consequently, city governments and members of the media often downplay displacement in order to encourage new investment and bring a new stream of residents into their long neglected urban neighborhoods.[17] Gentrification is, on the other hand, seen as an alternative to government urban renewal projects for the free-market system. This does not mean that there is not government interaction. City governments have to allow zoning changes and give permits to builders that are investing in these areas. Governments definitely have to let it happen. Gentrification does not just manifest itself, it takes the work of members of

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[16] "*Gentrification.*"   This comes from the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*.

[17] See above.

the community, the city, and new and old residents to cause change. The effects of the gentrification are not inherently bad, but they are not inherently good. The values and costs need to be weighed. The main issue is not that it is happening. It is that it is happening either too swiftly or in too confined a location.[18]

The main reason I disagree with the term is because of its broad nature. I understand that in some areas, gentrification can be seen as bad. For example, in the mission district of San Francisco, many landlords are finding loopholes in the system to allow new, higher paying residents to replace the longtime economically neglected residents of the neighborhood. This is definitely displacement. On the other hand, gentrification can be beneficial to a place. In the urban neighborhoods of Dallas, there is a strong influx of residents to areas that were long neglected. This has allowed for the improvement of urban public transportation, dilapidated schools, and abysmal parks. It may cause minor displacement in few cases, but the bonuses of the gentrification can be seen as good enough to override these issues. My basic point is that grouping a bunch of urban revitalization projects across the United States, all of which have complicated issues that need to be weighed, into one large category will not make them identical. Humans love to put things into categories, it is our nature, but gentrification is not a category that needs to prevail because it will just stop us from really seeing the problems that caused these neighborhoods to be dilapidated in the first place, problems that are not the same from place to place.

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To look at the next problem facing cities, we need to look at the opposite: rural areas. Farming in America has become just as centralized as cities. Large companies now decide the fate of American agriculture, just as they do American cities. Large corporations own the sprawling monoculture farms of rural America. They use mass simplification of crop production as a logistical advantage. They produce all of their peanuts in one place, all of their arugula in another. The monocultural, simplified system makes American agriculture susceptible to disease and bacteria. It also forces cities to depend on extremely complicated supply chains to receive food they could be producing in their back yards, literally.[19]

American agriculture did not always consist of sprawling monoculture farms filling millions of acres of land with one single crop. After World War II, a transition occurred from farming being controlled by millions of American families across the county to a point where farming was controlled by a few large corporations. Companies like Monsanto have also been able to control patents on seeds that they have genetically modified to make simpler or more resilient to unsustainable inputs: including the herbicide roundup and other pesticides. This has not only made the plight of the small scale farmer more difficult in the United States, but it has

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[18] Billingham, Chase M.   This article basically lays out the ideas of gentrification, and even though it calls the term too broad, an idea I agree with, it does not offer too many opinions, mostly just data and observations.
[19] Nordahl, Darrin.

also allowed for food availability to be focused onto more profitable markets, usually upper class areas.[20]

This monopolization of food has allowed the creation of large food deserts across the country, a term defining the lack of accessible and affordable produce within a certain urban or rural neighborhood, especially in the same neighborhoods that are suffering from decline. Food deserts can lead to adverse health effects that coincide with an unhealthy diet. Even as food deserts close thanks to government programs that "helped raise $1 billion to try to end" them and urban revitalization in intown neighborhoods that attract new grocery chains, a new problem has emerged: food mirages.[21] The term describes a situation in which "specialty stores [close food deserts when they] flock to newly hip districts while cheap supermarkets are pushed out."[22] They technically close food deserts by providing fresh produce within a walking distance or reasonable driving distance of a 1 mile radius, but are often too costly, and price out lower-income residents.

Cities will need to have some sort of efficiency and production value agriculturally in order to survive the coming century. It is also imperative for the health of the human race that we close health food gaps. People need access to a healthy lifestyle, no matter their socioeconomic condition. A life of safety and health should not just be for the rich. We do not need to funnel billions of dollars to universal healthcare, public safety, and low-income housing to accomplish these goals. We just need to consider the issues in the root planning of our systems and work on improving them. Healthy food is not available to all Americans, but that can be fixed very quickly and easily if we just invest in our communities.

Alongside these social and cultural issues, the physical planning of American urban areas is another major blocking force of improvement nationwide. Traffic has been an issue since the original planning of American highways. Since the beginning, the solution to traffic has been the construction of more roads, yet it has not once worked in the long term.[23] Road connectivity may temporarily lessen traffic woes, but in the end the new connectivity will just spur new development that will lead to more traffic. The planning of American cities, especially the suburban areas, has only created less efficiency and worsened the problem that we are having. They are planned for shortsighted, generalized concerns. To solve traffic, the only way is to get more cars off the road by providing incentives for biking, building more public transportation, and creating reasons to get more people into each vehicle. Building more roads has never been the solution and never will be the solution.

As a whole, the problems that are facing American cities are so immense that not many people know how to remedy them. We can take some solutions from looking at other countries,

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[20] "Expanding Monoculture."   This article on the website of the Union of Concerned Scientists talks about the issues with large corporation control of agriculture and monoculture practices.

[21] Paulson, Steven Tucker.   This article provides information on ways the government failed to solve the food desert crisis.

[22] See Nordahl, Darrin

[23] Weiner, Edward. In this book, referenced in footnote 4, Weiner tells of issues with American traffic flow that have been around since before the interstate system.

we can think deeply about a communicative approach, we can find the answers in the simplest places. The solutions are there, they just need to be pieced together. They are so frustratingly simple that they may seem ridiculous. Can we remedy these issues of urban decay and dysfunctioning neighborhoods in American cities without displacing existing cultures and communities?

How can *we* fix America's problems?

An American propaganda poster from World War two, advertising the creation of Victory Gardens.

The United States usually manages to come together in profound ways during a time of war. Whether it is a war with itself or a war with fascists from across the world, these are usually the times that Americans really manage to show their production power and adaptability. For example, during World War II, there was so much food being shipped to the troops across seas that the government encouraged the creation of "victory gardens" in order to make up for the food deficit on the home front. By planting these gardens, Americans produced 40% of their necessary produce. This illustrates the raw power of an America that is working together for one common goal. When the government, the people, and the companies work together, wonderful progression can be made really quickly. I am using this example because food scarcity, as I discussed in the last section, is a large problem in the United States. I think one simple solution is the bring back the concept of a victory garden. Not necessarily in that form, but urban farming just the same. If every backyard, rooftop, and empty lot is converted into a garden that people really care about and tend to, fresh vegetables will become much more common in areas of all incomes and immense amounts of oil will be saved. I am picturing thriving American cities with strong communities that produce their own food.

Returning to Detroit for a moment, one thing that has come out of the city's empty land and dwindling economic strength, is a progressive urban farming movement. Hundreds of empty

properties around the city and a workforce that is in search of new opportunity is making an new city by growing fresh produce for the sake of the community. It has developed a new source of hope in a place that most needed it. They are essentially utilizing their urban decline and decay to create a greater society.

The concept of urban farming is not new. Permanent Agriculture is a movement that has really thrived in recent years. Its basic tenets include creating extremely biodiverse food gardens that produce exceptional quantities of food in a natural fashion using only soil building qualities of the plants and the water falling from the sky. Permaculture uses knowledge gained from studying natural ecosystems and looks at all the pieces of an ecosystem. It then applies this knowledge to develop self-sufficient, man-made, fruitful ecosystems.[24]

Urban Permanent Agriculture applies to the issues with American cities in many ways. Existing forms of American agriculture, just like American cities, are designed to be as simple, uniform, and logical as possible. By attempting to attain the goals of simplicity, modern farms and cities depend on unsustainable inputs and excessive amounts of human interaction to survive. Meanwhile, cities and agriculture are remarkably intertwined. Modern cities require extensive agricultural systems to maintain their current course and speed. Permanent agriculture understands that in order for us to use nature to sustain us, it make senses for us to act like nature. If we need the qualities and services of nature to thrive as a species, why do we work so hard to simplify it? We need to accept our part within nature and nurture that role, instead of constantly fighting against it. It makes sense for us to treat cities like permanent agriculture treats food production. We need to understand that cities cannot all be the same, they do not all have the same solutions, just like all agricultural land. I also bring up the permanent agriculture movement because it is an important part of my direction for cities. I understand that it is impossible for a city to produce as much as it consumes, but it only makes sense for them to at least lighten the load on the American food system. People will still want avocados in Chicago. People still want grapes in the middle of the winter. Americans would have to give up more than we would ever be willing to for us to be completely sustainable, but it is important that the design of urban areas do their part to lighten the load.[25]

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Home ownership, just like urban farming, has the astounding ability to improve the health of a community. In the many renting communities of modern America and the expansive public housing projects, one thing is really lacking, besides decent conditions, and that is personal ownership. In Chile, a new method is being put in wide practice to pull people out of urban slums. The government only provides half the necessary funds to build people's homes, so it does exactly that. One architecture firm designed the "half-house."

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[24] *Permaculture Principles.* This website basically discusses the basic concepts of permanent agriculture and also offers design solutions for a permanent agricultural lifestyle.

[25] Nordahl, Darrin. The author of *Public Produce* brings up the point that it is impossible for all American food to be local, but it is important to grow as much as possible locally.

A picture of one of Elemental's half-houses

Elemental, a local Chilean architecture firm, designed a house that includes all of the necessities in half of it; staircase, bathroom, kitchen; but leaves the other half empty. They then gift an attached, half-constructed home to a family in need of a decent place to live outside of a slum. The firm's vision is to basically mass produce human living spaces for people of low socioeconomic conditions that still leave an opportunity for personalization and a strong community. The family can then fill into the home as they make money with their new opportunities. When they make the necessary funds, the can fill in the other half of the home, giving them all the space they would need. They also have a strong feeling of community from this process because they care about their home and neighbors since they have worked so hard to achieve it, instead of just being thrown into a random apartment in an expansive development with hundreds of people all living in primarily the exact same apartment. The other thing that makes the half-house concept different, is the architects actually ask the potential owners what they want. If they had the option between a bathtub and a hot water heater, the average architect would say the hot water heater, but the families, having never had indoor plumbing, would say the bathtub. Understanding the desires of specific people and not just numbers is important when planning projects like this. The people that live in these places are more than just numbers; they have lives and stories. [26]

Domestically, urban revitalization projects are occurring all across the country. Most are being constructed by private companies that are not necessarily doing poorly, but they are often more focused on making money than on the effects their projects will have on communities. One man who opposes this average revitalization style is an artist named Theaster Gates. A West Chicago native and "a full time artist, a full time planner, and a full time preacher with an aspiration of no longer needing any of those titles," Gates has seen his fair share of urban

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[26] *Urbanized.* This documentary focused on the problems facing cities in the coming years, but also offered solutions, such as the Chilean example. It looked at cities on a global level.

disinvestment throughout his life.[27] He took an interesting idea and used it to revitalize a block of his neighborhood. He started by refurbishing his historic home on the southside of Chicago. He then took the opportunity to buy the house next door when it came on the market. He pulled dilapidated materials from the building that could not be used and created art out of them. He then used the money from the art he sold to refurbish the building into a community space. The building, when completed, was transformed into a community record library and moviehouse. He then completed the same process a few more times until he had refurbished virtually the entire block. At the same time he brought a new life to the neighborhood and strengthened its community. Gates used the opportunities he was given as an artist and created something beneficial to everyone in his neighborhood. All he did was care, and act on it.[28]

After this, Gates did not stop. He, with the help of a team of graduate students from University of Chicago dubbed Place Lab, coined the concept of ethical redevelopment. He now continues his ideas of revitalizing urban neighborhoods for the people already living there, refurbishing and building upon the existing buildings instead of tearing them down and starting from the beginning. Ethical redevelopment is the answer to a similar question to mine: how can we revitalize urban neighborhoods in an ethical sense, for the existing communities, cultures, and peoples? He uses a strong love of design, a caring and community-oriented attitude, and a philanthropic hand to complete projects that will actually benefit the members of his community in Southside Chicago.[29]

A before and after picture of Theaster Gates Dorchester projects house

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[27] A direct quote from Theaster Gates.
[28] *Art:21: art in the twenty-first century* This episode focuses on Chicago, but has a specific piece on Theaster Gates and his accomplishments
[29] "About." This is an article from the Place Lab website that includes an informative video on Ethical Redevelopment that includes Gates himself.

This brings me to idea of durable housing. Even while cities like Chicago or Detroit have had suffering neighborhoods with a severe lack of new housing stock for years, the existing housing does not disappear with the people – not quickly at least. Homes can be built in a matter of weeks, but they disappear very slowly, such that "urban decline is not the mirror image of growth."[30] The basic model for this then means that as population grows, housing stock increases at roughly the same rate, but as population declines, housing stock decreases at a much slower rate.

So why is this important? It basically tells us that neighborhoods that have suffered decline cannot just have more houses thrown in to fix the problem by getting people to move there; there is already plenty of housing existing in a dilapidated state. This makes rehabilitation much more complicated. For example, if one third of the land in a neighborhood is empty, one third is abandoned but has structures, and one third has residents that have mostly likely suffered through years of watching their neighborhoods collapse, the issue of helping that neighborhood rebuild is not as simple as literally rebuilding it. One could do that, and many have in the past, but just building large housing projects in the area does not help; sometimes it only makes it worse. In the Morningside Heights district of New York, decline was becoming imminent towards the end of the 1950's. It should not have been; the neighborhood has abundant parks, hospitals, and one of the nation's best Universities, but decline was happening just the same. In an attempt to save the neighborhood, Columbia University worked to "save" the community by tearing down its most declining buildings and replacing them with a huge middle-income housing cooperative. However, the project served the opposite of their intent and pushed the neighborhood into decline even faster. The new development allowed for the destruction of the existing community when its members were displaced. The lack of community allowed for a deeper plunge into urban decline until Columbia University felt forced to buy large amounts of real estate and force gentrification in the area.[31]

<div align="center">***</div>

Researchers use planning strategy to decide which areas are going to decline and which are not. This is often not the case. Wonderful street grids and parks will not stop a neighborhood from decline if the cultural and population changes are as strong as they have been in urban areas in the United States in the postwar years with white flight, government redevelopment projects, and disinvestment.

In theory, the members of the community that still stay in their changing neighborhoods despite everything that happens are often the ones that care the most about them – or do not have the means to leave, so are forced to stay. Why does it make sense to push them out to help fix a neighborhood? Crime is like a cancer to a city. If it starts in one place, it can quickly spread to another and unless it is stopped in all places, it can still spread more. Also like cancer, crime does not try to be ruinous to a city, it is just so hated by the people that help a city that it forces

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[30] Glaeser, Edward L. This quote comes from the second page of the paper "Urban Decline and Urban Housing." It appears on page 346 of the Journal of Political Economy Vol. 113 no. 2.
[31] Jacobs, Jane. This is an example Jacobs uses in an attempt to prove almost the same thing.

them to fail. Delinquency within a neighborhood is relevant to the situation because people will not want to stay where it is happening. If dereliction is not under control, urban decay will only manifest more quickly. The idea of fixing a neighborhood is wrong in and of itself. If you go in and say it needs to be fixed, you might as well say it needs to be replaced, like a mechanic going into a car engine and changing out parts without even looking at why the old ones are broken. To help remedy the issues neighborhoods are having we need to find a way to instill care into the neighborhoods' communities. Building a bunch of homogenous new houses will not build a community, people want something interesting and delightful to fully invest themselves in. A sense of community needs to be built into the design. It is hard to even list solutions for this because they need to be extremely site specific.

No matter how much money is put into a place, that alone will never be viable to build a community. A sense of community is one of the hardest things to create. Money can help with some of a neighborhood's issues, but it can only be so supportive. When the beltline, a mixed use, urban green belt, was built in Atlanta, it did not alone bring about the new community in neighborhoods that had long been lacking one. It did, however, bring something for neighbors to have pride in. Something for neighbors to want to care about. That is what is important. Something for people to care about. Whether it is an repurposed urban space, a thriving neighborhood shopping street, or a lush community garden, there are many things that can bring pride into an a neighborhood, and even create a community that did not exist before. Communities need care to be built. They don't need to start huge; just a small spark can create a thriving community. All it takes is a few people that care to make a few more people care, and from there a domino effect can occur. Regardless of what happens after, a community will need a spark, and it depends on all Americans to bring their flint and steel.

A picture of the Atlanta Beltline near the neighborhood of Old Fourth Ward as it stood before and after its construction. The grass patch adjacent to the path in the after picture will eventually include a light rail line.

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No matter what common belief states, not all neighborhoods that are considered in decline or slums are actually that. When considering a neighborhood or community that needs to be revitalized or remedied, one must look very closely at the neighborhood's actual state. Just because a neighborhood is dense, or lacks the comforts of a new suburb, does not mean it lacks a thriving community of caring neighbors. Everything city planners have learned "about what is good for people and good for city neighborhoods, everything that [makes them] expert[s]," is based on statistics and maps.[32] That is not enough to actually judge a place.

Legendary activist Jane Jacobs uses the example of the North End in Boston throughout her book *The Death and Life of American Cities*. The North End was long considered "Boston's worst slum and civic shame."[33] Despite this widespread belief, Jacobs, an outsider to Boston, found the neighborhood to be completely different than expectation. After some digging she discovered that the neighborhood actually had significantly lower rates of crime, tuberculosis, and death than the rest of the city. She visited twice, separated by almost twenty years, and found that the second time she visited the neighborhood had significantly improved itself, without the help of outside banks, city investment, or new neighborhood members. The neighborhood members cared enough to invest their own money back into their own community. "The general street atmosphere of buoyancy, friendliness and good health was so infectious that I began asking directions of people just for the fun of getting in on some talk," said Jacobs herself after her second visit.[34] The fact that these community members cared enough was all it took to make the neighborhood thrive, a neighborhood considered a decrepit slum by many.

The Case of College Park, Georgia

College Park, Georgia, a reconstruction era, streetcar suburb on the southside of Atlanta, is a historic neighborhood that has suffered from urban decline for decades now. Property values have almost doubled on average in the last fifteen years, but that is only due to a small bubble of redevelopment around Woodward Academy, a local private school that I have attended since Pre-Kindergarten. The average income has decreased in the last fifteen years by two percent, only 60% of the state average. The city's population sits at 14,598 in 2015, a 28.4% loss from 2000.[35] Almost half the city is also considered to be in a food desert by the United States Department of Agriculture.[36] The unemployment rate of the city is 11% whereas the United States as a whole is unemployed at 4.5%. The crime rate in the city is 376% higher than the national average. If you live in College Park, you have a 1 in 8 chance of being the victim of some sort of crime.[37]

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[32] Jacobs, Jane.   This quote is from the introduction chapter to Jacobs iconic book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

[33] See above.

[34] See above.

[35] "College Park, Georgia." This website basically gives a breakdown of the demographics of the neighborhood.

[36] *USDA ERS.*   This website basically provides a map of all of the food deserts in the U.S.

[37] Areavibes. This website basically offers public statistics on American cities and neighborhoods.

The city is basically suffering from chronic urban decline, rising housing costs, lowering wages, and extreme crime. So why would I want to pick College Park as a case study for my own urban revitalization, refurbishment, and remedy plan? In part because I have personal experience with the city – I have attended school for five years in the city; I have numerous friends that live in the area – but mostly because I see potential in the area. Potential from a design perspective, potential from a planning perspective, potential because of the community and support group the city has, potential because of its connectivity to the world. College park contains within its boundaries numerous offices and hotels, an adaptable street plan, two of the few Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transportation Authority stations, and a large part of the world's busiest airport. Not only that, but the city has 842 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.[38]

In a city that I have lived in all my life, I have noticed a culture of tearing down old buildings, and being too busy to remember the past. In College Park, I not only see an opportunity to create a walking-friendly, community-minded, urban gardening neighborhood, but I also see a place to really consider the rich history of the city and the culture that comes with that remembrance for the past and thought of the future.
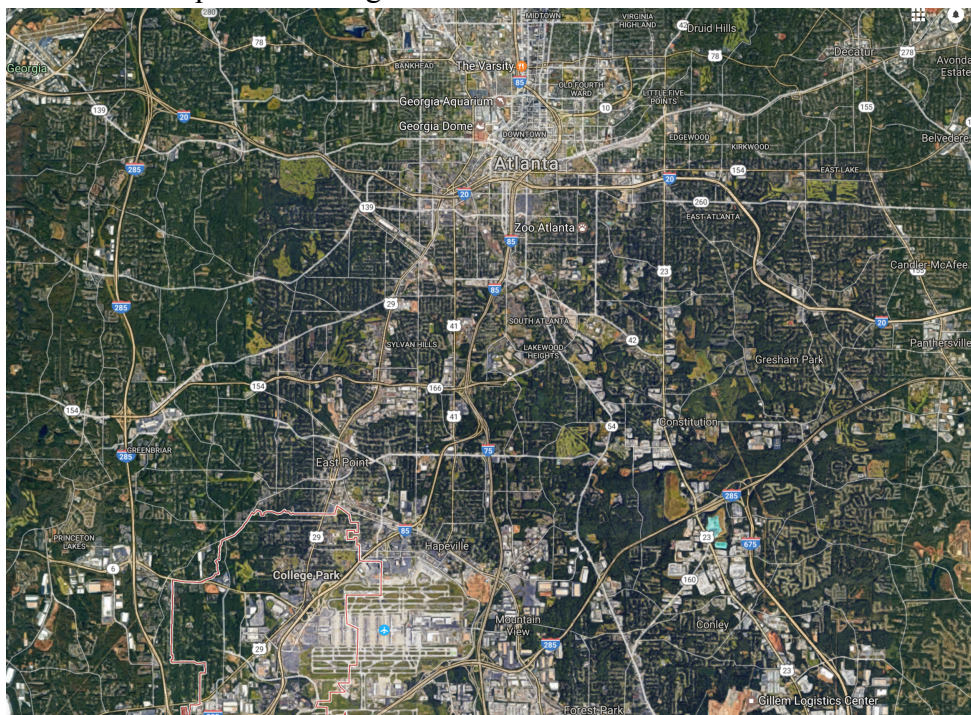
A map of College Park (outlined in red) as it sits in the Atlanta area

From the beginning of human settlement, communities have been focused around a public meeting place that benefits everyone. At first that was water sources: wells and streams. Everyone needed to live as close to that as they could carry a pot of water.[39] I think that this

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[38] "National Register of Historic Place." National Historic Places database is accessible from this website.
[39] That concept was found in a TEDx Talk by Kent Larson titled: "Brilliant Designs to fit more people in every city"

concept is still relevant today, thousands of years later. That is why I want the central focus of this development to be community. The development of a community mindset requires a public space that draws the residents of a neighborhood or city to really care. I also want there to be a heavy focus on food because I think that is one of the most underappreciated things in our modern American culture. I would like the meeting place to be multi-modal, but I think its central focus should be a farmers market that brings the concept of urban gardening in the neighborhood to a connected community perspective. There is something powerful in people having a strong part in where their food comes from.

I would like the spark in this new community to be a farmers market in the area at Harvard Avenue between Napoleon and Victoria streets. This would not just be a small market sitting in a random location, but a large planned development that takes into account the history of the area. It would also take advantage of its adjacent location the College Park transportation station, that would provide transportation to the market for people of all socioeconomic classes. It would also utilize all of the urban gardening programs in the city that would be installed to provide cheap produce to all members of the cities of College Park, East Point, Atlanta, and Clayton County, all of which are a close train ride from the area. One of the largest advantages of the farmers market space is that it not only brings the possibility of health food options to new areas, but that it also provides a space for numerous other events. The space could be rented out to other parties for private events or public art exhibitions or performances. It could add a new dynamic and interest to the downtown area that the city has long been lacking. I would also like to specify that for two reasons, the buildings in the new area would not be built taller than five or six stories. This is due to the close proximity to busy airport flight paths and because I would not want to disrupt the community with large, overbearing structures.

Image of Downtown College Park from Google Maps, including a rough plan of a possible central revitalization project.

The market space would also include a number of adjacent public amenities including a public park, garden, an arts exposition, and a sculpture garden. The focus on art and food is

especially key with the possibility of a project like this. Bringing artists into the neighborhood will help bring people together and support a strong community, as long as the artists are kept from attracting too many middle class people to move to the area, displacing longtime residents. It is important that all of these spaces include access for all people for free and provide multiple uses to the public. To provide more walkable amenities and promote walkability in the area, the plan would also include commercial and office space to the south of the site along Columbia Avenue, with the intent of creating a small business and pedestrian minded culture.

I think one of the biggest hurdles to overcome with a community spark project like this one is the general matter of design. The project would need to be designed almost perfectly to accomplish its goal well. The structures should be designed to be efficient, but also adaptable. Offices should be able to be easily transformed if necessary to apartments or even just different offices, depending on what is necessary. Parks need to be visitor friendly, with lots of places to sit, and the right size of open space. No open space should be so enclosed that the visitor feels overpowered, but they should not feel so open that the visitor does not know where to stand, sit, or meet with other people. It is important that the entire place is inviting and enjoyable for residents and visitors.

One of the biggest issues I find with areas that keep them from being pedestrian friendly is a lack of adequate walking space. Pedestrian infrastructure may seem simple, but it is often not straightforward enough for cities to accomplish. To help create a safe walking environment, the central area and the city as a whole would need to provide better pedestrian framework. This would include, more than adequate street crossings, widened sidewalks, following a narrow street mindset, and pedestrian bridges over the busy rail corridor that runs along Main Street.

To prevent this project from increasing land value in the area too quickly and displacing existing residents from the area, the city would install rent control policies to existing residents, and the city would also provide public housing gifts at a half-house site that would be constructed along John Wesley Avenue on the back side of the commercial development. North of the market, adjacent to the College Park Police Department would be the construction of a mixed income apartment development that provides reduced rent rates for in need residents alongside renters that do not need public rent help. This method has been employed in Harlem, and has been found to be very successful.

I think that historical preservation would not be a problem in the revitalization of College Park as it often is with the revitalization of other areas because of the historical preservation safeties already in place. With the historical registration of the extent of the city's historical buildings, new development will not be able to disrupt the existing historical structures.

Education has a key role in this project as well. Money and time will need to be invested in the city's school system. Educating the existing and new residents is key in providing the opportunity for people to go to work at steady, safe, and fitting jobs. That is one of the reasons there will be office space included in the project. It brings hope of new employment to the area that will provide people with the means they need to thrive.

On every rooftop and mixed among every building of the development would be urban permaculture garden space managed by a series of permaculturist families that would be gifted half-houses and a share of the harvested food in return for their work in the garden. I think bringing in permaculturist farmers will not only offer a realistic way of making the city produce immense amounts of food, but will also provide leaders that really care about the community because their livelihood depends on it.

I think that if the spark is thrusted upon College Park, the existing infrastructure will do the rest of the work. The city has a profusion of people that care, plenty of business opportunity, an abundance of durable housing, considerable amounts of cheap land, and effective transportation connectivity. Essentially all College Park needs is a spark and then a continual investment in pedestrian, park, and education infrastructure. The revitalization should be more of a steady process than a swift, strong attack on the city's issues.

The project does not necessarily need to be as large scale as the one in the image above, but the central point would be to create a spark of life in the community. The way I designed the simple plan for the downtown center is to fit on empty land without touching any of the older buildings in the area. I would not want to displace any businesses or offices because they are the existing blood in the dying community of College Park, I would merely want to help them improve their situation indirectly. I do not think we can revitalize our dilapidated urban neighborhoods like College Park by completely reconstructing them. The buildings are not usually the problems The real problem is the lifeblood of neighborhoods – the community of people inhabiting them – and that is what really needs to be remedied. A spark is necessary to ignite the fuel that is either existing or added with these small or large community projects. With that ignition, as long as there is enough fuel to burn and enough room for the fire to grow, the flames will burn. As long as we do not continue to extinguish our communities through disinvestment and crime, their blaze will keep burning. This brings me to the root of the problem. We are smothering the fires of our communities by taking away their rights to public space, education, and safety. A community just needs to be provided with the fuel and a spark, and the fire will continue to burn as long as we keep feeding it. As long as we do not repress people, they will want to do whatever they can to thrive.

This brings us back to the final question. Can we revitalize decaying and dysfunctional urban neighborhoods without displacing existing communities and cultures? I think the answer is yes. One single place has not managed to do this yet, but many places across the scope of the entire world have explored and created pieces of the solution. They just need to be put together. Not by one of us. By all of us. Our communities are the table that the puzzle of city revitalization will be put together on. The relationship between a healthy and functioning neighborhood and the community is the key to revitalizing American cities.

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