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Sustainable Development
The Can Company/Old Town Wichita
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The Can Company and Old Town Comparison

Like many cities in the United States, Baltimore, Maryland has made efforts to revitalize existing real estate properties in an effort to rejuvenate the city. The Can Company in Baltimore is one example of turning dilapidated and abandoned buildings into a successful economic and social development. The Can Company's original structures, 9.5 acres, were built in the 1890's and the company continued to grow and expand through the beginning of the 20th century (Benfield et al, 2001). The Can Company was on the rise and expanding for many years, until finally in the 1980's it was closed due to a merger with the National Can Company (thecancompany.com). As a result many jobs were lost and people were forced to seek other employment and even to relocate elsewhere. The buildings remained abandoned until the 1990's when efforts were put in motion to reconstruct the old buildings and uplift the area (Benfield et al, 2001).



Figure 1: The original Can Company's flagship building. (thecancompany.com)

Originally Michael Swerdlow, a developer from Florida, wanted to tear down the landmark buildings and had proposed 52 million dollars to construct two major high-rise apartment buildings in their place. These plans to demolish the structures were met with strong opposition from the Waterfront Coalition (a community action group), other community members, and city planners. After

heavy lobbying from the community, Swedlow's plans were rejected (Williams, 1999). Ultimately, only half of the original property were approved to be rebuilt. The remainder maintained their original structure and were updated (Benfield et al, 2001).

The first significant new business to be constructed on the Can Company lot was a 50,000-square-foot Safeway Supermarket. Although this was built from the ground up, it was the first step toward reclaiming the area as a productive land use and acted as a "catalyst" in bringing in new business (Williams, 1999). Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, the development company, then continued the renovation process purchasing the remaining 4.3 acres that contained the historical buildings.

The renovation of the Can Company led to the rebirth of an otherwise abandoned neighborhood. As a result, the Can Company property is now home to businesses, restaurants, shops, and can be considered a prosperous community. The renovated buildings provide an incentive for companies to move their headquarters into the Can Company property. Among the first tenants of the Can Company was Emerging Technology Center, Gr8, and DAP Products. Emerging Technology Center received just under \$4 million dollars in federal, local, and state aid and drew in numerous emerging technology companies to the area (Benfield et al, 2001). DAP Products went as far as relocating their business from Ohio to Baltimore taking full advantage of the new space and the available rebates. DAP Products employees were even able to receive tax credits from Maryland under the Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Act if they moved into specific nearby residential areas (Williams, 1999). The use of the old existing structures, as opposed to building new ones, has contributed to creating a more sustainable environment for Baltimore. As part of the plan, people now can have the option to live in close proximity to the workplace creating some conservation of fossil fuels, reduction in pollution of greenhouse gas, reduced traffic congestion and adding to a more vibrant community.

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Figure 2: Tenant Map of the Can Company campus. (thecancompany.com)

Like the Can Company, a similar renewal took place in Wichita, Kansas in the section of the city known as Old Town Wichita. Old abandoned buildings were renovated to create a new planned urban community. As with the Can Company, Old Town Wichita has many abandoned structures, specifically warehouses, which had not been used in many years. Instead of demolishing the property and starting anew, efforts were put in place to reconstruct the existing structures. Now, it is home to a vivacious town that offers a wide range of facilities such as entertainment, shopping, restaurants, businesses, as well as residential options (oldtownwichita.com).

Wichita saw the need to actively pursue a solution to the brownfield situation they were facing. Because Wichita is a city on the rise, they did not want these abandoned building and potentially polluted sites to retard or inhibit its growth as a city. As of 2003, 70% of the 60-building complex has been renovated through the cooperative help of the community as well as the help of the city (aia.org). The remaining 30% are in the process of being updated. "Design controls, lighting, and landscaping combine to make the district inviting and pedestrian friendly." (aia.org) This carefully thought out urban plan should sustain a productive environment in the future.

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Figure 3: Old Town Before Renovation (epa.gov)

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Figure 4: Old Town Post Renovation (epa.gov)

However, this urban renewal project uncovered serious problems. In 1990, Old Town was soon discovered to have polluted groundwater, making the area a biohazard. Due to polluted groundwater, bank loans were revoked, and the project was about to come to a halt (epa.gov). The project teetered on becoming a Superfund site. To keep the project in motion and to avoid becoming a Superfund site, the city of Wichita in collaboration with private companies took over the responsibility to clean the groundwater, and the project was put back on track. This is now known as the Gilbert & Mosley Project. The innovations they used resulted in Old Town being awarded the Ford Foundation's Innovations in State and Local Government Award from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government (Brown, 2003).

In 2006 Old Town Wichita won the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement, given by the EPA. This put Old Town Wichita on the map as being one of the leaders in smart growth and sustainable development. The award was well deserved because as a result of the project, Old Town Wichita has

prospered economically; it now boasts more than 900 additional jobs. These jobs have contributed to the sustainability of the city, and have also added to the \$40 million in revenue from the increased property values (epa.gov).

Wichita and Baltimore projects share many similarities. They both re-worked abandoned warehouses and created strong, thriving communities. They both did not initiate any obvious "green" design techniques, and are not LEED certified, but by keeping commerce, jobs, and people in the city limits, they both have actively reduced the amount and impact of suburban sprawl. Both sites provide easy access to public transportation, parks, and entertainment, which have created self-sufficient communities. Residents do not have to travel far to get needed goods or services. They also both overcame and thrived despite potentially deal-breaking obstacles. In Baltimore, the Can Factory originally was set to be demolished, and in Wichita, the ground water contamination was deemed unsafe.

Both structures were successful outcroppings of the industrial era. The businesses thrived during their heyday, only to become abandoned structures by the 1980's. Although they manufactured very different products, their closure resulted in a great loss to their respective cities. Now, over a century after being built, their contribution to their communities have been resurrected and they are now adding to the cities prosperity. They exemplify smart growth because they aid the economy, the environment, and use all the positive attributes of city life yielding strong communities. In addition, tax credits, and state financial assistance were provided in both communities (smartgrowth.org). They support sustainable growth in the inner of the city, as opposed to looking to the suburbs for new construction, creating more loosely knit communities and the continuation of suburban sprawl.

I believe both cases can be considered a success. The Can Company and Old Town adhere to the principles of smart growth by having renovated housing on or near the commercial structures, developing public green space and parks, creating a walkable community and accessible public transportation. They even created incentives to draw companies and employees to relocate to

the area, and perhaps most importantly provided new uses for existing structures (smartgrowth.org).

However, I have some reservations about the sustainability of the communities. Specifically, Old Town, having been on the brink of a Superfund site, it is questionable that polluted groundwater potable now, and will remain clean in the years to come. Unlike the Can Company, Old Town has residential building directly on the property; therefore there has been constant exposure to the groundwater, and possible pollution to the surrounding earth and air. That being said, having the government approve the cleanliness and even take it to the next level by awarding their efforts, provides a level of uneasy comfort to my suspicions. Since this town is still relatively new, the long-term effects will not be seen for many years. Although the Can Company does not have any outright health concerns, like Old Town, it does not mean it's exempt from risk. (Surprising, I could not find information regarding asbestos abatement, lead paint, mercury, or other contaminates on the site-a surprise for old building like these). There will always be a level of uncertainty when building on industrial sites. However, the efforts to contain sprawl and promote smart growth will hopefully outweigh any potential risk that might occur.

These two communities are examples for all cities to look at. Their re-use of property and their successes are examples of what otherwise discarded land and buildings can be turned into with the right mindset and environmentally sustainable outlook. Although ending suburban sprawl and all its waste will be an immense challenge, thanks to the combined efforts of communities, industries, and governments, steps in the right directions are beginning to occur.

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