

# Comeback Cities

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I was born in Newark - a city that has become this nation's poster child for urban decay. When I was young, the city was a bustling mix of manufacturing industries, a prosperous downtown, and thriving multi-ethnic neighborhoods. During my formative years, I also witnessed the rise and fall of the once grand factory where my father worked for his entire life, Victory Optical, which provided solid livelihoods for scores of ethnic families in Newark and surrounding communities.

For many people who grew up like me, the decline of manufacturing and of America's great urban centers signaled the end of this country's golden age. All my life, experts have been predicting the demise of cities. Today, many insist that the Internet will make urban centers irrelevant once and for all.

But, the fact of the matter is that cities are not declining -- many are even coming back. The past decade has witnessed an unforeseen rebirth in urban America, according to the newly released figures from the 2000 Census.

New York has been a big winner here. According to the new Census, the city's population jumped to more than 8 million people for the first time ever, an almost 10 percent increase. The Bronx, once a synonym for urban decay, grew by 7 percent, Brooklyn by 4 percent, Queens by 11 percent, and Staten Island by 15 percent. Surrounding communities like Jersey City grew by 5 percent, while my hometown of Newark stayed stable. Newark has even seen the rise of a new performing arts center, downtown restaurants, and a local arts scene.

There are several forces that are influencing the trend back toward urban areas.

- Crime is down and cities are safer. In New York City, couples now stroll down city blocks, where people once feared to tread.
- Cities are cleaner. People no longer are subjected to the soot, smoke and garbage of industrial cities of the past. In Pittsburgh where I live now, people picnic in urban parks, rollerbladers and cyclists whiz along trails where trains used to roll, and water-skiers jet down the once toxic Monongahela River.
- Lifestyle factors also play a key role. This is nowhere more evident than the transformation of New York's Soho. My research shows a striking correlation between a region's high-tech growth and a measure of creative and artistic people I call the "bohemian index." New York ranks 2nd on this index.
- Cities have regained their roles as incubators for innovation and magnets for talent. Drawn to cheaper rents and old buildings, new high-tech companies have sprouted up in once written off inner city neighborhoods from New York to Chicago and

Seattle. Fledgling companies benefit from the dense opportunities available in the city and people thrive on the thick labor markets, job opportunities and amenities there.

- Even though knowledge-based industries dominate this new economic landscape, some cities continue to remain hubs for manufacturing. Interestingly, California's Silicon Valley - the world's technology Mecca - tops *Industry Week's* Atlas of World Class Manufacturing Communities. New York ranks 21<sup>st</sup> on this list - which notes a trend toward smaller more specialized and immigrant-owned manufacturing in the city.
- America is getting more diverse and cities have benefited from their historic role as ports of entry for new people. Like most cities, New York lost native-born Americans, but more than made up for this by adding nearly one million new immigrants. My research shows a striking statistical correlation between diversity and high-tech growth. The ability to support a thriving gay community, as New York City has done, is strongly related to high-tech industry. This is not because high-tech workers are gay, but because a large gay population indicates a city with "low entry barriers" for people - where virtually anyone can plug in, start a business, and make a life.

But the current round of urban revitalization also generates serious tensions - many of which of which are increasingly evident in New York. Rents continue to escalate and space is at a premium. There is less and less space for artists and entrepreneurs to set up shop. Gentrification threatens to annihilate the diversity and creativity that have historically made great cities centers for innovation and entrepreneurial growth. And as these pressures continue to build, a new set of "place wars" threatens to break out, recasting the future development and politics of the New York and cities across the nation.

Urban America is at the cusp of a new era. The new knowledge-based economy, lower crime rates, a cleaner environment, and more diverse nation all bode well. But this is a very different city than the Newark where I was born.

The New American City is more about knowledge than manufacturing. It is more about lifestyle, entertainment and fun than just hard work and getting ahead. It is less about an "Ozzie and Harriet" style of life and more a reflection a new, increasingly diverse America - of straights and gays, young singles and energetic retirees, scores of new ethnic groups, a polyglot of multi-racial, multi-ethnic and alternative family arrangements.

We need to realize that this is a fundamentally different kind of city, and make our plans accordingly.

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