



Two Buildings and Two Towns: Comparison of Abandoned and Repurposed Plants

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At the height of apparel manufacturing in the United States in the 1970s, approximately 24,500 establishments were operating within the country (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1987). With massive closings since the 70s, current counts enumerate slightly more than 7,000 U.S. plants in operation. A noticeable number of closings also ensued in textile mills and textile product plants (Borneman, 2011). Two decades later, a similar pattern occurred in U.S. furniture manufacturing (Furniture, 2007). As these establishments tended to be clustered in the U.S. southeast in the 20th century, the burden of abandoned plant buildings looms large in many southeastern states.

Extensive research, both government and academic, has explored the impact of plant closures on employees; however, limited research has examined the impact of over 20,000 abandoned buildings throughout the U.S. southeast. Observation and limited documentation indicate that many plants remain abandoned contributing to decline of once lively communities that depended upon these operations. In stark contrast, a few abandoned buildings have been repurposed and now represent thriving operations that have rejuvenated their communities through new jobs, increased tax base, and reuse of resources. Increasing repurposement of abandoned buildings has potential to revitalize communities (Faircloth, Kaiser, & Steinmann, 2009). The purpose of this study is to examine an abandoned plant in one town, contrast it with the repurposed building in a similar town, and identify forces behind the repurposement. This information can be used to encourage potential change for the many other abandoned buildings that remain in the landscape.

A qualitative study using case study methodology was used. Two plants, abandoned when competition and other issues drove owners to take business off shore, were selected. Both plants were initially involved in major repurposing projects. Using extensive photographic documentation, the two plants were matched on characteristics for reduction of known biases. Both plants are large brick structures containing typical wooden floors, large windows, and high ceilings of spinning plants located in the U.S. southeast. Both plants were in moderately good condition at the time of closings and were located within small communities near larger towns.

Data on both plants were collected through a variety of sources, including online public documents (e.g., minutes of zoning meetings), newspaper articles, websites relative to the repurposing projects, personal interviews, and photographs. Data were analyzed using a content analysis method to decontextualize and recontextualize the information. Charts were used for comparison of ownership plus financial, sociological, and economic concepts following variables used in employment studies (e.g., Hodges & Lentz, 2010; MacDonald, et al., 2012).

Despite continued and renewed efforts for repurposing, Plant A remains empty while Plant B has been repurposed successfully. The most striking contrast in the plants is in the ownership and development process in the early stages of planning for repurposing. Plant A, the continued abandoned plant, was part of an economic development project that was started by a grass roots effort with some local government support. Plant B, the successfully repurposed plant, was purchased and developed by an individual using private financing and tax credits for development monies. The second major contrast between the plants is the immediate locale. Over the past thirty years, development around Plant A has moved toward industrial development. Meanwhile, the development around Plant B over the same time has remained relatively rural with some growth in housing. Development around both plants has continued through time with the housing and light retail growth around Plant B providing a symbiotic growth for both businesses in the repurposed plant and businesses in the surround. Meanwhile, industrial growth around Plant B has expanded but has not brought development interest in the abandoned plant.

The hands-on and personal oversight provided by the owner of Plant B seems to be the most obvious force creating success of the repurposement. Although government programs and grass roots involvement provide some monies and some interests, success of repurposement occurred only when public/private funding was matched with private forces to create action. Although striking in its comparative findings, this study is limited by its case study format. Future studies could investigate a larger sample. Particularly, a study could investigate the role financing had on other successful and failed repurposed developments, providing important insights into the role played by these repurposed buildings into the wider role of reinvigorating a whole community.

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