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What renaissance? Lowell has achieved national fame for its turnaround. But the revival is overrated, analysts argue, and now cities are looking for new models.

By Alan Wirzbicki, Globe Correspondent | September 9, 2007

WHEN STUDENTS ASK to meet with Robert Farrant, a professor of regional economics at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, he summons them to Brew'd Awakening, a coffee shop in the revamped center of the state's fourth-largest city. Without the coaxing, he said, few of his students would make the 15-minute walk from campus into downtown, where many businesses have struggled to stay afloat. "It's the only way they'll come into Lowell," said Farrant on a recent morning over a mug of java.

In its heyday, politicians and national publications hailed the resurrection of Lowell as the definitive model for troubled cities ruined by the collapse of the textile industry. The city's revival project, which began in the 1970s and became nationally influential in the 1980s and 1990s, created artsy downtown hangouts like Brew'd Awakening and transformed the crumbling Massachusetts Mills complex and other abandoned brick factory buildings into hundreds of new condos and apartments. The city has long been considered one of the nation's great success stories, and its turnaround strategies have been copied by other distressed areas.

But now Farrant and other specialists are questioning the Lowell miracle. On key economic indicators like income growth and job creation, the city differs little from other ex-industrial cities in Massachusetts, according to a series of recent studies. Poverty in Lowell has gone up substantially since 1980. And despite its "renaissance" reputation, empty storefronts still dot Market Street, one of downtown's main drags. Lowell's national reputation is fading, say urban planners and community development analysts, as the city's impressive face lift has failed to yield the expected gains for the working class.

"If I was writing a book 20 years ago, I would hold Lowell up as a great success story," said Joel Kotkin, the author of "The City: A Global History." "I don't think that's the case anymore."

The reassessment of Lowell comes at a time when increasing numbers of American cities are grappling with the same challenges many New England cities first encountered decades ago. Once-thriving industrial cities from Louisville, Ky., to Dubuque, Iowa, are rushing to adopt plans to shore up their economies as a broad variety of manufacturers move production overseas. But, officials involved with developing revitalization strategies say, the emphasis on large construction projects that characterized the Lowell revival - big-ticket items such as the National Historical Park, minor league baseball stadium, and hockey arena - have fallen out of favor, replaced by a growing emphasis on more prosaic goals like retraining workers and streamlining city governments.

Lowell's success at transforming its cityscape - dubbed "Mills to Martinis" in one marketing campaign for downtown condos - has undoubtedly helped the city, attracting middle-class commuters drawn to relatively cheap housing near the MBTA commuter rail station. And Lowell has fared better in many respects than cities such as Springfield or Lawrence, Farrant says, thanks largely to its aggressive revitalization effort and impassioned civic boosters like the late senator Paul Tsongas. (His wife, Niki Tsongas, won the Democratic nomination for the Fifth Congressional District last week.)

But Lowell's gains have also been exaggerated by three decades of city officials eager to tell an upbeat story, he said. And as time passes, some of the shortcomings of Lowell's redevelopment model are beginning to show.

"People are beginning to worry and talk about the two Lowells - the one of the interesting cultural revival and the one of these immigrant neighborhoods that are not necessarily connected to renaissance Lowell," said Forrant. "You've got this juxtaposition that not everybody involved in the revival wants to talk about."

For much of its history, Lowell has promoted itself as a prototype for the nation. Perched next to waterfalls in the Merrimack River that provided hydropower to the first mills, it was founded in the early 19th century as a planned manufacturing city by a group of Boston investors, and became the nation's leading textile maker before the Civil War. Newcomers from Ireland, Greece, and Quebec immigrated to Lowell to work in the thriving mills, and gravitated to ethnic neighborhoods like Little Canada, home to many Quebecois, and the Acre, where many Greeks settled.

The city's collapse began after World War I, when the factories along Lowell's sprawling canal system shut down in the face of competition from Southern textile manufacturers. Workers moved out, leaving vacant boardinghouses and churches with vanishing congregations. Little Canada was demolished in the 1950s.

Under the direction of Tsongas - a Lowell native who represented the region in the US House of Representatives from 1975 to 1979 and in the Senate from 1979 to 1985 - the city cleaned up many decaying ex-mill buildings, and created Lowell National Historical Park, the nation's first urban national park, in 1978. By recycling old buildings instead of ripping them down, Lowell's strategy represented new thinking at the time, when urban renewal was still often synonymous with the bulldozer. More signs of revival emerged in 1978, when Wang Laboratories opened its headquarters in the city, a complex that eventually occupied three downtown buildings. A web of old Boston and Maine Railroad tracks that once carried boxcars to the mills was turned into a trolley system that zips tourists around the national park in vintage streetcars. New waves of immigrants from Cambodia and Latin America arrived. By the early 1990s, when Tsongas ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, he was able to boast in his campaign autobiography that his hometown was a "national model of urban renaissance."

In 1992, Wang declared bankruptcy, reversing some of the city's economic gains. But Lowell embarked on a second wave of revitalization in the 1990s, opening a performing arts and hockey arena and building a new baseball stadium for the Lowell Spinners, a Single-A affiliate of the Red Sox. The city also encouraged developers to build more market-rate condos to lure white-collar professionals into town.

In all, economists and development analysts credit Lowell's efforts since the 1970s with attracting millions of visitors to the city and fueling the arrival of more middle-class residents. Mark Muro, the director of policy at the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program in Washington, said that Lowell deserves credit for demonstrating "one of the earliest and most important examples nationally of truly repositioning one of the satellite industrial cities." Lowell's creative reuse of old buildings was an inspiration to other cities that wanted to rejuvenate their economies without losing touch with their roots.

But the city's transformation has not always lifted all boats economically, according to studies. The number of people living in poverty in Lowell went up 41.6 percent between the 1980 and 2000 censuses, compared with 14.4 percent in Brockton and Fall River and 33.4 percent in Worcester over the same period, according to a report issued in December by the Citizens' Housing and Planning Association, a Boston-based affordable-housing nonprofit.

"The one thing that was kind of surprising to us is that from 1980 to 2000 Lowell didn't do as well as we had anticipated," said Karen Sunnarborg, a housing consultant in Jamaica Plain and the author of the study, who said that Lowell's reputation during that period had led her to expect better poverty results in the city's census data. For example, she said, Lawrence cut poverty by 10 percent between 1990 and 2000, according to census figures, compared with a more modest 4.7 decline in Lowell. "As of 2000 there wasn't a lot of data that pointed to great success," she said.

Another report issued this February by Brookings and MassInc., which examined the performance of ex-mill cities in Massachusetts, found that per capita incomes in Lowell went up 27.2 percent between 1980 and 2000, slightly above average for the 11 cities studied but well behind the leader, Haverhill, where incomes rose 57.7 percent in the same period.

Bernard Lynch, the city manager of Lowell, argues that poverty rates don't tell the whole story, saying that poverty is often linked to national trends more than local policies.

"Almost every community nationwide has seen some type of increase in the poverty rate in that period of time," he said. "There's a bigger issue here than just the city of Lowell." Moreover, he said, the city's poverty rates reflect, at least in part, the decision dating to the 1970s not to raze poor sections of the city during the redevelopment process.

"If we had gone into some of these neighborhoods and taken an approach that pushed people out, our numbers might look a lot better, but then you'd be calling in saying, 'There's been gentrification there!'" he said. "When you have those types of variety in housing options, you're going to have people of limited means living in the city."

But Farrant said that high-profile projects like the \$11 million LeLacheur Park, the riverfront baseball stadium, have yielded meager results. Studies by his students have shown few tangible benefits from the stadium, he said, since most jobs there are low-wage.

Lynch defended the stadium and the arena, which he said would bring long-term benefits for the city's image and quality of life. "When you look at the arena, frankly, right now it's a money-loser for us, but it enhances the image of the city and pride within the city and it will ultimately be able to handle its own costs," he said. "But some of that is very difficult to quantify. Same with the ballpark - it sells out all the time. It brings people into Lowell, and that's beneficial to the people that live here."

In the 30 years since Lowell began its revitalization campaign, the wave of deindustrialization that destroyed the New England textile industry after World War II has spread to the rest of the country, bringing down once-iconic American industries from steel to farm equipment and forcing hundreds of cities to confront the same wrenching questions about their future that Lowell first faced decades ago.

In Louisville, for instance - where city leaders in the 1970s bragged that their economy was "recession-proof" because of its wide manufacturing base - layoffs at major employers like

General Electric and Brown & Williamson Tobacco began in the 1980s. Pittsburgh's famous steelmakers collapsed.

"Economic development has become much more of a ubiquitous concern," said Joseph Seneca, a professor at Rutgers University who has tracked redevelopment efforts in the Northeast. Even service sector and finance jobs are now being sent overseas, he said, meaning not only ex-industrial cities are in trouble.

But urban specialists say those cities are increasingly adopting strategies much different than the plans Lowell pioneered in the 1980s, instead placing a heavy emphasis on training workers and shying away from expensive construction projects whose economic benefits are often vague. Muro said that many cities are trying to keep their focus on fundamentals, rather than get swept up in "idea viruses" - fads like conventions centers and stadiums that desperate cities had once looked at as economic panaceas. They are also making efforts to restructure municipal governments to make them more nimble in response to changing economic conditions.

In Louisville, for instance, the city and county governments merged and several neighboring counties entered into informal "non-compete" agreements so the region would speak to potential employers with one voice, said Carolyn Gatz, the director of the Greater Louisville Project, a civic group.

Ron Kitchens, the director of Southwest Michigan First, a planning agency in Kalamazoo, Mich., a region that lost jobs when the former Upjohn pharmaceuticals company was acquired by Pfizer in 1995, said he has noticed that planners have shifted their focus away from campaigns to attract a few big employers and have become more wary of importing a template from another city.

"The thing you have to remember about economic development strategies is that they are constantly changing and evolving because the country is constantly changing and evolving," he said.

Lynch dismissed the suggestion that Lowell is behind the times, pointing out that the city has also changed its approach, and has embarked on efforts to provide more job training and to work with neighboring cities to attract employers. Indeed, he said, experimentation is also a part of the Lowell model. "[Lowell] takes a new idea, runs with it, makes the city a better place, and then there's sort of a lag, then it goes in a new direction of more improvement," Lynch said. "Lowell almost takes two steps forward and one step back constantly."

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