The divided city: Poverty and prosperity in urban America

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Revival is happening in America’s cities and it is no longer restricted to the hot coastal markets. Millennials have embraced urban living and are moving to cities like Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and St. Louis in extraordinary numbers. Though it is not happening everywhere, certain “legacy cities” have seen remarkable transformations in the last 20 years. Unfortunately, not all urban areas of these cities are benefiting equally, as Allan Mallach, author of *The Divided City*, carefully articulates. Despite the neighborhoods that are coming to life, larger areas of these cities are declining at the same time, which results in growing inequality manifested in spatial, economic, and racial dimensions. In many respects, cities are more integrated than in the past, yet most neighborhoods tend to be primarily White or primarily Black. Neighborhoods that are resurging are either adjacent to downtown or linked to universities and medical centers with high-paying jobs, but the shift away from the manufacturing economy, with working-class jobs, has reduced the middle class, thereby undercuts the vitality of many neighborhoods.

Today, people, and the neighborhoods they live in, tend to become richer or poorer. Black neighborhoods suffered more from the foreclosure crisis and are less likely to have recovered from the recession. Once upon a time, cities were places of opportunity, where poor people could come to change their lives through employment opportunities providing upward mobility. Today, America’s postindustrial cities are split, with enclaves of prosperity encircled by declining and abandoned areas inhabited by millions of people stuck in generational cycles of poverty.

In the first three chapters, Mallach chronicles the rise and fall of America’s industrial cities and the erosion of the middle class; 1950 was the “population high-water mark for America’s industrial cities” (p. 24) benefiting from the period of economic boom following World War II, and this boom was fueled by the auto industry and housing production. The cars made it easier for families to buy the houses being built in the suburbs and those who were doing best moved out of cities to pursue this “idyllic” lifestyle, hollowing out the cities. The poor, mostly African Americans, were left behind to endure various policies of urban renewal and revitalization that displaced over 600,000 people and destroyed neighborhoods. Thus, by the mid-1960s riots erupted in many cities, and by the 1970s “the urban crisis” continued and “white flight became a flood” (p. 27). In the 1980s and 1990s population decline began to modestly reverse, but it is the arrival of the millennial generation (the young grads), coupled with immigration and the decrease in traditional married couple families and factory closings, that has changed the character of these cities and neighborhoods. However, in certain favored cities the presence of universities and prominent health care facilities has led to the rise of a new “eds and meds” economy, including banks and other financial institutions, which has created a significant number of replacement jobs.

Chapters 4 through 6 measure how race factored into these changing aspects of legacy cities and their neighborhoods over time. Some Black families who managed to gain wealth over the decades were disproportionally targeted by subprime lenders and, as a result, lost much of their newly gained wealth during the foreclosure crisis of 2008. However, like their White counterparts, other middle-class African American families who could afford to do so have been moving to the suburbs. The result is that the Black population of legacy cities is dwindling and those who remain are poorer. Young grads move into the gap, and this has made gentrification possible. *Gentrification* is the “one word that has come to stand for all the conflicts, controversies, and the sheer existential angst associated with the twenty-first-century urban revival” (p. 98). When affluent people move into low-income neighborhoods, complex changes are triggered, “which can be both good and bad for people, but often not for the same people” (p. 121). But, at least there is an upside for some.
Unhappily, a different tale of postindustrial America is unfolding in small cities and mill towns. These places do not benefit from the presence of universities and medical centers of significant size and scale to replace the number of jobs lost. The population drop is often dramatic when families leave these small places to follow the jobs, and Mallach gives us a number of stark examples in Chapter 7, my favorite. My consulting practice often takes me to these more rural places where as much as a third of the local economy derives from pensions, welfare, Social Security, and SSI. Chapter 7 provides the most thorough discussion of the subject as I have seen. Revival is unlikely to touch most such communities, creating a real quandary for our public policy sector, and the hopelessness of such communities contributes to today’s political polarization.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the efforts of various neighborhood community development corporations and cities, working to create programs to reverse neighborhood decline. These efforts rarely succeed; poverty persists and the “opportunity gap” grows. Through an adroit use of case studies, Mallach examines how cities have grappled with environmental deterioration, how nonprofits have tried to resuscitate declining neighborhoods, and how some education and training programs offer potential for success. Unfortunately, most of the successful educational and training programs have not been replicated.

The United States seems stuck in a rut with some programs, such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, which may indeed lead to meaningful change for a few, whereas other programs may positively impact a city block in a neighborhood (Chapter 10). Program evaluation is in a poor state. For example, no one is tracking the outcomes after youth leave the city summer jobs program. The scale of these human resource programs is meager in comparison to existing needs. They are just a drop in the bucket “amid the continued downward forces exerted by the larger system” (p. 251). Such small-scale programs “are a sort of social Tylenol, likely to bring only transitory relief; or worse, they are wasted effort” (p. 251).

In the concluding chapter, Mallach offers a variety of policy suggestions that would result in American cities becoming more inclusive. Mallach tries to improve upon current overly incremental strategies. Yet Mallach stops short of “utopian” approaches, which call for nothing short of the reordering of society (p. 255). His suggestions include programs to connect the poor to jobs, competitive charter schools, and an expansion of the Section 8 voucher program as part of an effort to strengthen the social safety net.

Cities do not have the power to accomplish that final goal without the will of the federal government, but there is much they can do to build human capital and the quality of life for the many, not just the few. Cities can create systems fostering gains in education and skills. Cities should forgo stadiums and megaprojects, which have been shown to benefit the few (often people from outside the city), and focus on making the city safe, with attractive parks, and blight free.

Mallach, a “chastened optimist” (p. 292), articulates the history that brought us to this moment in modern America with vivid insights, yet recognizes there will be no magic wand to make everything better everywhere. Small cities and mill towns face an especially strong challenge. But hope remains for legacy cities, where planners and policymakers have a variety of strategies available (well described in this book) for slogging it out for change.

I not only recommend the book but I recommend the emerging urban lifestyle. As a recent empty nester, I voted with my feet and moved to a resurging neighborhood in Cincinnati and away from a declining suburb. I did this because I believe in cities and, because, like Alan Mallach, I am a chastened optimist. Please enjoy this master work of a professional who has devoted his lifetime to community development and the study of cities.

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