

**“LIFE IS SHORT, PLANNING IS LONG”: THE CONTINUOUS  
REDEVELOPMENT AND ADAPTATION OF US-AMERICAN CITIES**

**A report on the fieldtrip to Chicago, Detroit and New York City  
by the Institute of Geography and Regional Research at the  
University of Vienna in March 2016**

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**1 Introduction**

One of the highlights of studying geography is undoubtedly the fieldtrip to a foreign country. It not only offers an opportunity to take students into a different geographical context, but hopefully will create curiosity, stimulate reflection and discussion and develop a certain research interest towards a concrete research question. For an urban geographer at the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna, the on-site comparison of iconic North-American cities with the Central-European urban context provides one of these rare occasions of gathering findings, collecting ‘aha’ moments and formulating new research questions. In the tradition of Elisabeth LICHTENBERGER’s transatlantic comparative research, 25 bachelor and masters students in geography joined the 12-day fieldtrip itinerary to Chicago, Detroit and New York City led by Yvonne FRANZ and Heinz FASSMANN.

From a European perspective, framed by the pampering benefits of a social welfare state, North-American cities seem to work quite simply, disposably and predictably. After decades of car-dependency, suburbanisation and urban sprawl processes – as well as indoctrinating the paradigm of a market-driven economy – US cities have to deal with an enormous complexity of urban

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challenges, ranging from desegregation policies to affordable housing, to post-carbon mobility, secure food provision and new forms of economies. Simply put, the underlying selection criteria for the fieldtrip was as follows:

- Chicago, the best planned city in the United States that has been pursuing a much stronger tradition of implementing and relying on a plan.
- Detroit, the epidemic showcase of large-scale urban decline, governed by weak policies and taken over by individual practices ranging from philanthropy to pure asset interest.
- New York City, the *laissez-faire*, liberal city that allows whatever the market wants to let happen.

According to the popular saying “if you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough”, we may argue that a simple explanation is the first attempt to understand complex urban settings. Our fieldtrip took us to three different cities that all incorporated similar topics of current urban challenges ranging from social to economic, ecological and political scales: declining affordability of housing and decreasing social housing options, increasing segregation, gentrification and disaffiliation in long-standing communities, unequal and insecure access to fresh and affordable food, car-dependency and underdeveloped means of public transport or non-motorised mobility, eroding labour market options and new forms of self-organised employment.

## **2 How to design socially mixed neighbourhoods?**

This question is largely linked to the housing market. Despite the American dream of homeownership, US-American cities have a long tradition of rental housing options, mainly in the social housing segment. However, public housing units are declining as a result of adaptation and renovation policies (see Chicago Housing Association or New York City Housing Association) or through demolition policies in order to get rid of highly segregated public housing projects, such as Cabrini Green or Lake Park Place in Chicago. As we learned in Chicago, current attempts by housing associations aim for socially mixed neighbourhoods, creating a mix within the building by combining public-funded accommodation with affordable and market-rate apartments. Or, as in East New York in Brooklyn, New York City, implementing inclusionary zoning with a mandatory share of affordable housing aligned with local median income benchmarks. Even in Detroit, new housing has been created in Downtown, such as the Jean Rivard Apartments, mostly catering to a new urban middle-class clientele.

However, those current policies are not without resistance, as we found out in Chicago while listening to a public housing tenant. She was neither convinced that an official waiting list for public housing has existed, nor that the right-to-return policy works as promised. In her opinion, the right-to-return option should be rather termed a “chance-to-return” option. During our stay in New York City, the planning department held a public hearing on the rezoning plan for East New York, including the mandatory affordable housing component. Although the attempts by the public actor aim for affordability, inclusion and creation of new affordable apartments, the community opposes the plans due to a fear of rising rents and gentrification processes in the long-run.

## **3 How to ensure access to healthy, fresh and affordable food?**

Coming from Austria, access to food might not occur to us as a pressing issue of living in cities. We would rather identify ourselves with the supposed trend of urban gardening, created as lifestyle

component by young urban hipsters. However, the term “food desert” became a much more obvious problem for certain areas in the United States. Not only declining cities like Detroit, but also global cities such as New York City run the risk of not being able to provide fresh and affordable food equally to all communities. The scope of fruit and vegetable provision in cities ranges from Christian charity such as Earthworks in Detroit to community gardens in predominately public housing neighbourhoods and farmer’s markets in New York City. All projects have in common questions of equality, empowerment and cohesiveness with regard to food security.

#### **4 How to enforce public transport and non-motorised means of transport in a car-dependent country?**

Peak oil became an accepted future challenge in the United States. However, it seems as if current practices to create more pedestrian and bike-friendly cities and better public transport connectivity are rather based on purely economic calculations. Each person that does not drive with a car into downtown creates less costs, traffic and consumption of space than a pedestrian or cyclist switching between different modes of transport. The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) focuses on behaviour change by prioritising public transport and bicycle mobility. The Complete Streets Programme scrutinises modal hierarchies by applying comprehensive place-making, including cultural programming, tactical urbanism, full-scale prototyping and implementation. Complementary to this, the Chicago Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMAP) aims for a community-based regional planning process focusing on regional transport systems, such as rail transport, and questions with relating to the first or last mile of delivery.

#### **5 How to overcome economic crises and spurring new dynamics in entrepreneurialism?**

The United States is well known for its entrepreneurial spirit and fragmented labour market. This can be partly seen as a result of the liberal market system. However, global forces such as the economic crises push the idea of entrepreneurialism in new directions. In Detroit, we learned about sharing practices, economic incubator spaces and crowdfunding techniques. Ponyride Ltd. is a prototype for the new creative class trying to economically redevelop Downtown Detroit. A former factory has been redeveloped and is providing micro spaces for workshops, small entrepreneurs – mostly from the design sector – and for knowledge sharing. The aim of an incubator is built on the idea of providing peer-to-peer knowledge on business development and supporting access to financial capital. The first step is often Kickstarter, an online funding platform for creative business ideas, followed by more advanced capital activities such as crowdinvestment, venture capital or private equity financing.

From a geographical point of view, the side effects of these entrepreneurial spaces are of interest: Compared to our last visit to Detroit in 2012 (see FRANZ 2012), the Downtown area is much more vibrant. This is not only a result of many new creative entrepreneurs opening up design studios, café bars or other co-sharing workspaces. Big players, such as Quicken Loans Inc. – a company that made a fortune with private homeowners during the housing bubble – apply their philanthropic mission by buying and renovating historical skyscrapers in Downtown Detroit and moving their headquarters and high-skilled employees to the former declined area. Right now, this practice seems to be a glimmer of hope for Detroit. In the long-run, the sell-off of an entire city needs to be seen critically.

## 6 Conclusion

The list of geographical topics, observed venues and new knowledge is almost endless. At this point, we have to emphasise that the questions and examples listed above are by no means complete – neither with regard to the fieldtrip programme, nor with regard to a comprehensive list of urban challenges. Nevertheless, the fieldtrip highlights mentioned in this report show how manifold the fields of research are in urban geography and how many questions remain still unanswered. The importance of transatlantic comparison and urban geography becomes obvious – both in university education as well as in research.

We would like to thank all the experts in the three cities who spent their precious time with us, provided valuable insight and knowledge and made the fieldtrip a ‘real experience’. Thanks to Charlie BARLOW and Michael CONZEN as well as Dean BOYER and his team from University of Chicago for excellent talks and tours as well as for the festive reception. Jane GROVER from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, David SEGLIN from the Chicago Department of Transportation and Matt SMITH from Crime Lab Chicago and their teams all provided in-depth insights from a planning practice perspective, concluded by an impressive tour through Chicago South with Lori BERKO from the Theaster Gates-led Department of Visual Arts and the College at University of Chicago.

In Detroit, we owe our thanks to Earthworks Community Gardens and Hantz Farms Inc. for the full-scale experience on urban farming and it diverging motivations and attempts. Without Noah MORRISON from Ponyride Inc. we would not have been able to dive into new forms of entrepreneurialism in Detroit and Lucas McGRail, building inspector for the City of Detroit, captured the full picture from Downtown to suburbia.

The grand finale of the fieldtrip in New York City was made possible by Joseph HEATHCOTT from The New School New York with his comprehensive knowledge and enthusiasm for Queens and its various neighbourhoods. Thanks to Hugo BARRECA, lawyer and design board member of Highline Park who gave a tour on the pros and cons of Highline Park in the West Village. Our housing experts Jerilyn PERINE and Sarah WATSON from the Citizen Housing and Planning Council framed the trajectories of housing in New York City. Thanks to Winston VAN ENGEL and his team from the Planning Department New York City who provided cutting-edge knowledge and on-site explanations on rezoning in East New York. The respected academic and longstanding colleague John MOLLENKOFF from the Graduate Center of City University on New York shared his knowledge with us and his experience of living in Park Slope. Without Mollina MILLIE from New York City Housing Authority we would not have been able to dive into various facets of public housing in New York. Thanks for a fascinating event with NYCHA board members. Last but not least, we would like to thank the Austrian general consulate Georg HEINDL for a memorable alumni reception at the Austrian embassy in the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

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Geographischen Gesellschaft](#)

Jahr/Year: 2016

Band/Volume: [158](#)

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Artikel/Article: "Life is short, planning is long": The continuous redevelopment and adaptation of US-american cities. A report on the fieldtrip to Chicago, Detroit and New York City by the Institute of Geography and regional research at the University of Vienna in March 2016 365-368