

THE HEART OF THE CITY:

Creating Vibrant Downtowns for a New Century

Alexander Garvin

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The planner Alexander Garvin helped create Atlanta's BeltLine, direct New York City's 2012 bid to host the Summer Olympics, and oversee redevelopment in Lower Manhattan following the September 11th attacks. His long career has tracked the transition to the post-industrial, consumption-oriented city, a development that his own practice has helped bring about. Hoping to familiarize colleagues with methods and rationales for making downtowns more productive and livable, he has written several books describing lessons from his career. *The Heart of the City: Creating Vibrant Downtowns for a New Century* is the latest.

Garvin is not interested in debating the merits of neoliberal urban policy. He treats the political consensus as a given and exhorts planners to do the best they can with the tools at their disposal. In fact, his experience with bureaucracy, particularly the planning permitting process, has left him justifiably wary of government agencies. The first few chapters provide an overview of the functions of contemporary U.S. downtowns, as well as recent urban history. Most points will be familiar to urbanists, but Garvin does include some important insights. One enlightening section on the impacts of the digital economy describes how, amidst the burgeoning of technology industries, most companies' needs for office space have declined markedly, as typists and filing cabinets have become obsolete. However, tech businesses do require architectural infrastructure that can handle up-to-date digital wiring, making old industrial buildings ill-suited to office conversion. Instead, such structures tend to be remodeled as residential space. These early chapters serve as a preface to Garvin's main argument: advocating for the use of Business-Improvement-Districts (BIDs) to spur downtown development.

Hundreds of these quasi-governmental entities already exist in American cities. They first appeared after WWII and multiplied prodigiously following the urban cutbacks and crises of the 1970s. Chartered by city governments and sometimes requiring state or Federal empowerment, BIDs, generally overseen by a board of directors, have assumed responsibility for many downtown services formerly performed by municipal governments. Funded by a surcharge

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on businesses within the BID's boundaries, their activities usually include, at a minimum, security, cleaning, and park maintenance. In locales where BIDs enjoy access to local property tax revenues, which allow them to issue bonds and take on large-scale property acquisition, they have become key players in driving urban development. Garvin supports using tax increment financing (TIF) to fund their activities. This method maintains a base-level stream of property tax revenue for city governments but permits BIDs to recoup the tax gains that accrue from property value increases stimulated by their own investments. Not surprisingly, given their core constituency, BID goals tend to reflect the interests of downtown private businesses. In essence, they constitute a method for circumventing conventional democratic decision-making processes. Garvin implies that BIDs are responsive to ordinary voters, but the evidence suggests otherwise (Unger, 2016).

There are plenty of reasons to bemoan U.S. municipal democracy. Many city governments have proven inadequate to contemporary urban challenges: the need for more mass transit, affordable housing, social services, and so on. However, the causes of bureaucratic impotency are manifold, of which administrative bloat and NIMBYism—the culprits Garvin fingers—are only two. Taking governance out of public hands, rather than seeking to reform it, yields substantial gains in efficiency, but the costs are steep—loss of civic trust, participation, and equitable distribution of services. Garvin does not acknowledge these trade-offs. At the very least, it seems logical to limit the duration of BID charters so that they remain accountable to elected representatives.

As Garvin's preference for BIDs indicates, he prefers an expert-driven approach to planning. He sees downtown development as a supply-side process that should be organized by elite institutions and, presumably, planner consultants. Their mission is to identify neighborhoods with potential as housing and office markets and endow them with the infrastructure and amenities needed to stimulate private investment. Despite sprinkling Jane Jacobs quotes into the text, he shows little concern that his top-down approach to planning might alienate many city residents. He titles the book's last sub-section, "Reducing Opposition to Change."

Garvin relates the redevelopment of neighborhoods such as New York's Hudson Yards and Boston's Seaport District, among others. Such projects represent impressive examples of growth and technical planning ability, and they are generating substantial gains in tax receipts that fund municipal services. However, the downtown landscapes they have created are bland, exclusive enclaves, where the prevailing ethos of consumption and surveillance make for a corporate, rather than civic, culture.

It is possible to celebrate how downtowns such as New York and Los Angeles have become more populous, productive, safe, and clean in recent decades, in part due to the efforts of BIDs, while still acknowledging how those changes are imperfect. In addition to Garvin's rosy characterization of many downtown rehabilitation projects, he is lax in places about acknowledging his involvement in them. The mask of disinterest slips embarrassingly when he gushingly praises Daniel Doctoroff, New York City's deputy mayor for economic development and rebuilding during the Bloomberg administration, for devising a financial scheme to pay for extending the No. 7 subway line to Hudson Yards (198). In the previous chapter, Garvin describes how he himself had suggested the idea to Doctoroff (167-168).

BIDs, like elites, belong in American cities due to their particular capacities. Planners and developers cannot wait forever for reforms to municipal government, and BIDs possess unique abilities to get things done. But they should remain subject to strong oversight and have their mission carefully articulated and limited in their charters. Like public authorities, another legal entity developed to circumvent democratic bureaucracy, they generate their own set of problems—opacity and devotion to growth that serves particular actors, i.e. business interests, rather than the municipal polity as a whole. They should not be deployed as a cure-all but as part of a carefully calibrated and monitored urban strategy.

References

Unger, A. 2016. *Business Improvement Districts in the United States: Private Government and Public Consequences*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.