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**Howard Gillette, Jr.** *Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 323 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3897-6.

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## A History of the Places We Don't Know: Putting Camden on the Map

Home at various times to Campbell's Soup, RCA Victor, and New York Ship Building, Camden, New Jersey was transformed from industrial powerhouse to a city in severe economic distress. Unlike many other post-industrial cities that saw private reinvestment since the late 1990s, disinvestment has continued to haunt Camden. Community organizing groups, frustrated with the city's inability to act, asked the state of New Jersey to intervene. In 2002, the State appointed a Chief Operating Officer to govern Camden for five years with the power to override local elected officials. Since that time, Camden has launched an unprecedented redevelopment program that plans to rebuild neighborhoods throughout the city, relocating thousands of residents in the process.

Books about large cities such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit are plentiful; books about small to mid-size cities are not. Until now, Camden and similar small, former industrial cities, have rarely informed public policy debates and urban discussions. Cities like Camden remain almost invisible outside of their borders. Camden residents and elected officials know the major storylines: job loss and its effects, suburbanization, a powerful regional political machine, a city government that lacks the capacity to perform basic city services, a jail that sits on prime waterfront property, and a structural deficit; but these stories have yet to reach a broader audience.

Seven years ago, Howard Gillette set out to write Camden's recent history. In a city that has experienced

decades of financial disinvestment, this was a tremendous undertaking. Standing in a weedfilled vacant lot downtown, mere blocks from City Hall, it is difficult to recreate the city's history. Little is left of the city's former industrial greatness. Industrial plants were demolished to make way for hoped-for but yet to appear redevelopment. Neighborhoods are littered with so many vacant lots that it's possible to stand in what was once a thriving downtown residential neighborhood, look through the middle of residential blocks, and see City Hall more than three blocks away. Materials documenting the city's history did not fare much better. Gillette pieced together the city's history by turning up documents and interviewing many individuals. The book that resulted would be an outstanding accomplishment in most cities; it is even more of an achievement in Camden given the state of public records.

The book's core is a detailed look at Camden's decline, and the vision, reality and politics of redevelopment planning since the 1940s. Gillette exhaustively documents the urban renewal strategies of the 1960s and their political repercussions; the big vision planning of the 1970s; and the earmarking of the waterfront as entertainment district and economic savior during the 1990s and early 2000s. For Gillette, Camden's decline is intricately linked to the suburban rise. Jobs, people, money, and power flowed from Camden City to Camden County. In return, the city was saddled with noxious land uses, held the poor, and was used to generate income for the emerging Democratic political machine. Surrounding

suburbs enacted policies to exclude the poor.

Gillette complements this picture with a look at neighborhoods and individuals. Camden is often referred to as a city that lacks political participation, but Gillette challenges this perception by documenting neighborhood efforts to revive communities. He profiles individuals who became leaders and religious leaders who launched housing development corporations and social service organizations. While they are clearly at times no match for the massive economic transformations rocking the city, they illustrate how, in a context that offered very little hope for residents and little opportunity for them to escape harsh economic and political circumstances, Camden's communities created an institutional infrastructure to meet the needs of residents. Gillette notes that some of these efforts were highly sophisticated and reasonably well funded—St. Joseph's Carpenter Society in East Camden, for example, has succeeded in not only stabilizing the housing market but in increasing housing prices—where others were much more grassroots and ad-hoc.

There are many highlights in this book. The best is Gillette's coverage of Camden politics in which he chronicles the city's heyday as political and economic power, then portrays its transformation into a city heavily dependent on the state and at the mercy of a powerful regional political machine. This is where he is at his finest, but after this description of party politics, we are left wondering what to make of the power of the party and its implications for the future of the city. Considering the party's prominent role in his discussion of development

politics, the reader expects a tie-in to its role in the future.

Gillette concludes by suggesting a metropolitan solution to Camden's problems. He cites advocates of the new regionalism who argue that changing the rules will facilitate metropolitan integration, such as state laws on taxation and school funding. But the reality of doing this is tenuous given a political culture that values home rule and the political machine's expansion from regional machine to state powerhouse. The focus on metropolitan area is useful and perhaps important as a next step in Camden's evolution but it is by no means the only step. Camden's current situation was influenced by its relationship to the metropolitan area but that alone did not produce the conditions nor is it likely to solve them. The book's conclusion could have been more engaging if it had laid out the broader context for Camden's revitalization such as the neoliberal political environment in which government's role is to facilitate markets and globalization. The outside forces shaping the city during its decline and renewal (with the possible exception of the political party) are the same that influence development in other cities. Missing in this story of Camden is what the experience of Camden illuminates in other places. Camden provides an excellent opportunity to understand the impact of economic and political forces that have shaped U.S. cities. The story of the last sixty years provides tremendous insight into the decisions local governments make in the context of the neoliberal policy regime's dominance and impact of economic transformation. Gillette helpfully places the city in a metropolitan context but the story of Camden has even more to offer.

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