

Brownfield Policy Implications for Strengthening Urban Manufacturing

Reusing brownfields to strengthen U.S. manufacturing was a major topic at this year's [National Brownfields Conference](#), held on May 15-17, 2013, at Atlanta, GA. The Conference, cosponsored by the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#), brought together over 5,000 stakeholders from the U.S. and abroad to share ideas and knowledge about redeveloping contaminated properties and sustainable development.

Brownfields are properties with a past use that has led to known or suspected environmental contamination. Their presence in [cities](#), large and small, poses significant environmental and economic problems and creates a strong disincentive for revitalizing urban manufacturing. While not all brownfields are former manufacturing facilities, brownfields are often associated with the decades-long decline of heavy industry in U.S. cities.

Encouraging brownfield redevelopment has been a major policy focus at the federal, state and local levels over the last decade and half. National and state regulatory and financial frameworks support community-driven land use planning and economic and community development efforts to overcome the problems of brownfields. These efforts have fostered an active network of government, business, nonprofit, community and academic stakeholders, and the Brownfields Conference is the premier venue to learn about the range of challenges and opportunities confronting these stakeholders.

With revitalizing manufacturing at the forefront of U.S. economic development efforts, many Conference attendees expressed the need to begin proactively identifying and cleaning up brownfields to meet demand for new urban manufacturing space fueled by growth in certain manufacturing sectors and reshoring. For example, [Jason Miller](#), Special Assistant to the President for Manufacturing Policy, spoke about linking [smart growth](#) policies for redeveloping urban brownfields with new federal initiatives for manufacturing. This is particularly encouraging since our work shows that brownfield redevelopment stakeholders have a critical role to play in supporting [urban manufacturing](#) and in correcting what we call "[Smart Growth's Blind Side](#)."

Experience demonstrates that industrial reuse of brownfields can be more cost effective and generate more community benefits than other end uses, but there will always be more need to reuse brownfields than there are available resources. Prioritizing scarce redevelopment resources for manufacturing is an immediate challenge for urban manufacturing supporters. Moreover, local stakeholders must address unchecked speculative infill development, including on brownfields, which continues to drive large amounts of rezoning of urban industrial land for other uses and creates uncertainty and additional barriers to reviving urban manufacturing.

The 15th National Brownfields Conference was a call for action to reconsider brownfield redevelopment policy implications for urban manufacturing. Going forward, manufacturing and brownfield redevelopment proponents will need to work together to capitalize on this opportunity.



Butler Manufacturing Co. on a 4.5-Acre Brownfield Redevelopment Site, Kansas City, MO

Photo credit. N. Z. Hoelzel, 2013



Nancey Green Leigh, Ph.D., FAICP (nleigh@coa.gatech.edu) is a professor in the Georgia Institute of Technology's School of City and Regional Planning specializing in economic development planning and urban revitalization, and director of the Ph.D. Program.



Nathanael Z. Hoelzel (natehoelzel@gatech.edu) is a Ph.D. student in the Georgia Institute of Technology's School of City and Regional Planning. His dissertation on urban manufacturing and brownfields is supported by a U.S. EPA's STAR Graduate Fellowship.