Images of Renewal and Decline

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From Sydney to Seattle, from Johannesburg to Helsinki, civic elites have become obsessed with the image that their cities project to the world. At a time when cities must compete with each other for investors, tourists, tax revenues, and middle-class residents, how the city is perceived is considered of paramount importance. Consequently, city boosters commission a variety of images: of gleaming office towers, of lively streets bordered by cafes, of housing whose residents can gaze out on both snow-capped mountains and multi-peaked skylines, of sailboats nestled in downtown marinas, and of couples and families strolling along riverfront parks.

In *Camden After the Fall*, Howard Gillette writes about how the political leaders of Camden, helped along by outside investors and state politicians, have pursued a vision for Camden that fits snugly into this image-driven perspective. Focusing on the waterfront, entertainment, middle-income housing, and on corporate-sector jobs, the major redevelopment initiatives over the last few decades have all aimed to re-make Camden as this imaginary place of harmony and prosperity.

Gillette contrasts this story with postwar decline and devastation and with grassroots efforts to resist decay and dsinvestment and craft alternative futures. He shows how these images of renewal avoid the present and reference the past only to romanticize it. Images of future prosperity, of a prosperity

promised and thus uncertain, can hardly bear the weight of images of disinvestment and abandonment. To acknowledge them would be to take measure of the intransigence of decay and the difficulty of making the transition from the depths to which the city has plunged to the future that these images of renewal promise.

In suppressing the present, and the past from which it emerged, images of renewal turn away from the city. The audience for these images -- investors, tourists, middle-income households -- is "outside" and the objective is to encourage them to imagine that the place being redeveloped will be like prosperous places they have visited or seen publicized elsewhere. This is not an appeal to the imagination of current residents who can hardly, given their circumstances, hope to occupy these new spaces. Rather, the appeal is to educated and well-traveled individuals, to an audience sufficiently disconnected from the city -- from Camden -- that it can imagine these new places independently of what the city currently is or once was.

Compare this with the work of Camilo Vergara. Vergara acknowledges the importance of images to how we understand, give meaning to, and act as regards cities. His main concern is the disinvestment and physical decay that triggered the need for reinvestment. More specifically, he asks his readers to consider how the past and present figure into our understandings

of a city in decline and the importance of looking within, rather than without, for the seeds of renewal.

All of this is quite at odds with the images produced and disseminated by civic boosters. Vergara's work is critical; his goal is to reveal what happened and to remind us that people live in these circumstances. Survival is a persistent theme. The message is one of immanent hope rather than salvation through capital investments from afar.

The power of images lies in their ability to evoke deep-rooted emotions as well as to tap into stories that we tell of ourselves and others. To imagine is to engage in a narrative act, an act of storytelling. Consider two qualities of city images. One is the extent to which images cascade, reinforcing or disrupting the story as they precede and follow each other. The other is the degree to which they expand or shrink future possibilities.

Images of renewal are hardly ever presented as sequences or cascades. Infrequently, the past is represented through a gauze-like screen meant to remind the viewer of a by-gone era when people lived well together and businesses were prosperous and governments fiscally sound. Most often, though, the images are of a single future with nothing leading to them and nothing coming after. We see the sun-drenched marina from the balcony of our condominium, wine glass in hand, partner by our side, but history begins and stops there.

To put it differently, images of renewal require an imaginative leap from an unacknowledged past into a promised future. They are utopian images, minimalist, without history. They are "principles" for living rather than actual engagements, and require an abrupt shift in the unfolding of development. Hidden from us, the viewers, is how this all is to happen. Magically, I suppose. And, this is partly what is being sold, the magic of the good life.

On this point, Vergara's work is powerful. His interest is precisely in the cascading effects of decay and abandonment. Disinvestment creates ever-descending spirals of deterioration, insecurity, alienation, and erasure. Decline persists and, as it does, the past disappears as buildings collapse into rubble and people flee. Lost is the past as an essential element of daily life and identity.

Efforts to resist and compensate for disinvestment and abandonment, things like homeless shelters, protective gating, low-income housing, and check-cashing stores, only serve as additional images of that which they are attempting to overcome. A methadone clinic is not a sign of prosperity or even of a better future, but rather a reminder that this neighborhood and its residents are suffering. Investment and renewal are further discouraged.

Images of renewal and images of decline are also unequal in their narrative valence. Images of renewal are meant to open up

narrative possibilities. As viewers, we are being asked to imagine ourselves living in these places, in places we occupy because we are affluent and accomplished, and in places where opportunities for finding happiness and achieving out goals are virtually limitless. Growth is what underlies this -- growth in investment, in spending, in new residents, in opportunities. Growth expands the narrative possibilities.

Decline, on the other hand, shrinks them. It places people in such precarious circumstances that it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine oneself in another world. The imperatives of survival are so pressing that they displace alternative ways of life. Busy making ends meet -- finding money to pay the rent, meeting the heating bills, buying food, negotiating the dangers of the street -- no time is left for crafting a path from a relentless present to a better, imagined future.

In concluding, I want to reflect briefly on the limits of images for helping us to understand the city. While we can see the consequences of disinvestment and abandonment and the results of large, capital investments in businesses, leisure, and housing for the middle-class; the dynamics behind these images, the dynamics that produce them, are hidden from view. Both Gillette and Vergara comment on this, though in different ways.

Gillette writes: "The story of urban decay and efforts to reverse it are, of course, much more complicated than daily

observations would make them... Much of what shapes that struggle is virtually invisible: the structures that shape housing markets, determine the flow of public revenue, and even determine who might be empowered to make tough decisions about limited resources." (p. xiii) Part of what he attempts to do in his book is to reveal the flows of capital, the political machinations, and the forms of institutionally-embedded injustices that create images of renewal for Camden but that leave the "real" -- rather than the "imagined" -- Camden only marginally better off.

What comes through clearly in the book is that we are not meant to know how such redevelopment schemes work. It is not just because what goes on involves exploiting urban decline for political and personal financial gain. It is also because such machinations are at odds with the public rhetoric and with the values -- the greater good, the better life -- that are being espoused.

Vergara comes at the invisible from another direction. In discussing the people he has met while taking his photographs, he writes eloquently that "They also wanted me to know that what I saw was not all there was, that it did not define them, and that, like other Americans, they aspired to and sometimes achieved a better life." (*The New American Ghetto*, p. 8) Of course, when the residents of such neighborhoods and cities do achieve a better life it is usually by moving on, moving to

another place -- a suburb for example. When they do, they draw even more social and economic capital from the city, leaving it to decay even further. And, although Gillette writes of people staying in place and struggling to re-build community and Vergara includes small, visual narratives of people living in dignity amid ruins, the dominant story is one of social advancement through geographical mobility. Behind this mobility are deeply-hidden forces.

Images reveal and evoke even as they exclude and deceive. Images of renewal often deceive the most. Only when agressively probed do they reveal who really benefits. We know who pays the price of disinvestment and abandonment, though they are kept out-of-sight and out-of-mind. If there are lessons about images that we should take away from the work of Vergara and Gillette it is that we should never under-estimate the power of an image, but, we should never trust an image to tell us all that we need to know.