

Compounded Interest

Walk downtown. Choose from an array of housing options, all of them affordable, many featuring fine historic details. Take advantage of local cultural opportunities. Enjoy the riverfront. Patronize shops and restaurants in a lively urban streetscape. Take classes at the local college. Escape on weekends to nearby recreational areas.

That might sound like an ad for a “New Urbanist” development (with the exception of the “affordable” bit), but in fact, it’s a description of life in many old industrial cities in Massachusetts. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that before there was a New Urbanism, there was an Old Urbanism that worked pretty well.

Today, thanks to the efforts of Boston-based think tank MassINC, more people are remembering. In 2007, MassINC teamed up with the Brookings Institution to produce a report on the “Gateway Cities” of Massachusetts — 11 former mill cities: Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester. The report demonstrated that these cities had been left behind while Boston enjoyed unprecedented economic growth, documenting some of the reasons but also some of the opportunities. Since then, a remarkable thing has happened: in less than two years, people have started to think of these cities not as problems, but as solutions. It’s the political equivalent of a score on *Antiques Roadshow* — treasures whose value was largely forgotten are suddenly getting attention.

This is a Massachusetts story, but it’s also a story with implications for post-industrial cities everywhere. The MassINC report came at a time when the state was focusing on smart-growth strategies while wrestling with the lack of affordable housing in the Greater Boston region. Meanwhile, these older communities, most within an hour or hour-and-a-half drive from downtown Boston, were languishing despite the availability of a work force, cheap space, housing, and infrastructure, as well as many public amenities. That confluence alone, with the benefit of enlightened public policy,

would be enough to give a boost to the Gateway communities. But current economic conditions might prove to be the final push that these cities need, because everyone, everywhere is looking for new ideas and new approaches to old problems.

Many of these cities are poised to take advantage of the new attention, with energetic political leadership and top-flight talent in administrative positions. They are working hard, aggressively wooing employers while simultaneously pursuing new development tools, such as form-based codes and Growth Districts. They understand that their mill buildings, once derelict reminders of former glory, are architectural wonders equal in area to Boston office towers, with enormous floorplates that are impossible in a major urban center. These are cities that are open to entrepreneurship and reinvention: “retooling” is not a metaphor in an industrial community; it’s a way of life.

Of course, these cities face challenges that vary from community to community, but that together have long tainted perceptions of their health and viability. Some have pockets of deep poverty, and attendant problems with crime and drugs. Some have struggling schools. Some have ossified governance structures that reward old-time political oligarchies and shut out newcomers, including new immigrant populations. The problems are daunting but can at least be ameliorated with economic growth.

This is a Massachusetts story, but it’s also a story with implications for post-industrial cities everywhere.

As we increasingly embrace sustainability as a public value, we cannot afford not to invest in these communities — and in the other smaller cities of Massachusetts that similarly have enormous infrastructure capacity and a rich, if sometimes neglected, building stock. The 19th-century textile and shoe industrialists generated vast family fortunes. We are only now realizing the extent of their vast public legacy, and the extent to which its value has compounded. How many growing industrial cities in other parts of the world will be able to say the same when their time has passed? ■

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA
Editor