

Roy Lubove and American Urban History:

A Review Essay on Pittsburgh's Post-Steel Era¹

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Beginning in the 1960s, the late Roy Lubove made numerous important scholarly contributions to urban, social welfare, and planning history. His early books, *The Progressives and the Slums* (1962), *Community Planning in the 1920's* (1963), *The Professional Altruist* (1965), and *The Struggle for Social Security* (1968), have all become classics in their fields. Lubove's work had a significant influence on American urban history in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when new methodologies and new approaches to the field were emerging. A "new" urban history was proclaimed by those pursuing quantitative methodologies, such as those utilized by Stephan Thernstrom and Theodore Hershberg, among others.² This quantitative urban history soon died out, but an alternative approach advocated about the same time by Lubove and emphasizing the "city-building process" has had much greater usefulness and longevity. In a seminal article on "The Urbanization Process," published in 1967 in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Lubove proposed a new conceptual framework for urban history – an interpretive framework that emphasized decision-making, social organization, and urban change.³ Along with Eric E. Lampard and Sam Bass

1. Roy Lubove, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: Vol. II, The Post-Steel Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

2. Stephan Thernstrom, "Reflections on the New Urban History," *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 359-375; Theodore Hershberg, "The New Urban History: Toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City," *Journal of Urban History*, 5 (1979), 3-40; Raymond A. Mohl, "The New Urban History and Its Alternatives," *Urban History Yearbook* (1983), 19-28.

3. Roy Lubove, "The Urbanization Process: An Approach to Historical Research," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 33 (1967), 33-39.

Warner, Jr., Lubove advocated a new, more analytical urban history that has shaped the field over the past thirty years.⁴

Lubove illustrated this city-building approach in *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business, and Environmental Change* (1969), a precursor to the book under consideration here. This early book on Pittsburgh focused on change in the city's physical environment and the process of decision-making that produced such change. In the early twentieth century, Pittsburgh's corporate and business elites essentially controlled and limited movements for environmental change and reform. The voluntary nature of reform organizations, the reluctant use of government coercion, and conflicting interests within the business community prevented reform of the city's physical environment. As a result, Lubove argued, the social and human consequences of the late industrial revolution persisted into the middle of the twentieth century.

In the post-World War II era, however, a regional economic crisis prompted the Pittsburgh elite to overcome business factionalism and sponsor a "reverse welfare state" (p. 106), expanding public power to rebuild and revitalize Pittsburgh's downtown, primarily for private and corporate purposes. The central business district was reconstructed, large-scale urban renewal projects sprouted throughout the city, and new parks and infrastructure were built. The business-inspired Pittsburgh "Renaissance" meliorated industrial pollution and created a new spirit of civic commitment. But as in the past, business elite planning and urban renewal did little to expand or improve working-class housing or social conditions. Consequently, neighborhood action groups emerged in the turbulent 1960s to challenge elite decision-making.⁵

Almost thirty years later, Lubove published a sequel, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: The Post-Steel Era*, extending his analysis of urban change from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s. In this new book, Lubove focused on the numerous strands of urban planning and policy-making at the local level during a time of dramatic transformation in

4. Eric E. Lampard, "American Historians and the Study of Urbanization," *American Historical Review*, 67 (1961), 49-61; Eric E. Lampard, "Urbanization and Social Change: On Broadening the Scope and Relevance of Urban History," in Oscar Handlin and John Burchard, eds., *The Historian and the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 225-247; Eric E. Lampard, "Historical Aspects of Urbanization," in Philip M. Hauser and Leo F. Schnore, eds., *The Study of Urbanization* (New York: Wiley, 1965), 519-554; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "If All the World Were Philadelphia: A Scaffolding for Urban History," *American Historical Review*, 74 (1968), 26-43.

5. Roy Lubove, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business, and Environmental Change* (New York: Wiley, 1969).

the Pittsburgh economy. In the 1960s, Pittsburgh's economic base still centered on heavy industry – iron, steel, heavy machinery, and other large-scale manufacturing. But by the 1980s, the city and region had experienced “a wrenching industrial revolution in reverse” (p. 11). A combination of forces – declining industrial productivity, international competition, market changes, miscalculations by management and labor, and the failure of the steel companies to adapt to newer technologies – led to the ultimate decline and demise of the steel industry in the Pittsburgh region. One after another, the steel companies closed down their Pittsburgh plants in the 1980s. The human and social consequences of deindustrialization in Pittsburgh were far-reaching. Relatively prosperous and stable working-class neighborhoods and communities were devastated by unemployment and the loss of that sense of security and identity that had been an integral part of the steel workers' culture.

Confronting the crisis of unemployment and industrial decline, various community-based organizations emerged seeking strategies for economic and social reconstruction in the Pittsburgh region. These self-help agencies established social service and health networks, organized food banks, promoted a mortgage assistance program, provided apprenticeship and job training (and retraining in such areas as computer education), and sponsored a wide range of economic development programs. Some church and labor groups worked to revive and modernize the region's industrial economy, some pushing radical or anti-establishment agendas, others seeking worker ownership of the steel mills. However, other agencies more realistically accepted the demise of steel as irreversible and sought instead, as Lubove writes, “a mixture of economic development, community revitalization, social service, and citizen empowerment strategies that might improve the quality of life” (p. 16). This latter strategy, based on community development organizations, became the dominant mode of urban planning and policy making in Pittsburgh's post-steel era.

Leading the way to these new approaches to urban problems, according to Lubove, were several important agencies and organizations – some private and some public. The first such agency was the River Communities Project (RCP) of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work. Headed by James Cunningham, who had worked with community action groups in Pittsburgh in the 1960s, the RCP made numerous studies of the impact of deindustrialization and discovered serious social problems that were not being addressed comprehensively

by government agencies. Government action in the Pittsburgh area was hampered by municipal fragmentation and inadequate resources. Moreover, the record of government-sponsored urban policy in the 1960s and 1970s was not encouraging — massive “slum” clearance, urban renewal, and major expressway and redevelopment projects had destroyed neighborhoods and divided communities. Building on its social work origins, the RCP advocated community-based action and organization to combat the economic, social, and human consequences of the steel-plant shutdowns. The operative theory was that neighborhood organizations could better accomplish what government could not or would not do.

At the same time, Pittsburgh’s Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) played an important role in “Renaissance II,” Pittsburgh’s second renewal. The URA had been a major force in Renaissance I, promoting numerous large-scale renewal and building projects in the 1960s. However, by the 1970s, in response to considerable negative citizen reaction to such projects, the agency began to shift from neighborhood destruction to neighborhood revitalization. This neighborhood thrust of urban policy was intensified by the beginning of the federal Community Development Block Grant program in 1974, which provided funding for neighborhood improvement. By the 1980s, the URA had been transformed into “the city’s most comprehensive instrument of economic revitalization” (p. 73). Not only did the URA facilitate numerous Golden Triangle projects, but it promoted historic preservation and recycling, as well as housing and neighborhood economic assistance.

A third important organization that grappled with Pittsburgh’s past and future was the Allegheny Conference on Community Development (ACCD). Initially founded in the early 1940s, the ACCD served as the vehicle through which Pittsburgh’s corporate elite shaped policy and planning during Renaissance I. This early civic coalition forged a long-term consensus with Mayor David L. Lawrence’s democratic political machine, with the ultimate goal of revitalizing the central business district and the regional economy as a whole. With the first Pittsburgh Renaissance virtually complete by the late 1960s, and responding to new problems of social turbulence, the ACCD turned to neglected areas of social concern, especially community revitalization. However, the agency never lost sight of the importance of economic development strategies.

As the Pittsburgh economy worsened in the 1980s, the ACCD at first blamed the steel city’s woes on a calculated policy of disinvestment pur-

sued by the steel industry leadership. But in the wake of the shutdowns and reduced federal funding, the Allegheny Conference sought to develop a long-term economic development strategy that would avoid the heavy dependence on a single industry that had burdened Pittsburgh in the past. In the early 1980s, several ACCD task forces promoted "a vision of a modernized twenty-first century economy rooted in diversification" (p. 28). In this effort to "reinvent Pittsburgh," the ACCD focused especially on fashioning a business climate favorable to advanced technology, higher education, medical and other services, corporate headquarters, and international trade. This self-conscious economic development strategy built upon some existing advantages – for instance, the Pittsburgh region had three major universities and some thirty-eight hospitals. The consensus stemming from the ACCD task-force reports was that "an expanded service sector would be the engine of diversification" (p. 29). Consequently, an infrastructure of for-profit and nonprofit agencies emerged to nurture high technology, provide small business loans, recycle mill properties, establish suburban industrial parks, stimulate economic growth, and create jobs. Thus, over time, economic development strategies emphasizing new technologies and the service sector were implemented, paving the way for Pittsburgh's late twentieth-century emergence as a post-industrial city with an economy centered on higher education, medical services, financial services, and advanced technology.

Pittsburgh's universities comprised a fourth institutional force for urban change in the post-steel era. As elsewhere, urban research universities (and the nonprofit sector generally) have evolved into powerful economic development agencies. With the decline of steel and the expansion of higher education, the University of Pittsburgh became the city's largest employer. Major university construction projects and the expansion of education and medical services added to the city's employment base, especially in the service sector. Increasingly, academic research in basic sciences, advanced technology, and biomedicine nurtured new business development. In particular, state-sponsored "advanced technology centers" linked academic researchers at the universities with the larger business community, facilitating the transfer of technological innovation to the private sector and stimulating the commercialization of basic research. Typical of such advances were the robotics, magnetics, and software research at Carnegie-Mellon University and the medical, scientific, and urban research activities at the University of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh's universities helped pave the way for

late twentieth-century urban change, replacing the steel industry as the engine of economic development and anchoring the emerging service sector.

The universities and the other major agencies discussed above also came to recognize the essential importance of neighborhood development and community action. Since the 1960s urban policy in Pittsburgh has had both top-down and bottom-up components. A major portion of Lubove's book focuses on the bottom-up activities – on the important and wide-ranging work of dozens of community organizations. Neighborhood activism had begun the 1960s in the form of resistance to the large-scale land clearance and redevelopment schemes of the era. Great Society initiatives such as the anti-poverty program and model cities further stimulated community action in Pittsburgh and elsewhere. The prototype for this sort of neighborhood empowerment can be found in ACTION-Housing, a community group created in the 1960s and discussed in some detail in Lubove's earlier book on Pittsburgh. ACTION-Housing believed that the neighborhood was at the center of city life and that people needed to gain "a measure of self-determination and a sense of control over their own destiny" (p. 91). As Lubove concluded in that earlier analysis of ACTION-Housing, "the 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new neighborhood-centered quest for power whose long-term consequences cannot be predicted."⁶

Lubove's new book on Pittsburgh, in the largest sense, provides a conceptual framework for understanding that quest for neighborhood power over the past thirty years. In the 1970s, an incredible array of community development corporations (CDCs) sprang up in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area in response to post-industrial urban change and to protect community and advance neighborhood self-interest. The Pittsburgh CDC network fought against destructive redevelopment plans, sought to halt neighborhood disinvestment and factory closings, promoted a variety of new housing and homeowner initiatives, worked for improved social services and local business start-ups, and advocated preservation and recycling of historic buildings and sites. To a certain extent, the CDCs were supported financially by federal funding through block grants and by private foundations. But the real work of the CDC network was carried out by local people in meetings, programs, plans, projects, and community agencies. By the 1970s, the CDCs had

6. *Ibid.*, 176.

become a political force in Pittsburgh, and their input was sought by government agencies in addressing the urban crisis created by deindustrialization.

In two centrally important chapters, Lubove details the wide-ranging work of the Pittsburgh CDC network. For those who tend to think of urban policy as something implemented by the federal government, this book will come as something of an eye-opener. Since the 1960s, in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, local initiative and community action have been at the center of urban policy, planning, and advocacy. Curiously, Lubove never forcefully or explicitly makes this important point, but it is overwhelmingly demonstrated by the Pittsburgh experience.

With *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: The Post-Steel Era*, Lubove made another important contribution to the literature of twentieth-century U.S. urban history. He has provided, perhaps, one of the best historical case studies of urban response to deindustrialization. This is not to say that the book is without problems. In many ways, this is a difficult book. The weight of the evidence and dense factual detail can easily overwhelm the reader seeking a sharply defined interpretive argument. Many chapters lack a clearly stated thesis; transitions and conclusions are often missing. The book's disappointingly truncated final chapter, which might have served to effectively pull together the various strands of the narrative, offers neither summary nor conclusion. The book has an important interpretive structure, but it takes a careful reading to uncover Lubove's line of argument. In short, this could have been a more powerful book with a forcefully stated thesis – a thesis directly linked to the evidence. These structural weaknesses stand in stark contrast to Lubove's earlier study of Pittsburgh, which did have a powerful and clearly stated interpretation focused on the dominant role of business in the formulation and implementation of Renaissance I.

One other critical point needs to be made. In Lubove's first book on Pittsburgh, the local business elite and their political allies were the villains, hampering reform at first and then shaping the Pittsburgh Renaissance to suit their own interests. In this new book, the federal government has assumed the scapegoat role, especially in recent years, imposing needless bureaucratic regulations, undercutting local initiatives, and inhibiting "the autonomy of communities and neighborhoods" (p. 92). For instance, Lubove criticizes the Clinton administration because "zealot" federal regulators in the Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Justice challenged local banking

practices that discriminated against minorities. According to Lubove, HUD "instituted a police-state enforcement of the Fair Housing Act," and HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros "apparently skipped class when the First Amendment was discussed" (p. 92). Lubove compares "top-down paternalism" in the federal government's small business assistance program unfavorably to neighborhood-centered economic development strategies (p. 98). These and other gratuitous attacks on the "federal leviathan," the Clinton administration, and some social welfare historians for their alleged "new leftism" reveal more about Lubove's politics than they do about post-steel Pittsburgh.⁷ Moreover, it is clear even from Lubove's own material that federal legislation and federal funding in various forms made possible much of new downtown development and community action that he finds so praiseworthy.

Nevertheless, Lubove has written a substantial work of modern American urban history. The book is massively researched, with over 120 pages of notes documenting 250 pages of text. In many ways, this account of Pittsburgh in the post-steel era can serve as a model that might be applied to the study of other American cities that have experienced deindustrialization. In the late 1990s, when the U.S. has more stockbrokers than steelworkers, we need more such careful analyses of the process of urban and economic change.

In his 1989 essay "Pittsburgh and the Uses of Social Welfare History," Lubove noted that in contrast to studies of class, race, ethnicity, and gender, social welfare history was "a kind of salvage operation, propping up the wreckage produced by more important change agents." Most historians, he wrote, preferred "to deal with the forces that make history, not with the debris."⁸ In this book, Lubove takes on both subjects. He seeks to understand the larger forces that produced dramatic and transforming change in late twentieth-century Pittsburgh. But more importantly, and in much greater detail, he explores the urban "debris" left behind by deindustrialization. And he effectively outlines the agencies, organizations, programs, and strategies developed by Pittsburghers to clean up the debris, to remake the city, and to prepare its citizenry for

7. For instance, Lubove attacks historian Robert Fisher, whose book, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (1984), is characterized as "a latter-day (1980s) expression of New Left hallucination." Such judgmental comments might better have been confined to the notes. See Lubove, *Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: The Post-Steel Era*, 94.

8. Roy Lubove, "Pittsburgh and the Uses of Social Welfare History," in Samuel P. Hays, ed., *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 295-325, quotation on p. 295.

the post-industrial age. In doing so, he powerfully demonstrates that by taking matters into their own hands, by creating a tremendously varied network of community agencies and neighborhood organizations, the people of Pittsburgh were themselves the most effective agents of urban change at the end of the twentieth century.

Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission Scholars in Residence, 2001-2002

Lucia Curta, Western Michigan University; "The Nationality Rooms Program at the University of Pittsburgh: 'Imagined Communities' in Showcases;" in residence at Pennsylvania State Archives

Kathie Shirk Gonnick, Temple University; "Mapping Pennsbury Manor's Past and Future;" in residence at Pennsbury Manor (collaborative residency)

Gabriele Gottlieb, University of Pittsburgh; "A Solemn Warning and Caution to Every One': Capital Punishment in Eighteenth Century America;" in residence at Pennsylvania State Archives.

Kali N. Gross, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture & Ursinus College (Fall 2001); "Black Ranting: Lunacy, Feeble Mindedness, and Black Women in Late Nineteenth Century Pennsylvania Asylums;" in residence at Pennsylvania State Archives.

V. Funmi Kennedy, Millersville University; "Artisans at the Crossroads: African Americans and Pennsylvania Germans at Work;" in residence at Landis Valley Museum (collaborative residency)

Andrea Zlotucha Kozub, Binghamton University; "Analysis of French Azilum Faunal Remains;" in residence at The State Museum of Pennsylvania & French Azilum

Jennifer Lawrence, Temple University; "The Administration of a System of Isolation: Eastern State Penitentiary, 1829-1860;" in residence at Pennsylvania State Archives

Thomas P. Rich, Bucknell University; "Building Pennsylvania: A Technological History of the Commonwealth, Part 2;" in residence at Pennsylvania Lumber Museum, State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State Archives; other sites as time permits