



MARKING CHANGE AT THE JERSEY SHORE

Lessons from Asbury Park, New Jersey

Asbury Park, New Jersey, is a small seaside resort located about 50 miles southwest of New York City grappling with gentrification and displacement. This article puts Asbury Park's current economic and socio-cultural changes in their historical and political context to highlight three interrelated factors that shape a city's durable physical and social landscapes: history, geographic specificity (including its metropolitan context, racial geography, and urban morphology), and leadership.

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Welcome to Asbury Park

During the waning days of summer 2022, veteran rock star Stevie Nicks gazed out on a throng estimated at more than 35,000 people attending the fourth annual Sea.Hear.Now Festival, a three-day event featuring thirty acts on three stages (cf. Sea.Hear.Now Festival 2022). The crowd stretched down Asbury Park, New Jersey's beach for more than a quarter mile. Nicks described the scene as "a fairy tale provided by nature," while goading the crowd, "Is this the world of Bruce Springsteen?" (Angermiller 2022). Asbury Park's notoriety as home to "The Boss" belies its diverse, complicated, and instructive history. The transformation of this small city summer resort destination over the past 152 years sheds light on processes of urban decline, regeneration, and gentrification outside the usual suspects—large, strong-market cities like San Francisco, New York, or London.

Asbury Park is a small seaside resort located about 50 miles southwest of New York City. Only 1.4 square miles in land area, its year-round population is less than 16,000 people. That number typically swells to over 70,000 during the summer when people sun on its beaches, walk on its boardwalk, and attend its concerts. Today's Asbury Park is quite different from the one Bruce Springsteen paid homage to in his 1973 album, *Greetings from Asbury Park*. After generations of physical and psychic damage wrought by racial strife and corrupt city government, Asbury Park is now a destination "shore town." The city experiences what Makris and Gatta call "seasonal gentrification [...] in which there is a transition from low-income or working-class community to a middle-class or upper-class community increasingly composed of second-home owners and vacationers." (Makris/Gatta 2020:16) Although these more affluent, predominantly white newcomers arrive for only a few short months, their impact is felt deeply by year-round residents, a majority of

whom identify as Black and Latinx and are living with lower-incomes or in poverty. Across labor and housing markets, commercial development, and services and amenities, this contemporary gentrification exacerbates existing social and spatial inequalities that have their roots in the physical and political origins of the city.

This article puts Asbury Park's current economic and socio-cultural changes in their historical and political context. We focus most closely on the city's founding, public divestment and economic decline over the mid-20th century, and planning efforts of the early 2000s to highlight three interrelated factors that shape a city's durable physical and social landscapes: history, geographic specificity (including its metropolitan context, racial geography, and urban morphology), and leadership. First, a city's physical, political, and social dynamics today do not exist in a temporal vacuum; they stem from the layers of dynamics that precede them. Second, a small city's metropolitan context and larger forces beyond the borders affect its development, residents, and policymaking. Further, its internal racial geography and urban morphology influence its trajectories of decline and ascent. Finally, leadership and political agency are central to crafting a vision and executing a plan.

Scholarly writing on gentrification often underappreciates the historical conjunctures that lead to contemporary changes. Moreso, it downplays public sector tools like zoning, housing policy, and design standards (cf. Zuk et al. 2018). It further neglects the role of political actors in setting a vision, marshalling resources, and cultivating relationships in order to activate or impede development. Asbury Park's story thus reveals some lessons for other small city leaders working to curtail decline and shrinkage, support equitable growth, and mitigate the risks of gentrification-induced displacement.

Roots of Spatial Inequality

In 1871, James A. Bradley, a practical visionary with a strong religious bent, went south from New York City and used his accumulated fortune to buy 500 acres of oceanfront land in New Jersey (cf. Asbury Park History Society 2022). Named after Bishop Francis Asbury, an early 19th century Methodist leader, Asbury Park was located just north of Ocean Grove, another Methodist settlement, and south of the more

notorious Long Branch, considered to be a playground for the gilded age's robber barons and favored vacation spot of U.S. President Grant (cf. Chernow 2017: 651). Bradley believed that a well-designed family-oriented resort guided by Methodist principles would draw an affluent clientele and help mitigate Long Branch's gambling, indulgence in alcohol, and other vices (cf. Wolff 2021). Bradley fused his



Photo: Erika Bentley Leonard

The Convention Center and Paramount Theater on Asbury Park's boardwalk opened in 1930 but has struggled in recent decades

religious beliefs with his business skills to make Asbury Park a successful enterprise. Recent regional railway improvements led to a real estate boom, and Bradley expected to profit from Asbury Park's appreciating land values, highlighting the critical role public infrastructure plays in a city's economic development (cf. Wolff 2021).

In the early years, Bradley served as the city's postmaster, mayor, and councilman and established the city's first newspaper. His hold on political leadership and retention of ownership of the city's oceanfront property increased the likelihood of personal reward and set a precedent for subsequent local official corruption. He paid careful attention to the details of physical design, applying ideas from his European travels. He set aside park lands, strategically situated commercial areas, and designed waterfronts to cultivate feelings of spaciousness and maximize the healthful effects of ocean breezes. He protected the site's three lakes to separate Asbury Park from adjacent communities, to create a central green space, and to help with stormwater management. He installed sanitary sewer and water supply systems that drew from wells and introduced an electricity-driven trolley system. Bradley donated land for churches and for the public library. The tree-lined, grid-patterned streets were home to privately-built Victorian homes.

Judging by early indications, Bradley's urban experiment was a great success and reached his grand vision. His "promised land" conveyed a majestic European feel while

supporting two hundred hotels and boarding houses. Year-round residents and seasonal tourists took pride in the city's public schools, library, exposition ground, opera house, and churches. But Asbury Park's meticulous design and sedate, family-oriented attractions extended only from the Boardwalk along the Atlantic Ocean in the east and Main Street to the west. Across the railroad tracks, beyond the city's official limits, lay the West Side and its main commercial street, Springwood Avenue, which was filled with shops, bars, betting parlors, jazz clubs, and a redlight district. The West Side was home to immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as formerly enslaved people emigrating from the rural South, who filled overcrowded housing on unpaved streets and provided an inexpensive labor pool to staff the city's expanding hospitality industry (cf. Wolff 2021; Makris/Gatta 2020).

Fiscal pressures at the turn of the 20th century motivated city council to annex the West Side in 1905, shifting the geography of Asbury Park. Bradley objected to annexation with his deep-seated racism and segregationist principles guiding the city's design; he argued that the West Side's largely Black population was immoral and susceptible to political corruption and that their neighborhoods would depress property values citywide. Bradley's opinions have been reified over generations in U.S. policy making and private banking, resulting in a racially discriminatory housing market and patterns of segregation that continue into the present.

Organized Abandonment and Decline

With Main Street and the railroad as stark boundaries, formal annexation offered little competition to the physical, social, and psychological barriers dividing the city's East and West Sides. Asbury Park's two sides co-existed with bifurcated commercial, social, and political centers, and racially segregated schools, movie theaters, and convenience store lunch counters. The West Side was home to groups who faced barriers in obtaining loans or were discriminated against when renting or purchasing homes throughout the region: working-class Jewish, Italian, Polish, Chinese, and Black families. The Black population largely found employment in the city's low wage hospitality industry or wartime jobs at nearby military installations. West Side streets remained unpaved, watered by city tank trucks in summers to reduce the dust (Interview: Reverend D. James Parreott). A vibrant, yet segregated, music scene drew crowds to the different locations separated by mere blocks within this small city. Black musicians played jazz and ragtime, and greats like Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Holiday, or Louis Armstrong made stops at West Side clubs on their way to New York City. On the East Side, the white-only Convention Hall hosted the era's big bands near the boardwalk.

Through the 1950s, city leaders and the commercial elite continued to cater to an urban leisure class during the summer season. The prevailing vision concentrated on encouraging the construction of modern hotels, restaurants, and boardwalk amusements with ornate and sophisticated architectural design. The city's politics remained local, machine-driven, and tinged by petty corruption. Strongman mayors held long tenures and local patronage lined political coffers. City revenues benefited from beachfront leases, illicit gambling operations, extractive parking meters, and the resale of foreclosed properties.

The post-World War II era ushered in powerful forces from beyond this small city's borders. New Jersey underwent a suburban housing boom, facilitated by federal housing and transportation policies and investments. More affluent, predominantly white populations that had the ways and means left small cities like Asbury Park—where leaders had not made any major public infrastructure investments in decades—for newer suburban areas. In 1952, the New Jersey Turnpike opened, connecting New York City and Philadelphia, followed in 1955 by the Garden State Parkway.



Photo: Erika Bentley Leonard

The population of Asbury Park grows four-fold in the summer months with beach-goers and other tourists



Photo: Erika Bentley Leonard

Areas of Asbury Park, especially on the West Side, face continued disinvestment and vacancy

Both provided automobile access to the shore towns and reduced dependence on fixed rail from which Asbury Park had historically benefited. Suburban shopping malls drew commercial activity from Asbury Park's business districts, and theme parks eroded the profitability of Asbury Park's 19th century boardwalk entertainment. Meanwhile, the West Side suffered from overcrowding, substandard housing, and predatory landlords. The city staff did not effectively tap available federal redevelopment funds, while the city's local building codes offered no real protection to residents, particularly tenants (cf. Wolff 2021).

By 1970, the city faced even greater needs with fewer resources. The West Side needed jobs, affordable housing, and recreational facilities. Fomented for years by the anger of young Black people over the stark racial disparities between the East and West Sides and inspired by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, racial unrest erupted in Asbury Park on July 4, 1970 (Interview: Reverend D. James Parreott). The social unrest lasted for a week and led to the destruction of Springwood Avenue's businesses, including many of its famed jazz clubs, and to the permanent displacement of some residents. The mayor declared a state of emergency, bringing in 200 heavily armed state, county, and local law enforcement to patrol the city. Sensing the city's lack of responsiveness to community leaders' demands, young people from the West Side crossed Main Street to the East Side's major commercial street, Cookman Avenue. The police fired into the crowd, which quickly dispersed, and 180 people were injured.

Unlike larger cities, Asbury Park's racial unrest received little sustained attention. But for this small seaside resort, the social trauma—much like its original visionary designs—left an enduring impact across the entire city. Commercial vitality on both the West Side's Springwood Avenue and the East Side's Cookman Avenue faltered, and unemployment rates climbed. Residential "For Sale" signs popped up throughout the city. The prospect of more affluent and segregated suburban school districts drew more white families with means out of the city, while the city's schools lost resources to serve predominantly Black students from poverty-stricken families. The boardwalk, once the centerpiece of the city's vision, was largely deserted.

The city's decline exacerbated hardship for those most vulnerable and cemented a negative public perception of the city as "a crippled ghost town" in need of repair (cf. Van Zandt/Greenman 2021: 70–71). One observer commented that he could sail up and down the Jersey coast and easily tell when he was near Asbury Park by the unmistakable emptiness of its beaches (Interview: Terry Reidy). Others referred to the city as "Beruit on the Jersey Shore" (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020: 31). State policies also affected the fate of Asbury Park. In the 1970s, New Jersey began to deinstitutionalize its psychiatric hospitals. The city had an ample supply of deteriorating hotel rooms with fewer summer tourists, and property managers eagerly sought a reliable, publicly subsidized cashflow and welcomed released patients. Bradley's once "promised land" was being transformed rapidly into a hospital "dumping ground" (cf. Nordheimer 1992).

Planning and Managing Positive Change

But the story of Asbury Park is not monolithic. West Side life was still vibrant, with family celebrations, cultural activities, and community building (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020). Young people from the suburbs came to the East Side to race their souped-up GTOs on a stretch of Ocean Avenue between the Empress and Berkeley-Carteret hotels (Interview: Bill Brash), and were immortalized in Springsteen's *Racing in the Streets*: "Tonight, tonight the strip's just right/I want to blow 'em off in my first heat / Summer's here and the time is right / For racin' in the street" (cf. Springsteen 1978). East Side clubs became a musical mecca—"a sacred, mystical shaman thing"—for renegade rockers like Springsteen and guitarist Steve Van Zandt (cf. Wolff 2021: 115, quoting Van Zandt). Through the 1970s and 1980s, Asbury Park also served as a refuge for LGBTQ people from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania with gay bars, clubs, and community, providing connection and safety amidst an otherwise hostile society (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020).

Changes came only slowly to Asbury Park over the next few decades as public officials desperately searched for an economic lifeline. In 1984, the city adopted a waterfront redevelopment plan that promised a new and alternative vision to change the city's character. The beachfront was still a priority, but unlike Bradley's founding ideals, the city considered the area as an amenity for year-round residents, not only an attraction for summer tourists. With an experienced developer engaged to rebuild the iconic Berkeley-Carteret Hotel and over 2,000 residential units, the

waterfront once again held great promise. In 1992, however, the development firm declared bankruptcy, refusing to surrender its waterfront development rights and owing tax payments to the city. The area remained abandoned for a decade while the city fought in the federal courts. The West Side fared no better with failed development deals mired in city politics and corruption, including the indictment of a sitting city councilman (cf. Wolff 2021: 133–137).

While city leaders continued to formulate waterfront plans and alternative policy visions in the 1980s and 1990s, smaller scale shifts occurred, catalyzed by housing and sociopolitical dynamics in the larger New York City metropolitan area. Robust train and highway infrastructure continued to provide access to Asbury Park and the city's housing was cheaper than more expensive beach destinations on Long Island and other Jersey Shore towns. The LGBTQ community, who had found refuge in the city for decades, took advantage of these conditions and continued to settle in Asbury Park to escape from challenges of big city life and the trauma experienced during the AIDS epidemic. Unlike their LGBTQ predecessors of the 1960s and 1970s, these newcomers began to take advantage of the housing market conditions and buy (rather than rent) real estate and stimulate commercial and residential markets through sweat equity, cash investments, and small business development. At the same time, they made only modest demands on municipal services like schools (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020). By the early 2000s, the city's public perception was shifting, and news media began crediting the LGBTQ community from New York City with revitalizing Asbury Park (cf. Capuzzo 2000).

The turn of the 21st century also marked a decade of political reform, partially in response to the city's 100-plus year history of corruption. Kevin Sanders became the city's fourth Black mayor in 2001. With family roots on the West Side and a jazz musician steeped in the Springwood Avenue scene, he redefined the city's vision and sought to bring back the energy of his childhood Asbury Park (Interview: Kevin Sanders). Sanders and his city manager, Terry Reidy, separated by more than a century from Bradley, grasped the importance of building on the city's history to create a motivating vision.

Their approach was not merely rhetorical; in the absence of a clear vision, Reidy argued, the city only could reactively chase redevelopment dollars, not proactively craft a vibrant city that served all its residents. Practically speaking, however, this approach required them to walk a tightrope:



Photo: Erika Bentley Leonard

Asbury Park's oceanfront has been a central feature of the city's development plans since its founding

how could they capitalize on the lure of the city's oceanfront and entice the private sector while also ensuring that the benefits of those investments helped improve conditions throughout the entire city, especially on the historically neglected West Side?

Their vision rejected competing with suburban malls and instead favored small businesses, especially restaurants, in a small, pedestrian-friendly city. Staying true to its master plan, the city administration enforced guidelines for streetscapes, parking, and zoning. In their efforts to cut spending through shared services with other jurisdictions and secure additional funds from the state, leaders recognized the importance of restoring the city's reputation across stakeholder groups. Before anything else, they had to rebuild trust with neighboring municipalities and state officials, who had deep reservations about the city's competence and integrity. These relationships, weakened by past administrations operating without transparency and keeping the state and county at arm's length, needed to be strengthened (Interview: Terry Reidy). Leaders also had their work cut out for them in re-establishing relations with residents, particularly Black residents on the West Side, whose trust was undermined by decades of neglect, systematic racism, and political corruption (for ethnographic account see: Makris/Gatta 2020).

Mayor Sanders and Reidy organized an advisory group that represented a coalition of public, private, and non-profit actors to generate ideas, monitor the city's development, and guide its growth. The group regularly revisited the city's vision and evaluated how it was meeting its goals. The relationships formed translated into visible—yet ultimately far too limited—actions: moving a community center from the boardwalk to the city's West Side, constructing a West Side municipal park with a bandshell, opening a dog park on the beach, and launching a pee-wee football parade. In addition, for-profit developers operating on the East Side devised workforce set-asides and training programs for West Side residents and contributed to local charities that benefited the West Side.

Although the city's economic development strategy somewhat stalled in the face of the 2008 recession, the course set by local government leaders—built on the city's history and grounded in intentional policy, planning, and regulations—was successful in transforming the city's public reputation and fostering more positive relationships with other jurisdictions and the state. It also encouraged the formation of a growth coalition that could claim at least limited success in redirecting benefits of economic growth on the East Side to the historically neglected and marginalized



Photo: Erika Bentley Leonard

Beachfront murals bring Asbury Park's art and artists front and center

West Side. In the past 15 years, high-end development on the East Side has boomed, the city secured funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for housing, economic development, and other investments on the West Side, and community calls for reckoning with Bradley's segregationist vision have grown (cf. Markis/Gatta 2020).

However, by some other accounts, despite efforts on the West Side, the continued development on the East Side through today has exacerbated ongoing inequities by stimulating gentrification and attendant exclusion and displacement (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020). As in the past, leaders emphasized the oceanfront and the economic power of summer visitors in their planning and economic development strategy. While leaders identified West Side residents as beneficiaries of investments, they neglected to adequately safeguard against not only economic but also cultural displacement pressures inherent in that growth. Further, they saw the strength of building on the city's history, but chose to focus on only particular narratives, and did not address the cumulative and compounding harm experienced by marginalized residents since the city's founding. A new community center and employment program could not sufficiently compensate for the city's generations of organized abandonment (cf. Bhandar 2022, citing Harvey, 1982) of the West Side's predominantly Black residents. Nor could they ameliorate continued neglect of the public schools and the deep-seated mistrust and skepticism held for elected leadership and private developers.

Lessons from Asbury Park

While distinct, Asbury Park's ever-evolving story also is relevant for other small cities facing gentrification after generations of economic and population decline. Three interrelated factors emerge as most salient: history, geographic specificity (including its metropolitan context, racial geography, and urban morphology), and leadership.

Grasping urban social change requires identifying and tracing the city's relevant historic threads to comprehend the ways that collective and individual struggles fit within wider social meaning (cf. Mills 2000). A city's physical, political, and social dynamics today do not exist in a temporal vacuum; they stem from the layers of dynamics that precede them. Historic patterns of exclusionary development and investment create huge challenges for leaders seeking private investment while also working to protect the public interest of a city's most marginalized residents. The uneven distribution of resources and risks from Asbury Park's 1871 founding sets the stage for persistent inequities across space and populations today that no single plan or set of policies can fully ameliorate.

Today, Asbury Park's changing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics continue to be spatially

divided into the East Side with its multimillion-dollar condominium buildings, new hotels, and trendy bars and restaurants and the West Side, still home to largely residents of color and those living with lower incomes or in poverty. Seasonal gentrification in Asbury Park results in increased housing values that put economic pressure on lower-income renters and homeowners facing higher rents or tax assessments, respectively. Culturally, businesses cater to summer visitors, who skew younger, whiter, and more affluent than most of Asbury Park's year-round residents. Some small business owners worry they will be displaced by newer operations that can afford rising commercial rents. These economic and cultural impacts are deeply felt by current Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, and other long-term residents (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020: 54; Interview: Reverend D. James Parreott).

In Asbury Park, leaders could not avoid invoking the city's history as a seaside town, given that its main economic asset is its boardwalk and oceanfront. Beyond that, Asbury Park has a robust musical tradition—from the jazz scene of Springwood Avenue on the West Side to the East Side's clubs that gave the world the likes of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. At the same time, however, the city's history



Photo: Erika Bentley Leonard

The “new” Asbury Park caters largely to upper income, predominantly white tourists

is also reflected in the persistent concerns about the lack of resources and investment on the West Side of the city. The multigenerational experiences of segregation, poverty, and marginalization from city policies and plans foster a temporal fluidity that inextricably links personal and collective pasts to the present and to planned futures (cf. Bierbaum 2018).

Understanding how contemporary perceptions, reputation, and trust have been built and broken over time is critical for a small city that may have limited economic development opportunities. Asbury Park's history of strongman politics, corruption, and fiscal mismanagement cultivated mistrust with neighboring jurisdictions and state agencies that could have otherwise been allies. Leaders in the early 2000s had to work deliberately and diligently to repair that trust and, in doing so, were able to secure state funding, technical assistance, and additional resources.

Likewise, the now-hidden assets of these oft neglected communities are sources of pride and can be foundations for neighborhood stabilization and development without the pitfalls of displacement. The vibrant small business district on Springwood Avenue that existed before the 1970s— butcher shops, dry cleaners, millineries, jazz clubs—could serve as inspiration for a commercial redevelopment plan on the West Side (Interview: Reverend D. James Parreott). Finally, local culture, history, and personalities can also provide a boost to a small city's reputation. For example, the contributions that Springsteen and his musical peers provide are invaluable, be they in cash donations, stimuli to economic vitality, or international notoriety.

Beyond its history, a small city's specific geography and how it is situated in a larger metropolitan context influences its trajectories of decline and ascent. For the uninitiated, the story of Asbury Park's founding and decline through the early 2000s makes growth, development, and risks of gentrification seem a distant, improbable possibility. Yet, it is exactly the kind of publicly facilitated divestment that sets the stage for reinvestment and gentrification—the "old one-two" of displacement—caused first by decline and then by growth (cf. Powell/Spencer 2003).

Asbury Park's timeline of decline aligns with patterns of industrial small cities in the US. Starting in the 1950s, deindustrialization and globalization triggered an exodus of jobs and capital from cities in the Northeast and Midwest to the South, and eventually off-shore to countries with lower wages and production costs. Like Asbury Park, small cities and inner ring suburbs faced shrinking populations, declining tax base, aging infrastructure, and increased needs among the remaining residents. Locations with anchor

institutions like universities or hospitals or in the orbit of a stronger market city tended to fare better (cf. Mallach 2018).

Yet Asbury Park is a little different from other shrinking post-industrial cities; it was never dependent on manufacturing because of its economy anchored by its main amenity—the oceanfront. While other declining post-industrial cities must figure out how to repurpose warehouses, factories, and closed schools, Asbury Park faces different redevelopment challenges and opportunities. The housing and labor market dynamics of the New York metropolitan area, New Jersey's patterns of suburbanization and transportation, the particularities of racism, segregation, and LGBTQ experience, and its oceanfront location all shape how Asbury Park developed, declined, and transformed. For example, the city's oceanfront location on the forthcoming trainline from New York City created the opportunity for its founder. Yet New Jersey's suburbanization and highway development in the 1950s—the result of local, state, and federal policies—left the city vulnerable to decline. And later, its position in the New York metropolitan area, coupled with a population with disposable income for second homes and an LGBTQ community at least in part looking to flee New York City, again provided market opportunities in the 1990s and 2000s for its gentrification.

City leadership in the 2000s was not naïve about these larger forces influencing Asbury Park's decline, growth, and possibilities. In reflecting on his tenure, former city manager Reidy explained that his and the mayor's commitment to crafting a renewed vision anticipated gentrification's negative impacts: "If a city does not have a vision of what it would like to be, it will likely be overwhelmed by gentrification. The market will take over and drive redevelopment" (Interview: Terry Reidy). He understands that "there is nothing inevitable about gentrification," that it is a trajectory of neighborhood change to be managed, not an unbridled force to which leaders and residents must surrender (cf. Mallach 2018: 99).

Planning theorist Susan Fainstein argues that cities too often focus on economic development to the exclusion of everything else. To achieve urban justice, she suggests that cities should expand their focus to include considerations of equity, democracy, and diversity in their development decisions (cf. Fainstein 2010). Even while focusing on economic development, Asbury Park's recent leaders intentionally crafted safeguards for incumbent residents, such as local hiring requirements. These have been only somewhat successful, however. As Makris and Gatta recount, "younger people of color who can provide aesthetic labor"—who have the right "look" that retail stores and bars feel fit their brand—can find jobs, but for older workers, those

with criminal records, and those that do not fit the “trendy” Asbury aesthetic, economic opportunity remains elusive (cf. Makris/Gatta 2020: 57).

Likewise, a city’s specific racial geography and urban morphology affect its patterns of development. The urban morphology that Bradley created at its founding provide the physical contours that maintain social divisions, racist and classist exclusionary practices, and attendant inequities. Bradley exploited the natural elements—the oceanfront, lakes—and leveraged manmade infrastructural choices—parks, railroad, streets—to physically manifest his moralistic urban vision. Bradley and subsequent leaders cemented racial and socioeconomic segregation between the East and West Sides.

Since its founding, the intentionally racist spatial distribution of populations and infrastructure have resulted in unevenly distributed resources and risks. As the city experiences reinvestment in the contemporary moment, this unevenness means opportunities for new development in some areas and vulnerabilities to displacement in others. This physical divisions persist in residents’ and visitors’ collective consciousness and create feedback loops with the reputational and trust dynamics described above.

Undergirding all of this is the importance of leadership and political agency in crafting a vision and executing a plan. Decline and growth do not happen naturally or magically, but rather are instigated by people who have power to make policy and planning decisions. In retrospect, James Bradley’s 19th century religious vision was unlikely to provide a reliable urban planning guide. His understanding

was too utopian, his control too tight, and his actions too autocratic to stand the test of time. Yet admittedly his city-building achievements were remarkable and left a physical and psychological mark on Asbury Park that shaped its subsequent development and sociopolitical dynamics. Not only his vision, but also his ability to marshal resources to implement massive infrastructure and design interventions arguably remain unmatched in the city’s history.

Strong and even strong-arm mayoral leadership became a hallmark of Asbury Park politics through the late 20th Century. This approach led to corrupt relationships between the private sector and governing agencies, isolation from neighboring jurisdictions and state agencies, and mistrust between residents and their elected leaders. In the 1990s and 2000s, strong (but not strong-arm) leadership has helped move Asbury Park out of development stalemates. A team of experienced executives and staff created a consensus vision that avoided blind acceptance of private sector dollars or a philosophy of “a rising tide lifts all boats,” and instead pursued intentional design to ensure a more equitable distribution of economic growth benefits to the most historically marginalized residents (Interview: Terry Reidy).

While admittedly unfinished, Asbury Park’s story emphasizes the complexities inherent in small cities. It brings to light dimensions of decline, growth, and gentrification that are often missing in other scholarly accounts of economically stronger, larger cities. It challenges urban planning theorists and practitioners to consider how history, metropolitan context, racial geography, urban morphology, and leadership matter in planning for an equitable and vibrant future.

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Personal interviews

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Terry Reidy, September 7, 2022

Bill Brash, October 6, 2022

Kevin Sanders, September 13, 2022