

Comment on John T. Metzger's "Planned Abandonment: The Neighborhood Life-Cycle Theory and National Urban Policy"

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Abstract

Metzger's analysis of the effects of the neighborhood life-cycle theory is an interesting, yet flawed discussion of the relationship between public policy and theory. According to Metzger, Downs's theoretical model of urban dynamics had an enormous effect on decisions related to urban renewal, discriminatory lending, and other practices that had negative consequences on urban neighborhoods. Conversely, alternative urban models of neighborhood dynamics have generated positive impacts, such as the increased lending in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods resulting from the Community Reinvestment Act. Metzger's analysis is flawed because he (1) never demonstrates that the neighborhood life-cycle theory affected policy, rather than just legitimating existing ideas about urban dynamics, (2) does not accurately represent urban models developed as an alternative to ecological approaches, and (3) equates triage planning with discriminatory practices.

Keywords: Neighborhoods; Real estate; Urban planning

Introduction

John T. Metzger's article about the neighborhood life-cycle theory describes a sad irony. Many social scientists, and sometimes politicians, bemoan the fact that public policy is often made with little input from relevant theory. Metzger's article, however, argues that the neighborhood life-cycle theory, an explanatory framework developed by Anthony Downs, had an enormous effect on local, state, and federal policies. Downs posits that urban neighborhoods travel along a predictable downward path, mimicking the cycle of birth, maturation, decline, death, and (sometimes) rebirth that characterizes all living things. Each stage is observable to an outsider, and neighborhood transitions result from the aggregate effects of decisions made by households seeking to maximize their own well-being.

The irony, according to Metzger, is that policies based on the neighborhood life-cycle theory had disastrous consequences on low- and moderate-income and minority families. According to Metzger, Downs's theory was used by lenders and investors to redline minority neighborhoods. In addition, the life-cycle theory equated a neighborhood undergoing racial transition with decline, thereby reinforcing the

perception that African-American neighborhoods are undesirable. Politicians and planners used this theory to develop urban renewal, under which many low-income and minority neighborhoods were bulldozed to make way for large-scale projects that benefited upper-income residents and cultural institutions catering to economic and social elites.

Given this analysis, it is almost tempting to say that it might be better for public officials to avoid using theory when formulating policy and programs. Metzger rejects this position. In the second part of his article, he describes an alternative to the neighborhood life-cycle theory. In this view, neighborhood decline is caused by a lack of capital, rather than an inevitable aging process. The good news is that neighborhood organizations can influence the decisions of institutions that allocate capital and reverse years of neglect and disinvestment by institutions that acted in a discriminatory manner. Urban residents need to organize and exert pressure on such institutions to ensure that neighborhoods receive the resources necessary to help landlords, homeowners, and merchants maintain their property. Viable and stable neighborhoods, according to Metzger, are dependent on well-organized residents who advocate for their neighborhood to ensure access to capital.

Metzger lauds the policies that have resulted from this model. The Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) provided the impetus for many banks to enter into agreements with community groups to increase the amount of capital in previously underserved neighborhoods. Metzger cites the work of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) as an example of the positive effects of the CRA.

The article, in describing the neighborhood life-cycle theory, in providing a trenchant critique of the model, and in underlining the importance of capital in neighborhood change, provides an interesting analysis of the effect of a particular theoretical framework on urban policy. There are, however, three points that I think undermine some of the analysis. I will discuss each in turn.

What effect did the neighborhood life-cycle theory really have on urban policy?

Metzger contradicts himself as to whether the neighborhood life-cycle theory actually affected policy. At one point, he seems to argue that the theory was used to *develop* policies, while in other places he says that the theory was used to *legitimate* policies that would have been implemented anyway. Perhaps the theory was used for both purposes in different contexts, but the article does not contain such a finely grained analysis. If the theory was inconsistent with the perceptions of

lenders, politicians, and the general public at the time, it seems unlikely that it would have had any effect at all on policy. Downs developed his theory when millions of African-American families were migrating from the South, whites were moving to suburban jurisdictions in increasingly large numbers, urban manufacturing employment opportunities were decreasing because of deindustrialization, and new employment opportunities were rapidly developing in suburban locations. These external forces were very powerful and created enormous pressures on urban neighborhoods. It is not surprising, then, that Downs developed a model that predicts an inevitable downward life cycle for urban neighborhoods.

Are we to believe that *because* of the neighborhood life-cycle theory bankers, realtors, and politicians viewed African-American neighborhoods in negative terms? It seems more likely that the racial stereotypes used by lenders, politicians, and government redevelopment officials had more influence on urban policy than Downs's theory. In fact, the policy prescriptions of open racial and economic integration that Downs set forth in *Opening Up the Suburbs* (1973) seem to have had less influence on public policy than his idea of using a triage methodology to allocate scarce public resources.

A key question, then, is, "What would have happened if Downs had *not* developed his life-cycle theory?" Unfortunately, we cannot arrive at a definitive answer. My guess, though, is that urban policy would not have looked very different. While the theory may have provided policy makers with a convenient, scientific basis for making decisions, urban renewal, highway construction, and the FHA/Veterans Administration mortgage insurance programs would no doubt have been enacted without it.

Is triage always bad?

My second issue with Metzger's article relates to his characterization of triage as a method of developing urban policies. In medical practice, triage means that attention should be directed first to those who most are in need, but are likely to live with immediate treatment. Doctors must ascertain whether a patient (1) can live without immediate attention, (2) needs immediate attention and as a result will live, or (3) will die even if he or she receives immediate attention. Analogously, Downs's life-cycle theory was used to classify some neighborhoods as beyond repair and assert that they should therefore be allowed to deteriorate to a point where it would be easier to assemble land for large-scale redevelopment projects. Unfortunately, residents in such neighborhoods, who were overwhelmingly minorities, were subjected to increasingly difficult conditions: poor schools, large numbers of vacant lots and abandoned buildings, and declining property values.

This legacy of the neighborhood triage approach is very disturbing. Racial prejudice and discrimination affected urban policy decisions, so it is no surprise that the triage approach was used not only to legitimate decisions that had negative effects on low-income minority neighborhoods, but also to justify the inexcusable and pernicious practice of disinvesting in these neighborhoods. The alternative model, presented by Metzger, argues that residents in all urban neighborhoods may be capable of initiating collective efforts that will lead to stabilization and, perhaps, revitalization: Neighborhood triage should be abandoned.

I disagree with this conclusion. In other work, I have advocated a variant on the neighborhood triage approach based on three assumptions: (1) Public and private resources are limited and should be allocated to maximize their effect, (2) not every intervention will work in every neighborhood, and (3) quite often neighborhood interventions are implemented at crosspurposes (Temkin and Rohe 1996, 1998). Policy makers should tailor and coordinate neighborhood interventions to suit residents' preferences for relocation, as well as local economic and social conditions. This means that place-based policies should be enacted in neighborhoods where a large majority of the residents express a desire to remain and build on existing community assets, while voluntary mobility-oriented programs should be offered first to residents in neighborhoods where a large number of residents would prefer to relocate. Of course, preferences among residents may not be so clearly defined, and so policy responses cannot be so easily developed to reflect residents' preferences. At the very least, revitalization and relocation policies should not work at cross-purposes: for example, offering residents relocation opportunities while at the same time implementing another initiative to stabilize the area. In this context, neighborhood triage is defined as implementing policies that are aligned with residents' preferences and coordinated to maximize their effect.

Other factors that create neighborhood change

The third point I wish to make relates to the alternative model Metzger presents. Certainly, a neighborhood's stability is influenced by the availability of capital, defined by Metzger as subsidized investment funds available from institutions and the public sector. It is debatable whether Marxist scholars alone are aware of the importance of capital for neighborhood viability. Moreover, Marxist scholars such as Harvey (1973) and Smith (1996) often point out that urban dynamics are greatly influenced by the conflict between the use and exchange value of urban land. Capital flows into areas where exchange values are increasing, often changing the use value of a particular neighborhood (Smith 1996). In this view, neighborhood collective action is initiated to defend a particular neighborhood's use value in

the face of threats from investors who want to maximize exchange values (Castells 1983; Logan and Molotch 1987). Therefore, the Marxist critique of the neighborhood life cycle underscores the link between urban form and social relationships conditioned by the dominant mode of production at a particular point in time. CRA advocacy, which is focused on mortgage lending, seems to have grown out of a community organizing tradition that owes more to Alinsky than Marx does.

However, this is a minor quibble, and I agree with Metzger that it is plausible that a strongly organized community will be better able to secure resources that will benefit residents. What is missing from this alternative model is any discussion about the other factors that affect neighborhood stability. Neighborhood conditions are affected by a large number of variables, usually in ways that include interaction and feedback effects (Galster 1998). Metzger's alternative model leaves us with the impression that any neighborhood is viable: All that is needed is an increase in capital along with policies to ensure that residents remain there as their economic conditions improve. While Metzger may be correct, I believe that he is too sanguine about the potential for improvement in all types of distressed neighborhoods.

A neighborhood's trajectory is affected by many factors in addition to availability of capital (Temkin and Rohe 1998). Collective activity focused on CRA-type advocacy may not be enough to stabilize a neighborhood if the residents do not believe that it is a good place to live. In some neighborhoods, then, disinvestment is a problem, but so are high levels of crime, social disorganization, low educational attainment among residents, chemical dependency, and other factors that affect a neighborhood's overall quality of life. The link between these conditions and the availability of capital is tenuous at best.

Conclusion

Despite my three criticisms of this article, I agree with many of Metzger's major points. Downs's model, similar to other ecological characterizations of urban dynamics, did not emphasize the possibility of residents acting and taking steps to improve local conditions. As a result, human agency, in the form of effective collective action, was either referenced in passing or not included in the neighborhood life-cycle model at all. That is not to say that neighborhood residents are in complete control of their collective fates. Large-scale structural changes in the form of continued suburbanization of employment opportunities, the shift to a service-oriented economy, and increased globalization create effects beyond the scope of any well-meaning neighborhood-based advocacy organization. The ability of local residents to engage in effective collective activity is constrained by po-

litical, social, and institutional realities within a metropolitan area. While neighborhoods do not inevitably decline with age, they are also not assured of revitalization because of residents' good intentions and collective actions. It is prudent, then, to develop policies for residents of neighborhoods that are in desparate shape and perhaps beyond the revitalization activities of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Author

Kenneth Temkin is a Research Associate at the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

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