

Big City Problems: Private Equity Investment, Transnational Users, and Local Mobilization in the Small City

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High Point, North Carolina, once known as the “Home Furnishings Capital of the World” for its vast manufacturing complex, has suffered intense deindustrialization over the past 60 years. During this same time, however, High Point has competed with much more prominent cities to become the world’s most important furniture exposition node and a major design, fashion, and merchandising center. Exploiting its inexpensive real estate—what amounts to a planetary rent gap—and its furniture design heritage, city leaders have aggressively offered the furniture world unprecedented control over its downtown landscape for the twice-annual exposition. Over the past 35 years, however, there have also been growing efforts to combat the domination of the city by exchange value considerations privileged by outside real estate interests such as private equity firms Bain and Blackstone. This article documents, first, the loss of a resident-centered downtown to the pursuit of exchange values and, second, the mobilizations to reclaim resident-centered use values. As it does, it interrogates what the High Point case can teach us about the small city in the quickly transforming global context.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the integration of North Carolina’s cities into leading edge enterprises of the contemporary global economy, two regions dominate the conversation: Charlotte, a major global finance hub, and Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill, a research hub in biotechnology and digital communications. The small city of High Point, with a population of 111,000, sits directly between them in North Carolina’s Piedmont region.

Once known as the “Home Furnishings Capital of the World,” High Point’s gritty “mill town” status—as with many U.S. industrial towns—eventually became more of a liability than an asset. Unlike most deindustrialized small cities, however, High Point’s downtown has been a site of intensive capital investment over the previous 50 years, most recently by global private equity firms such as Bain and Blackstone. Today, this small city is integrated into a specialized circuit of global economic activity that both draws on its industrial past and represents a sharp departure from it. This new global identity has led city leaders, quite ambitiously, to declare High Point “North Carolina’s International City.”

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This investment has recycled High Point's downtown in striking fashion, as major exposition signature buildings have gobbled up real estate in the city center. The Natuzzi building, completed in 1999 and designed by renowned Italian architect Mario Bellini, exemplifies the city's new eclectic style. Its black metallic form is designed to resemble a cruise ship, down to its portholes and gangplank. Such a postmodern architectural spectacle in a small North Carolina mill town, along with a semiannual influx of 75,000 visitors from 110 nations, leads to some extravagant comparisons. "Look at the Bilbao," said designer and resident Raymond Waites, in reference to the wilting Spanish city that became an international sensation following the injection of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim museum. "Nobody had ever heard of Bilbao before; now it's on everybody's wish list to go there" (See McNeill 2009).

Of course, the city's architecture does not quite match the Gehry pedigree that marks Bilbao and the Piedmont may lack the historic charm of Spain's Basque country. Still, contemporary High Point, like Bilbao, is known around the world. Yet its renown is restricted to a smaller population of niche users. High Point's downtown is a node of specialized global commerce. It is home to the High Point Market (HPM), the largest furniture exposition in the world.¹ Twice each year, the HPM makes downtown High Point, still the middle of nowhere for most, the center of the universe for the world's furniture fashion industry.

"I defy you to find another city of this size anywhere in the world," said an HPM leader, "where [in] Milan and Paris and Cologne and London [you] say 'High Point' and people know what you're talking about." Most people in these cities, to be sure, will *not* "know what you're talking about." However, as with the larger global fashion industry that these European cities coordinate, High Point is instantly identifiable to a professional subculture of designers and tastemakers whose creative labor eventually filters down to living rooms. Indeed, the region around High Point claims the largest number of designers per capita in the United States (Florida 2012; Nichols 2013).

High Point's global (small) city status is decisively rooted in its industrial past in which nonunionized Southerners, often rural migrants, toiled in textile and furniture mills. Beginning in the 1970s (although not truly becoming a kitchen table conversation in High Point until the 1990s), waves of globalization washed these industries out of existence, leaving what Sharon Zukin (1991) calls "landscapes of devastation" in their wake. High Point subverted this pattern by rolling with the tide, somehow managing to replace the modernity of the factory with the postmodern, often campy spectacle of the HPM. The resulting downtown landscape has been called "impeccable" by architect and planner Andrés Duany. It evidences everything from the global kitsch of Chinese firm Lifesyle's replica of Shanghai's Forbidden City to the vernacular signification of the city's World's Largest Chest of Drawers—a "duck" in the terminology of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. (Venturi et al. 1977).

Local pastor and activist Elijah Lovejoy would often highlight the \$5 billion statewide impact of the Market, the hundreds of thousands of visits to and through downtown, and the 12 million square feet of HPM real estate downtown (Brun and Lester 2013). "So that's money, people, and real estate," he reasoned. "From a business model, that should be everything you need." However, Lovejoy explained, for the city's 111,000 residents—half of which are White, one-third Black, with Latinx and Asian residents each making up about half of the remaining population—the downtown hardly exists.

What remains for residents is a High Point of starkly different neighborhoods, from the East Side that was anchored on the city's segregated Black downtown to the sprawled, residential subdivision and lush, upscale office park landscape of North High Point that the city has developed since the 1980s. In Lovejoy's theory of local space, downtown is to the city as a living room is to the home: "It is the heart. It is the place people gather. It is the one area everyone calls their own regardless of how they feel about people on the other side of town." For all of its commercial success, by Lovejoy's account, High Point's downtown failed this test. Massive showrooms display ersatz living rooms, but the downtown was not utilized by residents (including residents in the furniture industry) for any of the social and civic purposes that constitute Lovejoy's "living room."

High Point's downtown is an alienated landscape in relation to its surrounding neighborhoods and the city's permanent population. The hotels and expo spaces that dominate High Point's downtown are a transitory and disembedded space, evidencing a sociocultural and economic disconnectedness that evokes both Frederic Jameson's (1991) Bonaventure Hotel and Sassen's (2019:89) global city downtown. "Our downtown belongs to the world," Lovejoy expressed.

Taking advantage of the city's cheap real estate compared to other furniture exposition cities, High Point leaders exploited the region's furniture design, production, and merchandising expertise—its "furniture DNA"—in turning over the city's downtown real estate to the world's furniture exhibition and merchandising circuits. The downtown they sculpted became what amounted to a furniture development zone or, in the words of a local real estate attorney, a "bastion of free market capitalism." Over the previous 60 years, a local growth machine has used High Point's zoning as—to quote Ada Louise Huxtable (1980)—"an instrument for maximizing real estate return" rather than making the "city a fit place to live."

The complete dedication of downtown real estate to the exposition has fostered a type of collaboration among product designers, showroom designers, and showroom developers that is unparalleled in High Point's rivals. This has enabled a degree of recycling, renovation, and reconstruction of the built environment in the 5 months between each HPM period that makes it distinct (Schlichtman 2009) (See Figure 1). "I've got to be a Market ahead," a veteran showroom designer said of the collaboration for the next HPM that begins during the current one. "We're talking about what we're going to do, how their pieces are going to be, how they are going to be put together, what kind of accessories I need, what kind of bedding."

"It is a major difference, there is no question about it," said a showroom owner who managed a centrally located downtown showroom for 5 years while serving a clientele of retailers from the Middle East and North Africa. Exhibitors' control over showrooms "differentiates this international market from other places," he continued, so that High Point is not like "an exhibition in Frankfurt or Milan" where there is "no feeling for it." "The way the display is more permanent in nature. You have your bedroom, you have your dining room—it *looks* like a dining room."

Of course, as Lovejoy's earlier comments illustrate, the privileging of the global demand for High Point real estate has had a substantial effect on the ground over the past six decades. "If somebody wants to come into your city and pay millions of dollars to develop a piece of property that's going to add tax value to your city budget, it takes a lot of courage to say 'no you can't do that, were going to keep that property for us,'" Lovejoy conceded.



FIG. 1. Mexican firm Taracea’s showroom in a former bank. Courtesy of Taracea. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

High Point’s connectedness to circuits of capital has created what one proponent of resident-centered downtown development, Aaron Clinard, called a “false market” for real estate in downtown High Point. Small businesses that want to enter the downtown—in his words—find they “can’t afford the dirt.” There is not much dirt left. The HPM’s showroom square footage has steadily grown, surpassing 1 million square feet in the 1960s, 2 million in the 1970s, 6 million in the 1980s, and 10 million in the 1990s to become the largest wholesale furniture exposition in the world with a square-footage equivalent to four Empire State Buildings.

Taking up the call by Lees et al. (2016:223) for “deeper gentrification research,” this article addresses the case of contemporary High Point related, first, to its startling integration into the global economy and, second, to the disintegration that this implies from the spaces of everyday life. Preceded by the literature review and methods sections, the two sections addressing these dimensions form the core of the article.

The first, “Turning the Downtown Over,” addresses the global forces that materialize in the space of this small city. City leaders have surrendered considerable local autonomy to the neoliberal logics of the market. In asserting itself as an unlikely command and control center for the world furniture market, High Point had to weather a number of challenges while attracting massive capital injections from major private equity players like Bain and Blackstone. This section outlines how “opportunities for profit from real estate are produced in place” and interrogates the “extent and agents behind speculative investment in [downtown High Point] real estate” (ibid). How did High Point leaders establish this small city as a global furniture exposition node?

The second, “Taking the Downtown Back,” addresses various acts of resistance as local activists attempt to reclaim their “living room.” It explores High Point resident’s recent efforts to “reinstate the use values (actual or potential) of the land, streets, buildings, homes, parks and centres that constitute an urban community” (Slater 2017:20). How have actors resisted High Point’s center city being, in Lovejoy’s words, “occupied by show-rooms?” How have such mobilizations learned over time?

CONTEXTUALIZING THE CASE IN THE LITERATURE

It was more than 13 years ago that Bell and Jayne (2006) suggested that urbanists routinely overlook small cities. Their warning came more than a decade after Lyons and Salmon (1995:99) had already noted how “the increased globalization of the world economy is . . . expanding the global control potential of some cities further down the hierarchy.” Even so, it remains common to argue that cities such as High Point cannot truly be a prominent global node—even in a very specialized circuit of the global economy.

After all, it is a “lower tier” city even in its own state and in a secondary region such as the U.S. South. Its global activities, it would seem, should “flow up” through “higher tier” cities that are more central in flows of information, capital, and people. It has been common to relegate a city like High Point to being a home for the so-called back office functions (e.g., bookkeeping and call centers) of neighboring higher-tier cities such as Charlotte or Atlanta (GaWC 2018; Knox 1997:26, Lloyd 2012:493). There is, in fact, a more conventional “back office” section of the city, mostly in North High Point, whose articulation to the global economy is mediated by these larger cities.

However, downtown High Point has achieved its position in the world furniture circuit through capturing the “purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction” that occur within the global circuits of furniture design, merchandising, exposition, and administration (Castells 1996:442). It is nodes like High Point where such flows “link up specific places” (ibid:443) and this is evident in the region’s remaining concentration of furniture-related companies, organizations, and functions that both Florida (2012) and Porter (1998) have denoted a furniture cluster.

This article, then, will resonate with the call of Brenner (2014:17) to exercise caution in interrogating a “city’s ‘relevance’ to the global economy.” Although considering a city’s “role as a basing point for transnational corporate activities” such as transnational corporate headquarters and advanced producer services firms has been the standard in global cities research, Brenner (ibid) noted that there is a much “broader range of possible global-local linkages” to consider. Lefebvre’s (2014) notion of urbanization as a “net of uneven mesh” across the planet is a constructive way to conceptualize a context that produces a place like High Point: a small city that manifests clearly identifiable urban characteristics—even many characteristics of a global node—and yet in other ways seems to hardly resemble a city at all.

High Point leaders did not capture these global flows by offering a homogenous, interchangeable nonplace, but rather through employing the city’s place character cultivated as the 20th century’s home furnishings manufacturing center (Paulsen 2004:243). Facing crippling deindustrialization, its leaders did not pursue typical small city strategies such as “plopping” a generic revenue generator (e.g., a casino) in the downtown after retail and office tenants departed (Molotch, Freudenburg and Paulsen 2000:818). Nor

did High Point create a residential, retail, and office enclave with “no historical connection . . . whatsoever” (Mele 2013:426) or theme the downtown with local history for the consumption of regional visitors (Engler 1994; Frenkel and Walton 2000; Gottdiener 1997; Paradis 2002). High Point’s tertiary sector furniture niche developed “not in spite” of its “economic past as . . . [an] industry centre[], but because of it.” (Sassen 2008:33, Sassen 2009).

Place mattered, and the region did as well. In the case of small, Southern High Point, as Lloyd (2012:484) would not be surprised to find, we see the “leading edge of crucial new developments in political economy, including neoliberalism and globalization” (ibid). The impact of globalization in the U.S. South and the way that it juxtaposes marginality and centrality shares some similarities to the influx of global capital into the Global South. “The timing of Southern entry into the wider economy, shedding its quasi-colonial status,” Lloyd explains (ibid), “left it as more or less virgin territory, its regional economy free to develop according to the logic of neoliberal, global capitalism.”

To Brenner’s warning then, we might add Merrifield’s (2014:4) call that urbanists dispense with the strict binaries of “global North and global South,” “developed and underdeveloped worlds,” “urban and rural,” and “city and suburb.” We will increasingly need to draw from several different threads of literature and consider lessons from a diverse array of settings. What we see occurring globally, in this view, are different manifestations of the urban, different manifestations of centrality and marginality, rather than simply a presence or absence.

Eric Clark’s (2005) framework for understanding gentrification is extremely (and perhaps surprisingly) useful in integrating these various strands of research. To Clark (2005:263), gentrification is “a process involving a change in the population of land users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital.” This minimal definition supports my understanding of gentrification as a larger—even global—context. It helps to illuminate gentrification’s enveloping structural characteristics that constrain actors to particular outcomes regardless of their motive. Such a context can exist any place where “de-”s (e.g., decentralization, defunding, deterioration, etc.) have lowered the costs of the capital re-investment necessary to transform it into a landscape for more affluent users (Schlichtman et al. 2017:89).

As we consider the agency of High Point actors on the ground, it is helpful to grasp this larger context that is highly structured by macro- and meso-level factors before localized specific actors even test its malleability. Moreover, maintaining a grasp of this larger context helps us to consider how many of the same mechanisms that facilitate more mundane cases of residential gentrification can also produce “mutant” variations such as downtown High Point (e.g., here, there is no residential infrastructure and no permanent retail infrastructure). I have structured the following literature review with what Clark identifies as three factors that cause gentrification.

COMMODIFICATION OF SPACE: THE GROWTH MACHINE AND EXCHANGE VALUE

Clark’s first factor that causes gentrification is a commodification of space within which land use is determined by the “operation of land markets in capitalist space economies”

(Clark 2005:266). To use terminology employed by Logan and Molotch (1987), Marx et al. (1981), Simmel (1971), and many others, this transformation of human environments into a more-or-less indistinguishable goods privileges exchange value (the worth of a place in the economic market) over use value (the benefit that is experienced in utilizing a place). Of course, the new environment also has use value, but it is one privileged by the pursuit of exchange value.

One could argue that the governance of High Point has been dominated by various configurations of a growth machine for one century, but the growth machine idea is especially important in understanding the past six decades. In the now classic words of Logan and Molotch, I define a growth machine as a mode of governance to “increase aggregate rents and trap related wealth for those in the right position to benefit” (Logan and Molotch 1987:292). This arrangement “puts localities in chronic competition with one another in ways that harm the vast majority of their citizens” and normalizes growth goals as a mundane part of civic life (Molotch 1999:249).

Of course, “growth machines work best when a lot of local stocks have . . . qualities of commodification” (ibid 251). Growth leaders, as the theory explains, recognize and mobilize for this. Absent such leverage, such as in cases when desirable, prime land is “government owned or subject to strong controls,” stakeholders may no longer feel the context is malleable enough; the return on their political investment is just no longer worth it (ibid).

POLARIZATION OF POWER: THE PLANETARY RENT GAP AND THE CITY USER

Eric Clark’s second factor for gentrification is a polarization of power relations. This polarization enables some stakeholders to raise and suppress the value of places based on their economic, political, and social power. We will examine both land owners as well as land users in this section.

Neil Smith (1996:65) explained that real estate purchasers seek to obtain properties at a price that minimizes the chance of their investment being unprofitable. These are often areas with a large *rent gap*, which is the disparity between the potential value of property and the actual value under the present land use. As we will see, High Point leaders implemented their downtown furniture strategy very early in the area’s decentralization and devaluing. The result was that the downtown never actually developed a *local* rent gap.

Yet downtown High Point property values were extremely low from the vantage point of larger furniture firms with showrooms in more prominent cities and, later, by the valuations of global private equity. High Point’s is not a localized rent gap, then, but a planetary rent gap. The exploitation of this gap by outside interests in a small city illuminates the ways that local places have become, in Slater’s (2017:132) words, “woven into causal linkages with processes at much wider spatial scales” (Vradis 2013).

The inflow of capital to exploit this gap contributes to what Sassen (2002:22) terms the “internationalized sector:” an area of a local economy that is of intense interest to buyers and sellers around the world and is therefore very distinct from other, more local sectors within the same city. The result is that future local investors and land uses are excluded from participation in the real estate market due to the presence “of a transnational class with considerably higher purchasing power” (Lees et al. 2016:64). These stakeholders

increase “the potential ground rent to a point that existing local demand [is] not allowed an opportunity for profit” (ibid).

Loretta Lees et al. (2016:62) have observed that in “the appropriation of the rent gap,” the state creates “the economic, legal, and administrative framework” for the exploitation of the gap while investors, who are increasingly “mobile and transnational,” are in “search of new spaces of profit.” What results, as Edward Soja (2006:184) noted of world cities, is “an erosion of local control over the planning process,” as “powerful exogenous demands . . . penetrate deeply into local decision-making.”

By the end of the 20th century, the contemporary climate of global finance and private equity’s new role in infusing capital that had in the past been orchestrated by national and state governments “amplified the role of interest rent-seeking global financial capitalists” in local places (Farmer and Poulos 2019:5–6). The result, explain Farmer and Poulos, is two-fold: “local rentiers jump scale upwards to form alliances with national and international financial institutions, and finance capitalists use a downward scalar strategy to shape local state and governance” (ibid). The growth machine idea links these various scales of stakeholders and shows how finance capital can be “an active, local player in shaping and institutionalising growth and place-based exchange strategies” (ibid).

Property investors are not the only powerful interests relevant to this case, however. The users for which they are manipulating space are another important factor. Eric Clark’s employment of the term “users” in his definition of gentrification highlights the idea that the populations that utilize urban spaces can be directly or indirectly related to those who actually own or reside in these spaces. Guido Martinotti (1996:5) defines a specific category called “city users,” which is a population that comes to a city to “use its private and public services.” This “swelling population . . . has increasing effects on the structure of cities and actually uses them in a rather uncontrolled way” because it has little reason to be conscious of the negative side effects of such use (ibid).

Lees et al. (2016:87) note, in fact, that such users need not be conscious of their actions in order to “deploy their class power to transform neighborhoods” within the process of gentrification. Yet while “competition or conflict of the users with the inhabitants” may not be readily apparent, Martinotti (1996:7) explained, city users “heavily affect” the landscapes they utilize. The resulting landscape is, over time, not so much the “product of national economies, but a segmental unit of a larger entity” in the global economy (Martinotti 1996:8). For these users, then, High Point is part of the “transterritorial terrain of centrality with regard to a specific complex of industries and activities:” the furniture world (Sassen 1995:71). For them, downtown High Point’s terrain of centrality is the network of other furniture exposition and design locations. In fact, downtown High Point is utterly indecipherable without this context.

VISION OVER SIGHT: THE DISPLACEMENT OF “EVERYDAY LIFE SPACE”

The final factor facilitating gentrification, according to Clark, is the domination of “vision” over “sight” that is characteristic of the “vagrant sovereign” (Clark 2005:266). The vagrant sovereign’s vision over sight is an idea that Clark borrows from cultural critic Wendell Berry. It implies the “impulsive roamings” of investors whose “dreams and visions” require the disembedding and displacing of present uses and users for their realization (ibid).

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the HPM began its ascent, urban visions for regeneration often entailed the promotion of events and conventions (Eisinger 2000; Smith 2012). High Point's big city competitors such as Dallas and Atlanta were employing a "tourist bubble" approach that featured fortified leisure areas and superblock convention centers (Hannigan 1998; Judd 1999). In seeking to attract visitors, they privileged perceptions of safety and ease of navigability, strategically separating the visitor experience from the unpredictability of interaction with residents beyond those present to play a role in a stage set created by the convention and visitor industry (Goffman 1973:22). Although High Point leaders "celebrate[ed] market-based solutions to urban economic development," to use Mele's (2013:424) words, there were limits to the degree they could actually create the usual "self-contained, insular enclaves" that privileged city users. After all, HPM consisted of hundreds of property owners co-participating in a single event.

Fortuitously for High Point, however, visitors would tire of disconnected outsider-centered districts. They amounted to what Sharon Zukin (1982:190) called a "parody of the unique" and Herbert Muschamp (1995) called "sanitized razzmatazz." Neighborhood leaders, too, bristled at the idea that the bubble's "festival marketplace" restaurants, shops, and tchotchkes were "authentic" to their city. Experiences that celebrated "gritty" local vernacular and authenticity, including explorations of gentrifying artist and bohemian neighborhoods as well as ethnic enclaves, appeared on official tourist maps (Grazian 2003; Lloyd 2002; Pérez 2004). Research on small cities has examined how they capitalized upon this turn with their historic and walkable downtowns to attract visitors and residents, often from the surrounding region (Buraydi 2001; Paradis 2002; Robertson 1999).

High Point's leaders had long drawn upon such assets, but to a much different end. High Point cultivated the type of dense, walkable, mixed-use, and vibrant common space celebrated by thinkers such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and, later, Andrés Duany (Duany et al. 2000). It was set aside for a distinct middle and upper class, just as critical urban scholars might suspect. Yet this was not a gentrification landscape to create a home space for local creatives, but rather a new urbanist home space dedicated to distant users.

Over the past 35 years, High Point witnessed a growing critique of this arrangement by residents who are not "just complaining about the loss of historical essence, but about the reduction of their everyday life's space to the instrumental logic" of capital investment (Castells 1996:426; Friedmann and Goetz 1982:325–26). This is, at its heart, a "right to the city" question (Lefebvre et al. 1996). Therefore, this resistance is best understood as an "exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization" (Harvey 2005:1–2).

METHODS

This article, in which I hope to provide a broad overview of this case, is an overview of a larger ethnographic project that has spanned two decades (Schlichtman Forthcoming). I lived in High Point from 2002 to 2004, visited a portion of each summer from 2010 to 2012, and conducted field observations and took photographs during HPMs over the past 5 years. I have formally interviewed just over 100 residents. Throughout this project, I have used multiple methods to achieve different ends. To access residents' sentiment concerning the downtown, I employed methods such as go-along interviews and photo elicitation interviews (Harper 1998; Kusenbach 2003; Lynch 1960). To interrogate the

nature of the downtown's transformation, I recorded the land uses from 1963 to 2003 utilizing a data set developed from Polk city directories (Schlichtman and Patch 2008). To access the public dialogue surrounding the downtown transformation, I conducted archival research and executed a 40-year content analysis of the city's daily newspaper, the *High Point Enterprise*. Finally, to document the downtown's aesthetic transformation, I created a photographic catalog of the downtown built environment's exteriors and coded it with a research partner (Hwang and Sampson 2014; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). My immersive field observation included working in various HPM and city-related jobs and participating in citizen committees. These methods yielded transcripts, field notes, archival artifacts, newspaper articles, photographs, and video that I draw upon here—not always to address the original research questions that necessitated these methods but to overview this case.

TURNING THE DOWNTOWN OVER

FROM LOCAL GROWTH MACHINE TO GLOBAL PRIVATE EQUITY

In the 1970s, we can discern clear traces of the real estate practices that would help to define the next thirty years. Downtown landowner and former exhibition center manager J.J. Cox outlined these practices. Cox began urging HPM exhibitors to “take long-term leases” of downtown spaces so that they could “amortize the costs” of their showrooms on their books (Hawkins 1972). Moreover, he argued, they would “get known for their location” as they “invest[ed] in their spaces so that the areas are fixed to suit their needs” (ibid). Their pursuit of their self-interest, on the aggregate, would help the downtown “look[] better” (ibid). In sum, Cox stated that showroom use “represents the best current use for otherwise vacant buildings” (ibid).

The rationale that Cox outlined and the city's subsequent acceptance of it would precipitate a new commodification of downtown real estate that incentivized efforts to manage politics and sculpt land use laws. While “state authority and political party arrangements are crucial” in a nimble growth machine, as we will see, “another category of conditions is even more fundamental: the degree that land and buildings are allowed to operate as commodities” (Jessop et al. 1999; Molotch 1999:250–51). Property owners worked to manipulate property to its “highest and best use” by market criteria in an environment of “any growth is good growth” (Institute 2010). Small resident-centered businesses felt this revaluation: they routinely complained that the city council kept them uninformed regarding HPM-centered downtown plans at the very time they were “supposed to be fighting shopping centers” (Johnson 1978).

In the 1980s, High Point began converting factories and warehouses to furniture display, copying a rival exposition in San Francisco. By this time, explains Zukin (1982:64), living in old factories was so normal that a *New York Times* “home furnishings reporter considered a twenty foot ceiling in the living room matter of factly, as one of several common design problems.” Factory lofts soon became the preferred canvas for “experimenting with an avant-garde mise en scène or décor” (Zukin 1982:2) and this global trend became evident in the HPM (See Figure 2).

In 1998, when Chicago's Merchandise Market Properties International (MMPI) led by Chris G. Kennedy, the son of the Senator Bobby Kennedy, entered the High Point real



FIG. 2. Canadian firm Bermex showrooms in former hosiery mill. Courtesy of J.J. Schlichtman. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

estate market, it marked a new era of exogenous influence on the downtown. MMPI had itself just been acquired by behemoth Vornado Realty Trust. In two transactions during 1998, MMPI/Vornado acquired three major buildings and four smaller ones, including the HPM's signature loft conversion (Wire 1998).

The entry of Vornado Realty Trust, with total assets of just under 10 billion dollars, made it apparent just how relatively local the HPM had been. Three local iconic buildings were now Vornado's "holdings." Like MMPI's other holdings, they would now be valued in New York and Chicago offices by formulas and metrics disconnected from the High Point fabric.

The break with the past was palpable. "They lived here, they had their plant here, they invested in the community, their workers were here," the owner of a realty firm explained of the old generation of local showroom operators who either were manufacturers themselves or had very strong ties with them. "What the Kennedy's own now, that was local people . . . I mean, to somebody buying a building down here now—somebody from San Francisco or Chicago or whatever—it's really a dollars and cents thing. It's an investment no different than if they were buying a building in Phoenix or New York."

SIGNATURE ARCHITECTURE

The HPM's total downtown square footage grew at an astounding rate at the turn of the century, expanding by 2 million square feet in 2000 and 2001 alone. The city's architectural stature was also growing. The founder of Natuzzi leather, Italian Pasquale Natuzzi, commissioned Mario Bellini to complete a new showroom and U.S. headquarters. The Milanese Bellini is a consummate designer, with 25 works in the permanent design collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and architectural designs in cities such as Milan, Tokyo, Melbourne, Frankfurt, and Paris. "High Point has entered into the world's dialogue on design," noted a local architectural historian, with Bellini's "only American work" (Briggs 2007).

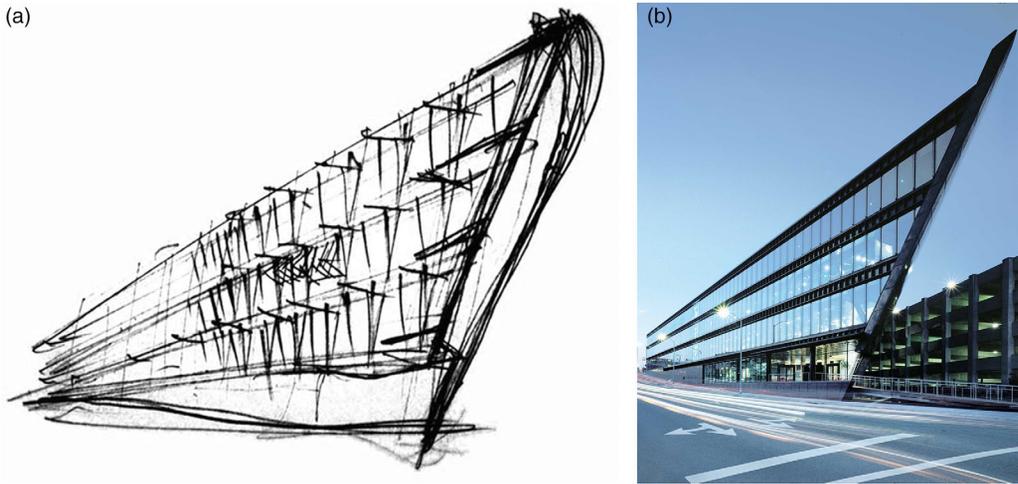


FIG. 3. (a and b) Bellini rendering and completed Natuzzi building, Courtesy of Mario Bellini Architects. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Natuzzi and other projects of this era would challenge the local growth machine's understanding of showroom buildings as sparingly built cash cows. The president of Natuzzi USA explicitly articulated this challenge, stating "this project will be a significant one" and adding that "it's not going to be a 'how fast can you put it up and how cheap can you build it' showroom building" (Holeman 1995).

"I think it's very important. I'm a crusader for design," said prominent High Point designer Raymond Waites of projects such as Natuzzi. "I'm a crusader that architecture can be a draw." (See Figure 3a and b). The year after Industrie Natuzzi's ribbon cutting, Italian manufacturers Delma Arredo and Rossetto leased the city's former courthouse from fellow Italian manufacturer Gabrielle Natale. Natale—as Industrie Natuzzi the year before—had moved to its own freestanding building, one of the city's former hosiery mills. Like Natuzzi, the free-standing Natale building housed both the firm's showroom and its North American headquarters. For the first time, the firm could showcase their "collections in their entirety" in a building that "offers the space to do exactly that in the diameter of an average dining room, bedroom, or living room" (Craver 2000).

Lifestyle Furniture founder William Hsieh made a strikingly international statement with his new building, a stylized replica of the Forbidden City. He had the building's fragile components shipped from China by the exclusive licensee of Forbidden City reproductions. Hsieh viewed the building as a mark of Asian ascension to the forefront of the world furniture industry. It was erected next to High Point City Hall in 2004 with the firm stating that "the company's Chinese heritage is something we should boast about and talk about" (HFN 2004).

LAS VEGAS AS THE NEW FURNITURE CAPITAL?

In 2000, there were rumbles among High Point's furniture leaders that East Coast investors announced plans to construct a complex dedicated solely to furniture exhibition

in Las Vegas. The complex was ultimately named the World Market Center (WMC). Resonant with the signature architecture era in High Point, the WMC leadership charged architect Jon Jerde with creating “a design that will become recognizable internationally,” be “an icon . . . as a lasting container for showcasing all facets of the industry,” and establish an “architectural language” for “an evolving internationally recognizable collage” (WMC 2008). Las Vegas’ mob-lawyer-turned-mayor Oscar Goodman stated “If I lived in High Point, North Carolina, I’d either be committing suicide as I stand here right now, or I’d be looking for a ticket to come out here to Las Vegas. I’d be worrying about the new furniture capital of the world: Las Vegas” (Editorial Staff 2004).

On the eve of the Spring 2005 HPM, World Market Center leaders announced plans to eventually expand the project to 12 million square feet—the same area as High Point. The major logistical advantage of High Point had been its malleability to manufacturers’ display needs. Large manufacturers wanted to have a stable show space that they could be innovating from exposition to exposition. Some wanted to open their showroom by appointment when it was necessary during the year. Manufacturers have constructed showrooms in High Point that fit both needs, but these two functions were randomly scattered throughout the downtown and their organization was loose and piecemeal.

The first phase of the Las Vegas Market Center internalized these High Point innovations: of the 10 floors that were fully accessible to manufacturers the entire year, the bottom two were also accessible to the manufacturers’ clients year-round, while the top eight floors were open to the manufacturers’ clients only for the Las Vegas furniture expositions. Such an efficient integration of both uses had “never been done on this scale before” (Newman 2005).

To the surprise of many, 1 year after the World Market Center opening, High Point furniture showroom real estate values were holding steady. “You can’t fill those eight [planned] buildings with what it costs to build them,” Kennedy argued at the time (Miller 2006). Las Vegas was anywhere from two to 10 times as expensive as High Point for exhibitors, depending on the specific comparison. “That doesn’t seem like a good deal, does it?” asked Kennedy. As it turned out, exhibitors that owned their High Point buildings held on to them. Others that leased space from local building owners renewed their relatively inexpensive leases in High Point while they also tried out Las Vegas. The World Market Center complex was never fully built out. “[Our] buildings are paid for,” said the owner of a multi-tenant building in High Point.

One “fallacy of Las Vegas,” said a former furniture professional and showroom owner, was that “it doesn’t make sense to build a building for [the smaller upstart companies] that can go bankrupt in three Markets.” Many echoed this statement. “Most High Point companies, particularly the creative ones, are smaller and it’s hard for them to afford those big expenses,” echoed Raymond Waites. In other words, there are very few “anchor tenants” in the furniture industry. The upstarts that innovate the industry have a much more volatile existence (See Figure 4).

High Point’s built environment offered places—from hallways to abandoned gas stations—where these more high-risk, high-reward companies can find space. A publisher selling magazine ads shared the institutionalization of this scrappy mindset in her philosophy toward advertising clients. “We would always say that little guy who is getting an eighth of a page in the back of the book today is going to be your full page advertiser in a year,” she said. “Because that’s how it works. I mean, you know, you hit it right—you’ve got the right product—you could blow up and own a building, you know, three years from now.”



FIG. 4. Gas station turned showroom. Courtesy of J.J. Schlichtman. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

PRIVATE EQUITY, WAVE TWO

In 2005, Chicago-based private equity firm Walton Street Capital purchased five downtown High Point properties including the exposition center Showplace and the downtown's white office building, which it planned to convert to showroom use. However, the financial collapse hit both Las Vegas and High Point in the ensuing years. Bank of America ultimately placed these High Point properties into receivership in 2009.

Vornado Realty Trust—MMPI's umbrella company—had also felt the pain of the great recession. Investors viewed the “exiting of the mart business” as necessary for Vornado's portfolio (Sadovi 2012). With its shares falling in value, a Wall Street analyst explained, “people want to see Vornado simplify” (*ibid*). In March of 2010, the private equity firm gave their High Point buildings back to the special servicer overseeing the company's securitized mortgage in lieu of a foreclosure on their buildings (*ibid*). High Point's holdings were “a small investment for them, and they just decided ‘this is no longer important for us,’” said the director of the High Point Market Authority at the time.

Seizing on the flux in High Point's core building stock and the struggles of the Las Vegas Market, in May of 2011, a newly formed firm called International Market Centers (IMC) announced a 1 billion dollar purchase of both the High Point and Las Vegas markets. With the purchase, IMC owned the World Market Center complex in Las Vegas and would transition it into what amounts to a secondary exposition. However, IMC's

High Point purchase was inherently different. It did not control a convention center, but a downtown.

IMC was majority owned by funds managed by Bain Capital Partners (with total assets of over \$60 billion) and a subsidiary of investment funds that were managed by Oaktree Capital Management (with approximately \$80 billion dollars in assets). Related Companies was also a partner in the deal. Bain's managing director commented that "this significant and strategic investment creates the world's greatest marketing stage for the home furnishings industry" (IMC 2011). A small city's center was in the hands of private equity firms.

"I'm envious," a High Point city councilperson quipped sarcastically. "Excellent short-term visionaries," he added, seeming to resonate with Clark's and Berry's ideas of the vagrant sovereign's "vision over sight" (Green 2014). "Of course," he added, "it is well known that I am stuck in the 20th century. I'm hung up thinking more about the long-term effects to a country, a culture and a people, a municipal tax base, cities—sovereignty."

"Let's not capitulate to this takeover attempt," declared a local- and state-level civic leader (Phillips 2011). An financial entrepreneur, showroom property developer, and former U.S. ambassador under George W. Bush, he broke with his own economic philosophies to implore the citizens to "purchase and . . . manage the Market" and in so doing control their own destiny (*ibid.*). It was a call to a municipal socialism of sorts—and by a Republican.

TAKING THE DOWNTOWN BACK

In unimpeded growth machine, as Molotch states, "the master motivation is near-term development, not employment, fiscal health, or sustainable economies" (Molotch 1999:261). As other cities throughout the state and region began overseeing strategic investments in their downtowns, some High Pointers began to reinterpret the consequences of their city's growth strategy. What had seemed like a rational use for otherwise vacant storefronts had evolved into showroom uses pushing out resident-centered alternatives. "Realtors don't bother to even take people downtown anymore because they say you're wasting your time," said politician Jay Wagner. In the remainder of this section, I outline seven attempts to regain a resident-centered footprint in the downtown.

THE EMINENT DOMAIN STRATEGY (c. 1986)

Judy Mendenhall, High Point's first woman mayor, was a tenacious supporter of the notion of a diversified downtown that maintained resident-centered functions. In late 1986, the mayor confronted downtown property owners with her notion that the saturation of the city center with HPM showrooms and warehoused properties waiting for a lucrative HPM leases was detrimental to the social fabric of the city. She threatened the owners of 44 targeted properties with the possibility of eminent domain, inherently expressing that such uses were not in the public good.

This marked the first time that furniture and real estate interests found they had to justify their arrangement in the city to a high-ranking official. The attorney for one property investor stated that "the best benefit to the people of High Point is to protect the

furniture industry” (Reis 1986). He noted “the buildings’ value to the furniture industry increases their worth” and increases the city’s tax revenues. “I don’t understand fooling with that,” said a property owner across the street, adding that “anything that hurts the exhibitors hurts High Point” (ibid).

Such a “we feeling” was often articulated by downtown stakeholders (Logan and Molotch 1987:62). It furthered the idea that the HPM is “us” and made exchange value a community affair. As noted by Cox and Mair, it promised residents “the vicarious hope of living in a major league or world class city” (Cox and Mair 1988:319). Mendenhall’s 1980s efforts failed and have all but disappeared from the city’s collective memory.

THE CHARRETTE STRATEGY (c. 1994)

Residents had come to know a very large center-city block occupied by a Sears store as the “Magic Block.” The land earned its name in the early 1960s when the city assembled it by acquiring 33 properties under federal and state urban renewal policy. When the assembly of land failed to prompt investment (a common occurrence throughout the nation as noted in Frieden and Sagalyn 1989:43), the city sold the land to High Point University in 1964. Decades later, some High Pointers quip how dozens of small businesses were “magically” wiped out for nothing.

In 1994, the Sears store was vacating to move into a new mall and High Point University was planning to sell to grow its endowment. Mendenhall, who was then the Chamber of Commerce president, argued against the property being “just showroom space” (Gels 1994). Mayor Becky Smothers, taking what seemed to be a proactive step, arranged a National Endowment for the Arts Mayors’ Institute for City Design charrette with six well-known urban planning practitioners and academics from throughout the South.

Although Smothers stated that she would not disclose her specific preference for the property, she noted that she was “fiercely protective of the Market” (Gels 1994). “Highest and greatest use would have been for showroom,” the owner of a realty firm stated in retrospect, but he added that questioning this norm by holding a charrette “was a million percent correct.” Citing one of the resident-centered plans developed from the charrette, he stated that it “was probably the last chance to save downtown as a retail center.”

A local real estate attorney and civic leader felt somewhat gullible looking back on this time, recalling how those assembled—including himself—felt they could “have an idea that changes High Point’s destiny.” Looking back, however, he has “wized enough” to know that the city never had the will to serve as the “connective tissue between idea and action.” In contrast to Mendenhall’s effort, the city never suggested that it would use any tools—in this case rezoning—that would interfere with the tenets of highest and best use. Everyone knew that the university planned to sell to the highest bidder and only the machinations of government or massive public pressure could have stopped that.

The implicit idea behind the charrette and other similar efforts was that an idea would emerge that would somehow be both resident-centered and also privilege exchange values. By this point in the downtown’s trajectory, this was an impossibility. Without the “backbone” to “gain control by zoning it,” the charrette was merely a show, the attorney concluded. “We were kibitzers.”



FIG. 5. The Showplace exposition center (background) was ultimately built on the Magic Block. Courtesy of J.J. Schlichtman. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In this period, there was also a newly emerging variable: the city, state, and federal governments were investing in road and utility infrastructure development in the greenfield of North High Point. The real estate market was structured in such a way that resident-centered uses in the furniture district were now in competition with greenfield prices. At the charrette, urban planning scholar David Crane called these the city's "two warring forces" and observed how this dynamic created the lack of a place for residents to gather (Blount 1994; Gels 1994). During this era, said civic leader Aaron Clinard, the city council became "married to their theory of economic development being out there in North High Point."

If HPM showroom investment had not been present in downtown High Point, the valorization of greenfield might have eventually produced a downtown rent gap great enough to incentivize an inflow of local or regional capital investment back to the downtown. This was occurring in other city centers in North Carolina. Instead, as noted earlier, HPM showroom investors captured the entirety of this gap as it emerged, driving rents upward. Throughout the 1990s, High Point leaders continued to view averting such a "death" of the downtown property market as a resounding victory (See Figure 5).

THE AIR RIGHTS STRATEGY (c. 2002)

When I met Aaron Clinard in 2002, he was the leader of the city's advisory Downtown Improvement Committee. Clinard had reasoned—in the words of Zukin (1991:143)—that the downtown was "materially and symbolically regarded as the province of business elites," not only by the city and furniture industry, but by most High Pointers. Therefore, he did not intend to confront showroom development directly. Instead, his goal was to

create “new real estate that might be considered off-limits to furniture showrooms” for resident-centered purposes “such as retail, restaurants, entertainment, housing and public space” (Walker Collaborative 2007:33).

Clinard’s idea was to develop air rights in the downtown over the city’s below-grade railroad tracks. He imagined a pedestrian plaza over the covered tracks that bisected Main Street, flanked on either side by resident-centered uses. Determined to execute his plan, he led several contingents of city leaders to visit other cities’ railway air rights projects in 2003.

In the end, the plan to “cover the tracks,” as it was known locally, would fail. Covering the tracks was cost prohibitive itself (\$69 to \$100 million) but the city also had to find an investor who perceived profit potential in retail and housing within a geography in which showrooms were the sole lucrative investment (Walker Collaborative 2007:33). Of course, in order for such funding to be allocated to this project, there had to be a political and social will to provide resources and assurances at multiple levels of government (e.g., rent subsidies, interest-free loans, public ownership, etc.). Leaders would have to view High Point’s economically productive, renovated, and occupied downtown as a problem in need of intervention; they did not.

THE REGULATION STRATEGY (c. 2008)

Walker Collaborative, the firm that drafted the city’s 2008 master plan (hereafter the Walker Plan), called for a public–private partnership to carry it out. The Walker Plan hinged upon regulation of the HPM, which it described as unhealthily dominating the downtown. The first and most pressing battle for this new organization, which was formed as The City Project, was to oversee the approval of what came to be known as the “Market overlay district” (hereafter: MOD). The Walker Plan acknowledged the wisdom in Clinard’s campaign to create new land but suggested that the city utilize a more traditional (and bolder) power of government—zoning—to regulate the land uses of the downtown.

The Walker Plan proposed to create a boundary outside of which “new showrooms would be prohibited in the future . . . to avoid this area becoming a single-use area that lacks around-the-clock vitality” (Walker Collaborative 2007:4). The city’s planning director Lee Burnette confirmed that “an analysis of land rents . . . showed that clearly people were holding out for the potential of a Market showroom.” This warehousing of properties created what he called “an edge of uncertainty” in places where landowners were willing to wait indefinitely, without any improvement of their property, for the showroom footprint to expand. There were buildings in this edge of uncertainty that residents felt were extremely promising for resident-centered uses, a fact that had surfaced repeatedly in my own research.

After many months of tedious negotiations and public meetings, the final MOD plan came up for a vote. During the deliberation, one councilperson suggested the city “abolish the whole overlay and let the market [lowercase “m”] dictate where showrooms are.” “I think the market [lowercase “m”] will decide where the Market needs to be,” Mayor Becky Smothers agreed. These statements reverberated through decades of High Point history, at least as far back as Mendenhall’s effort. There was a unanimous vote against the MOD.

“The people who were able to mobilize effectively—the people who filled the room,” said Elijah Lovejoy, “were furniture showroom owners, furniture showroom representatives, furniture showroom lawyers.” “The room was basically filled with . . . a lot of out-of-town interests,” he concluded. The sentiment of a stakeholder from New York encapsulated the whole battle for Elijah Lovejoy. “His criticism for why this plan should not be passed,” said Lovejoy, “was ‘if you pass this plan, High Point is going to lose its reputation and advantage for being a business-friendly place. The one advantage you have is that people don’t have to worry about all of the baggage and restrictions when they come to High Point.’”

“It’s the rare moment that you get to have an outside perspective on your own city, your own culture . . .,” Lovejoy said of the MOD proceedings. “It’s sad,” he continued, “because it’s a nice way of saying ‘we want to do whatever we want—to take advantage of whatever we want to take advantage of—without your interference.’ And it just means there’s nobody strong enough to resist that.”

After the defeat, the HPM Authority president, who was not supportive of the MOD, shared his ultimate vision for the HPM’s future with me. “You know, *ideally*,” he began, “there would be more bars and restaurants open in the area so that it would have a natural flow for entertainment. Probably more urban dwellers, so that you had people actually living in and around the area.” “But most importantly,” he continued, “while Market is going on, you’ve got that hustle and bustle on top of it.”

This marked the first time I had known a major HPM leader to articulate a strong, systemic synergy between HPM use and resident use. “That’s what people—it becomes a pain in the butt, but it’s what they like because it creates buzz,” he said. He felt that this buzz would be an ideal environment for the contemporary HPM, actually drawing from his own experience as a first wave gentrifier in Chicago’s South Loop. High Point’s artificially isolated downtown, forged in the exclusionary tourist bubble era of the 1970s through the 1990s, was less than ideal for users who had become accustomed to the world’s gentrified landscapes and were looking for what he described as a “natural flow,” a “hustle and bustle.”

However, the HPM Authority had neither the resources nor the power to pursue such a goal. Moreover, there was little urgency or will to support it given that HPM leaders had developed an expertise in the choreography required to make the downtown come to life each HPM with temporary amenities and a massive temporary transportation system (Schlichtman 2009). Akin to the visioning of the 1994 charrette, the president was simply stating that he saw merit in the idea, not that he planned to (or even could) use the Authority’s capital to promote it. Again, only the machinations of government or massive public pressure could begin to change a downtown isolation that the city’s entire governance structure had evolved to protect.

THE SUBSTITUTE DOWNTOWN STRATEGY (c. 2010)

Due to the furniture industry’s dominance of downtown High Point, the Walker plan stated, “a ‘de facto’ downtown has evolved along North Main Street” (Walker Collaborative 2007:53). With the defeat of the MOD, Aaron Clinard made a decisive departure from his previous efforts to reclaim the downtown and turned his attention to the north. “One of the reasons that I am still involved in this,” Clinard said, “is because I think we

now have the plan to be able to create—for lack of a better term—a substitute downtown. I don't think we are ever going to be able to reclaim what we call the traditional downtown."

Clinard and City Project director Wendy Fuscoe went on to explain their plans for the substitute downtown that they now called Uptowne. This area included many structures that were more than 80 years old. With a critical mass of small businesses, dozens of restaurants, a historic preservation district, and the city's best hotel, it was High Point's only landscape that could—in the words of one local theater leader—"do what other cities . . . are really doing well in their original downtowns."

As we discussed the Uptowne idea in his office, Aaron Clinard and I got into a side conversation about how it could eventually benefit the HPM with amenities if Uptowne investment "creeps towards the traditional downtown" one mile south. Wendy Fuscoe broke into our conversation. "*This* area is what we are focused on being the downtown area. We are not thinking about that ever being the downtown," Fuscoe implored. "So all these efforts to streetscape are to make it pedestrian-friendly, walkable, urban—and the Market is secondary to that. This effort is for the 100,000 people who live in High Point," she stated decisively.

There was a very different feeling in High Point in relation to privileging the HPM. It was a sense that, although MOD was not the solution, finding a solution was imperative. "It was almost a transition from 'it can never happen in High Point' to now, an expectation that 'it can happen and it will happen,'" Fuscoe said of the shift. "Some younger people are going to start running for city council," added a High Point resident who was an administrator at a local community college as we walked downtown, speaking of people like Elijah Lovejoy and Jay Wagner. "So you can't be one-dimensional." However, neither Wagner nor Lovejoy viewed Uptowne as a legitimate replacement for the downtown.

THE TACTICAL URBANISM STRATEGY (c. 2013)

High Point's growing consciousness of its need for a "living room" was powerful enough for the City Project to raise the \$410,000 dollars necessary to bring Duany and his team to town to create another master plan. He quickly learned that sprawling High Point had violated just about all of his tenets of sustainable community development (Duany et al. 2000). Yet in its dense and walkable downtown full of well-designed and occupied storefronts, it already had one of Duany's usual prescriptions for such ills. "I've never been to a place where the store fronts are in hibernation—which is to say they're paying leases, but they're not available for our revitalization," Duany said.

"You need to have huge capacity buildings," he added, "but then actually they don't really die so that we can rehabilitate them." High Point was successfully dead—this was one of Elijah Lovejoy's core ideas. The "spikes" of economic activity in downtown High Point, Duany continued, make "life incredibly difficult." They "are terrible for commerce. The only thing they're good for—absolutely uniquely—is your tax base."

Duany backed the creation of Uptowne, a place he saw as serving "the older folk, who also need their restaurants, their walkability." In the downtown, he called for the development of a green in the Showplace exposition center parking lot by moving all of the HPM-based parking spaces to the perimeter of the existing parking lot, thereby opening

the center. Duany pointed out that the green would be excellent for a farmers' market because it would have free parking on all four sides where trucks could be backed up to vendor displays. While the Duany Plan called this a "multipurpose public green," it could not be public. Duany was using "public green" in M. Christine Boyer's (1992:190) sense: as a design term, a look that connotes meaning. The "green" was owned by IMC.

Similarly, the remainder of Duany's downtown plans would "rely on private parking lots" owned by furniture interests "that must be returned for Market week" (Duany-Plater-Zyberk 2013:71). This free market plan was in stark contrast to the Walker Plan's aggressive MOD proposal that articulated the HPM's "domination." It also contrasted with Duany et al.'s (2000:166) previous advocacy for bold, strategic use of community-minded regulation and incentives.

"We can build nothing," Duany reiterated of downtown High Point. To make downtown High Point "sufficiently cool" without any traditional permanent construction, Duany would call for the use of temporary shipping container structures assembled upon parking lots. Downtown High Point's parking lots would be sub-leased using "creative lease structures" overseen by the city. High Point residents would utilize the shipping containers on these parking lots for what Duany identified as guerilla or tactical urbanism: temporary, cheap, small, grassroots projects intended to make a place more livable. In time, with success, the property values for resident-centered uses would rival property values for HPM-centered uses so that "people can properly come in and build buildings."

The Duany Plan, echoing the Walker Plan and many local voices, identified a downtown stretch of storefronts with a "Main Street USA" aesthetic (Boyer 1992:190) that seemed ideal for resident use. There are "really good shops" on the south side of the street, Duany said, but "almost all of them are committed to furniture." Duany then called attention to the parking lots on the north side that were facing these storefronts. For these parking lots, Duany proposed shipping containers that would be subleased by the city and then offered to "cafes and so forth." Such a hip, shipping-container-centric north side of the street, his market-based rationale explicated, would then make the more conventional south side of the street more conducive for resident-centered uses (See Figure 6).

Some High Point leaders had pitched incentives for the storefronts on the south side of the street to help make their rents affordable to resident-centered uses. This, proponents believed, would eventually interest developers in building on the parking lots on the north side. Duany was adamantly against the idea that the government must "subsidize everybody to do everything" and espoused the *opposite* idea: to bring up the value of the brick-and-mortar spaces by making the area popular through the shipping container spaces on the parking lots.

Another project, "The Pit," was intended to help "in the repositioning of the cultural reputation of a dead area" (Duany-Plater-Zyberk 2013:71). Duany felt that an edgy place was needed in High Point—not as "an end in itself but a means of positioning downtown High Point in the minds of the young." The Pit would be a symbol intended to lure a first wave of gentrifying creatives. The proposed area, the interior of a central downtown block, was "currently derelict, with a parking garage, ramps, steps, and an entry way at both sides" (ibid). The plan stated that the area offered "every indication of being a superb location for this type of activity" (ibid). The Duany Plan suggested that it be fitted with "fencing, lighting, speakers, movable furniture (such as cleaned up old tractor tires, pickle buckets, and spools), first rate wall art, food trucks, and clever



FIG. 6. Temporary retail in shipping containers. Courtesy of Duany-Plater-Zyberk. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

programming” (ibid). He wanted High Point to be a place that offered high returns for millennials with little to lose, as his other plans made clear (Schlichtman Forthcoming). The “derelict” state of the site appealed to the “first wave” of “risk oblivious” gentrifiers, Duany explained, such as those found in SoHo in the 1970s and “on the Left Bank of Paris in the 1870s” (ibid).

Duany’s plan for a downtown basketball arena and civic space constructed entirely out of shipping containers utilized the same land use strategy. In this case, the shipping containers were to be used as massive hollow bricks, with windows and doors built between them. Like other downtown projects, the arena would merely be resting upon the ground because Duany’s proposed site was owned by IMC. “Just a slab and you put bolts in it. Then you put some [shipping containers] on,” Duany gestured. He stated that the city of High Point could approach the landowners with the proviso “‘If you ever sell—you need to have the full real estate—we’ll pull out.’”

The shipping container buildings that Duany pitched were neither legal nor feasible under High Point’s current building codes. As one section of Duany’s proposal for an interim High Point code (Duany-Plater-Zyberk 2014:141) explains, shipping containers “cannot meet conventional codes, except by becoming so expensive that they approach conventional construction.” Duany’s unconventional plans for businesses, civic centers, children’s playgrounds, and residences for recent college graduates (the latter two not discussed in this article) could only be allowed by a city that adopted large-scale reform aligning with what Duany called the Pink Code (i.e., the lightening of red tape). Duany would promote the Pink Code in *Fortune* magazine the next year (Duany 2014).

“Really, tactical urbanism is how most cities are built,” said new urbanist Mike Lydon, “especially in developing nations” (Berg 2012). High Point was not in a developing nation, however, and the city council deemed even the explicitly informal Pit project, which had to meet existing codes, infeasible at a cost of more than \$1 million. Duany lamented that “the slack that once allowed revitalization to evolve organically has been exterminated by bureaucracies . . . within the rising tide of regulation” (Duany 2014). From Duany’s perspective, High Point needed to proceed with the loosening of codes quickly.

“By the way, the Chinese are not waiting, okay? They’re not waiting,” Duany said to cheers at High Point University. “Nobody’s waiting. Only the Americans are stuck in their own bureaucracy. And we cannot compete worldwide when you can’t get anything done efficiently,” he continued. “We cannot compete in this world.” Growth machine theory anticipates such arguments, as described by Molotch: “If we don’t lower our standard first, somebody will beat us and they will get us.” (Brecher and Costello 1998; Molotch 1999:259).

THE LAND ACQUISITION STRATEGY (c. 2017)

One common view in High Point has been that furniture exposition demand simply determined the HPM’s footprint downtown. Of course, such formulations remove the agency that is exercised by key decision makers from view, giving the impression that—to cite David Harvey (1989:240)—changes are “legislated by historical circumstances rather than by the conscious collective action of individuals.” In recent years, it has been Republican politician Jay Wagner who most persistently pointed out this obfuscation. “The reason we are talking about and planning all of these different areas” (e.g., Uptowne, North High Point) in the first place, he said, “is because the elephant in the room is downtown.” It was an elephant Duany handled with care, hoping to delicately develop around it while standing ready to move at its request.

Even before Duany’s visit, Jay Wagner began speaking to me about the potential for retail, residential, and office uses in the downtown in order to “reclaim a portion . . . for ourselves.” He knew that for High Point to experience resident-centered growth like that he observed in other small cities, it would not be organic, natural, market driven—or deregulated as Duany called for. “What you don’t see so much,” Wagner stated as he surveyed what he considered successes in other downtowns, “is behind the scenes what the city has done in key properties in key places to help to create the stage where that growth and that organic city life can occur.”

“I think that’s where we are. How do we set the stage for that to happen? Because it doesn’t just happen,” Wagner noted. Wagner was a political conservative, but his pragmatic view toward High Point’s internationalized real estate sector conundrum had made his orientation toward development more of a gumbo. As residents widely acknowledged, the initial decision not to zone the downtown for the inclusion of resident-centered uses is what structured the contemporary passivity. These structures ensured, as he noted, that “doing nothing” resulted in lopsided wins for furniture real estate interests. “For too long,” Wagner said, “we’ve sat back and just let things happen.”

After transitioning the City Project into Forward High Point the previous year, in March 2016 under the leadership of a new mayor—furniture insider and resident-centered downtown proponent Bill Bencini—the City Council announced a strategic goal. With

a 7–0 vote, the council determined that it would develop a plan to produce 15–20 new restaurants and shops, 250 housing units, and a central gathering space downtown (City Hall 2016).

Forward High Point hired Ray Gibbs, who had led similar efforts in neighboring Greensboro, as their executive director to oversee the efforts. Soon after, the city council also approved a \$16 million expenditure to assemble land for the construction of an independent league (i.e., not minor league, which is affiliated with a major league team) baseball stadium as an anchor for the new area. The state of North Carolina approved the city for the issuance of up to \$35 million in limited obligation bonds to build the stadium (Way 2017). High Point requested that Guilford County allocate tax revenue generated from the development area into bond repayments but—in a short but colorful political battle—the motion to do so failed at the county Board of Commissioners for lack of a second.

In November 2017, in a race marked by very low voter turnout, Bencini’s downtown ally Jay Wagner became mayor by a margin of 53 votes. Shortly after, the city council approved a plan led by planning director Lee Burnette for a 131-acre area of the downtown that included the 12 acres of the stadium project area. In the plan, almost the entire area was placed in a new mixed use zoning district that excluded new market showrooms and grandfathered just under 30 existing showrooms in that area.

Over the next year, the city solidified the stadium plans and commissioned Maryland-based developer Tim Elliott to be the master planner of the district surrounding the baseball stadium. His first project, Market Center, would be a new 52,000 square foot office structure built to “look like it’s been here for a while,” according to Elliott, mimicking the brick, steel, and glass of the factory lofts adjacent to it (Brasier 2019). Market Center was slated to open in late 2020. The plans show outdoor decks overlooking the stadium with retail on the ground floor and a restaurant that spans the first two floors. Elliott was also charged with designing a 120-room hotel with a restaurant slated to open in 2021, a 130-unit apartment building to be completed in 2022, and a 90-unit apartment building for completion in 2023.

In 2018, as the downtown plan was unfolding, the High Point Chamber of Commerce launched a complementary initiative called HP365 that sought to cultivate the extant remains of High Point’s surviving furniture economy into the “Silicon Valley of Furnishings” (Business High Point - Chamber of Commerce 2019). High Point maintained significant links to its old manufacturing economy, which included not only furniture exposition and merchandising but also design and small-batch manufacturing. This initiative sought to support this “eco-system” as they “strive to redefine themselves and adapt to an ever-changing marketplace” (ibid). An executive with tenures at both Oaktree Capital Management and IMC partnered with the CEO of the High Point Chamber of Commerce to form the non-profit HP365 with funding from a \$1.5 million grant from the state’s Department of Commerce and \$1.5 million from private donors including IMC.

In June 2018, this nonprofit announced that part of the city’s former hosiery plant, which had previously been renovated as a showroom building, would house a furniture industry incubator and platform called Plant Seven. The 100,000 square foot center would feature a furniture co-working space with a furniture materials library, a 3D printing facility, an events space, a fitness center, a restaurant, and a café. The goal was to create a place where “product designers and engineers, craftsmen, finishers, photographers,

logistics companies, professional services, and others” can engage in the “‘cross-pollination’ of ideas and techniques” (ibid).

“I think it is still the artistic, creative center,” designer Raymond Waites said of High Point—almost despite itself. “When I moved here, I found that there were some of the weirdest, creative people—much more than New York—I mean, really idiosyncratic, brilliantly-creative people.” The prominence of the HPM has facilitated the continued presence of enough critical mass of the region’s ancillary furniture functions that HP365 and Plant Seven made sense.

With the HPM and these functions embedded in the region, High Point has the opportunity to cultivate craft and maker cultures in a fashion wholly specific to its place character. “In High Point, people live here,” said a furniture blogger of the city’s furniture cluster. “They interact with each other. There’s kind of a—without a formality—salon. Everybody’s here,” he said. Yet within High Point’s fragmented community, the synergies occurring among this “salon” almost seemed accidental. They were certainly fragile. “Nobody has taken the golden thread and tied it through and pulled it together,” he concluded.

“The real beauty is,” said the Plant Seven CEO, “this project is global in scope and it perfectly serves as a platform for new start-ups while also supporting the large number of active designers, producers and service companies already located in the High Point region” (Business High Point 2018). It was not only inviting new business, in other words, but also acknowledging the long-ignored designers and product developers that had remained in High Point. When it opened, Mayor Jay Wagner remarked, “just like you have craft beer, you have craft furniture. There’s a lot of young enthusiastic creative people in there making furniture” (Yost 2018).

In January 2019, High Point University president Nido Qubein, who had taken a very active role in the HP365 vision, announced that the hosiery mill renovated by Gabrielle Natale (see Figure 2) would serve as the linchpin for a new events center. The new complex would incorporate the building (formerly owned by Quebec furniture firm Bermex), the Plant Seven project, an additional factory building, and 25,000 square feet of new construction to create the Congdon Events Center. The entire complex would be about a quarter-million square feet. The space would serve as a site for meetings and conventions for both furniture and nonfurniture groups. IMC’s CEO Bob Maricich, in a glaringly stark departure from the rhetoric of local growth machine era, came out strongly in favor of these projects. “You start talking about hotels and restaurants and the stadium and a small convention center—all of those things add to the vibrancy of downtown, and that bodes very well for Market” (Kimbrough 2018).

DISCUSSION: THE RIGHT TO JANE JACOBS

In keeping with the norm of its various tourist bubble competitors in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, High Point developers built skywalks, policed the Market thoroughly, and implemented various formal and informal policies that encouraged High Point residents to stay out of the downtown area so as not to disrupt the HPM experience or complicate its traffic. Vagrancy, prostitution, and drug dealing sweeps were the norm, with a widespread understanding that HPM’s more cosmopolitan versions of the latter two were coming to replace the local.

However, as various types of city users began to tire of superblock convention centers, downtown High Point's walkability, perceived authenticity, and lack of defined boundaries became assets. Marketgoers spoke of High Point buildings' "exposed brick, wood plank floors, and rustic appeal," how some spaces are "still like shops" and others are "high rise," and how each building "has its own personality and its own quirks." What was unique is that High Point leaders drew upon these assets, not for the benefit of middle class residents or day-trippers but rather for its furniture users.

HPM insider guides celebrate the "opportunity to eat 'southern-style' food" at "local diners and 'dives.'" They share reviews of the "homemade pies and cakes" of the local barbeque "joint." "If you really want the flavor, we're going to give it to you," said a HPM official of the marketgoer who wants to explore. During my very first HPM, exhibitors and marketgoers explained to me that—to them—High Point was a counterforce to global homogeneity, what they called a "walmartization" of exposition.

However, if it was authentic small business and local buzz that marketgoers were truly desiring, the moment had passed: the downtown was bereft of it. Once local leaders decided to transition the city "to a 'higher' use," the privileged "demand for space conflict[ed] with that of other urban groups, especially the small businesses" that became, for the growth machine, "both an irritant and an impediment" to their goals (Zukin 1982:175).

Over the past two decades, it is apparent that the increasing privileging of authenticity and walkability within convention and visitor practices was coinciding with the agitation of generations of High Pointers who were asked to stay out of what Lovejoy and others called their "living room." "We could/should worship Market," *High Point Enterprise* editor Tom Blount (1994) noted after Mayor Smothers' charrette, conceding enthusiastic Market support, "but we need to take care of ourselves at the same time." Charrette urban planner David Crane expressed that there was an opportunity cost of the city's development practices. He observed how "many people are not connecting" due to the High Point's lack of a community-building spaces for year-round residents (*ibid*).

"How do we bring these two worlds together?" a local Black historian would ask me several times of the separate realities of marketgoers and residents. "It's like they're always clashing." Yet it appears that a synthesis—a "both/and" era—is now possible as never before. The new district that Forward High Point is assembling is exceptional in the way that it acknowledges both High Point's furniture and nonfurniture residents, recognizes its heritage, addresses some of its unmet needs, and utilizes its strengths.

In a historic first, the resulting district has at least the *potential* to co-locate High Point's globalness and its localness. Plant Seven actually overlooks the site of the High Point Rockers baseball stadium. With tickets that cost the same as a movie ticket, independent league professional baseball is about as local an artifact as there is in professional sports Americana. At the same time, however, the new district would also overlap with the HPM's edgy North Elm District in which several of the exhibitors had a year-round presence. Some of these showrooms were grandfathered and allowed to remain, although new showrooms would be prohibited.

During Greensboro's transformation, Elijah Lovejoy pointed out that some of High Point's "law and order" politicians portrayed the neighboring city as a place that was "chaotic, bizarre, out-of-control, fighting all the time, bickering." "The irony," he said, laughing, "is that Greensboro is seen as a place of life and High Point is struggling with maintaining its life in spite of all its civility and order." High Point residents have

lamented that High Point has lost the cosmopolitan feel it once enjoyed when a multinational furniture executive, bus driver, immigrant small business owner, New York designer, and showroom carpenter all shared the same downtown spaces. When I moved to High Point in 2002, there were still remnants of such interaction, almost wholly limited to the downtown's two major restaurants (which are now both closed). In the Forward High Point campaign, there may be a potential confluence between city users' gentrified taste for authenticity and local concerns for an inclusive downtown.

While Greensboro is hardly New York, Lovejoy's portrayal of downtown Greensboro's milieu of diverse interests evokes Jane Jacobs' (1961:54) "ballet" of urban interactions, which—as she noted—would be unrecognizable to people who do not "know how it is." Current Mayor Jay Wagner has called this desired phenomenon the "friction" of community and Market leaders of the 2010s have been—for the first time, by my observation—viewing it as an asset that they lack. This opens the possibility for downtown High Point to possess a degree of centrality both to residents and to its users around the world. As opposed to previous eras, such friction, complexity, and buzz are in fashion in the gentrification era.

Peter Marcuse explained that in fights for the right to the city, the discontented—a group that views the "dominant system as preventing adequate satisfaction of their human needs"—and those who are more directly "deprived of basic material and existing legal rights" may be coming "up against the same constraints" (Marcuse 2010:195, 90). In arguing for this particular understanding of urban politics, Marcuse (2010:191) noted that it is a cross-class "combination of the deprived and the discontented" that most effectively organize for the right to the city.

The current efforts in High Point have the potential to result in a more inclusive downtown that a broad, cross-class, and race-diverse array of residents has been asking for—though rarely together. Like many who contest capitalist processes, High Point residents fighting for resident-centered spaces were very rarely *against* the HPM, and some sincerely desired the its success. They believed that resident-centered interests and HPM-centered interests must co-exist. Some even felt that resident-centered spaces would make HPM more profitable.

Although the latest effort to reclaim High Point's downtown can hardly be framed as a mobilization to "claim the right to the city for all deprived and alienated," it is a decisive step toward reestablishing the most basic right of access to the center, to the city's prime space, to its landscape of power (Marcuse 2010:191–93). To maintain and further this progress, the local government will need considerable resolve. To cite just one example, while showrooms are zoned out of the new district, other HPM functions are not. There remains a possibility, then, that if there is little local demand for new apartments and condos, they could be occupied by furniture firms at bargain prices.

CONCLUSION: SMALL CITY AGENCY AND THE 'WHITE BUILDING'

Radical urbanists often cite how growth leaders pitch their agenda as the only solution—"there is no alternative" (i.e., the TINA principle). In other words, there is no alternative to gentrification but ghettoization, no alternative to corporate incentives but disinvestment, etc. The reality, of course, is that there are thousands of alternatives (i.e., TATA).

The High Point case reminds us that the urban agenda is malleable and that local leaders indeed possess agency. No outside observer could have predicted High Point's rise and its various specific chapters (e.g., surviving Las Vegas, the current resident-centered efforts, etc.).

This case substantiates an understanding of agency that Savitch and Kantor liken to a card game. Each city collectively and each politician and civic leader specifically works with the cards that they are dealt, their "hand of structural constraints" (Savitch, Kantor and Vicari 2002:171). Cities—even given similar endogenous forces—have varying abilities to exploit the resources with which they can "bargain" or play their hand (270).

We saw during the Bain/IMC transaction, for instance, a former Bush official advocate for a public takeover of HPM. We witnessed typical growth machine players calling for resident-centered growth. Judy Mendenhall, a mayor, fought for resident-centered businesses in the downtown to the extent of threatening the use of eminent domain against real estate speculators during the 1980s. Aaron Clinard, an attorney, has been the most consistent voice fighting for use value amidst growth leader's attempts to make rising exchange values a cause for community celebration.

The ownership of the majority of a downtown by a private equity firm—now Blackstone, which acquired Bain's interest in 2017—has had an interesting effect on the mobilization for resident-centered growth. In the past, individual showroom owners, wanting to protect the wear and tear on their "cash cow" HPM properties, had every reason to actively discourage use of the downtown by residents between HPMs. In contrast, IMC's Bob Maricich has called for downtown High Point to be "a place of vitality and energy"—and not only during Market. To private equity stakeholders, the branding of High Point as a place—especially in this era of both authenticity-seeking and gentrification—suddenly matters.

Creative class policies, explains Cunningham, can "be thought of as a Rorschach plot, being invested in for varying reasons and with varying emphases and outcomes" (Cunningham 2009). High Point's residential, leisure, and retail district along with its "creative industry"-centered HP365 campaign has an altogether different connotation from a similar plan executed in another small city. In High Point's already walkable and well-maintained downtown, this marks the first explicitly resident-centered plan since its original agglomeration of retail and offices to serve mill owners and workers. Each of High Point's new amenities, then, has the potential to connect the downtown to local actors of various class and occupational backgrounds that had been excluded from regular use of it for decades.

Not only is IMC more motivated to invest in their buildings than the old local growth machine, but it appears that the "impulsive roamings" (Clark 2005:266) of private equity firms at the current moment value the re-embedding and re-integration of resident-centered uses more than the old elite had. Beyond this, they have a greater capacity for (and self-interest in) large-scale philanthropy. The combination of these two factors is evident in the tenuous fate of High Point's white office building located at the very center of the downtown.

During his visit, Andrés Duany had joined some High Pointers in lamenting the loss of the building—first to showroom use in 2005 in its initial private equity purchase, then when IMC mothballed it in the Bain purchase in 2011. Calling it "one of the greatest loft buildings in the world," Duany asked why the city "tortured this building" with building



FIG. 7. The downtown white office building. (Showplace in background.) Courtesy of J.J. Schlichtman.
[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

codes that made its renovation prohibitive (See Figure 7). In October 2018, IMC donated the building to Forward High Point, stating—significantly—“what’s good for the City is good for the Market.” This was an exact reversal of the traditional High Point adage, noted earlier.

Of course, such new potential synergies are intertwined with a new set of risks. High Point’s new resident-centered uses will—unless contested politically—likely be developed exclusively for middle- and upper-middle-class users. This new variety of political contestations will require new types of mobilization and more formal tools (e.g., community benefits agreements). To date, neither the High Point Housing Authority nor any other voice for affordable housing has exerted influence upon the new project plans.

Second, High Pointers will likely perceive various negative consequences of decreased local influence in the HPM. For instance, the local Black historian noted how, in the past, local wealth and power related to the HPM had “filtered into” low-income communities. However, the mechanisms by which this occurred—such as informal job networks—have “gotten sophisticated and we were more or less pushed out.” This access to local power—managed through relationships—will need to be replaced by more formal interactions and negotiations with IMC.

Third, there is, of course, the readily apparent risk that High Point's grasp on the HPM is now majority controlled by the calculations of investment formulas. Such formulations increase the possibility that downtown High Point could literally go from fully occupied to virtually empty in a few transactions. "I don't think it's the Southern way to have a Plan B," Judy Mendenhall told me in 2003 as she assumed the presidency of the HPM Authority, then located on the ground floor of the white building. Given the events of the previous decade, High Point leaders are becoming aware that they must develop one.

Unsurprisingly, High Point has not developed the activists, organizations, and other voices of community reflection that its complex condition requires. Localized interests in globally central small U.S. cities—be they corporate headquarters such as Bentonville, Arkansas or less conventional variations such as High Point—do not have the same structural capacity as their larger peers to demand benefits from the powerful global interests that could increasingly choose them. In most small cities, people leading the charge for the right to the city are volunteers with very different day jobs and even many development-related professionals may be lacking relevant expertise. To a great extent, then, they often rely upon either the benevolence of corporate interests or the synergies that exist between their interest and those of profit-seeking enterprises.

At the moment, the regulation of downtown High Point's development is coming from the city's leadership. In response to IMC's donation of the white building, Forward High Point issued a request for site proposals to mixed-use developers in June 2019. Remarkably, the RFP included several unprecedented deed restrictions. Most notably, Forward High Point prohibited use as a "showroom for the display and wholesale sale of furniture, home décor, and related accessories" (Forward High Point 2019). The RFP stated that other deed restrictions were likely once Forward High Point selected a developer, including requirements that uses "must be open to the General Public on a full-time basis, at a minimum of 50 weeks a year," that "all residents must be full-time," and that all office users "must be full-time users of their space" (*ibid*).

As small cities become more deeply embedded in global circuits of commerce and investment, they will increasingly need to employ the tools of activists in larger cities such as deed restrictions, inclusionary zoning, linkage policies, and community benefits agreements in order to capture benefits from local development. Without a privileging of the community fabric by higher scales of government, however, they do so at their own risk. Such use-value-centered, long-term interests jeopardize what we have noted above as two key advantages that small cities offer global capital: malleability and low costs. If they are to begin pursuing strong local and inclusive visions for growth, then small cities must establish their value beyond these two metrics.

Note

¹Residents and insiders refer to High Point Market as "Market" or "the Market." To add clarity in distinguishing it from the word "market," I will refer to the Market as "HPM."

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