

Flogging the New South City

Contributed by Mark Winston
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On my flight home today, I saw a little US Airways blurb on several cities. US Airways loves to promote its hub cities. One of these, of course, is Charlotte. And what did our favorite airline tell us is the big attraction for us in the drag Queen City? Why, NASCAR, man-made-white-water rafting and fine dining, of course... Just picture those unique Charlotte institutions of... Uhm... Nevermind, it was Ruth's Chris and Hard Rock Cafe. Where was I?

"Import Substitution" was a term not originated by Jane Jacobs, but she crystalized it in her book "Cities and the Wealth of Nations", in which she posits that in order to thrive in deep time, cities must convince the world of their unique value and place in that world. They must make themselves relevant in the face of their competing city economies, and intercity trade is only effective when different cities specialize in different things which give meaning to their isolation.

This differs from the mid-century economist's definition of import substitution as a public policy, in which governments keep out foreign products in order to develop identical but competing brands. As an adjunct of urban theory, it can be more easily described as what happens when cities devise new products and industries as a method of creating a competing identity, as opposed to the more common local industrial policy of endeavoring to lure factories to town to produce identical products which require no more unique or specialized skills than the next town.

Too few cities today, no matter how protectionist and nativist their boosters, manage to completely heed this necessity: building a local business base which competes in the market of innovation, rather than metely building its "share" of standardized and undifferentiated widgets. The New South City is quite possibly the worst case I've ever observed.

Charlotte is a prime example of a big-time city in desperate need of purpose. In the never-ending quest to become the World Class City it so covets, Charlotte boasts such things to visitors as a US Airways hub, NASCAR track, man-made-white-water rapids course, corporate headquarters for a couple transnational counting houses, and World Class Upscale dining opportunities. We know they are World Class, of course, because Atlanta, Los Angeles, Washington DC, Houston and Dallas have them too.

To residents Charlotte offers World Class retail at South Park Mall, including Nordstrom, the Apple store and fine dining opportunities such as the Cheesecake Factory. It also offers residents towers-in-a-park condos downtown that are built on top of the ruins of things that maybe once could have been distinguished from other urban redevelopment condotowers-in-park. It offers Upscale dining opportunities, of course, and lots of nightlife for young alcoholics of all social strata, as long as they're young, white and professional. Locals are gushing this week about their uniqueness as Ikea sites their latest store and Whole Foods moves into a wealthy neighborhood where people can actually afford organic produce.

The missing element, of course, is something distinguishing to Charlotte. All we see is that it offers a safe, interchangeable environment which visiting businesspeople and obsessively-upwardly-mobile residents find comfortingly indistinguishable from most other cities of its size or climate. This means, however, that there are also no domestic factors to grab visitors (both travelers and those from the 'near abroad') and the home-grown and identify for them why they should stay or value Charlotte in any way.

Declining and stagnating cities throughout the country (world?) that continue to plug along and attract devotees, despite their decline, have certain things which distinguish them. These distinguishing factors are the unique values which keep such cities competitive after unions start controlling their factories and the taxes go up and the roads start getting cracked and bumpy. Distinguishing, identifying urban values are often the only things keeping relentless blight at bay in old cities. These cities rely not on transplanted sameness for their success and livability but on their identities themselves. They live on the work of those who want to live in a city which possesses a wierdness or oddity (aka "charm") that will sustain them when faddish growth slows, usually because they become known as the "home" (or "roots") of a specific industry or service sector uniquely identifiable with that locale.

Charlotte lacks all of this. Admittedly, most mid-sized cities throughout the country (and especially the fast-growing Sun Belt cities) lack all this as well. But Charlotte wants recognition and identity SO BAD! It's sad that its boosters are stuck bulldozing most of the culture and history that was there already in order to replace it with an interchangeable New South sameness.

New Orleanians who have managed to keep their city alive over the past couple years (decades?) have had the help of a city that is ripe (literally) with preserved history and a unique geographical setting. The same could be said of Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, and just about any major city in the country that has experienced decline (with the notable exception of Detroit, whose boosters are simply too few to overcome the decay). These places manage to shoulder decline because they attract people with a strong emotional tie that goes beyond the latest corporate

assignment or beyond the widespread "nearest 'big city' I can afford" mentality which is quite prevalent in Charlotte.

Will Seattle, San Diego or Phoenix be able to do this when their stellar growth and outperforming economies start to max out? Even moreso, will Las Vegas or Austin or Raleigh-Cary? The question for cities that are still growing at a healthy clip and attracting lots of money and newcomers with no immediate threat of decline, is what unique values they offer the new people and new money flooding into them. What will make the next billionaire booster or cultural icon attach themselves to their city? What will keep businesses hanging around other than low taxes and slick new roads? Why will relocated corporate climbers turn down their next transfer because they've "finally found their home from home"? I can guarantee such things only take place when identifiable geographic, institutional or historical values exist which differentiate a place from its peers and neighbors - even if they are not qualitative or quantitative - the city has to have something all its own, not just more or newer of something which can easily be found everywhere else. Those who stay will not stay because of their preference for the local mall's version of the Apple store or because they think their local Ikea is "the best".

Maybe building a World Class City does first require building a city that looks just like any other city. Admittedly, the process of globalization does cause most cities to experience a creeping sameness throughout the trading world. While at times demoralizing to one's sense of place, it is incredibly beneficial economically, and the big question of our age (for urbanists, at least), is whether the faceless beneficiaries of this era of globalization can make proper use of this windfall in the task of import substitution and the establishment of unique local values which will set them apart from their peers and identify themselves solidly as "home" to existing residents and potential residents and visitors alike.

Can Charlotte ever attract the Devil-may-care devotion that places like New Orleans, San Francisco and Buffalo instill in their lifelong boosters? Can Charlotte sustain itself as a World Class destination for people who actually care where they are? When crime rates, real estate glass cielings and urban poverty reach World Class levels, will people still find a reason to stick around?

Only time will tell.