

Going to TOWN

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Three European cities—Berlin, Freiburg, and Warsaw—tackle urban vitality and climate change with varying approaches to town center redevelopment.



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Freiburg, Germany, has developed an extensive network of streetcars, as well as bike- and pedestrian-friendly policies.

JUDGED BY MODERN U.S. STANDARDS, EUROPEAN cities have enviably prosperous city centers—thriving mixed-use zones teeming with pedestrians, transit, and bicycles. But it was not always so. In many cases, these historic cores were regenerated after severe war damage or after long periods of economic and population decline. The notable city success stories most often came only after a shrewd tactical combination of visionary policy changes and patient investment.

Now those successes are drawing renewed interest. Cities that are still struggling—including many in the United States—are taking notes on the suc-

cesses of and lessons taught by Europe's standout examples of urban regeneration. Much of the new interest is coming as a result of renewed concerns about climate change.

Amid all the new climate research, one intriguing observation stands out: people in central city areas on average produce notably lower levels of greenhouse gases per capita, even when they enjoy a comparably higher standard of living, as many do.

Some researchers point to density as a key variable: the higher the density, the lower the emissions, at least at up to density of about 30 units per acre



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(75 units per ha). Others—notably Andrea Sarzynski, senior research analyst at the Metropolitan Policy Program, and her colleagues at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.—are looking beyond density to a complex mix of other factors. Compact city cores often have a more efficient distribution of jobs, housing, and daily services, and offer more efficient ways of getting around, including walking and transit. They also allow more efficient distribution of energy and water and tend to promote a more compact, efficient lifestyle in more compact and efficient homes.

But buyers do not seem to be waiting for research reports; they already are heating up markets in

Europe's central cities. As in the United States, there is a strong market trend toward urban living and the cultural and lifestyle amenities it can offer. But the recognition that what is good for urban living is also good for the environment is fueling a new mix of government policies, private capital, and public/private partnerships. The result is a fresh new mix of ambitious town center redevelopments.

In three European examples—Freiburg and Berlin in Germany, and Warsaw, Poland—the political and historical conditions are remarkably different, but the goal is the same. The varied lessons to be drawn may be instructive for other cities.

Building Green on a Medieval Core

The southwestern German city of Freiburg, across the Rhine from the Alsace region of France, has emerged as a kind of European poster child for successful green development. But what may be more intriguing is the way the city has explicitly coupled green technology with urban regeneration.

This medieval city of 210,000 is now one of the fastest growing in Germany. That growth is fueled in part by solar research and other green technologies: the city is the home of Albert Ludwigs University and a raft of international green research and policy organizations. The influential International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) has its headquarters here, as does the International Solar Energy Society.

Like many German cities, Freiburg's historic core was severely damaged during World War II. Its faithful reconstruction after the war—a point of pride in reaffirming local identity and culture—also added significant upgrades to pedestrian and transit facilities. Other upgrades followed, including another aggressive plan for revitalization in 1969. The existing tram line—an electric-powered light-rail system—was preserved and extended to become what current chief planner Wulf Daseking calls the backbone of the city, encouraging extensive infill transit-oriented development.

In 1996, Freiburg passed one of Europe's most aggressive greenhouse gas plans, carrying ambitious reduction targets of 25 percent below 1992 levels by 2010—and a variety of carrots and sticks to achieve those cuts. The climate protection concept included new energy efficiency standards for buildings, along



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Freiburg's new tram line extends into Rieselfeld, a high-density transit-oriented development. Many of Rieselfeld's buildings incorporate passive solar design, solar photovoltaic panels, bike-friendly facilities, vegetable gardens, and other green features.

with innovative policies for urban development around transit facilities.

Today, homes in Freiburg have to meet tough energy standards when bought or sold, and the city's skyline has sprouted some 120,000 square feet (11,100 sq m) of solar panels—a remarkable fact for a region whose latitude and climate are roughly comparable with those of the northern tip of Maine. Roughly half the city's heating is provided by a combined heat-and-power system that uses excess heat created by power generation in a steam cogeneration system.

The city's efforts to promote walking, bicycling, and use of public transit have certainly paid off. More than 35 percent of Freiburg residents do not own a car, and more than one-third of all trips occur by bicycle. "In Freiburg, the bicycle is an essential mode of transport for short and medium-distance journeys," says Rolf Böhme, mayor of Freiburg from 1982 to 2002. "At relatively small expense, people can be encouraged to cycle by promoting bicycle use for the benefit of the environment in a targeted way."

Freiburg's population growth has been met in large part by two new brownfield developments near the

city center—Rieselfeld, on a former sewage plant, and Vauban, on an abandoned army base. Both developments offer tram service into the heart of downtown and have solar collectors, passive solar houses, community gardening, car sharing programs, and other state-of-the-art green development features.

Planning for Rieselfeld began in the early 1990s. The detailed development process was controlled by the city, with smaller parcels sold to developers and to community cohousing groups. The design and construction process was controlled through a series of urban codes, as well as stipulations about energy efficiency and other development features.

The plan of Rieselfeld is a straightforward grid, with a tram line looping through the neighborhood. A V-shaped central district contains the neighborhood's schools, meeting and sports areas, a gymnasium, a church (shared by Catholic and Protestant denominations), and many of the project's stores and offices. A seven-minute tram ride connects to downtown Freiburg.

Development of Vauban followed soon afterward with detailed planning that began in 1995. Now approaching buildout, the community on completion is expected to have 5,000 residents and 600 jobs. Vauban's development included more direct participation of the area residents in planning, which resulted in an increased emphasis on community facilities such as gardens, playgrounds, and a community center. Residents also asked for, and received, greater variety in building types.

Vauban has an array of green features, including a cogeneration plant that uses excess heat from manufacturing, extensive solar electric and solar hot water panels on many buildings, and green infrastructure such as extensive natural vegetation and stormwater runoff infiltration zones. All the houses are energy efficient and many are zero-energy homes. Residents with cars are assessed an annual parking fee, and those who choose not to own a car—about half the residents now—can avoid the steep annual cost of €18,000 (\$27,000).

Though sales reportedly have gone well, not everyone seems to find the new master-planned developments appealing. Andrew Purvis, writing in the U.K.'s *Observer* newspaper this past March found that some residents chafe at what they seem to regard as a sense of conformity. "It jumps in your face a little,"

resident Claudia Duppe told Purvis. “It feels claustrophobic because everyone expects you to behave in the same way.” Other residents objected to the monolithic architecture. Barbara Classen, who moved to Vauban from England, likened the neighborhood’s feel to a British government housing complex, and noted that some Freiburg residents clearly prefer the more traditional parts of town.

Freiburg’s new planned developments, though notable successes, may carry useful lessons for others planning similar projects that might be too reliant on green virtue as an in-your-face selling point. Rene Reiche, another Vauban resident, summed it up this way for Purvis: “Green living has to be a quality decision, not just a salving of my conscience.”

Rebuilding a Shattered City Center

Passengers arriving at the Hauptbahnhof, the gleaming new central station in the heart of historic Berlin, are often puzzled to discover that it is surrounded by an empty expanse of brownfield land. Here, the Berlin Wall and its buffer zone had cut through a declining industrial area, already heavily damaged by Allied bombing during World War II. As a result, the area remained a mostly deserted storage yard in the years after the war.

That changed in 1990 when Germany was reunified under one government. Anticipating major economic development in the area, the city undertook an ambitious redevelopment plan calling for retail, office, and residential projects. The train station came first, in 2006, and the rest of the development is slowly coming on line—though far more slowly than was projected in original estimates, in part because the market for residential and office development has not been as strong as expected.

Karl-Heinz Maschmeier, a consultant to the public/private development consortium, thinks the pace is set to pick up. “Already, more than 300,000 people pass through the new station every day,” he notes. “It will become even more central when it is connected to the new airport by bus. This will accelerate development, especially in the hotel sector.” Maschmeier points out that the area is attracting art galleries and other new development, and already includes several government ministries, a major hospital, and a contemporary art museum.

Berlin, a city of 3.5 million, has struggled in recent years to maintain its population and manufacturing base. Reunification with the declining East Berlin exacerbated the challenge. In response, the city in 1991 implemented an “ecological economy” program, placing a big emphasis on recruiting green technology firms. The result is that today, more than 400 green businesses employ 13,000 workers, according to a study by the Ifo Institute for Economic Research at the University of Munich and the Institute for Ecological Economic Research in Berlin. More than 100 companies are involved in environmental measurement and analytical activities, and the city has 80 environmental research institutes.

A key element of the ecological economy initiative has been urban and transportation planning aimed at making the core of the city more attractive to residents. Unsightly or toxic manufacturing facilities, for example, will have to clean up their act. New eco-businesses will be recruited to the central city, offering high-paying jobs for urban residents who will be able to live near their work.



Berlin is seeking to connect its new Hauptbahnhof central railway station to pedestrian and bike paths, and to new urban infill areas.

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Berlin's 1994 Energy Concept policy, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent, placed a high premium on the city's traditional urban planning, which emphasizes a dense mix of residential, business, retail, and leisure space. The policy directed that at least five new neighborhoods be built with the specific goal of offering an appealing car-free urban lifestyle. Public transit, walking, and bicycling, always prominent features of Berlin's urban environment, were promoted through new incentives and new public investments in infrastructure.

But Berlin's most notable success might just be in its former East Berlin neighborhoods, which have seen a resurgence of renovation and urban infill

regenerated through a shrewd mix of public policy and private entrepreneurial activity. That is a shrewd policy for climate change, too: as the National Trust for Historic Preservation puts it, sometimes "the greenest building may be the one that's already built."

Stoking the Market for Urban Living

Passengers leaving the train station in central Warsaw are greeted by a surprising sight: the enormous, improbably ornate Palace of Culture and Science built by Joseph Stalin in 1952 as a gift to the people of Warsaw. The communist regime that welcomed that gift is gone now, replaced by a new political climate that may be one of Europe's most laissez-faire. Even though it lacks Germany's level of public funding, the core of Warsaw is undergoing aggressive redevelopment.

Just to the west of Stalin's gift is an almost equally startling sight, this one created by Western capitalists: the new *Złote Tarasy* (Golden Terrace) mixed-use development, with its signature gleaming, undulating courtyard roof. The complex, opened in 2007 to popular acclaim, includes offices, a hotel, and shops, and totals 2 million square feet (186,000 sq m) of space built for a reported \$500 million.

A new museum of modern art is planned in the plaza across from the Palace of Culture. The minimalist design by Swiss architect Christian Kerez, winner of an international competition, is intended to evoke the understated modernist designs of the area's postwar architecture. The project is not without controversy: some critics have likened the design to a bunker or a big-box supermarket, and the first competition jury resigned en masse when they concluded that the restrictive qualification rules were unfair to smaller Polish firms.

Nearby are popular older urban neighborhoods teeming with young urban professionals. Farther out, but served by transit, are the large new housing developments of the Wilanow district, a new neighborhood on the grounds of Wilanow Castle. Condominium developments like *Ostoja Wilanow*—low-rise buildings on a parklike commons—offer young urban professionals easy access to downtown amenities.

Of all the cities damaged during World War II, Warsaw may have suffered the most. Under the Nazis, its large Jewish community was imprisoned in



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In the historic heart of the former East Berlin, the city is demolishing the Palace of the Republic, a communist-era building that was found to be contaminated with asbestos. It will be replaced by a rebuilt *Stadtschloss*, the historic Royal Palace demolished by the communists.

development. Once-grim streets are now popping with colorful shops, cafés, clubs, and startup businesses. Maschmeier cites a project his company recently completed: a 100-year-old factory that had served as a hotel and government residence building and then had sat empty for a decade, now houses leading media offices and commands a premium over the market. "Old substance paid off," Maschmeier says.

The lesson may be that the best opportunities do not always lie in empty brownfield sites, but sometimes in older, quirky neighborhoods that can be



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Warsaw's Zlote Tarasy (Golden Terrace) complex is a new mixed-use project adjacent to the central Warsaw train station. It includes 200 shops and restaurants, a movie theater, a hotel, offices—and Poland's first Hard Rock Café.

its ghetto, then transported to concentration camps where most died. Then the Polish underground Home Army launched the Warsaw Uprising, which was brutally crushed. Almost 85 percent of the city was razed by the Nazis in retaliation.

Undaunted, the city after the war rebuilt its historic center and its splendid buildings in meticulous detail, often working from archival drawings and family photographs. Today, the Stare Miasto, the central square, is the city's most popular tourist draw and a strong economic engine for the central city.

Warsaw hardly fared much better under the crippling economic hardships of the Soviet-installed communist regime. Like East Berlin, the central city stagnated. But some new construction did continue: Stalin's Palace of Culture was soon joined by other buildings in the same socialist realism style—a distinctive hybrid of Polish Renaissance and more streamlined Soviet forms.

Today, many of those buildings are popular nightlife haunts. Urban professionals, students, and artists are clearly drawn to their distinctive retro charms. Many younger professionals now want to live in the central city, where life is more cosmopolitan, says Anna Czywczynska, a sales agent at a central city art gallery.

"The government doesn't seem to be doing much about climate change," she says. "I think we're following your American example to a fault. A lot of couples, especially with children, still want to live far out in the little suburban house and drive to work. But a new tendency is evolving and I am an example of it. Younger people want to be more outgoing and more environmentally friendly, and we want an urban lifestyle."

Clearly, many young urban professionals are fueling a hot new market for central city living. Czywczynska thinks this is the most important ingredient for tackling climate change. "Maybe we overreacted, but in Poland we learned the hard way that top-down planning doesn't work by itself. You have to work with the market's natural tendencies."

That lesson seems to be recognized in Berlin, and in Freiburg, too, where top-down planning is increasingly leavened with a more strategic mix of private and bottom-up planning and construction. Europe has always seemed more willing than the United States to favor public solutions over private ones—though the increased regulatory burden in Europe has been offset somewhat by a more predictable environment and, therefore, less risk. But as these three cities show, Europeans are also evolving their own diverse mix of public and private strategies, customized to accommodate a wide range of cultural, political, and economic conditions. **UL**

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