



RENEWABLE: Small industrial cities like Flint, Muncie, Youngstown, and others are often seen as throwaways, but despite their challenges, they “have a lot to work with,” argues Tumber in a new book published this fall by MIT Press.

Q&A

Bright Lights, Small Cities

Small industrial cities haven't fared well. But they could thrive in a green economy, argues journalist and historian Catherine Tumber '92 (PhD).

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

SMALL-TO-MIDSIZE INDUSTRIAL CITIES with illustrious pasts have more promise in the future than we've been led to believe, argues **Catherine Tumber** '92 (PhD) in a new book, *Small, Gritty, and Green: The Promise of America's Smaller Industrial Cities in a Low-Carbon World* (MIT Press, 2011).

Eclipsed by the strength of large cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago, small-to-midsize industrial cities such as Syracuse, Akron, and Muncie, Ind., rarely find themselves included in debates about what the city of the future might look like. But beginning in 2008, Tumber, a journalist, historian, and research affiliate at MIT's Community Innovators Lab, traveled to those and approximately 20 other mostly small industrial cities in the North-

east and Midwest, and found healthy, intergenerational sustainability movements attempting, with some notable successes, to retool their communities for a green, low-carbon future.

Tumber—who grew up near Syracuse, attended college amidst the several small industrial cities of western Massachusetts, and earned a doctorate in history at Rochester—is frank about her personal affection for modest-sized cities.

“They can be really interesting, idiosyncratic places to live for people who don't necessarily want to live in New York or Los Angeles. And they have a lot to work with,” she said in an interview in October.

What are some key assets of small-to-mid-size industrial cities in a low-carbon future?

For one, they generally sit among some of the richest farmland on earth. And in the

future that land will be essential to restoring local food systems, harvesting wind and solar energy, and producing biomass for alternative fuels.

In Janesville, Wis., there's a fight on between people who want to preserve some especially rich farmland that surrounds the city and those trying to develop that area for an eventual megaregional corridor stretching from Detroit through Chicago to Minneapolis–St Paul. These are two very different responses to climate change and globalization. Should cities grow even more concentrated into megaregions, or should these smaller cities retain not only their identities but their farmland and industrial infrastructure for productive use? Smaller industrial cities are also home to much of what is left of American manufacturing—in terms of both skills and industrial infrastructure. In Muncie—a place

with a long history of making automotive transmissions—they're transitioning to making gear boxes and other components for windmill turbines. They've attracted a couple of companies—unfortunately, not American ones—to the area because of the skills and infrastructure there. In addition, parts of Indiana are on a highly desirable wind shed. So they're manufacturing their product near their ultimate market, a practice that will likely grow more common as transportation fuel costs rise. Muncie is a great example of a city using both its natural resources as well as its manufacturing legacy to plan for a low-carbon economic future.

Why have small-to-midsize industrial cities confronted so much more difficulty than big cities in the first place?

You have to go back to the 1960s to get to the root of their trouble. That's when deindustrialization and outsourcing began in earnest. But federal disinvestment in cities and economic support for suburban development also played a large role and had consequences that were devastating for large cities, but catastrophic for smaller ones.

Urban freeways, for example, were constructed in cities of all sizes. But while the Cross Bronx Expressway destroyed specific neighborhoods in New York City, in a city the size of Rochester, the Inner Loop destroyed the entire urban fabric of the central city. The flight of retail to the suburbs also disproportionately harmed smaller cities. Large, dense cities could still sustain a significant retail presence, but smaller cities were hollowed out by the retail exodus and became much less appealing places to live over time. That said, they also have disproportionately more to gain from reversing these and other ill-fated decisions.

You're quite critical of some of the urban theorists and economists who've conceived of ways of revitalizing cities after the 1960s. Why?

They've made the metropolis the ideal urban form, when that had not always been the case. I lay much of the blame for that on Jane Jacobs—as much as I admire her—who framed the intellectual response to widespread urban decline, ignoring what she called “little cities and dull factory towns,” and arguing that urbanism thrives only in large and growing cities. She influenced the next two generations of urban theorists—

people like Richard Florida and Ed Glaeser—who, while they don't ignore smaller cities, advise them to do things like develop a creative class of artists, try to attract knowledge industries, and develop a tourist trade. These are not necessarily economic strategies that will work in smaller cities. As much as Scranton is a nice small city, it's probably never going to have a substantial tourist trade.

In the 1960s, there had been a debate between Jacobs and the social critic Lewis Mumford about different visions of urbanism. In the 1920s and 30s, Mumford argued against concentrating all of our wealth and cultural riches in large cities, and for valuing smaller cities as well, including the farmland and the ecological region in which they're set. Jacobs basically won the debate, which is why we don't really hear about Mumford's vision.

You write that a localist movement has existed “in fits and starts” since the 1970s. Are you optimistic about its future?

Definitely. So much has changed since the 1970s. First, the environmentalist movement has become more urban-centered. A lot of localist talk was cast in terms of the rural back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s. Second, the smart growth movement has emerged. It didn't really exist in the 1970s. And the smart growth movement tends to view cities as part of a larger economic and ecological region. And so when people talk about localism, they talk about it in a more expansive way. And then third and more recently, the local food and retail movement, inspired to some extent by Michael Pollan's work, has mounted a serious challenge to our petroleum-drenched industrial food system. All of this has broadened the appeal of localism since the 1970s.

Will that be enough to reverse the fortunes of small industrial cities?

My book is really about the promise of smaller industrial cities in a low-carbon future, and that future is not really yet upon us. There's little market incentive for the shift in thinking and political will that my book calls for. I wrote this book in the hopes that public officials, foundation leaders and an animated citizenry will take a longer view. Short of that, we can also impose cap-and-trade, fuel taxes, or things like that. But I don't think we have the political will for that. Better for these places to quietly prepare for what's likely to come. **R**

In the News

RICHARD KOVAR '76 IS NATIONAL FAMILY PHYSICIAN OF THE YEAR

The American Academy of Family Physicians has named **Richard Kovar '76** the Family Physician of the Year. The award, national in scope, is given out annually to just one physician. Kovar, a practicing family physician and medical director of the nonprofit Country Doctor Community Health Centers in Seattle, serves predominantly urban, low-income, uninsured patients. His medical interests range from pediatrics and adolescent medicine to geriatrics, treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS, and mental health and crosscultural health care.

SPORTS JOURNALIST RON THOMAS '71 EARNS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Ron Thomas '71 has received a Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Sports Journalism. The award, given out by the Northeastern University School of Journalism and its educational and consulting center, Sport in Society, recognizes journalists who examine sports in social and cultural context. In addition to reporting for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *USA Today*, *Chicago Daily News*, *BlackAmericaWeb.com*, and other outlets, Thomas is the author of *They Cleared the Lane: The NBA's Black Pioneers* (University of Nebraska, 2002) and was a researcher for the HBO documentary *Fields of Fire: Sports in the '60s* (1995).

CIVIL ENGINEER PRISCILLA NELSON '70 HONORED FOR RESEARCH

Priscilla Nelson '70, a professor in the department of civil and environmental engineering at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, has received the 2011 Henry L. Michel Award for Industry Advancement of Research from the American Society of Civil Engineers. Nelson, a leader in the design and construction industry, specializes in geological engineering and its application to underground construction. She served as provost at the institute from 2005 to 2008, and previously spent 11 years at the National Science Foundation where she served as senior adviser to the director, and in various other leadership roles.