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Review: Where We Want to Live: Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities

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Review: *Where We Want to Live: Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities*, by Ryan Gravel (2016). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. 256 pages. \$26.99 (hardcover).
Daniel Immergluck

The Atlanta (GA) Beltline is an emerging ring of parks, trails, and a proposed transit rail line intended to encircle the core of the city of Atlanta. The Beltline is an example of a recent spate of big urban projects—New York City's High Line is another example—that goes beyond simply rails-to-trails projects to constituting major urban redevelopment efforts. The Beltline has most likely been successful if judged only on whether it has accelerated real estate development and increased the city's tax base, especially in areas that were prime for increased gentrification. A much more contested question, however, is the degree to which it represents equitable development, especially whether it has benefitted modest-income residents who have lived in nearby areas for years.

Ryan Gravel's *Where We Want to Live: Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities*, while touching on issues of reclaiming abandoned infrastructure in older cities, is fundamentally a book about the origins of the Beltline. Gravel is one of its key designers and advocates, working early on with a key city councilperson to win city support. As might be expected, then, this book is not a place to find an objective analysis of the Beltline project. It is a call to action to think big and act boldly, to develop catalytic projects like the Beltline around aging urban infrastructure. To that end, the book works well.

The best parts of the book are the sections where Gravel recounts building a coalition supporting the Beltline, one committed to a greener, denser, and less car-dependent Atlanta. As Gravel himself suggests, the early grassroots advocacy efforts may have been the victim of their own success, for in a quintessentially Atlanta way, the early Friends of the Beltline morphed into the Atlanta Beltline Partnership, a well-heeled nonprofit closely linked to the city and effectively an arm of the development entity, Atlanta Beltline Inc., the city's agency overseeing the project.

While Gravel does a good job of extolling the potential benefits of the Beltline, including spurring property values and increasing physical activity among urban residents, he spends very little time on the challenges that it has faced or, more important, on responding to the significant criticisms that have been leveled against it. He continually refers to what he terms “naysayers” without identifying them or describing their concerns. Rather than using the book as a vehicle to address these criticisms, he largely ignores them.

The Beltline has been the subject of criticism on several fronts, but I have space to discuss only two. First, a report written in 2005 for the Atlanta Development Authority by a team of academics and transit professionals questioned whether transit along the Beltline (which has not been developed yet) is a wise use of subsidy (Ross, Meyer, Dobbins, Jackson, & Millar, 2015). In this report, they raise concerns about the lack of connection to employment centers

in Downtown, Midtown, and Buckhead, which are not directly served by the Beltline. They also look at land use patterns and longer-range plans for areas around the Beltline, finding these areas to be mostly residential with only community-level commercial, land development patterns not expected to generate a large number of trips. In short, the transit potential of the Beltline appears limited at best. Dobbins (2016) has resurrected some of these criticisms in an essay arguing that any new transit dollars should be directed to improving the city's existing mass transit system and not toward Beltline transit, which he views as a poor use of scarce transit dollars.

A second concern is the lack of substantial action on the issue of housing affordability and displacement. The Beltline has clearly helped spur an increase in property values and development, especially on the east side, but with these changes have come gentrification, rising rents, and higher property taxes for existing residents (Immergluck, 2009). The Beltline did include a provision for using a portion of the funding from the Beltline tax increment financing (TIF) district to fund affordable housing development. Unfortunately, the initial base for the TIF increment was set in 2005, at the peak of the housing bubble, and so it has produced few dollars for affordable housing. As of this writing, the Beltline has generated about 1,000 units of affordable housing since 2005, representing less than 20% of the goal life. Moreover, it is unclear whether many of these units actually exist yet, or whether they include units projected to be funded by a downpayment assistance program.

There is the question of the Beltline's definition of affordable housing. It is calculated with a relatively high income threshold so that some subsidized developments are able to satisfy the requirements by providing small, \$1,000-per-month studios, which are not cheap by Atlanta standards and not affordable to households with incomes lower than 50% of the area median income where the need is the greatest. Meanwhile, thousands of high-end luxury units have sprouted up near the Beltline, often with rents exceeding \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month, particularly on the east side, causing land values to spike, which has made the preservation of existing affordable housing extremely difficult.

The book does include a chapter on equity, which feels a bit like an addendum. There is almost no mention of housing affordability or displacement until this chapter, which is 195 pages into a 225-page book. Even here, there are few ideas about what could have been done differently to secure affordability and prevent displacement. Instead, it touts the Beltline's existing programs and policies, which have little to show for themselves.

To some, rather than utopian visions of denser, less car-dependent cities, projects like the Beltline have come to represent “environmental gentrification,” using the elite popularity of “sustainable development” to create new urban playgrounds for the affluent (Checker, 2011). Hopefully the Beltline can change course and move quickly to lay the foundation for truly equitable development in its next set of initiatives, especially as it advances on its southern and western arcs. Without putting antidisplacement efforts (like property tax circuit breakers for low-income homeowners) in place before redevelopment, the results are likely to be the same:

some nice parks and a rising property tax base, but also a housing market that could make it impossible for lower-income families to share in these benefits.

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