

## Imagining the Suburban Future

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February 5, 2009

I view my task as starting today's discussion about the future of the suburbs, and I will do so in two ways. I begin with some conceptual comments about what we currently mean by suburbs so that I can define what I am talking about. I will then go on to speak more concretely about their future. I shall discuss suburbs in general rather than those in specific places.

And since I cannot predict the future, I will try to imagine it but as a social scientist and planner, not as a novelist, much as I did in my recent book Imagining America in 2003. Most of imaginings will be about approximately the next 10 years, but sometimes I will use a longer time frame.

### Defining Suburbs

We currently define suburbs in two ways. The first definition is of a bounded community located on the other side of the city limits; that is the classical definition which the OED traces back to at least the 14th century. The second, contemporary American definition sees suburbs as bedroom communities of single family homes serving mostly white collar workers and the cities to which they commute.

However, neither definition is very helpful these days. The first definition views suburbs as relational to the city limits, but for most of us, these limits are only lines on a map. The lines matter mainly to elected and appointed officials because they set the boundaries to their governance authority as well as their tax and police power.

However, most urban and suburban residents pay virtually no attention to these official boundaries; instead they follow their own individual, and thus distinctive paths. These include their journeys to work, or to the relatives and friends they see regularly, as well as to the various stores at which they shop most often and the places they worship, among others.

Some of the places to which people go have boundaries of their own; stores and other firms have market areas in which they do most of their selling. Non profit agencies can identify service areas from which they draw most of their clients but some, like parishes, have boundaries which define their

authority.

Drawing maps of all these journeys and areas and the land uses at which they end just for the most important economic and non-economic activities will reveal an immense welter of lines and boundaries, suggesting in yet another way how unimportant the official boundaries are in everyday life. In addition, such a mapping will indicate that most of American life now takes place in interconnected metropolitan regions, and not in urban or suburban communities.

The second definition, of the suburb as a bedroom community, is out of date.

Although such bedroom communities still exist, many of the commuting workers, who are now both male and female, no longer travel to and from the city. They are more likely to work all over the region, including in old industrial suburbs that the observers obsessed with bedroom communities ignored, or former bedroom communities that have now attracted shopping malls, office buildings and other places of employment.

There are some suburbs which mainly serve cities, for example Long Island City, in which one can find both back offices for Manhattan firms and apartment houses occupied by commuting Manhattan workers. However, I doubt anyone ever thinks of Long Island City as an example of suburbia.

The point I want to make is that the terms we use to analyze communities oversimplify them and the subjects we study, but I will spare you a similar analysis about the complexities of defining cities.

Instead I will suggest a working definition for this presentation! Suburbs are lower density settlements, mostly residential but sometimes also commercial, industrial or with mixed land uses, with a variety of relationships to nearby cities and to other suburbs.

Cities are higher density such settlements, usually older than suburbs with a yet greater mixture of land uses. I suppose I could also add that cities have fewer single family houses, but the typical American city has many more such houses than our stereotype of the city.

This is a good time to warn you that what I say hereafter applies to America as a whole; I will not be talking about the NY-NJ region, for it is too atypical in too many respects. Anyone involved in urban policy or urban studies should think of the NY-NJ region as one dominated by a small island off the coast of the United States.

Clearly, that island is not comparable to any region in the rest of the U.S. and over the years some politicians have suggested it be pushed out to sea and sent back to Europe where it belongs.

However, my colleagues on this panel will be talking about this region, and about its New Jersey portion as well.

### Imagining Suburban Futures

I now want to do some imagining of the future, but I will begin with three assumptions. First, I think the post World War II growth of the suburbs, however defined was a unique event. It was brought on by two decades of economic depression and world war in which virtually no building occurred, by the tremendous demand for housing generated as a result, and by a powerful preference for single family houses in which young families could raise their children.

That post war growth went on for many years, partly as a result of government housing and road building policy and the two decade long continuation of post war affluence. These were followed by the white flight from the cities that resulted from the expansion of ghettos and other nonwhite urban neighborhoods in many cities.

I assume that such a long and massive housing and community building spree will ever take place again, at least not in any foreseeable future.

Second, I think that residentially speaking, the American Dream will remain focussed on the single family house and that people will continue to make sacrifices in the hope of spending a large part of their adult lives in one.

For our discussion today, I would most strongly emphasize the point that both suburban homeowners and future homeowner hopefuls will oppose politically any attempt to move them involuntarily to significantly higher densities.

Undoubtedly, more future new home buyers and renters than ever will settle for rowhouses and garden apartments, and many may never wind up in a single family house. Still, I don't think they are ready to give up that hope. Even now, few people are ready to raise families in high rise apartments, other than some of the very rich but they almost always also have low density weekend houses.

However, I wish the federal government would undertake some experiments to see under what conditions, young families would move into what kinds of high rise apartments, and what levels of financial incentives, read bribes, would be needed to get them to

make such a move.

My third assumption; that except in crises and after disasters, most community change is slow. Although Americans are still thought of as a nation of movers, since the 1960s, the number moving once a year has gone down slowly from 20 percent to 13 percent. Most of that moving is done by the poor who are looking for better or cheaper housing, although they move small distances within communities. A recent Pew national survey reports that while 63 percent have moved to a different community at least once in their lives, the rest, 37 percent, have stayed in the community in which they were born.

My change-is-slow assumption has a policy sequel: planners should not assume that people will do what planners and their plans expect them to do. By all means make plans for drastic change if you are sure it is in nearly everyone's best interest, but prepare a backup plan for what most people think is in their best interest.

#### Four Factors

Speaking then of American suburbs in general, I do not imagine drastic changes in the next decade or even the next quarter century. However, what will actually happen depends on four sets of factors:

- 1.the state of the economy,
- 2.changes in the family, household and related social institutions,
- 3.the energy situation, and
- 4.the spread of global warming.

#### The Economy

I think it is fair to imagine that not much residential growth or housing construction will take place until the end of what might now be called the Great Recession. In fact, if conditions worsen, more young people may stay longer in, or return to the parental abode. Yet more will double up with peers. Even some married or partnered couples will have to live with other couples. And a number of immigrants will return to the old country if the cost of living there is significantly cheaper.

I doubt that the Obama administration will want or need to add to the existing housing supply until the foreclosure and related disasters have ended, although I would be glad if it would increase the supply of low income housing to counteract the shrinkage in such housing that has taken place the last couple of decades.

The spread of foreclosures may mean fewer total occupied suburban dwelling units in the near future, although I suspect many of the foreclosed units will eventually be reoccupied by

tenants.

Once the recession is over, and assuming it has not grown into a full scale depression, I imagine that customary patterns will resume. As young families grow in size and income, many will again become home owners and move to lower density settlements. And many of them will wind up in new subdivisions built on cheap land beyond the last previous zone of such construction.

Even so, larger percentages of new homeowners will choose or settle for higher density housing; more of the row and townhouses with which residents of the NY-NJ region are already familiar. I would expect popular and regionally variable new versions of New Urbanist planning all over the country.

Affluent people other than retirees will still move to bigger houses on larger lots in more prestigious suburbs as they become more affluent. Since heating costs can be expected to rise in the future, however, McMansions may be as out of date as Hummers.

At the same time, I would also expect urban and inner suburban gentrification to resume, at least in economically healthy metropolitan areas. In such areas, the now ongoing process of driving the poor into economically declining outer suburbs will speed up, and often the poor will be living very far from their previous residences.

Worse yet, they will be far away also from job opportunities as well as from the commercial, welfare and other support facilities they need. Many of the newly suburban poor are likely to be more concentrated and more surrounded by hostile neighboring communities than in the city. Helping agencies, including planners need to help them as much as possible, and they should be first in line for additional mass transit.

However, one important caveat. I think it would be foolhardy to assume that the end of the current recession will be followed by another economic boom. I doubt new economic bubbles will be initiated - or permitted - for quite a while. More important, I imagine the labor market will not recover as quickly as the rest of the economy.

As a result, the number of decently paid full time jobs may be scarcer than during the last period of prosperity at the end of the 1990s. That may put a damper on purchasing power, and therefore new home construction as well as community building. Eventually the federal government may not only have to stimulate home building but also to subsidize the local infrastructures that go along with new housing. And by then, some experimentation with higher density family living may well take place.

## Family and Household Change

Most of my imagining so far has not proceeded far beyond the extrapolation of current trends, but these trends have to be adjusted for changes in the behavior of families and households. The main trends are two; Americans are marrying later and more are remaining single. Late marriage may put off mainstream suburban home buying and the rising number of singles will reduce the overall number of children in them. The total supply of parents may not decrease, however at least as long as we need immigrant cheap labor, although better off immigrants will be renting suburban apartments in low and moderate income suburbs.

The most intriguing question; how and where the rising number of never marrieds and divorced singles in the non-immigrant and mostly middle class population will live. At present, answers are hard to find and I hope the 2010 Census will tell us more.

Although stereotypical singles live near the center of the typical American big city, permanent singles are probably nearly as suburban as everyone else. However, they are more likely to live in apartment houses. How long and to what ages they will want to live alone is hard to predict. Even if they continue to live by themselves, they may choose districts where other singles can be found, and for that reason also, the proportion of apartment houses in at least some suburbs should increase.

I assume not many want singles' neighborhoods, especially after they reach their mid 30s. Instead, they will instead choose to live near shopping malls and other kinds of centers where gyms, bars, cafes and other facilities in which singles feel comfortable are available.

There will also be more old people and retirees than ever before, but I suspect fewer will be able to afford to move to Florida and other coastal areas. More will choose to live in, or come back to, areas, where specialized medical facilities are available.

## Energy Prices and Scarcities

The uptick in gas and oil prices in recent years, the concern with the future scarcity of oil, and the rising awareness of the dangers of global warming has revitalized arguments against suburban sprawl and appeals for higher residential density.

I do not expect these appeals to be persuasive in the near future, because even if gasoline costs \$10 a gallon, moving to a higher density dwelling nearer work makes little economic sense. It makes no sense at all if the lower density dwelling becomes

impossible to sell. Since few people live by economic rationality alone, more expensive gasoline will not produce a desire to live in the city or to move to a higher density suburban home even when it makes economic sense. I assume that instead, daily commuters will buy smaller cars, perhaps in the least densely settled parts of the country as well.

Perhaps young marrieds will put off buying a single family house for a while, but they too are not likely to become interested in urban living unless governments make it worth their while. The neo Greenwich villages associated with gentrification or with orthodox New Urbanism will not appeal to the middle class American mainstream.

The anti-sprawl arguments, old and new, have been accompanied by appeals for more mass transit. Consequently, it will be interesting to see whether the Obama administration's infrastructure programs will include provisions for serious improvements in mass transit. I suspect the White House will have time, money and political support for only a small start, but remember that outside our region a tiny number of people now use or even want mass transit.

Indeed, so far, Washington's emphasis has been on the spending and jobs associated with the rebuilding of roads and bridges, even though improved roadways can result in more driving, which would defeat attempts to save energy and reduce carbon emission.

Eventually, some kind of transit program that really transports a mass of people will emerge, but I wouldn't care to guess when eventually will be. I think the process will be slow, and not large enough to make a sizable impact on existing or new suburban communities.

The foreseeable future might bring us some federal funds for electric and even conventional busses and vans in areas now with insufficient or no mass transit. One reason for this argument: the political need to spend new federal monies in every congressional district could enable many suburban communities around the country to ask for mass transit money. Jitneys would make sense in the suburbs too, and old SUVs converted to jitneys could each take 6-7 commuters out of their cars. Such quick mass transit fixes could be undertaken now, and Detroit auto companies could certainly build the additional needed vehicles.

One of these years, planners and energy planners may have enough data to guess at what energy cost levels if any, commuters will stop driving and their households will live at higher density levels. Someday the government may be willing and able to bail out owners of single family homes who are ready to move to energy saving apartment houses. Possibly, new generations will

learn how to raise children in high rise housing, especially if there are playground like facilities every fifth floor.

I have always wondered why Moshe Safdie's 1950s Montreal high rise housing project, Habitat, was never imitated. It consisted of cantilevered modules which gave every household a decent-sized balcony and with almost the same level of privacy as a single family house. However, it was not a thing of beauty and it experienced endless technical problems. Most important, it was constructed in an era in which only intellectuals and the poor were expected to live in high rise housing.

Perhaps in the long run, every expressway in now transit-free parts of America will be required to give over one lane on each side for busses, trolleys and vans. Where people live too far from the nearest mass transit stop, electric van service and even public vehicles, including electrically motorized bicycles or mini-mini sized cars as well. Large cars could be rented for family vacations and other occasional trips to parts of the country not served by any form of public transportation.

Conversely, if the discovery of new oil deposits or the invention of a small and easily rechargeable battery could maintain fuel costs under 20-25 cents a mile, the political foundation for higher density development and the full expansion of mass transit would weaken. I could even visualize a resumption of past and current metropolitan area growth trends, with people being able to live at the densities they wanted and could afford. Enough land for such expansion is available in many although not all parts of the country, and I still think that, all other things being equal, devoting land to growing people is more important than devoting it to fruits and vegetables.

The revival of more or less standard sprawl would require the expansion of workplaces further into the countryside as well. However, I could see combinations of office and light industrial areas located and large shopping malls located near major highways and highway junctions. They would be modern equivalents of the pedestrian central business districts of the 19th and 20th centuries. The total land area devoted to work places might decline somewhat, however, for with further changes in communication and related technology, more people would be working at home.

Actually, such complexes could even be constructed if energy becomes scarcer and more costly, for if housing was built near them, the resulting settlement could be designed to be served almost entirely by mass transit, mini-mini cars and those electric bicycles.

Global Warming

In theory, the need to do something about global warming would mitigate against a return to higher oil and coal use, but in practice, I question that in the immediate future, such a regression to the past could be stopped. Although everyone is against global warming, at this stage not many people are ready to seriously change their habits and lives, except in an emergency of the kind in which they have no choice.

The reason is simple; global warming does not yet have sufficient direct and personal effect on anyone. Right now the glaciers are melting only on TV, and I am not sure whether people who are too young to think about the welfare of their grandchildren will sacrifice now to save them from 110 degree summers that might arrive when these grandchildren are adults.

We do not yet know enough about either the progress of global warming or the progress of the political perception that something more than nominal or symbolic must be done.

Major life style changes that affect large numbers of people are never easy and I cannot imagine any taking place in the next decade or two. For one thing, politicians but also the voters will hope for future technological miracles that will make such change unnecessary.

It is easier to imagine that totally safe and waste-free nuclear energy will be discovered and that someone will invent protein pills so that methane producing beef cows can eventually be seen only in zoos. But for a long time, we can still avoid change by blaming China and India for their inability to bring about sharp reductions in global warming, and by then, all the red meat we want to eat will be grown outside the U.S. Actually, that's virtually true even now.

If these now magic solutions do not come to be, I suppose there will be slow progress toward a carbon tax and a reduction in the use of coal and, for reasons already discussed, in oil. In addition, governments will find ways of bribing people to move to higher densities and to projects as well as subdivisions that can be served by project-wide heating and cooling systems.

In the longer run, and if global warming worsens, the federal government may be required to tax lower density living and at a rate at which the single family house becomes a luxury. Comprehensive mass transit will become politically viable everywhere at last, especially if it reduces or postpones involuntary moves to apartment living.

Longer run scenarios have to resemble science fiction. I could fantasy governments having to ban single family houses and one story workplaces as well as cars larger than glorified golf carts. I suppose the government could also empty out declining

small towns and rural areas and leave them vacant or resettle them at higher densities.

Eventually, some parts of the U.S. may become too hot for humans and other mammals and will require resettlement, but by then the planet's Southern hemispheres will have been depopulated and American foreign policy will probably be trying to deal with humongous population movements, world epidemics, wars and genocides. Closer to home, the oceans will have risen considerably and many of the country's coastal regions will be under water. Much of New Jersey will suffer the same fate, and its surviving peoples will be living in the Kittatinny mountains, the Poconos and Catskills and maybe even further west. However, today no one knows if and when that will happen, and I suggest we do not worry about it now.