

Book Review

**Comeback Cities:  
A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival**

By Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio

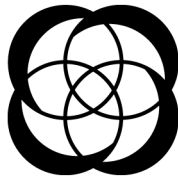
Comeback Cities makes the case that America's inner cities are rebounding. The reasons are a positive convergence of different economic, political and cultural forces. A new type of pragmatic urban leadership is at the core of this turnaround. This thoughtful analysis of urban America provides reason for hope. It is also must reading for regional stewards who are interested in inner city development as part of community-based regionalism. The authors' views on regionalism, however, are rather skeptical.

The authors identify four trends that are “different from one another but nevertheless linked” that are creating this urban turnaround. The first is the “maturing of a huge, rapidly expanding grassroots movement in America.” Thousands of neighborhood based nonprofit organizations are now having an aggregate impact. A second and related trend is the rebirth of functioning private markets in former wastelands. Meanwhile, thanks to regulatory pressures and structural changes in financial markets, credit is reaching inner cities for property renovation and small business at levels not seen in decades.

A third trend is dropping crime. Holding crime to tolerable levels through innovative police practices creates a self-reinforcing dynamic that links rising confidence and commerce. Fourth and finally has been the unshackling of inner city life from the giant bureaucracies that once dictated everything happening there—in particular the welfare system, public housing authorities and public schools.

Leading these turnaround efforts has been a group of pragmatic mayors and civic leaders who practice a “third way” between laissez faire and government programs. These included George Voinovich in Cleveland, Ed Rendell in Philadelphia, Tony Williams in Washington, DC. Rudy Guiliani in New York, John Norquist in Milwaukee and Stephen Goldsmith in Indianapolis. As Stephen Goldsmith (now a policy advisor to President Bush) says in his book *The twenty-first Century City*:

A new breed of mayors now occupies city halls across America. With a deep understanding of the need for smaller government and a determined to attain a better life for citizens in tough urban neighborhoods, these new mayors have blurred the lines between Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal. They do not



want bigger checks from Washington; they want the freedom to solve their cities' problems in their own way

The authors believe the forces driving inner city renewal are already under way. They do not have to be dreamed up or require some major policy shift. In fact, they are deeply skeptical of “regionalists” who seek structural changes involving new federal and state policy. Instead they argue for “deregulating” cities – bringing an end to policies that hold back cities by keeping them uncompetitive.

Their view is near term. “If legislatures can be persuaded to redraw their state’s entire structure of local government, more power to them.... But in the meantime, we see no need to what for that”. Unfortunately, the authors take a very narrow view of regionalism as it is practiced today. Regional stewards know that thinking and acting regionally means connecting an understanding of the forces driving the new economy, how the economy is linked to more livable communities and the power of community-based regionalism through a wide range of public-private partnerships. This is the new civic regionalism rather than the old regional government movement of the past. If the authors only knew what regionalism is really about, I think they would have fully embraced its grassroots civic leadership for economic vitality and quality of life. It is surprising that the authors were not familiar with the work of Manuel Pastor and other leaders in community-based regionalism, which incorporates much of what the book has highlighted as new trends for inner cities. Maybe in the author’s next book. This book gives us a lot to thinking about.