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The self-destruction of diversity

My observations and conclusions thus far sum up to this: In our American cities, we need all kinds of diversity, intricately mingled in mutual support. We need this so city life can work decently and constructively, and so the people of cities can sustain (and further develop) their society and civilization. Public and quasi-public bodies are responsible for some of the enterprises that help make up city diversity—for instance, parks, museums, schools, most auditoriums, hospitals, some offices, some dwellings. However, most city diversity is the creation of incredible numbers of different people and different private organizations, with vastly differing ideas and purposes, planning and contriving outside the formal framework of public action. The main responsibility of city planning and design should be to develop—insofar as public policy and action can do so—cities that are congenial places for this great range of unofficial plans, ideas and opportunities to flourish, along with the flourishing of the public enterprises. City dis-

tricts will be economically and socially congenial places for diversity to generate itself and reach its best potential if the districts possess good mixtures of primary uses, frequent streets, a close-grained mingling of different ages in their buildings, and a high concentration of people.

In this group of chapters on decline and regeneration, I intend to dwell on several powerful forces that can influence, for good or for ill, the growth of diversity and vitality in cities, once an area is not crippled by lack of one or more of the four conditions necessary for generating diversity.

These forces, in the form that they work for ill, are: the tendency for outstandingly successful diversity in cities to destroy itself; the tendency for massive single elements in cities (many of which are necessary and otherwise desirable) to cast a deadening influence; the tendency for population instability to counter the growth of diversity; and the tendency for both public and private money either to glut or to starve development and change.

These forces are interrelated, to be sure; all factors in city changes are interrelated with all other factors. Nevertheless, it is possible and useful to look at each of these forces in its own right. The purpose of recognizing and understanding them is to try to combat them or—better yet—convert them into constructive forces. Besides influencing the growth of diversity itself, these forces also sometimes affect the ease or difficulty with which the basic conditions for generating diversity can be introduced. Leaving them out of account, even the best planning for vitality would fall a step back for every two steps forward.

The first of these powerful forces is the tendency for outstanding success in cities to destroy itself—purely as a result of being successful. In this chapter I shall discuss the self-destruction of diversity, a force which, among its other effects, causes our downtowns continually to shift their centers and move. This is a force that creates has-been districts, and is responsible for much inner-city stagnation and decay.

The self-destruction of diversity can happen in streets, at small nodes of vitality, in groupings of streets, or in whole districts. The last case is the most serious.

Whichever form the self-destruction takes, this, in broad strokes, is what happens: A diversified mixture of uses at some place in the city becomes outstandingly popular and successful as a whole. Because of the location's success, which is invariably based on flourishing and magnetic diversity, ardent competition for space in this locality develops. It is taken up in what amounts to the economic equivalent of a fad.

The winners in the competition for space will represent only a narrow segment of the many uses that together created success. Whichever one or few uses have emerged as the most profitable in the locality will be repeated and repeated, crowding out and overwhelming less profitable forms of use. If tremendous numbers of people, attracted by convenience and interest, or charmed by vigor and excitement, choose to live or work in the area, again the winners of the competition will form a narrow segment of population of users. Since so many want to get in, those who get in or stay in will be self-sorted by the expense.

Competition based on retail profitability is most apt to affect streets. Competition based on working- or living-space attraction is most apt to affect whole groupings of streets, or even whole districts.

Thus, from this process, one or few dominating uses finally emerge triumphant. But the triumph is hollow. A most intricate and successful organism of economic mutual support and social mutual support has been destroyed by the process.

From this point on, the locality will gradually be deserted by people using it for purposes other than those that emerged triumphant from the competition—because the other purposes are no longer there. Both visually and functionally, the place becomes more monotonous. All the economic disadvantages of people being spread insufficiently through time of day are likely to follow. The locality's suitability even for its predominant use will gradually decline, as the suitability of downtown Manhattan for managerial offices has declined because of this reason. In time, a place that was once so successful and once the object of such ardent competition, wanes and becomes marginal.

Many streets which have already gone through this process and are at rest in their moribundity can be seen in our cities. Others,

caught in the process now, can be watched in action. Among those in the neighborhood where I live is Eighth Street, the principal commercial street of Greenwich Village. Thirty-five years ago, this was a nondescript street. Then one of its principal property owners, Charles Abrams (who happens also to be an exceptionally enlightened planning and housing expert), built on the street a small night club and a motion-picture theater unusual for its time. (The narrow auditorium for good screen viewing, the coffee lounge and the intimate atmosphere have since been widely copied.) These enterprises proved popular. They brought more people into the street during evening hours and week ends, to supplement the day people passing through, and thus helped stimulate the growth of convenience and special shops. These, in their own right, began to bring still more people, day and evening. As I have mentioned previously, a two-shift street like this is an economically sound place for restaurants. The history of Eighth Street began to bear this out. It acquired an interesting growth and range of restaurants.

Among all the enterprises of Eighth Street, it happened that restaurants became the largest money-earners per square foot of space. Naturally it followed that Eighth Street went more and more to restaurants. Meantime, at its Fifth Avenue corner, a diversity of clubs, galleries and some small offices were crowded out by blank, monolithic, very high-rent apartments. The only unusual factor in this history is Abrams himself. Unlike most property owners, who might not have pondered the implications of what was occurring, or have seen reason for worry in the face of success, Abrams watched, with dismay, bookstores, galleries, clubs, craftsmen and one-of-a-kind shops being pushed out. He watched new ideas starting up in other streets, and fewer new ideas coming to Eighth Street. He could see that some of this movement was helping to enliven and diversify other streets, but he could also see that Eighth Street was slowly but steadily starting to undiversify itself. He realized that if the process ran its full and logical course, Eighth Street would eventually be left beached, in the wake of popularity that had moved away. For much of his own property, in a strategic stretch of the street, Abrams has thus deliberately searched out tenants who will add

something other than restaurants to the mixture. But sometimes he has to search hard for them because they must reasonably approach the current high earning power of restaurants. This narrows down the possibilities—even purely commercial possibilities. Eighth Street's worst potential threat to its diversity and its long-term success is, in short, the force let loose by outstanding success.

Another nearby street, Third Street, is far advanced in a similar trouble, because of another kind of sorting. This street, for a stretch of several blocks, has become immensely popular with tourists, drawn first by the local bohemian life of coffee houses and neighborhood bars, with—at first—a light sprinkling of night clubs, all mingled with the interesting neighborhood shops and residential life of a stable old Italian and artists' district. In their proportions of fifteen years ago, the evening visitors were a constructive part of the area's mixture. The general liveliness they helped create was part of the residential appeal, as well as an appeal to visitors. Night spots are today overwhelming the street, and are also overwhelming the very life of the area. Into a district excellent at handling and protecting strangers they have concentrated too many strangers, all in too irresponsible a mood, for any conceivable city society to handle naturally. The duplication of the most profitable use is undermining the base of its own attraction, as disproportionate duplication and exaggeration of some single use always does in cities.

We are accustomed to thinking of streets, or neighborhoods of streets, as divided into functional uses—entertainment, offices, residence, shopping or the like. And so they are, but only to a degree if they maintain their success. For example, streets which become so profitable for such secondary diversity as clothing shopping that clothing shopping becomes almost their exclusive use, decline as they are progressively deserted and ignored by people with other secondary purposes in mind. If such a street has long blocks, which further degenerate it as a pool of intricate cross-use, the sorting out of its users, and the resulting stagnation, is emphasized. And if such a street belongs in a district which, in general, is sorting into one primary use—such as work—there is seldom hope for any spontaneous turn for the better.

The self-destruction of diversity can be seen at outstandingly successful little nodes of activity, as well as along street stretches. The process is the same. As an example, consider the crossing of Chestnut and Broad Streets in Philadelphia, a spot which a few years ago was a climax of Chestnut Street's varied shopping and other activities. The corners of this crossing were what real estate men call a "100 percent location." It was an enviable place to be. One of the corner occupants was a bank. Three other banks bought themselves into the three other corners, apparently to be at the 100 percent location too. From that moment, it was no longer the 100 percent location. The crossing is today a dead barrier along Chestnut Street, and the tumble of diversity and activity has been pushed beyond.

These banks were making the same mistake as a family I know who bought an acre in the country on which to build a house. For many years, while they lacked the money to build, they visited the site regularly and picnicked on a knoll, the site's most attractive feature. They liked so much to visualize themselves as always there, that when they finally built they put the house on the knoll. But then the knoll was gone. Somehow they had not realized they would destroy it and lose it by supplanting it with themselves.

Streets (especially if their blocks are short) sometimes can weather much duplication of successful uses, or else can regenerate themselves spontaneously after declining and stagnating for a time. These escapes are possible if the surrounding district sustains a strong and vigorous mixture of diversity—especially a strong, underlying base of primary diversity.

However, when whole neighborhoods of streets, and entire districts, embark on excessive duplication of the most profitable or prestigious uses, the problem is far more serious.

Striking evidences of this disastrous sorting-out can be seen in many city downtowns. The successive historical centers of Boston's downtown, like so many archeological layers, are fossilized as stratum after stratum of sorted-out uses, each stratum lacking primary mixture, each stratum stagnated. The Boston Planning Board, analyzing downtown uses, mapped them by color—one

color to designate managerial and financial offices, another for government, another for shopping, another for entertainment, and so on. The stagnant areas all show on the map as a series of virtually solid swatches of a single color each. On the other hand, at one end of the downtown, where the Back Bay meets a corner of the Public Gardens, is a swatch of map marked with a different kind of legend, designated in red and yellow stripes. This swatch was too complex to map according to specific uses, so it was given an appropriate representational legend, standing for "mixed." This is the only part of Boston's downtown that is at present spontaneously changing, growing, acting like a live city.

Such successions of sorted-out downtown neighborhoods as those in Boston are generally thought of, vaguely, as the residue left by a moving downtown center. They are regarded as a result of the center's movement elsewhere. But they are not. These clumps of excessive duplication are the *cause* of the center's movement. Diversity is crowded out by the duplication of success. Unless they are handsomely financed to start with, or instantly successful (which is seldom the case), new ideas tumble into second-best locations; thereby second-best becomes first-rate, flourishes for a time, and eventually it too is destroyed by the duplication of its own greatest successes.

In New York, the sorting-out of downtown was already being memorialized back in the 1880's, in a jingle of the time:

From Eighth Street down, the men are earning it.
From Eighth Street up, the women are spending it.
That is the manner of this great town,
From Eighth Street up and Eighth Street down.

Willa Cather, writing in *My Mortal Enemy* of Madison Square as its turn arrived to become an intense center of diversity, described it thus: "Madison Square was then at the parting of the ways; had a double personality, half commercial, half social, with shops to the south and residences on the north."

Miss Cather put her finger on the characteristic of mixture and "double personality" that always marks an outstandingly successful center as it approaches its crest and poises there. But the mix-

ture hardly represents a "parting of the ways." It is a coming together and mingling of the ways.

Madison Square, now a glum, has-been district of massive office buildings and a commerce very marginal in comparison to that it once enjoyed, was remarkable at its crest for possessing the old Madison Square Garden (now supplanted by an office building). Never since has New York had such an urbane, glamorous and magnetic assembly hall, because never since has New York had a major assembly hall at the magnetic, expensive center of a good mixture.

The eventual sorting out and long decline of Madison Square was not, of course, an isolated event. It was part of a larger movement, made up of many accumulations of economic pressure upon successful mixtures of uses. On a larger scale than Madison Square, these pressures of competition for space were continually unsorting diversity throughout the entire middle of downtown, and tumbling diversity out at the upper end of downtown; downtown itself was moving as a result, leaving its beached districts behind.

A moving downtown usually leaves, along with its clumps of excessive duplication, pockets of nothing much at all, places which the most intensive new combinations of diversity have bypassed or over which they have leapfrogged. These pockets or side strips are apt to remain nothing much at all thenceforth, because the sorted-out clumps adjoining them provide so poor a spread of people through time of day. There is space here, but nothing to catalyze uses for it.

Apparently the self-destruction of district diversity by excessive duplication occurs in London too, because of the same forces that move American downtowns. An article on the planning problems of Central London, in the January 1959 *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, a British periodical, has this to say:

For many years now variety has gone from the City [the bank and financial office center]. There the teeming daytime population contrasts with a 5,000 night population. What has happened in the City is happening to the West End. The claim of many who have offices in the West End is that for their clients and customers

they have the amenities of the hotels, the clubs, the restaurants and for their staff the shops and the parks. If the process goes on, these very advantages will be gobbled up and the West End will become one dreary sea of office blocks.

We have pitifully few outstandingly successful residential districts in our American cities; most city residential districts have never possessed the four fundamental conditions for generating exuberant diversity in the first place. Therefore, examples of the self-destruction that follows outstanding success are more usual in downtowns. But the relatively few city residential districts that do become outstandingly magnetic and successful at generating diversity and vitality are subjected ultimately to the same forces of self-destruction as downtowns. In this case, so many people want to live in the locality that it becomes profitable to build, in excessive and devastating quantity, for those who can pay the most. These are usually childless people, and today they are not simply people who can pay the most in general, but people who can or will pay the most for the smallest space. Accommodations for this narrow, profitable segment of population multiply, at the expense of all other tissue and all other population. Families are crowded out, variety of scene is crowded out, enterprises unable to support their share of the new construction costs are crowded out. This process is now occurring, very rapidly, in much of Greenwich Village, Yorkville and the midtown East Side of Manhattan. The uses duplicated excessively are different from those duplicated excessively at centers of downtowns, but the process is the same, the reason why it occurs is the same, and the ultimate effects are the same. The admired and magnetic knoll is destroyed by its own new occupants, by the act of occupation.

The process I have described occurs only in small areas at a time, because it is a sequel only to outstanding success. Nevertheless, the destructive power of this process is larger and more serious than its geographical scope at any one time suggests. The very fact that the process does occur in localities of outstanding success makes it difficult for our cities to build further upon outstanding success. It too often slips into decline.

Furthermore, the very means by which outstanding success declines make the process doubly destructive to cities. At the same time new construction and narrow multiplications of uses are destroying mutual support in one locality, they are, in effect, depriving other localities of their presence, localities where they would *add* to diversity and strengthen mutual support, rather than subtract these qualities.

For some reason, banks, insurance companies and prestige offices are consistently the most voracious double-destroyers in this way. Look to see where banks or insurance companies are clustered, and you will too often see where a center of diversity has been supplanted, a knoll of vitality leveled. You will see a place that is already a has-been or is becoming so. I suspect that this curious circumstance is owing to two facts. Such organizations are conservative. Conservatism, applied to the choice of city locations, means investing where success is already a well-established fact. To see that investment may destroy success requires looking too far ahead for those who value most what is already achieved—and are perhaps mystified by localities with a potential for success, or are insecure about them, because of not understanding why some places in cities should be successful, and others not. In the second place, such organizations have money, and thus are able to supplant most rivals for the space they want. The wish and the ability to settle on the knoll are thus combined most effectively in banks and insurance companies, and in prestige offices—which borrow readily from banks and insurance companies. To a certain extent, the convenience of being very close to one another is important, as it is in many other city activities. But this hardly accounts for the accuracy and degree with which such powerful organizations supplant successful combinations of diversity. Once a locality has been stagnated by their excessive duplication of work uses (at the expense of other tissue), the more prosperous among them readily leave the nest of convenience which is no longer so appealing.

However, it would be misleading to fix upon particular culprits among differing city uses, even outstanding culprits. Too many other uses exert the same economic pressures and end with the same hollow triumphs.

It is more fruitful, I think, to approach this as a problem of malfunction in cities themselves.

First, we must understand that self-destruction of diversity is caused by success, not by failure.

Second, we must understand that the process is a continuation of the same economic processes that led to the success itself, and were indispensable to it. Diversity grows in a city area because of economic opportunity and economic attraction. During the process of diversity growth, rival users of space are crowded out. All city diversity grows, in part at least, at the expense of some other tissue. During this growth period even some unique uses may be crowded out because they give such low economic return for the land they occupy. This we think of as salutary if the unique uses are junk yards, used car lots or abandoned buildings, and it *is* salutary. During the growth period, much of the new diversity occurs not merely at the expense of uniquely low-value tissue, but also at the expense of already existing duplications of use. Sameness is being subtracted at the same time diversity is being added. This result of economic competition for space is net increase in diversity.

At some point the diversity growth has proceeded so far that the addition of new diversity is mainly in competition with already existing diversity. Relatively little sameness is being subtracted, perhaps none. This is the case when a center of activity and diversity has reached a peak. If the addition is really something different (as the first bank on the corner in Philadelphia was), there is still no net loss in diversity.

Here is a process, then, that operates for a time as a healthy and salutary function, but by failing to modify itself at a critical point becomes a malfunction. The analogy that comes to mind is faulty feedback.

The conception of electronic feedback has become familiar with the development of computers and automated machinery, where one of the end products of an act or series of acts by the machine is a signal which modifies and guides the next act. A similar feedback process, regulated chemically rather than electronically, is now believed to modify some of the behavior of cells. A report in the *New York Times* explains it thus:

The presence of an end product in the milieu of a cell causes the machinery that produces the end product to slow down or to stop. This form of cell behavior Dr. [Van R.] Potter [of the University of Wisconsin Medical School] characterized as "intelligent." In contrast, a cell that has changed or mutated behaves like an "idiot" in that it continues without feedback regulation to produce even materials that it does not require.

I think that last sentence is a fair description of the behavior of city localities where the success of diversity destroys itself.

Suppose we think of successful city areas, for all their extraordinary and intricate economic and social order, as faulty in this fashion. In creating city success, we human beings have created marvels, but we left out feedback. What can we do with cities to make up for this omission?

I doubt that we can provide for cities anything equivalent to a true feedback system, working automatically and with perfection. But I think we can accomplish much with imperfect substitutes.

The problem is to hamper excess duplications at one place, and divert them instead to other places in which they will not be excess duplications, but healthy additions. The other places may be at some distance, or very close by indeed. But in any case they cannot be fixed on arbitrarily. They *must* be places where the use concerned will have an excellent opportunity for sustained success—a better opportunity, in fact, than in a locality that is doomed to destroy itself.

I think this diversion can be encouraged by a combination of three means, which I shall call: zoning for diversity; staunchness of public buildings; and competitive diversion. I shall touch on each of these briefly.

Zoning for diversity must be thought of differently from the usual zoning for conformity, but like all zoning it is suppressive. One form of zoning for diversity is already familiar in certain city districts: controls against demolition of historically valuable buildings. Already different from their surroundings, these are zoned to stay different from them. A slightly advanced development of this concept was proposed by Greenwich Village civic groups for their area, and adopted by the city, in 1959. On certain streets,

the height limitations for buildings were drastically reduced. Most of the streets affected already contain numerous buildings in excess of the new height limitations. This is not evidence of illogic, but is precisely why the new limitations were asked: so that the lower buildings remaining could not be further replaced by excessive duplication of the more valuable high buildings. Again, sameness was being zoned out—or in effect, differences zoned in—even though in a most limited fashion and on relatively few streets.

The purpose of zoning for deliberate diversity should not be to freeze conditions and uses as they stand. That would be death. Rather, the point is to insure that changes or replacements, as they do occur, cannot be overwhelmingly of one kind. This means, often, constraints on too rapid a replacement of too many buildings. I think the specific scheme of diversity zoning, or the specific combination of schemes, that an outstandingly successful city locality requires is likely to differ with the locality and with the particular form of self-destruction that threatens it. However, in principle, zoning aimed directly at building ages and building sizes is a logical tool, because variety in types of accommodations is reflected, usually, in variety of uses and populations. A park being surrounded by intensive duplications of tall offices or apartments might well be zoned for lower buildings along its south side in particular, thus accomplishing two useful purposes at one stroke: protecting the park's supply of winter sun, and protecting indirectly, to some extent at least, its diversity of surrounding uses.

All such zoning for diversity—since the deliberate intent is to prevent excessive duplication of the most profitable uses—needs to be accompanied by tax adjustments. Land hampered from conversion to its most immediately profitable potential use needs to have this fact reflected in its taxes. It is unrealistic to put a ceiling on a property's development (whether the tool is control of height, bulk, historical or esthetic value, or some other device) and then let the assessment on such a property reflect the irrelevant values of more profitably developed properties nearby. Indeed, raising the assessments on city property because of increased profitability of the neighbors, is a powerful means today of fore-

ing excess duplications. This pressure would continue to force them, even in the face of controls overtly intended to hamper duplications. The way to raise the tax base of a city is not at all to exploit to the limit the short-term tax potential of every site. This undermines the long-term tax potential of whole neighborhoods. The way to raise a city's tax base is to expand the city's territorial quantity of successful areas. A strong city tax base is a by-product of strong city magnetism, and one of its necessary ingredients—once the object is to sustain success—is a certain amount of close-grained, deliberate, calculated variation in localized tax yields to anchor diversity and forestall its self-destruction.

The second potential tool for hampering unbridled duplication of uses is what I call staunchness of public buildings. By this I mean that public and quasi-public bodies should adopt, for their properties, a policy somewhat like Charles Abrams' private policy for his property on Eighth Street. Abrams combats the excessive duplication of restaurants on his property by seeking other kinds of uses. Public and quasi-public bodies should establish their buildings and facilities at points where these will add effectively to diversity in the first place (rather than duplicate their neighbors). Then, in their role as uses, these should stand staunch, no matter how valuable the property becomes because of surrounding success (which they have helped create if they located well), and no matter how large the offers from those who would supplant them to duplicate surrounding successful uses. This is a penny-foolish but pound-wise policy for municipalities and for bodies having an enlightened stake in municipal success—analogueous to penny-foolish but pound-wise taxation policy for enforcing diversity zoning devices. The New York Public Library, on an immensely valuable site, contributes more of value to the locality than any possible profitable duplication of nearby uses—because it is so different, visually and functionally. When pressure from citizens persuaded New York's city government to lend funds to a quasi-public body, so it could buy Carnegie Hall from its private owner who was going to sell it for duplication of nearby uses, and Carnegie Hall was thus retained as a concert hall and auditorium, a continuing effective mixture of primary uses in the neighborhood was thereby anchored. In short, public and public-

spirited bodies can do much to anchor diversity by standing staunch in the midst of *different* surrounding uses, while money rolls around them and begs to roll over them.

Both of these tools, zoning for diversity and staunchness of public uses, are defensive actions against self-destruction of diversity. They are windbreaks, so to speak, which can stand against the gusts of economic pressures, but can hardly be expected to stand fast against sustained gales. Any forms of zoning, any forms of public building policy, any forms of tax assessment policy, no matter how enlightened, give eventually under sufficiently powerful economic pressure. They usually have, and probably they usually will.

Along with defensive tools must therefore go another: competitive diversion.

There is a widespread belief that Americans hate cities. I think it is probable that Americans hate city failure, but, from the evidence, we certainly do not hate successful and vital city areas. On the contrary, so many people want to make use of such places, so many people want to work in them or live in them or visit in them, that municipal self-destruction ensues. In killing successful diversity combinations with money, we are employing perhaps our nearest equivalent to killing with kindness.

In short, the demand for lively and diversified city areas is too great for the supply.

If outstandingly successful city localities are to withstand the forces of self-destruction—and if the nuisance value of defense against self-destruction is to be an effective nuisance value—the sheer supply of diversified, lively, economically viable city localities must be increased. And with this, we are back to the basic need to supply *more* city streets and districts with the four conditions economically necessary to city diversity.

To be sure, there will always be some districts, at any particular moment in time, which are most exuberantly diversified, most popular and most tempting for destruction by momentarily most profitable duplications. If other localities are not far behind in opportunities and interest, however, and still others are coming along, these can offer competitive diversion from the most popular. Their pull would be reinforced by the obstacles to duplica-

tions introduced in the most popular districts, which are a necessary adjunct to competitive diversion. But the competitive pull would have to be there, even though it could be a lesser pull.

If and when competing localities, in their turn, should become sufficiently successful to need city substitutes for feedback signals, they should ask and get defenses against excessive duplication.

The time at which a city locality starts to act like an "idiot" cell is not hard to discover. Anyone intimate with an outstandingly successful city district knows when this qualitative turn is in process of occurring. Those who use the facilities that are starting to disappear, or view them with pleasure, know full well when the diversity and interest of the locality to which they are attached are on the downgrade. They know full well when segments of the population are being crowded out, and diversity of population is narrowing—especially if they are being crowded out themselves. They even know many of these results in advance of their fulfillment, by projecting proposed or imminent physical changes into changes in everyday life and the everyday scene. The people in a district talk about it, they register both the fact and effect of diversity's self-destruction long before slowpoke maps and statistics tell, too late, the misfortune of what happened.

At bottom, this problem of the self-destruction of outstanding success is the problem of getting the supply of vital, diversified city streets and districts into a saner relationship with demand.