

POLLUTED AND DANGEROUS: AMERICA'S WORST

Abandoned Properties and What Can Be Done About Them.

Justin B. Hollander,
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Justin Hollander's *Polluted and Dangerous* brings renewed focus to persisting concerns associated with abandoned industrial properties across the United States. These properties, commonly referred to as brownfields, have proven difficult to reuse and continue to challenge various attempts at redevelopment. Hollander focuses on a sub-category of brownfields called "High-Impact Temporarily Obsolete Abandoned Derelict Sites" (HI-TOADS), a concept borrowed from previous work by Greenberg et al. (1990, 2000). Hollander characterizes HI-TOADS as brownfields that, other than being abandoned and unused, cause impacts on property values or transactions at distances of more than one-quarter mile away from the site boundary. Proceeding from the assumption that HI-TOADS present special challenges, the author asks the following questions: (1) which U.S. cities are most likely to contain HI-TOADS?, (2) do local planners consider HI-TOADS as problems?, (3) what policies are used to address HI-TOADS?, and (4) how successful are those policies? Hollander used multivariate statistical analysis to answer the first question and conducted telephone interviews with local officials at those cities to answer the second question. Questions 3 and 4 were answered using five detailed case-studies conducted at Trenton (New Jersey), Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), New Bedford (Massachusetts), Youngstown (Ohio) and Richmond (Virginia).

Hollander found that most cities identified as potential locations for HI-TOADS using statistical analysis did acknowledge their presence. When it came to policies used to deal with HI-TOADS, economic development priorities (e.g., property-tax and employment benefits) were substantially dominant over community empowerment and healthy environment policies. City administrations were found to prefer the neighborhood life-cycle discourse over the alternative neighborhood-change theories and site-specific tools over neighborhood planning. Both strategies kept decision-making within the corridors of city halls while avoiding input from community members. A planner by training, Hollander ascribes the above results to the sidelining of planning professionals and the dominance of economic development specialists in the process of resolving HI-TOADS. The dominance of economic development narratives, not surprisingly, has led to the ignoring of "low-hanging fruits" within the HI-TOADS - properties that are presumed to have low revenue, low development potential and low social value. Hollander argues for bigger roles for planners in particular and local government in general, incorporation of community empowerment policies, use of an "Early Warning System" to prevent abandonment,

promotion of maintenance and adaptive reuse of historic properties, and adoption of the EPA “Hazard Ranking System” to prioritize HI-TOADS for remediation funding.

Despite the extensive research, *Polluted and Dangerous* fails to contribute any significant advancement in our understanding of the brownfield ‘problem’. Hollander’s use of the HI-TOADS concept to distinguish between different types of unoccupied urban land uses will not bring any new or surprising revelations to academics involved in brownfields research. Given the strong geographical implications of HI-TOADS, it is surprising the author does not make any serious efforts in demonstrating the impacts on property values or transactions at distances specified in the definition. Hollander concedes to numerous methodological and analytical weaknesses, and that does little to inspire confidence in the research or the utility of HI-TOADS as a useful concept. In fact, it is not really clear whether the interviewees were really sure of what HI-TOADS are either (see Epilogue). This confusion was also demonstrated when city officials were asked to quantify the number of HI-TOADS in their cities — while Buffalo (New York) and Camden (New Jersey) noted seventy-five and forty-two HI-TOADS in their cities, respectively, the remaining nineteen cities only claimed to have HI-TOADS in single digits. According to the definition, HI-TOADS can be taken off the list by the simple act of erecting a fence around the property. Given the author’s exhortations for community empowerment and healthy environment policies, it is difficult to comprehend how erecting a fence around a contaminated property resolves the long-term health and environmental implications for the neighboring community. The HI-TOADS case-studies lack any serious environmental or social analysis and mostly engages in an economic examination. The biggest concern, however, lies with a complete absence of any form of critical analysis. Questions regarding ‘what’ predominates questions asking ‘why’. There is almost no discussion about the implication of local, regional and federal politics on HI-TOADS redevelopment, or the responsibility of businesses and market systems that created these environmental conditions. The dependency on public subsidy and state and federal funds to create conditions favorable to private profit and gentrification is normalized, and opposition to government oversight duly noted.

In conclusion, *Polluted and Dangerous* could be useful as an introductory textbook for students eager to gain some basic understanding of brownfields and their redevelopment challenges. The introductory chapters provide an informative summary of research conducted on brownfields and the case-studies would be useful to those interested in the specific cities or sites investigated. The usefulness of the text for researchers, however, remains limited.

References

- Greenberg, M. R., K. Lowrie, L. Solitare, and L. Duncan. 2000. Brownfields, TOADS, and the struggle for neighborhood redevelopment. *Urban Affairs Review* 35 (5):717-734.
- Greenberg, M. R., F. Popper, and B. West. 1990. The TOADS: A new American urban epidemic. *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 25 (3):435-454.