

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Stephen J. McGovern.** *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. xiv + 342 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2052-2.



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One of the seeming realities of modern life is that municipalities have to make themselves attractive to investors or watch the money head down the road to a “friendlier” climate. The academic version of this view was largely shaped by Paul Peterson’s *City Limits* (1981) which detailed the constraints within which municipal governments work. Stephen McGovern tells a very different story, one where the citizens affected by downtown development can force changes in land-use policy, and do so in a way that ensures the benefits of growth are shared equitably and capital does not grow wings and fly away.

His primary concern is not land-use policy itself but local political cultures, and the role individuals have in shaping them. More specifically, he investigates the possibility of replacing the hegemony of free-market, private investment with a Gramscian counterhegemony. In McGovern’s view this would be a progressive political culture where (1) policy is set in the public sphere, led by government intervention rather than private investment, and (2) policy direction is controlled not by bureaucratic managers or some other elitist hierarchy but through the mass participation of citizens. Such a culture would be characterized by an egalitarian ethic.

In these terms, the comparison of downtown development in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., in the

1970s and 1980s provides a stark contrast of success and failure. In San Francisco, “growth-control” activists challenged the widely-accepted notion that commercial development in the downtown would provide benefits for everyone by expanding the tax base and position the city well in the emerging postindustrial economy. These activists were fighting an uphill battle just to establish that downtown development was not an unmixed benefit; there were social and economic costs to the city, and particularly to the lower-income neighborhoods in the downtown area. A series of citizens’ initiatives were launched which, though at first unsuccessful, increased awareness of the need for limits on construction of new office towers, and also argued that what new construction is allowed should be required to provide direct benefits through various mitigation measures. Thus, in the late 1970s, San Francisco became the first major American city to create a linkage policy; in this case, the policy required developers of office buildings to put money into a transit fund to help offset the increased burden on the public transit system caused by the new offices. Over time, similar linkage policies were developed for affordable housing, employment opportunities for residents in the vicinity of the new construction, and child care.

Even before the successful adoption of Proposition M in 1986, the city’s planning department and its pro-

growth mayor, Dianne Feinstein, were slowly accepting the premise on which the growth-control activists made their argument. McGovern even found grudging acceptance of the controlled growth policies among members of the business community.

For McGovern, the change in San Francisco's approach to downtown development from one of free market opportunism to one of equity based on controlled growth is much more than a simple shift in municipal government policy. It replaced the leadership of private investors with that of a highly interventionist government. It was adopted not on the advice of experts or professional managers but through the broad, grassroots participation required of the citizens' initiative campaigns. Thus, this marked a cultural change—the arrival of a counterhegemony.

By contrast, Washington, D.C., provides a case study of how the hegemony of private capital can successfully withstand the criticism of growth-control activists. McGovern argues that these activists were divided into two camps, neither of which were committed to a progressive political culture. The "planning advocates" emphasized a managerial approach which accepted government intervention as a positive way of controlling downtown development, but they were suspicious of mass organization which would reach out to community groups and involve ordinary people in the decision making process. In short, they felt that it was best to leave most decisions to the experts in the planning department. The other group, the "community development advocates," emphasized a populist approach which sought broad-based support but avoided government intervention. This group mainly consisted of community development corporations and non-profit housing organizations which preferred to deal directly with developers.

Divided as they were between managerialists and populists, growth-control activists in Washington failed to mount a serious challenge to the commonly-accepted views of how downtown office construction benefitted the community. The planning advocates focused on aesthetic and environmental concerns of downtown development and offered an elitist solution—an approach that stood little chance of connecting with people in low-income neighborhoods. The community development advocates were so closely allied with real-estate developers, they could offer little in the way of alternatives.

Ironically, when linkage policies were introduced in Washington it was partly by the suggestion of pro-growth advocates who believed such policies could pre-

empt more restrictive zoning laws. The Washington version of linkage which developed in the mid-1980s saw developers contribute to housing projects in exchange for a relaxation of existing zoning restrictions—an approach that came to be called "zoning for dollars."

While class and racial divisions clearly played a part in the failure to institute progressive land-use policies in Washington, McGovern's main point is that the failure is mainly that of the growth-control activists for not connecting government interventionism with mass support.

The author's interviews with various players in municipal government and politics allows him to analyze the attitudes behind the issues, and thereby go beyond the specific policies to the broader issue of political culture. This leads to one minor criticism which is that McGovern chose not to clean up the grammar or syntax when quoting the interviewees, which results in a lot of difficult reading. For example, McGovern makes only one minor change to help the reader through the following quotation:

People from Chinatown came and went down to City Hall to protest the Golden Gateway Center as why [it] didn't have any low-income housing there. And it was, no one was listening (p. 128).

Such insistence on a precise rendering of what was said is a distraction for the reader and may be misrepresenting generally articulate individuals. This is not the first study of land-use policy to argue governments can control commercial development without risking capital flight. McGovern himself points to studies of other municipalities to suggest that these arguments do not apply only to major cities with booming downtown cores. What scholars of urban development might find most useful is the cultural framework which McGovern provides. And that depends on whether one believes that a Gramscian approach is appropriate for analyzing municipal politics in the United States. McGovern makes a convincing case that there was a broad change in attitudes toward downtown development in San Francisco; but is this the type of cultural change which Gramsci was looking for? McGovern acknowledges that the change which Gramsci described was much broader and deeper, and he suggests a "lowering of horizons" is required. "Most obviously, the concept of 'fundamental change' need not be confined to a colossal shift from capitalism to socialism" (p. 25). Furthermore, he argues that specific detail of how political cultures change is needed, and is an area where Gramsci himself was largely silent. The resulting analysis is nothing if not bold.

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