



## BEYOND INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE: READING THE FUTURE OF POST-INDUSTRIAL CITIES

With a review of:

**Matthew E. KAHN and Mac McCOMAS, *Unlocking the Potential of Post-Industrial Cities*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2021, 148 pages, Daniel CAMPO, *Postindustrial DIY: Recovering American Rust Belt Icons*, Fordham University Press, New York 2024, 384 pages, and Silvia BARBERO and Axel TIMPE (eds), *Nature-Based Solutions for Urban Renewal in Post-Industrial Cities*, Routledge, New York/London 2025, 342 pages**

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Manchester, Dortmund, Łódź, Ostrava... Just a few examples of post-industrial cities that used to be powerhouses in the 19th and 20th century. Mining, steel, textiles, and other manufacturing sectors were the lifeblood of the economy then. Factories, smoke, and noise dominated the urban landscape, but people had jobs and were proud of what they achieved. Ironically, after their heydays most of these industrial hotspots faced economic decline, unemployment and restructuring. The lagging development of post-industrial cities is often related to the so-called 'lock-in' phenomenon: a place becomes stuck in outdated socio-economic structures, technologies or mindsets, making it difficult to adapt to new economic realities (Goodman, 1999; Hassink, 2010; Kozina *et al.*, 2021). How to break this lock-in?



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Meanwhile, we know that there are no universal recipes to re-invent post-industrial cities. All places have their own challenges demanding their own place-specific solutions. However, in general, it seems that diversifying the urban economy, investing in education, and new business development, as well as the redevelopment of run-down industrial sites are helpful. But what is effective and what is not? Which local stakeholders are best equipped to implement which measures? And are there any cities looking beyond the 'mainstream' restructuring strategies? With these questions in mind, we focus here on three recently published books on post-industrial cities: a work by two economists on the possible comeback of these cities, a treatise that argues for more citizen involvement in restructuring industrial-era sites, and a book on nature-based interventions in revitalising post-industrial cities.

## 2. CORRECTING COORDINATION FAILURE

Under the promising title *Unlocking the Potential of Post-Industrial Cities* (2021) Matthew E. Kahn and Mac McComas – two economists linked to the Johns Hopkins' 21st Century Cities Initiative – published a concise book in which they explore the challenges faced by Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. These six American cities used to be thriving manufacturing hotspots, but have experienced severe population loss and economic decline due to deindustrialisation. The disappearance of manufacturing jobs over the years has induced, among other things, high unemployment and poverty levels and an outdated housing stock and infrastructure. How to reverse this trend? In the authors' view the major problem is underinvestment and coordination failure in these cities, leading to a kind of catch-22 situation. The stakeholders in charge – think of business investors, real estate developers, banks, and local authorities – are waiting for each other: few are willing to be a first mover in making investments in run-down neighbourhoods and in the people living there. What is needed, Kahn and McComas stress again and again, is the development of cost-effective human capital-strategies, i.e., policies to help young people build their skills in safe, green, and attractive residential areas. In this way, a solid urban middle class may emerge that provides the basis for fruitful private and public investments that allow cities to find their way up. When such strategies are implemented in a context where local politicians are open to experimentation and innovation, while being honest about what works and what does not, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis might face a bright future. Or, as the authors put it optimistically: 'The historical obstacles that our six cities must overcome to enjoy economic success are immense but not insurmountable. The right set of investments in people and places will unlock the full potential of these post-industrial cities,' (p. 12).

This book is a refreshing contribution to the body of literature on old industrial cities. Despite the American context on which it is based, European readers will find much recognition in the topics that pass in review. In no more than 148 pages and 8 chapters, Kahn and McComas manage to provide a hopeful perspective for post-industrial cities. One of the merits of the book is that it is easy to read. Also for non-economists, the book is crystal clear, as it is free of jargon. Moreover, it contains a pleasant mix of theory, empirics and real-life examples. Furthermore, it is good that the authors pay attention to the connection between the economic life of cities and the social and physical environment in which it takes place. At the same time, the analysis remains (as is so often the case in economic studies) rather general, superficial, and predictable: if we let the market do its job, take a long-term perspective and encourage private and public parties to work together more productively, post-industrial cities will make a comeback in the end. However, this typical economic mantra ignores the particularities of time and place ensuring that what works in one city does not necessarily work in another. And even though the authors have a close eye for the connection between economic, social, and physical challenges in post-industrial cities, it is questionable whether the cities can simply rely on the laws of supply and demand. However, we completely agree with the authors that successful urban revitalisation requires the correction of coordination failure, as well as an open culture of experimentation and co-operation between government, businesses, and citizens.

### 3. FROM PROFITS AND POLITICS TO PASSION

*Postindustrial DIY: Recovering American Rust Belt Icons* (2024) is both a supplement and a critique to the book we discussed above. Its author, urbanist Daniel Campo, based at Morgan State University in Baltimore, argues that it is important to look beyond profit-driven investors and politically motivated authorities when searching for ways to restructure old industrial cities. In shaping urban futures, he stresses, there is one group that is often overlooked, namely engaged citizens. Unlike the market and government, they are guided by the driving force of passion. In his beautifully illustrated treatise, Campo tells the stories of these creative individuals – be it former workers, preservationists, artists or locals with heart for their community – and their attempts to reshape former industrial sites. Often, these enthusiasts lack formal training, institutional support, or financial resources – but that does not hinder them in renewing parts of their cities. For this grassroots do-it-yourself work Campo introduces the concept of ‘postindustrial DIY’ which ‘...aims to recover, preserve, interpret, reuse, and celebrate significant industrial-era places through locally directed and mostly hands-on building and landscape practices, cultural programming, and a range of smaller and itinerant activities,’

(p. 32). To illustrate the power of this approach, Campo presents detailed case studies of iconic projects, such as the story of a former automobile plant in Detroit, an iron foundry in Pittsburgh, and grain elevators and train stations in Buffalo. Postindustrial DIY in these places often manifests itself in temporary uses in the educational, artistic and cultural domain, aesthetic improvements, and other low-cost interventions. It is evident that the author has also a mission from his 'manifesto for postindustrial protagonists' at the end of the book.

If there is one thing that will stick with the reader, it is that passionate non-professionals can be crucial in renewing parts of post-industrial cities. Engaging citizens in the urban transformation process automatically brings in local memories, original insights, and creative ideas. The DIY practices of ordinary people offer a useful complement or even alternative to formal urban restructuring strategies conducted by business and government actors. Campo shows that grassroots urbanism tends to focus on improvisation, temporality, and open end-solutions. That is also the reason why he thinks it more realistic to strive for 'recovering' rather than 'reviving' post-industrial places. We can only concur with that, because in our perspective it is illusory to revitalise an entire smokestack city at once – the multiple challenges facing this type of territories are simply too complex for that. In this light, it is somewhat surprising that Campo suggests that no industrial-era place is 'too far gone' to be saved by everyday people. After all, some locations in a city are more suitable for recovery than others, while the business case of re-use is not always viable. In other words, the question is whether an approach of 'let a thousand flowers bloom' in old industrial cities always works. Sometimes it is inevitable to make clear choices and prioritise one recovery project in one part of the city over other initiatives. Having said this, the book offers a very useful contribution to the discourse on bottom-up strategies in urban studies, spatial planning, and cultural geography. Campo vividly demonstrates how ordinary people are co-shapers of the built environment. He points to the potential of informal, citizen-led practices to foster alternative modes of urban restructuring. Thus, Campo's *Postindustrial DIY* challenges readers to reconsider what the transformation of old industrial cities is all about and who should be involved in this process.

#### 4. PRODUCTIVE GREEN SOLUTIONS

Whereas in the previous book DIY is the magic word, the edited volume *Nature-Based Solutions for Urban Renewal in Post-Industrial Cities* (2025) is all about NBS. This abbreviation stands for Nature-Based Solutions, a concept that the authors, in line with the European Commission (2020), define as 'Solutions that are inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmen-

tal, social and economic benefits and help build resilience,' (p. 2). Telling examples of NBS are green infrastructure on former industrial land (e.g., parks, gardens, and aquaponics systems), community-based urban farms and green roofs or walls on public and private buildings. The book, which is edited by the Italian associate professor of systemic design Silvia Barbero and the German landscape architect Axel Timpe, starts with a short introduction and is followed by 17 chapters that address the question of what role NBS can play in supporting the transformation of post-industrial cities. All of the contributions to the book are the result of the Horizon 2020 project proGIreg ('productive Green Infrastructure for post-industrial urban regeneration'), in which a variety of nature-based solutions were tested with the aim to renew industrial-era territories. The NBS were implemented in Living Labs in Dortmund, Turin, Zagreb, and Ningbo (China), while policy experiences were also gained in Cluj-Napoca, Piraeus, Cascais (Portugal), and Zenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The common thread of the chapters is that green infrastructure can indeed enhance biodiversity, climate resilience, and the well-being of residents. However, to be effective, NBS requires both local leadership and models of participatory thinking and co-design. Ideally, urban policymakers and local communities work closely together in implementing the nature-based interventions.

Although published by the respectable publishing house Routledge, the book reads primarily like a research report. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. One of the advantages is its emphasis on concrete applications of NBS in urban practice, both in words and images. For example, the reader learns in detail about the success factors of urban gardening-projects, such as the one set-up in Turin's Mirafiori Sud district (chapter 9). Or one can learn about the experiences with a therapeutic garden, modular urban farm, and pedestrian/cycling path in the Living Lab Zagreb and what these interventions hold for the future (chapter 6). Thanks to this real-world focus the book has a close eye for the complexities of implementing NBS in post-industrial contexts, such as institutional fragmentation, land ownership issues, and the risk of socio-spatial inequalities. Another strong point is that the book, like many research reports, is set-up as an open access publication, which enables the results achieve a broad distribution in both academic and professional circles. But the research report-like character of the book also has downsides. The main drawback is that the editors Barbero and Timpe have made little effort to embed NBS in academic literature, relate the findings from the cases to earlier studies or reflect on the overall message of the book. The introductory chapter is brief and superficial, and at the end there is no concluding reflection from the lessons learned. The editors have even failed to include basic information on the institutional affiliations of the more than 50 (!) authors of the various chapters of the book. Despite these imperfections, *Nature-Based Solutions for Urban Renewal in Post-Industrial Cities* is a valuable work. For even if it had deserved better editing, the volume demonstrates that implementing nature-based solutions in restructuring old industrial cities is both a productive and future-oriented strategy.

## 5. THE NEED TO LOOK BEYOND INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

When it comes to old industrial cities, most of us initially think of industrial heritage, such as factories, infrastructure, and other physical remnants of the manufacturing sector. However, the three books we discussed in this review convincingly show how important it is to look beyond industrial heritage. Post-industrial cities deserve special attention from local authorities and other stakeholders, not only because of their physical appearance, but above all because of their idiosyncratic socio-economic challenges. And since the physical, social, and economic features of these cities are often closely interrelated, an integrated approach is necessary. For example, to bring new jobs to an old industrial city, it is not enough to look at it solely from an economic perspective – attention must also be paid to the physical and social state of the city's neighbourhoods and the opportunities for people to advance. From policy makers and other urban actors this requires alignment, coordination, and cooperation.

In practice such an integral governance approach is difficult, not only in post-industrial cities. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of 'silo thinking': departments, agencies, and other organisations tend to work in isolation from one another, which can lead to fragmented, inefficient or even contradictory policies. For the future of post-industrial cities 'correcting coordination failure,' as Kahn and McComas call it, should therefore be a top priority. And while doing that, policymakers should not forget to make use of citizens' intrinsic motivation to contribute to the recovery of parts of the industrial past, as Campo highlights. After all, to put it in the words of the American writer, historian and media personality Studs Terkel (1912–2008): 'Ordinary people are capable of doing extraordinary things.' It would be a shame if city authorities failed to make further use of this powerful local resource. Finally, Barbero and Timpe's edited volume shows that post-industrial cities have another resource that is often overlooked: abandoned and thus abundant space. Space that lends itself for a variety of green, nature-based solutions. Seen in this light, post-industrial cities have a more prosperous future than one might expect.

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