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From the Selected Works of Michael E Lewyn

2017

Market Urbanism blog posts, second half of 2017

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lewyn/152/
Mini review: Vanishing New York, by Jeremiah Moss

DECEMBER 15, 2017 BY MICHAEL LEWYN
I recently read a highly publicized pro-NIMBY book, *Vanishing New York*. The author, who goes by the pen name “Jeremiah Moss” tells a simple story: throughout New York, gentrification and chain stores are on the march, making the city rich and boring. The story has an element of truth: obviously, there are some places that have gentrified, and there are some places (mostly notably Times Square) that have lots and lots of banks and chain stores.

But on balance, the book’s relationship with factual reality is a bit uneven. Much of the book complains about the evils of gentrification. But in fact, even in Manhattan the poverty rate is 17.9 percent, about three times that of most New York suburbs. Moss also claims that the city is getting whiter, but even Manhattan is 40 percent black and Hispanic, and New York City as a whole is 54 percent black and Hispanic. By contrast, in 1980 the city was only 45 percent black/Hispanic, and in 1940 it was over 90 percent white.

Moss seems to think that the city is being taken over by chain stores. The last time I walked through the East Village (one of the neighborhoods he writes about) I found about one or two such stores per block, or about 5 or 10 percent of all storefronts. My guess is that Moss thinks about chain stores the way many racists think about racial minorities: because they assume one is too many, 5 percent seems to them like a takeover.

Moss is all for immigration from foreign nations, but constantly complains about newcomers, especially parents; he uses the word “stroller” like anti-Semites use the term “international bankers”- as a code-word for a dreaded enemy. He has a problem with college students too (complaining about “NYU’s presence… [having] spread like a virus”). My impression is that Moss believes that cities should be a bantustan for bohemians and low-income minorities- everyone else keep out!

His history is sometimes based on fantasy: he suggests that 1970s fires in poor areas were “part of a conspiracy to chase blacks and Puerto Ricans from the city.” Since New York got less and less white throughout the 20th century, this would be one of the most unsuccessful conspiracies in American history.

Moss writes that the High Line “flatten[ed] multiple neighborhoods” and created “a dreamworld of exclusion.” So one might think that the Chelsea neighborhood surrounding the High Line lost people. Right? Wrong? Zip code 10001 (the Chelsea zip code) had about 17,000 people in 2000, and had just over 23,000 in 2015. Moss writes that because of gentrification “blacks were no longer the majority population in Harlem.” Not completely false (depending on how you define Harlem) but highly misleading. As blacks have been mostly replaced by Hispanics, Central Harlem is 79 percent black/Hispanic and only 15 percent white. Because the neighborhood’s population has grown by 30,000 people since 2000, it actually has more nonwhites than 15 years ago.
Moss is at least aware of the harms caused by high rents, but his remedies actually would exacerbate gentrification. He favors rent control and allowing neighborhoods to vote on housing – in English, less new housing. These policies would make the city’s existing housing shortage even worse, creating even more gentrification as people priced out of one neighborhood gentrify another.

Based on the largely favorable reviews, many people had a positive emotional reaction to this book. I did not. I think that my aversion to this book is based not just on policy disagreements, but on my vision of what a central city should look like. Moss dreams of a 1970s New York, a city that is desirable only for bohemians and for people who cannot afford to live elsewhere. I want to rebuild the city of the 1940s, a city that includes middle-class Republicans as well as bohemians.
My last post, on urban geographic constraints and housing prices, led to an interesting discussion thread. The most common counter argument was that because dense cities are usually more expensive, density must cause high cost. But if this was true, cities would become cheaper as they became less dense.

Most American urbanized areas have become less dense, not more, over time due to suburban sprawl. Even where city populations have grown, much of that growth has been in areas that where undeveloped a century ago. Thus, the developed part of even growing cities were, I suspect, more dense in 1917 than than they are today: for example, Manhattan’s population peaked at 2.3 million in 1910, about 40 percent more than its current population. So rents should have come down. Did they?
Apparently not. The Census date has statewide data showing that rents rose pretty much everywhere in real terms over the late 20th century. In the District of Columbia, real rents increased from $346 to $612 in real dollars between 1950 and 1990, even as the city was losing population and the region was de-densifying. If Washington is typical, it appears that lower density and higher rent went hand-in-hand.

Urban[ism] Legend: The “Geographically Constrained Cities” Fantasy

OCTOBER 22, 2017 BY MICHAEL LEWYN

One common argument against building new urban housing is that cities are geographically constrained by their natural and political boundaries, and thus can never build enough housing to bring prices down. This claim rests on a variety of false assumptions.

The first false assumption is that the amount of land in a city limits the amount of housing in that city. If you assume that every bit of residential land must be
occupied by single-family houses on 1/5 of an acre on land, I suppose this assumption makes sense. But in reality, you can always put more people on a block of land. Where today you have big houses, tomorrow you could have small houses. Where today you have small houses, tomorrow you could have small apartment buildings. Where today you have small apartment buildings, tomorrow you could have large apartment buildings. Even in midtown Manhattan, where I live, there are lots to two-to-four story buildings that could be knocked down and replaced with larger buildings. If Manhattan had the density of Mongkok (a popular Hong Kong neighborhood with 340,000 people per square mile), it could accommodate almost 7 million people - about 80 percent of the city of New York’s population.* And if Manhattan had enough housing to accommodate Mongkok-type densities, a whole lot of housing units (either outer borough units or older Manhattan units) would become vacant, causing rents to plunge.

The second assumption is that a city’s built-up core is its entire housing market. But this is wrong, because Manhattan landlords compete not just with each other, but with landlords in the outer boroughs and the suburbs. So if enough housing units were, for example, built in New Jersey, demand for housing in Manhattan would eventually decrease.

*A common counterargument is that demolishing and rebuilding housing is expensive. This argument fails for two reasons. First, the differences between high-cost cities and low-cost cities have far more to do with land costs than with construction costs. For example, metro San Francisco’s construction costs per housing unit are only 1.7 times higher than those of Atlanta, but its metro land costs are more than fifteen times higher (data here).
One long-forgotten housing option is residential hotels; a century ago, most renters lived in hotels and shared space with short-term tenants. I just read a book, Living Downtown, about the rise and fall of residential hotels. Rather than discuss them in detail I refer you to my amazon.com review.

But here are two general thoughts:

1. one reason Airbnb has been controversial is because it mixes long-term and short-term tenants. But in the first half of the 20th century this was a common mixture.
2. Until the 1920s, residential hotels were so unregulated that they included a wide range of places, from luxury hotels to vile flophouses where there was not even a mattress to sleep on. But this mixture allowed even tramps to avoid sleeping on streets as they do now.
Ever since zoning was invented in the 1920s, homeowners have argued that limits on density and on multifamily housing are necessary to protect property values. But today, urban NIMBYs seek to prevent new housing on the ground that new housing will lead to gentrification, which will in turn lead to increased property values, which in turn will lead to rising rents and displacement.

Similarly, I often read that cities and suburbs shouldn’t have any new housing because they might become “too dense” or “overcrowded.” (Never mind that when there’s not enough housing to go around, excluded residents respond not by leaving the city, but by sleeping on the streets, thus making the city feel even more crowded).

But at the same time, I also read that building new housing is futile, because it will all be bought up by foreign oligarchs, who (because they aren’t quite greedy enough to rent out their property) cause the housing to be lifeless and unoccupied. It is not quite clear to me how the city can be overcrowded and undercrowded at the same time, but evidently this view seems to be common.