

Florida Atlantic University

*Camden After the Fall:*  
*Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City*  
by Howard Gillette Jr.

A Book Review Submitted To

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by

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## Book Review

Gillette, Howard, Jr. *Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

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Camden, New Jersey has the unfortunate distinction of being one of the poorest cities in the United States. Consequently, it has been a focus of federal, state, and local urban renewal programs since the 1960s. Despite this attention, Howard Gillette explains in *Camden After the Fall: Decline and Renewal in a Post-Industrial City*, these renewal efforts have failed to help the plight of Camden's citizens. Urban renewal programs are usually geared towards improving the infrastructure of the city in an attempt to get middle-class Americans and businesses to move into Camden. However, such improvements do little in the short and the long run to help the everyday lives of Camdenites who are struggling to make ends meet in a city with atrocious environmental conditions, high taxes, and few jobs to offer.

Of the jobs that are created from businesses that are lured into the city, such as the state of New Jersey's \$52 million aquarium, which is located in Camden's downtown waterfront, the city's uneducated and untrained masses only qualify for their menial, low paying positions. Promoting higher education, then, seems like the obvious answer for improving life in Camden. However, when one is struggling to survive, education, understandably, is not a top priority, even though it would help in the long run. This is the legacy that deindustrialization created for Camden. With flocks of white, working class Americans departing for the suburbs in the 1960s and into the 1970s, due in part to riots breaking out, Camden lost a great deal of revenue. The city tried to make up for this

revenue by raising taxes, but that only caused a number of factories to move out of Camden and into the surrounding suburbs. With the loss of manufacturing jobs, those individuals with the means to do so followed the factories into the suburbs. Those who could not afford to move were left in a city with few jobs, a deteriorating atmosphere, and higher taxes that would scare away new businesses from investing in the city.

Unfortunately, Gillette does not explain what the riots that scared the people out of Camden were all about or who participated in them? These are integral questions that naturally arise from such a claim. Additionally, his work lacks a forward progression. One chapter will provide a buildup of events ranging from the 1960s to the 1990s, while the succeeding chapter will break that momentum and go back to the 1960s. On top of that, it is nearly impossible to distinguish one Camden organization from another. New organizations, such as the Greater Camden Movement or the Concerned Citizens of North Camden consistently pop up throughout the book. This tends to clutter-up the narrative and it takes away from the reader's understanding of the subject matter. The author simply needed to explain that Camden's residents did not sit on the sidelines in the face of adversity; they attempted to improve their lives. Mentioning just a few organizations would have been sufficient to make his point. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand who certain individuals are because there is no title given with their name.

While Gillette's book has its flaws it, nevertheless, offers an incredible, vivid picture of life in Camden before and after the fall of industrialization. He must be commended for his dedication to his subject matter. Despite poor record keeping in Camden, Gillette perseveres in his quest to capture the true story of Camden. He does this by using newspapers and by conducting hundreds of interviews with current and

former Camden residents in order to understand why former residents are bitter at the current fate of Camden. This effort helps the reader to understand that Camden was not a perfect city before the industries left. Former citizen Ruth Bogutz recalled that “the Jews, blacks, Poles, and Italians at her school ‘were friendly during the day, but we didn’t cross at night (32).’” Such a comment illuminates the depth of racism that existed in the city. Gillette asserts that the “close association” between the loss of manufacturing jobs and the racism that existed in the city “contributed greatly to sustaining public memory in the belief that African Americans were somehow responsible” for Camden’s fate (40). Gillette explains that former residents of Camden blame African Americans for the city’s downfall because the city currently has a non-white population base of ninety percent. To his credit, he exposes this blame as pure racism.

Howard Gillette Jr., a professor of history at Rutgers University portrays a startling image of the present conditions in Camden and dismisses the remembered unity that a great number of former Camden residents adhere to when discussing their lives in the city. His greatest contribution to the field of urban history is taking a small city of industrial fame and using it as a case study for the problems that exist in other formerly industrial cities in the United States. By using a smaller city, he is able to better grasp the complexity of the problems left by deindustrialization. He believes that the state of New Jersey’s most recent urban renewal initiative for Camden of building new infrastructure in the city will help to improve the city’s image for investors. However, he views this as a mirror image of the failed initiatives of the 1960s since the new 2002 initiative fails to “direct resources toward improving options for current residents, even as it sought to attract middle class residents back to the city (250).”