

Fast Company

Introducing The Master Plan: A Chronicle of New Urbanism and Exurban Decay

BY Greg Lindsay Mon Feb 1, 2010



"I was in California," the consummate ad man Don Draper rhapsodized last season in *Mad Men*. "Everything's new, and it's clean. The people are full of hope. New York is in decay." The suburban landscape that awed him circa 1963 was the fruit of a warm climate, middle-class manufacturing jobs, Federal Housing Administration mortgages, brand-new interstate highways, and tax code changes that made shopping malls a [slam-dunk](#) for developers. The immediate result was master-planned communities such as Lakewood, California, "the Levittown of the West," which started from nothing in 1950 and had grown to 17,500 homes by the time Don Draper rolled through town. The rest is post-war geographic history.

What a difference a half-century makes. America's suburbs are now home to the largest and fastest growing poor population, [according to a recent report](#) by the Brookings

Institution. The country's largest metro areas saw their poor populations grow by 25% between 2000 and 2008, faster than either primary cities or rural areas. (The suburban fringes of Los Angeles were expected to take the biggest hit last year.) Part of this has do with math--the suburbs grew three times faster during that span. But faced with aging infrastructure, higher maintenance costs, and growing numbers of poor, this increase could become self-perpetuating, a la the inner cities in the 1960s and 1970s. "Clearly," the Brookings Report concluded, "the balance of metropolitan poverty has passed a tipping point."

There have been others. The suburban landscape we once aspired to and now take for granted is changing before our eyes. The absolute number of vehicles on America's roads fell last year for the first time in fifty years. So did the number of miles driven and the gallons of gasoline consumed. ExxonMobil believes the latter is in permanent decline due to high prices and biofuels. Our centrifugal patterns of urban development are no longer a given. A study released last summer by [CEOs for Cities](#) found that homes in denser, more walkable communities commanded premiums as high as \$30,000 in cities like Charlotte, Chicago, and Sacramento. Another study the year before concluded that distant suburbs had suffered much steeper declines in value than those in "close in" neighborhoods.

The data lends some credence to Christopher Leinberger's gloomy prediction in *The Atlantic* two years ago that the exurbs would become "the next slums," littered with as many as 22 million superfluous McMansions. Last year, creative class demographer Richard Florida [postulated](#) (also in *The Atlantic*) that a new "spatial fix" was underway, punishing low-density suburbs and rewarding high-density neighborhoods. Echoing economists like Harvard's Ed Glaeser, he declared "the economy is different now. It no longer revolves around simply making and moving things. Instead, it depends on generating and transporting ideas. The places that thrive today are those with the highest velocity of ideas, the highest density of talented and creative people, the highest rate of metabolism. Velocity and density are not words that many people use when describing the suburbs. The economy is driven by key urban areas; a different geography is required."

The Obama administration feels the same. "The days where we're just building sprawl forever, those days are over," the President announced within a month of taking office. Two weeks ago, [he told the U.S. Conference of Mayors](#) "we've learned a great deal about what we can do--and shouldn't do--to help rebuild and revitalize our cities and metropolitan areas for the future. So the budget that I'll present next month will begin to back up this urban vision by putting an end to throwing money after what doesn't work--and by investing responsibly in what does," backed in part by \$300 million in stimulus-funded grants for cities willing to follow smart growth principles.

"Because when it comes to development," he added, "it's time to throw out old policies that encouraged sprawl and congestion, pollution, and ended up isolating our communities in the process."

New Urbanists and city-dwellers cheer such talk, while suburban defenders such as Joel Kotkin hear a declaration of "war against suburbia." But as always, the messy reality falls somewhere in between.



A year ago, I asked Alan Pisarski, the dean of transportation studies and author of the monumental, decennial "Commuting in America" series, whether traffic and congestion patterns suggested Americans would rather walk than drive. "People may want places to walk," he replied, "but they may want to drive to get there." His point is that Americans may choose to live, work and play in mixed-use communities, but they have no intention of moving any closer to cities. For one thing, America's population has doubled since the flight to suburbia began in earnest around 1950, and so there aren't enough brownstones to go around. For another, commercial development in America doesn't encourage it. If we need and want dense, walkable communities, we will have to figure out how to build more of them.

Maybe the New Urbanists' greatest innovation is "SmartCode," their rigorous zoning manual for guaranteeing the integrity of a newly-built neighborhood. But its existence only underscores the fact that left to their own devices, market forces and their instruments--the developers--would never follow these precepts on their own. And why would they, when the system is aligned against it? Tax codes, zoning, community

boards, and financing are a straitjacket on new types of development--they created a product that works, and they're preconditioned to produce more of it. (For an excellent account of how the suburban sausage gets made, read Witold Rybczynski's *Last Harvest*.)

If we want to change the spatial fix of America, we will either have to change the underlying conditions to make density more profitable, or find someone enlightened who can work within the existing system. Realistically, we'll need more of both.

My new column, "[The Master Plan](#)," will follow the people, cities, companies and policies working to make this change possible, and to create, in President Obama's words last week, "more livable and environmentally sustainable communities."