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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Kromer. *Neighborhood Recovery: Reinvestment Policy for the New Hometown.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000. x + 262 pp. $22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2717-8.

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Published on H-Urban (October, 2000)

New Urbanism for Old Neighborhoods

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Over the past quarter century, a host of urban sociologists, political scientists, and historians have painted the inner city neighborhoods of America's large cities in the most lurid terms. A potpourri of images – economic and social isolation, joblessness, abandoned housing, huge moldering high rise public housing projects, glowering graffiti- scarred walls, rampant drug addiction, alienated youth, gangs, female-headed families, the underclass – come to mind. Elijah Anderson, William Julius Wilson, Dave Bartelt, Tom Sugrue, and Michael Katz, among others have well chronicled the social and racial tragedy of these so-called postindustrial urban neighborhoods. Once, in the nineteenth century, the pristine, tree-lined streetcar suburbs documented by historians Sam Bass Warner and Ken Jackson, in the late twentieth century, economically eviscerated by deindustrialization and disproportionately occupied by African-American and other minority families, gutted by fires and housing abandonment, these urban neighborhoods endured a sustained policy of marginalization, denied decent housing, commercial, educational, trash, fire, police and other vital services. These neighborhoods steadily devolved into vast urban wastelands that pleaded for a solid, durable revitalization policy to reincorporate them into the orbit of the larger urban social and political economy.

In their 1991 book *Philadelphia: Neighborhoods, Division, and Conflict in a Postindustrial City*, Carolyn Adams, David Bartelt, David Elesh, Ira Goldstein, Nancy Kleniewski, and William Yancey singled out the City of Brotherly Love as a particularly egregious example of the so-called "two-city" phenomenon. One city of gleaming glass skyscrapers and posh eighteenth century townhouses flaunted a modern high-tech economy of finance, real estate, research, professional, and other services. But surrounding that glittering world existed the broad swath of decaying residential neighborhoods marked by age, high levels of physical deterioration, and severe isolation from the mainstream economy.

John Kromer in his *Neighborhood Recovery: Reinvestment Policy for the New Hometown* uses similar language to describe Philadelphia's inner city. However, unlike his sociological and historical counterparts noted above, Kromer refreshingly takes a much more optimistic tack

in charting the urban future. Kromer uses his past experience as director of Philadelphia's Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD) to forge a blueprint for urban neighborhood revitalization, that is, a set of guidelines, rules, and recommendations for transforming the graffiti-spattered, abandoned, and bombed out nether regions of the city into active, vibrant communities. Buttressed by substantial public and private investment (a key premise of this program), he envisions once-despairing neighborhoods resurgent with hope. He sees them scintillating with new and rehabilitated housing, street markets, high tech industry, and vibrant citizen participation.

Kromer's book hardly fits into the traditional genre of urban history. In fact, the historical perspective barely appears. Occasionally, the author alludes to an earlier neighborhood revitalization venture, the successful, "suburban style" Yorktown development of the 1960s located just above Girard Avenue in North Philadelphia. Kromer cites Yorktown with its record of community involvement, homeownership, and stable real estate values as evidence that well-planned, government-supported community reinvestment can produce long-lasting positive results. On the other hand, he decries the city's architectural inheritance of the 1930s era, the concentrated, inward-turning, public housing projects that turned their backs on the larger community. However, Kromer, like other "progressive" critics of public housing, regards the conventional public housing program as the only federal low-income housing program aimed at very low-income families.

Using vignettes, analysis, and narrative accounts of his own experience wielding urban public policy, Kromer propounds an appealing, intriguing, and perhaps practical case for the possibility of neighborhood revitalization. It is a case built upon several main points. First, Kromer stresses the importance of public/private collaboration. Not the post-World War II, pro-growth model illuminated sometime ago by political scientist John Mollenkopf in *The Contested City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), and more recently by John Teaford in his *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990). That model hypothesized an entrepreneurial political alliance of big-city Democratic mayors, Washington, and rich Republican lawyers, businessmen, developers and other urban elites sworn to save America's seedy, Great Depression-wracked downtowns. Kromer, however, emphasizes the collaboration between city, state, and federal agencies (the OHCD, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for example) working tightly with neighborhood-based community development corporations (CDCs). The latter are the same CDCs that Roy Lubove hailed so extravagantly in his volume about Pittsburgh neighborhood revitalization, *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: The Post-Steel Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). Working in concert with city agencies such as the OHCD, directed in the nineties by Kromer, CDCs secure seed money from private foundations and corporations, and public funding from sources such as Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs); then working with the Redevelopment Authority to condemn and purchase blocks of abandoned housing and vacant lots, the CDCs contract with developers and assemble packages of new and rehabilitated housing, commercial ventures, or even new light, high tech industry.

Second, Kromer underscores the importance of neighborhood strategic plans. Neighborhood organizations, including CDCs, operate amidst shattered local economies, failing schools, high dropout rates, low skills, chronic joblessness, and depressed real estate. Again, with OHCD help, neighborhoods must forge a realistic plan based upon a practical vision of what the revitalized area can become. One ultimately successful plan, noted Kromer, featured urban farming; ancient housing was condemned and cleared, and the neighborhood revitalized all around the introduction of a new industry, a high technology farm producing hydroponics lettuce. In any case, Kromer argues the necessity of making urban space appealing, what he terms the "New Urbanism for Old Neighborhoods" (p. 53). Accordingly, somewhat in contrast to the injunctions of Jane Jacobs, population densities are lowered, the size of new residential units is increased to make housing attractive to new home consumers, and "parklets," neighborhood markets, and commercial strips add to the panache and marketability of the revitalized area.

Naturally, Kromer fixes much of his attention on housing, especially homeownership and race. He contends with many others that America's key housing programs, the mortgage interest tax deduction, tax credits for low to modern income housing development, and even the Clinton Administration's HOPE VI program, principally benefit the white middle class. As far as racial minorities are concerned, argues Kromer, HUD funding available for neighborhood revitalization (HOME and CDBG) represent by far the biggest and most accessible resource for addressing the low level of black homeown-

ership and for aiding the city as a whole. Using HOME (lump-sum federal block grants that can be used to acquire block of housing for neighborhood conservation and other housing purposes) and CDBG, Philadelphia established an inner city homeownership counseling center that over two years enabled 2,200 mostly black, lower-income families to own a home.

Kromer calls public housing (conventional and section 8) the "second-largest affordable housing program in the nation, funded at a level of $17 billion in FY 1999" (p.137). The first funded at $58.3 billion was mortgage tax deductibility. However, both, asserts Kromer, prove inequitable to low-income families. He assails the poor design of public housing, the inflexibility of public housing funding, and also HOPE VI, that he sees taking scarce money from low-income housing needs to lure middle class families back into the city. For that very reason, that cities should reach out to all classes and not to the exclusion of low-income families, Kromer also stresses special needs housing, for the homeless, the mentally ill, and persons with AIDS. This time in agreement with Jane Jacobs, Kromer pleads that cities must nurture diversity and be places unafraid to encourage the widest possible inclusivity so that the same street providing services to the homeless, houses middle class families, low-income households, and persons with AIDS. Borrowing from his experiences as the director of Philadelphia OHCD, Kromer, therefore, basically argues that government in league with grassroots neighborhood organizations, especially CDCs, and corporate sponsors can resurrect decaying inner city neighborhoods and make them appealing places in which to live. In other words, the "New Urbanism" can be made inclusive, can be transplanted into the city, and can be harnessed as a tool to revitalize the devastated residential swaths of the postindustrial city. It is a visionary prospect for a city policy maker whose prescriptions for urban revitalization are otherwise firmly grounded in a hard-nosed realism about the scarcity of public and private funding and the limitations of inner-city area-based physical and human resources. It is a vision, too, that seemingly flies in the face of past patterns of urban building and rebuilding, what Max Page has called the "creative destruction" of the city. Nevertheless, it is also a much-needed, bold, refreshingly optimistic exploration of the future prospects for urban regions that have too long escaped the path of capitalist urban exploitation and, therefore, the dramatic change wrought by "creative destruction." In that respect, while it is not urban history, Kromer's book offers urban historians an antidote to the dismal social science of the inner city and the chance to hope that America's dying streetcar suburbs might flourish again, albeit remade in the image of the "New Urbanism."

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Citation: John F. Bauman. Review of Kromer, John, *Neighborhood Recovery: Reinvestment Policy for the New Hometown.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2000.

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