

BEYOND THE RUINS: THE MEANINGS OF DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds.
Foreword by Barry Bluestone
Cornell University Press, 2003

Marx’s famous dictum that “all that is solid melts into air” was intended to characterize the experience of capitalism at the apex of industrialization. Yet, as the authors of this collected volume demonstrate, his passage also aptly depicts the process of deindustrialization that began in the second half of the 20th century. As manufacturers moved abroad or to the South in search of lower production costs, thousands of Americans lost their jobs and faced a daunting future. The contributors to this book argue that the ordeal of these workers marked not simply a shift in employment but rather a “fundamental change in the social fabric on a par with industrialization itself.”

The nadir of deindustrialization came in the 1970s and 1980s, when a decline in production led many manufacturers in the United States to export or relocate their factories. This trend began to reverse after 1996 as production increased but, by then, the needs of industry had shifted from concrete goods like automobiles to information technology and biotechnology. As the social geographer David Harvey has pointed out, the forward march of productive capacity in the late 20th century was inherently contradictory: increased efficiency led to

decreased need for human workers. Unemployment and abandoned industrial structures were byproducts of the success of late 20th-century capitalism.

Beyond the Ruins deepens our understanding of this distressing and complex phenomenon. For instance, Tami Friedman’s chapter on the departure of the textile industry from Yonkers, New York argues that the process of deindustrialization began in the early- to mid-1950s, during the postwar economic boom. Bryant Simon reveals the role of racial desegregation in the decline of Atlantic City, as the inclusion of African-Americans challenged the perception of Atlantic City as a place of exclusion and middle-class leisure. Most memorably, John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon illuminate the loss of identity that accompanies deindustrialization, not just for individuals but also entire communities: “Deindustrialized communities are vulnerable to all kinds of loss — not just the loss of jobs or economic security but also the loss of identity, as outsiders interpret the meanings of deindustrialization to serve their own purposes. . . . In many cases, locals internalize the image of their community as a site of loss, failure, and corruption.”

The authors therefore demonstrate that deindustrialization is not only an economic problem but also a social and political phenomenon. By describing the plight of numerous communities across the United States, they point to some of the obstacles to redeveloping deindustrialized areas, especially the stigmatization of former manufacturing towns. As Barry Bluestone and others have elsewhere pointed out, these disadvantages often become “deal breakers” for potential business investors. The challenge is to transform these obstacles into strengths by finding creative ways of making the past an engine to a brighter economic future.

[Jeanne Haffner PhD is an urban scholar and a fellow at Harvard University. Her forthcoming book \(MIT Press\) studies the role of visual technologies in the evolution of the “new urbanism” in postwar France.](#)



SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS IN THE MILL CITY

Tuyet-Lan Pho, Jeffrey N. Gerson and Sylvia R. Cowan, eds.
University of Vermont Press, 2007

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants, but never more so than today: the foreign-born American population has risen from 5 to 13 percent since 1970. But this statistic cloaks an even larger reality. For most developed economies, population growth has stopped. The bad news for national budgets from Italy to Japan is that fewer workers pay into the system supporting more retirees. America has largely postponed its demographic crisis by attracting a young immigrant workforce, accounting for two-thirds, and soon all, of our population growth. Immigrant communities also invigorate cities, one of the greatest forces counteracting sprawl.

The 12 essays in this book portray the Southeast Asian immigrant community’s role in revitalizing Lowell, Massachusetts. After the fall of Saigon and the genocide of roughly one quarter of the Cambodian people, government and citizen groups cooperated to resettle 1.3 million refugees in the US by 1980 — 600 in Lowell. But most of Lowell’s foreign-born residents came in a vast secondary migration to fill good jobs in computer-assembly plants and to benefit from the critical mass of fellow expatriates. By 1990, Southeast Asian

immigrants numbered 25,000 of Lowell's 115,000 residents, including the world's third largest population of Cambodians after Phnom Penh and Long Beach.

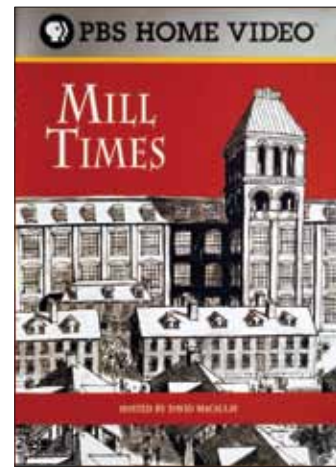
The book highlights the complex social networks thriving in Lowell's new soil. Informal rotating credit associations propel an enviable micro-venture capital system that remade Lowell's boarded-up storefronts into a bustling commercial streetscape. Lowell's "Destination City" campaign comes under fire for squandering opportunities to support the dynamism of local social, cultural, and religious life in favor of corporate giveaways.

Distinct national subcultures experienced differing degrees of violent displacement. Old conflicts transferred intact "from the Mekong to the Merrimack" materialize in new forms in the immigrant landscape of Lowell. The American-trained anti-communist Lao refugees are split from later Lao immigrants over which Lao flag to fly. The "upstairs" and "downstairs" monks of the Trairatanaram Temple are split over how best to reconstitute Cambodian Buddhism after the genocide.

But cultural immersion also reveals solutions. Though constituting only one in five Lowell residents, Southeast Asians account for almost half of high schoolers, a majority of dropouts, and most gang activity. In response, the Trairatanaram Temple launched Operation Middle Path to initiate at-risk youth as Buddhist monks. The lessons of Lowell's immigrant experience point to the potential of social capital mobilized through local informal relationships to resolve problems untouched by government programs.

With the cancellation of travel studios, architecture schools might consider offering a *local* travel studio. The physical infrastructure of new American cultural communities from Lowell to Lewiston, Maine is arguably a more critical landscape for relevant architectural engagement.

Robert Cowherd PhD, Assoc. AIA is associate professor of architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. He is the author of *Cultural Construction of Jakarta* (forthcoming), based on five years of work and research in Java and Bali.



MILL TIMES

By Unicorn Projects
VHS and DVD, 60 minutes
PBS Home Video, 2001

David Macaulay is a steady friend to architects, teaching future clients — and the current clients who rear them — to appreciate buildings from the inside out, and as artifacts of the social and economic systems that create them. Like an

Concerned with Glass Distortion?



Your Vision. **BUT** You Got This.

We can achieve your vision.



JE BERKOWITZ, LP
ARCHITECTURAL GLASS SINCE 1920

See us at
AIA at
Booth
4289

One Gateway Boulevard, P.O. Box 427, Pedricktown, NJ 08067 PHONE: (800) 257-7827 FAX: (856) 299-4344 www.jeberkowitz.com

anthropologist, he explains buildings not as simple aesthetic objects, but as the crystallized shells of society's ebb and flow.

Who better to tell the story of the hulking mills of New England and, through them, the story of their era? The author of *Cathedral*, as well as *City* and many other illustrated books, Macaulay narrates the PBS video *Mill Times*, a documentary interspersed with a Disney-inspired animated narrative. Focusing on America's first mill — the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island — it is derived loosely from Macaulay's book *Mill*, albeit more as a companion piece than a video incarnation.

The story unfolds engagingly, the good explained clearly and the bad gently handled for young viewers. It's a story of discovery, adventure, change, and the risks that accompany change; progress and material comfort are celebrated and counter-weighted by reminders of social and environmental consequences.

These labor-saving monsters must have inspired awe, and adult viewers may find themselves reflecting on labor

relations, social experimentation, and the surprisingly benign relationship of river and mill — a reminder that prosperity and environmental degradation are not inexorably linked.

Many New England mills were owned and run by local families, who were held accountable for employees' well-being by conscience and community. Success attracted investment in the form of the now-familiar corporate structure, and accountability thus diffused in a sea of faceless investors and executives. This anonymity seems to have made the deepest inhumanities of industrialization possible: responding to laborers' appeal to conscience, the corporately owned mill's executive sneers, "The investors prefer to remain *discreet*."

Corporate anonymity wasn't the sole social innovation of mill times — the unique experience of the Lowell Girls is possibly the best known of many boarding arrangements that flirted with social engineering and bring Charles Fourier's utopian "phalanx" communities to mind.

Architects, who wrestle buildings'

energy consumption daily, may be surprised at the relative harmony between New England's first mills and the natural environment. These giant mechanical assemblages disrupted rivers, but that's about it: no plumes of smoke, no sooty Dickensian worker housing. Those would come with steam engines and fossil fuels. A river mill was a clean thing. One has to wonder if it couldn't be put to some hydroelectric purpose.

Early complicity in the slave economy is dealt with gingerly; the nightmarish filth and abuse of the late-era mills' response to intensifying competition isn't addressed at all. Given the attention-span constraints of video, however, *Mill Times* presents a comprehensive overview of an era with an impact on our region that is deep and still unfolding.

Conor MacDonald is a writer in Boston and a member of the Common Boston Steering Committee.



We shape a better world

California Academy of Sciences
San Francisco, California.

www.arup.com

ARUP



© Craig Hanna

The Park at River's Edge - BSLA Design Honor Award Winner

SHADLEY ASSOCIATES

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS / SITE PLANNING CONSULTANTS

www.shadleyassociates.com

781-652-8809