

# Re-Building Diversity: Prospects for Establishing Diverse Downtown Communities

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The past half century of urban development witnessed the near-extinction of downtown and near-downtown residential communities in most large cities of the American west. The middle- and upper-class exodus to the new-found “paradise” of the low-density suburb left primarily the poor and a small number of affluent dwellers near the city center. Without a sufficient residential population to sustain neighborhood shopping, schools, and services, downtown communities quickly lost the “critical mass” necessary to sustain healthy community life.

Historically, downtown communities provided safe and affordable dwelling for workers, new immigrants and a wide range of others who elected to live near the city center. Downtown communities served as a “meeting ground” for diverse American subcultures and social groups, providing an urban milieu that offered opportunities for human contact with individuals of different origin, economic status, and values.

In sequence of books beginning with *The Uses of Disorder* (1970), most recently summarized in the *Conscience of the Eye* (1990), the sociologist Richard Sennett has written persuasively about the social value of urban diversity, complexity, and heterogeneity. His thinking is fundamental to the nature of the city, which historically served as a forum of communication among individuals from different walks of life. The downtown residential community was one of the most fertile settings for this kind of urban diversity, providing rich opportunities for human exposure.

The ideals articulated by Sennett are a world apart from current separatist and exclusionary practices of urban development. The divide between social ideals and the market-driven forces that propel most urban change is so wide that the goal of diversity is rarely even discussed as an element of urban regeneration.

This study examines central city revitalization programs in four western cities, focusing on efforts to promote urban diversity in revitalization. The four cities—San Diego, San

Francisco, Portland, and Seattle—have each witnessed a loss of once-thriving downtown residential communities.

The case study cities may be criticized for their past records of removing historic downtown residential communities in favor of promoting more economically-lucrative development. The loss of diversity and absence of the qualities that Sennett advocated are as much due to conscious urban development policies as to resident motivations to leave the city center.

Although the era of removing older downtown communities has long passed, there is little evidence that mixing diverse residents is a serious policy objective. Following Sennett's claim that “planners pay lip service to diversity but do not take it seriously,” review of redevelopment efforts in the cities studied reveals a strong tendency to separate diverse residents by separating building types, ownership patterns, and income levels.

American cities are currently in an era of “numbers” for scoring downtown residential restoration. Production of dwelling units is touted by emphasizing the quantities, densities, and statistical measures of income mix achieved. But numbers of new dwellings do not make communities that offer opportunities for contact between diverse individuals and groups. The pressure on urban development agencies to deliver “results” most often leads to large projects that kill the potential for urban diversity.

The study underscores the difficulty in founding new neighborhoods of identity. In the cities examined, it was demonstrated that regeneration efforts built on the foundations of older neighborhoods, accompanied by nurturing mosaics of small projects, are most successful at reviving strong, diverse downtown communities. The study further substantiates observations made by Jane Jacobs in the early 1960's.

*Editor's note:* The full text of this paper was not available at the time of publication.