

ERRORS AND OMISSIONS

SMART GROWTH'S BLIND SPOT TO INDUSTRIAL JOBS AND LANDS

By Eric Aderneck

SUMMARY

Community planners are well-versed with the tenets of Smart Growth and other similar planning concepts that advance compact development forms, mixed uses, diverse housing, walkable communities, and environmental protection. But what about jobs? If Smart Growth means creating homes for people of all income levels, that also means creating spaces for all job types, ranging from the creative class to the blue collar.

SOMMAIRE

Les urbanistes communautaires connaissent bien les principes de la croissance intelligente et d'autres concepts de planification similaires qui favorisent des formes de développement compactes, des utilisations mixtes, des logements diversifiés, des communautés accessibles à pied et la protection de l'environnement. Mais qu'en est-il de l'emploi? Si la croissance intelligente signifie créer des logements pour les personnes de tous niveaux de revenus, cela signifie également créer des espaces pour tous les types d'emplois, de la classe créative aux cols bleus.

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKING CITY

Community planners are well-versed with the tenets of Smart Growth and other similar planning concepts that advance compact development forms, mixed uses, diverse housing, walkable communities, and environmental protection.

BUT WHAT ABOUT JOBS?

"For many cities and planners, adopting Smart Growth sprawl-containing strategies is associated with the conversion of relatively inexpensive industrial-zoned land to land zoned for mixed-use commercial and residential redevelopment. This can weaken the urban economic base, reduce the supply

of good job-producing land, and contribute to industrial-sector suburban sprawl."

Although written more than ten years ago, this critique is still relevant today. Well located industrial lands have been converted to residential development under the name of Smart Growth and sustainability. But not all of those industrial activities can be outsourced elsewhere.

Smart Growth tends to focus on mixed-use communities with residents served by local amenities, but makes limited mention of employment and virtually none of industry. Rather, attention is on residential, retail, and recreation – the new trifecta of location, location, location. But a city is more than a collection of nice housing, shops, and amenities.

If Smart Growth means creating homes for people of all income levels, that also means creating spaces for all job types, ranging from the creative class to the blue collar. For Smart Growth to strengthen and diversify local economies, policies need to protect critical industrial land from residential encroachment and erosion.

While there's been a shift in employment away from industry, not all jobs are office jobs. Industrial-like businesses that provide crucial services in the urban ecosystem may be 'low key', such as the 'dirty work' of maintenance, suppliers, deliveries, construction, waste management, and cleaning. Some are population serving and some are business serving, and some a combination of both.





SITUATION CRITICAL – INDUSTRIAL IMPORTANCE

Just as there is a housing continuum and an urban transect, there is an industrial spectrum, from light to heavy, traditional to modern, analog to digital, and land extensive to building intensive. Even an economy oriented towards the future requisites some industrial lands. Industry isn't just an undesirable neighbour – it offers many positive externalities and 'back of house' functions that are under-appreciated: diverse jobs, services, and taxes. Flexible and responsive spaces are needed for adaptable and resilient cities.

In terms of transportation, more jobs close to the city centre and proximity between suppliers and customers can counter some reverse commute patterns and contribute to shorter trips, enhance transit service, efficient goods movement, less traffic, reduce air emissions, and safer streets. The highest use for lands from a financial perspective may not necessarily be the best use from a policy perspective. Some lower value industrial uses are required as part of an urban system, and displacing them disrupts that network.

Industrial uses are all too often presented as the poster child of negative externalities, generating air contaminants, truck traffic, and noise. Industrial nuisances like pollution are not the issue they once were, while not dismissing the concern. A city is more than just an amenity-rich consumer destination, but also a base for production, distribution, and repair.

The language about industrial lands uses past tenses and negative terms, when not overlooked and neglected. Notably, many recent municipal strategies and plans relating to industrial lands group them together with other 'employment lands', confounding rather than clarifying that they are different and each need their own supportive policies. By combining them together, it can open the door to allowing employment uses in the form of commercial on industrial lands.

SMART GROWTH IS PUSHING INDUSTRIAL JOBS TO DUMB LOCATIONS

In a sense, the Smart Growth approach has capitalized on the deindustrialization of North American cities that are experiencing population expansion, by converting urban

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industrial lands to residential-oriented, higher-density communities, with the promise of additional housing, active transportation, and environmental sustainability.

In a prior era, those industrial lands were the employment base of the city, and housing was built within walking distance from them. The conversion of industrial lands is also easier in terms of some development approvals, because unlike the intensification of existing residential districts, there are no residential neighbours raising objections. That noted, there may be soil remediation issues on historically heavy industrial sites.

Calls to address the housing crisis, noting industrial land values are much lower than residential ones, puts pressure on the former to convert to the latter. Smart Growth, which advocates for compact development, often through the re-development of core industrial lands for residential and commercial uses, displaces industrial uses, and ironically actually furthers another type of sprawl – industrial and logistics job sprawl.²

Whether by intent or effect, the tension in many cases is protecting existing industrial lands versus building new mixed-use developments. The concern about residential change leading to 'gentrification' is well-known, yet displacement of industry is just as real. When those service commercial and light industrial businesses, often in older buildings on lower-density properties, transition, industry is pushed out of the city. And only later is the loss of significant property tax revenue noted, replaced by lower tax rate residential that require greater municipal services.

Utilization is not measured only in residential units per acre or commercial floor area ratio. Industrial is inherently land extensive, and yet is still productive. A simple count of the direct number of jobs on industrial lands paints an incomplete picture; industrial activity contributes to many more indirect and off-site jobs through multiplier effects.

THE INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY AND URBAN SERVICES

Profiles of Smart Growth appear as if the only types of jobs are office, retail, service, and some other commercial sectors, if they have enough cache, such as knowledge-based tech, software, design, that desire an urban work locale. Yet these businesses need supportive uses, product design needs prototyping labs, food production needs processing facilities, e-commerce sorting needs distribution hubs. Additionally, both light and heavy industrial lands accommodate public services like civil infrastructure, maintenance yards, bus parking, and recycling facilities needed to run a city and fulfill sustainability objectives. Once industrial businesses are removed, what are the long-term implications on the workforce and economy?

Proper land use plans support these economic development objectives. Urban industrial locations provide proximity to the workforce, businesses, consumers, services, etc, supporting and advancing agglomeration economies, growth clusters, and positive spillovers, which are the very reason cities formed.

Land use conflicts, past and present, real and perceived, must be addressed. In some cases, the impacts of industrial on residential such as pollution, vibration, odour, and noise require a physical separation, especially between heavy industrial and ground-oriented residential uses. But with lighter industrial and vertical residential, there is the opportunity, through careful policy and design, to innovatively and appropriately integrate some of these uses.

URBAN INDUSTRIAL FOR AN INDUSTRIOUS CITY

Out of sight, leads to out of mind. But also out of place, and out of space. Sustainability is not just an environmental matter, but also one of economy, employment, income, and wealth, which sustains a vibrant society.





The definitional evolution of ‘sustainability’ – increasingly focused on environmental and green – has been used as a rationale to convert ‘dirty’ industrial working lands to ‘clean’ residential living plans. The concept has been captured to mean high-end livability for consumers who can afford it. Yet it’s a lonely voice who argues against sustainability, livable, greenness, cleanness, and smartness, by advocating the need for urban manufacturing, trade-oriented lands, city serving functions, and blue-collar employment.

Even as the structure of the economy changes, there remains a necessary link between production and consumption, industrial and service, workers and work. The form and type may change through technology and time, but is still needed for the denizens. We don’t want to lose industry; we want to modernize the products and processes so it can be part of the future of cities.

METRO VANCOUVER ACTIONS TO PRESERVE INDUSTRIAL LAND

The Metro Vancouver Regional Growth Strategy, Metro 2040, adopted in 2011, included policies to designate and preserve industrial lands in the region. This was in response to conversion of industrial lands to other uses, including suburban office parks and residential housing, collectively leading to an undersupply of industrial lands to meet the needs of the regional economy. With decisions about significant lands made by individual municipalities, retention of uses that service the region was at risk. These policies were enhanced in the updated Regional Growth Strategy, Metro 2050, adopted in 2023.^{3,4}

Agreed to by all member jurisdictions, these regional policies are implemented as municipal regulations. This has resulted in a better understanding of the importance of industrial land and has substantially reduced the rate of industrial land conversion compared to the decades before such regional oversight existed, in a gateway region continuing to experience high rates of growth.

Metro Vancouver also prepared a Regional Industrial Lands Strategy, completed in 2020,^{5,6} which included additional actions for governments,

agencies, and stakeholders to ensure sufficient industrial lands to meet the needs of the growing regional economy. In addition to elaborating on the importance of a coordinated transportation system, it further advances industrial intensification and densification, such as multi-level buildings, to optimize the limited lands available. In terms of monitoring, every five years Metro Vancouver undertakes a comprehensive inventory of industrial lands to document the supply and change over time. Notably, while comprising only 4% of the region’s land base, industrial lands are home to over a quarter of the region’s jobs.⁷

CONCLUSIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Smart Growth has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the importance of industrial lands for the livability of cities, with emphasis on residential, retail, and recreation. Smart Growth needs to embrace an equitable, efficient, and adequate industrial land base necessary for a sustainable urban economy and its diverse workforce.

The demand for urban living, which is a positive form of development that advances sustainability and is often advocated by Smart Growth, can occur in higher density forms than are viable for industrial land uses.

Conflicted policy objectives and responses need to be recognized and reconciled. Build Smart Growth communities, and also protect industrial lands and expand employment opportunities. Here are the proposed solutions:

- Simultaneously pursue industrial lands retention and residential densification, through coordinated regional and municipal plans and actions.
- Use robust policy and zoning tools to protect industrial land – and avoid spot rezonings that undermine these policies.
- Intensify existing residential and commercial areas, and keep industrial lands for primarily industrial uses.
- Enhance strategies to promote industrial intensification and densification.
- Direct office space to urban centres well served by transit and amenities.
- Integrate rather than separate light industrial and other uses in an urban environment, as appropriate.

- Introduce light industrial uses within some commercial and mixed-use districts where appropriate, with cautions about combining industrial and residential uses together.

A holistic approach requires consideration at the city and regional scale, not just at the site level, and the long-term needs of the entire community. Real success is a place where residents can live close to work, and industry can operate close to the workforce. Stable industrial lands are needed for a resilient, sustainable, prosperous, and smart city-region for years to come.

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ENDNOTES

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