

Issue Brief

Brownfields and Livable Communities

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Issue

Brownfields are industrial or commercial sites that are (or are perceived to be) environmentally contaminated, complicating the potential for redeveloping or reusing the sites. Despite the obstacles involved in cleaning up the property, brownfields are often attractive for redevelopment because they are already connected to existing infrastructure, they offer alternatives to building on virgin land, and redeveloping them turns hazardous eyesores into community assets. In addition, they give communities the same benefits as other development: an expanded tax base, revitalized neighborhoods, and new jobs.

Details

Recent federal legislation, for which the AIA lobbied, increased funding for state and local brownfields programs, allowed more flexible uses for that funding, and offered more liability protection for innocent parties who previously might have been subject to lengthy, costly litigation.

With an estimated 500,000 sites in the U.S.—in small towns, big cities, and rural communities alike—the potential for brownfields projects is huge. Although brownfields projects can be more complex than conventional developments because of environmental clean-up, special financing, and longer development time frame, they can reap greater rewards for developers. They are often located in urban areas where developable land is in short supply, they qualify for government subsidies, and the property is often cheaper because of the contamination.

Reclaiming these sites will help communities become more livable by cleaning up environmental hazards, reusing existing infrastructure, and allowing infill development rather than sprawling outward. Many brownfields redevelopments, in cities as diverse as New Orleans; Wichita, Kansas; Emeryville, California; and Trenton, New Jersey, have sparked neighborhood revitalizations, turning semideserted industrial areas into hip, vibrant districts.

AIA Action

The AIA strongly supports brownfields redevelopment and urges its inclusion as a vital element in livability and revitalization strategies. The process of cleaning up and reusing a brownfield is long and complicated, with myriad players and federal, state, and local regulations and incentives to coordinate. Architects can help develop the overall vision for the site, fit it into the context of the surrounding community and region, and keep the multitude of stakeholders—including concerned community residents—informed, involved, and on track.

Quick Facts

- According to a U.S. Conference of Mayors survey:
 - Over 900 brownfields sites, comprising more than 10,000 acres, have been successfully redeveloped.
 - Another 700 sites, involving 9,000 acres, are currently being redeveloped.
 - Actual tax revenue from brownfields projects in 45 cities totals \$90 million.
 - Brownfields redevelopment has generated more than 83,000 jobs in 74 cities.
 - An estimated \$790 million to \$1.9 billion of tax revenue and 576,000 jobs could be generated by brownfields redevelopment in 149 cities.
 - In addition, 113 cities estimated that brownfields would allow them to support an additional 4.3 million people without adding to existing infrastructure.
- The mixed-use Atlantic Station brownfields redevelopment in Atlanta reported a waiting list of more than 800 people for its first 69 condo units, more than six months before they will be available.

Resources

- For more information on the AIA's involvement in brownfields legislation, visit AIA Government Affairs at www.aia.org/gov.
- The June 2003 issue of *Architectural Record* features a continuing education article on brownfields, available to AIA members at archrecord.construction.com/resources/coneduc/archives/0306edit-1.asp.
- The International City/County Management Association runs an online clearinghouse for brownfields information at www.brownfieldsource.org.
- The U.S. Conference of Mayors' annual brownfields reports, along with other resources, can be found at www.usmayors.org/uscm/brownfields.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Web site has federal regulations, incentives, and partnerships to promote brownfields redevelopment at www.epa.gov/brownfields.