

## **Patricia Burgess, Ruth Durack and Edward W. Hill**

### ***From Re-imagining the Rust Belt to "Whose downtown is it, anyway?": Distorting the Cleveland Development Model***

Cleveland in the late 1970s appeared to be falling apart, losing 30 percent of its total employment. Today it's called "comeback city" and has won five All American City Awards. It was featured as a place where corporate leadership saved a sick city.

Cleveland is now in stage two of re-imagining. *Civic Vision 2000* is the new physical plan presented to the city, but the process is much different than in previous plans. A small group has produced a collection of disconnected elements whose principal purpose is to attract temporary tourists rather than strengthen the city for its residents and the region.

The story of stage one of the Cleveland model consists of several stories: 1) the role of business elites; 2) public-private partnerships and the creation of a complex civic infrastructure; 3) regional economics; 4) a ruling oligarchy; and 5) physical development.

Overlaying these stories is a template of strategy, organization, and tactics that became the Cleveland model. The goals were to provide an economically viable rationale for Cleveland's downtown; to stabilize and expand the region's employment base, and to stabilize the middle-class base of Cleveland's neighborhoods. And there were three clearly defined strategies: solidify downtown as a place of employment, strengthen the real estate market, and create a visible symbol of the region's revitalization.

But things changed. The strategy shifted from one of having retail activities supported by private sector office employment to one of commercial activity supported by a growing visitor industry. The initial projects were: Playhouse Square, the Galleria, Terminal Tower, and the Inner Harbor. It was expanded to secure the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In the end these projects became "gorillas" with the strength to dominate the development agenda. These projects consumed incredible amounts of money, time and energy on the part of the Mayor, the corporate community, and development organizations.

The largest danger the gorilla projects present is that they may make downtown an opportunistic collection of architectural icons that are not connected by a fabric of buildings, shops, housing, open space, and street-level activities that promote a vibrant streetscape.

A new 1997 plan *Civic Vision 2000 and Beyond* is limited to downtown and its strategy is to create a number of destination activities that will attract and hold visitors.

*Civic Vision 2000 and Beyond* was released for public comment in May 1998. It calls for an indoor sports center, a retail village, two hotels, expanded marina slips, a passenger ferry terminal and a retail site. The plan for Euclid Ave. is to return it to its previous splendor, but with a more balanced mix of uses. Marketing underlies everything in *Civic Vision 2000 and Beyond*. The result is a consummate pastiche of knock-off marketing: a plan that has something to appeal to just about every segment of the tourist public, and very little of real value to Clevelanders. Except for the park over the convention center, the entire development is programmed for activity, suggesting that public enjoyment of the lakefront depends on commercial entertainment and that people will have no idea what to do without some kind of programmed stimulation. And there is a lack of any clear formal concepts or design principles in the organization of the waterfront district. And finally, the *Civic Vision 2000 and Beyond* is silent on implementation costs and issues of funding.

The flaw lies in its tactics -- the mistake in its implementation lies in the lack of consensus achieved before its public release and breaks the Cleveland development model.

But there was another marketing process underway -- the one to sell the plan to the people of Cleveland and the region through the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Articles hinted at wonderful things to come and articles since the plan's unveiling reprint several of its illustrations in full color with glowing text. But not all were favorable; some did criticize both its content and the process it created.

The work on the plan went largely unreported. Then came the unveiling with a front page story and lavish color photographs and a map labeled "A dream for development."

But the story is not over yet. It is not a done deal. Several individuals who head various non-profit planning-related groups have joined in drafting a "Public Realm" plan which makes specific suggestions to add more green spaces and public places to what has been proposed.

There is an irony in the current planning document. Its goal is correct -- an economically viable downtown. Its strategy is largely correct -- expanding the market for downtown land and buildings. Yet its tactics are flawed due to the breakdown of the original Cleveland development model and the over emphasis on transactions that has shaped the plan itself. The waterfront site planning is more fitting for a theme park than for a city. By focusing on the packaged experience of attractions rather than the development of an authentic urban fabric Cleveland is failing to capitalize on some of its most important assets.

This transformation of the Cleveland model poses the question: Is downtown to be a home for the city's residents, to be the heart of the region, or to be a lure for conventioners and visitors?

## Questions, Comments, Answers

Q: Who owns the Plain Dealer and what was their role?

A: The Newhouse Corporation, who is very powerful, but I'm not cynical about the newspaper. They didn't do anything that any other newspaper wouldn't have done. They focused on the upbeat part and they had Litt, a skilled architecture critic.

Q: What was the role of Cleveland's mayor?

A: Civic 2000 and beyond was done at the request of the mayor. There are a number of stories going around... The aquarium was the mayor's project and it fell through. The gorilla came to town (the Browns walked out of town) and the stadium became a had-to-do deal -- and that tanked the aquarium. Then it was reported that the mayor was talked into expanding the effort to putting together the next set of transactions. There's another separate discussion about whether it was set up so that the mayor had plausible deniability, if the thing blows up. The mayor is interested in transactions -- he's a deal guy.

Q: There's a real contrast between the two visions, but I don't get a sense of why. What happened between the first plan and the second plan that allowed there not to be a lot of citizen participation?

A: There was broad based selling of the vision to the elites in the first. There was consensus and agreement by everyone who had an interest in the downtown. On the second, this wasn't done. It wasn't even clear how much participation the 22 people had as opposed to a much smaller group. It is our notion that it was the transactions or the deals that became the focus, not the vision. And the public didn't know what was going on so no one asked to participate.

Q: Where is it going?

A: Last week, the planning commission met and is translating the visual images into a series of written policies. For example, one new policy says...develop at least four new attractions on the waterfront, including an aquarium, the NFL experience, retail, and transportation museum. It can't be more explicit than that. And given the piece of land there, it's not going to look much different. About half the policies were adopted on Friday and they ran out of time.

Q: Who is putting up the money?

A: That is a bit of a mystery now. None of the (previous) groups have been brought into it. The legislative delegation has not agreed here capital resources . They've said this is a vision, and don't worry about the funding. The Euclid project is funded mostly through tax abatement.

Q: Something is missing here that I'm not getting. You've criticized the process, but are there other explanations? Another could be they feel every harbor front in North America has one of these so Cleveland should too. If there had been public participation or a referendum, would the citizens of Cleveland voted for it? Probably yes. The important critique is how do we get the right plan. What would public participation have produced?

A: There's no evidence that this is the wrong critique. I suspect that public participation would have generated a different plan. It's clear that blocking off the waterfront isn't wanted. There are only 6,500 population downtown, but there are a lot of civic groups. They weren't brought in. No one checked off with these groups. The crime is that there was only one vision and no challenge. The 22 people are good people, but they were sold on the plan. Cleveland is the home of knock-off planning. And then it was confirmed when the design firm was hired.

Q: On the role of the press, my sense is that was passive, with little searching inquiry. Twelve clippings over 2 years struck me as being low coverage for such a major project.

A: It was very light coverage. There was nothing for 18 months. And Litt was presented as commentary, not news.

Q: I'm also interested in the alternative meaning of the word "gorilla" -- "guerrilla" -- and whether the alternative plan is a guerrilla plan in the sense of alternative values and ideals.

A: The Urban Design Center should have been involved but the guerrilla plan came out of 3 hours of 6 people sitting around a table and put together quickly. It's not a plan either -- it's a diagram of some alternative values in place for the waterfront. But it was embraced.

Q: How did the city sell itself to the outside world? And how much of reimagining happens by taking the good bits from other cities? How conscious was it?

A: The original strategy was to make Cleveland the destination of choice between Chicago and NYC for corporate headquarters. That was clearly stated and it failed. So there an attempt to find a new strategy. There are major tourist destinations in the region, but not downtown. They wanted to stay so they looked around at other cities to see what they had done. They went to Baltimore and thought they could do the same. But they need a firmer economic rationale on which to build the downtown than tourism.

Q: though the decision-makers might have been wrapped in the me-too-ism, I think that people are becoming more educated about these ubiquitous projects and how one-dimensional they are. I have faith in public participation as a transforming feature.. There are thoughtful people out there. What is your prediction if you got into an activist mode, would you find alliances?

A: Lots of them. The green plan is evidence of that. The speed has been difficult. They've pushed the plan because alternatives if a careful thoughtful review had been done, it wouldn't have come down in favor.

### **Langley Keyes, real-time rapporteur**

As someone who has spent time in Cleveland in the neighborhoods, not downtown, it's interesting to hear downtown's view of things. But I think the omission of the neighborhoods is a serious one, because Cleveland has one of the more extraordinary civic infrastructures in the country. The great thing about Cleveland is that they never leave -- they move to different neighborhoods and different jobs, and keep their skills.

Why did this occur? Other places would kill for a Plan 2000. In some ways you could say that people just weren't paying attention. Where was the planning department? Where was the mayor? Or you could say that because there is such a good civic infrastructure in Cleveland, means that it will work out. There are similarities to the Boston waterfront.

The two questions are why did this happen, and is there an opportunity now for people to save face. The thing you have to understand about Cleveland is the extraordinary infrastructure and when planning goes awry in Cleveland, of all places, then it raises major questions about other places. Unless in fact, it was just that people weren't paying attention. I can see this story as a success story of that civic infrastructure finally figuring out what was going on and then bringing their capacity to bear against it.