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America in 2050: Urban, Suburban, or Both?

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Last Wednesday night, Joel Kotkin--a futurist and (sub)urban historian--squared off in a debate against Christopher Leinberger, a developer, consultant and proponent of "walkable urbanism." The topic "America 2050: What Will We Build." The pair tangled on four key issues: demographics; housing supply & demand; transport; and density. Kotkin was in hostile territory: a roomful of Manhattan architects and academics belonging to the Forum for Urban Design.

Demographics

Kotkin, author of *The Next Hundred Million*, is commonly labeled an apologist for sprawl, he's more like its Gorbachev, seeking to reform an unsustainable institution from within. He believes that sheer population growth will save the economy as America adds another hundred million people in the coming decade, mostly through immigration. While China ages disastrously and Europeans die off, young immigrants will more than offset the earnings of the retiring Baby Boomers, replenish the heartland, and resuscitate our moribund construction industry.

This bodes well for suburbia, he argued. Upsetting conventional wisdom, studies show boomers retiring close to home, while immigrants are increasingly making the suburbs their first stop, and millennials see a suburban future for themselves as well. He sees them following the same path as their parents -- marrying, moving to the suburbs, and settling down to raise a family. Collectively, these three groups will sop up the estimated surplus of [22 million large-lot homes by 2025](#).

But Leinberger produced his own statistics, refuting Kotkin's numbers and demonstrating that the percentage of married couples with children versus those without had hovered around a 50-50 split when suburbia was constructed in the 1950s; today the ratio is more like 33-67, on its way in the coming decades to 14 percent with children and 86 percent without--obviating the need for yards and good schools. Suburbia is massively overbuilt, awaiting a second baby boom that isn't coming.

Supply & Demand

Kotkin believes the next hundred million Americans will largely eschew "superstar" cities such as New York, Boston, San Francisco and the west side of Los Angeles because of housing costs. They'll opt instead to live in "cities of aspiration," such as Dallas, Houston, Charlotte and Atlanta. His America in 2050 looks a lot like the Dallas suburb of Plano, Texas, which has the highest household median income and the highest percentage of residents with college degrees of any American city with more than 250,000 inhabitants. "Everybody thinks we're rich and white, but we're not," Mayor Phil Dyer told me recently. "In 1980, our population was 72,000; now it's 265,000. Back then, we were 91.5 percent white; now it's 61.2 percent." The percentage of Asians has risen from 1.2 percent to 15.8 percent. "That's how diverse we are."

But one way to interpret the high costs of housing in superstar cities like New York or San Francisco is pent-up demand for a very restricted supply. Harvard's Edward Glaeser has been [making this point](#) for years, calling for both of those cities to relax zoning and end NIMBY battle to permit more and denser building. "New York and greater San Francisco are the two most productive areas in the country," he wrote, "but people have increasingly moved to lower-wage Sun Belt cities because those areas have low housing prices created by unfettered supply." Unfettered supply has since become a massive oversupply. As Leinberger noted with a sly grin, new single-family home sales in May fell by 33 percent to an annualized rate of 300,000--an all-time low. The demand isn't there; it's still latent in cities.

Transport

Complicating Kotkin's vision of continued growth at the suburban edges are the numbers: the number of miles driven annually by Americans peaked in 2008; car ownership declined for the first time since World War II last year (and some suspect [disinterested millennials](#) are to blame). But Kotkin still has faith in the car--or whatever it morphs into. On Wednesday, he repeatedly referred to MIT's recently published [Reinventing the Automobile](#), which envisions electric-powered, ultra-lightweight two-seaters with dedicated lanes. Combining these with ride-sharing programs or even letting the car [drive itself](#) is [several orders of magnitude easier](#) than rearranging how people already live, he argued.

Leinberger's proposal was simultaneously more modest and ambitious. Citing the demand for "walkable urbanism"--which also goes by the names of New Urbanism and transit-oriented development -- he suggested private developers drive up land value by [supplying their own transit](#) in the form of light rail, a la the streetcar-suburb developers of Washington D.C. and Los Angeles. "NIMBY is giving way to YIMBY," he said, pointing to Tysons Corner, Virginia, where three weeks ago the Fairfax County board [approved a plan](#) to extend the D.C. Metro system and massively densify the original edge city along its spine. The same phenomenon [is at work in Dallas](#), where the city of Irving, Texas has spent \$1 billion of its own money to guarantee a new line of the DART light rail system through Irving is finished. Why? Because light rail and the density it creates can drive up land values from \$5 per square foot to \$200 per square foot. "You make money from the land," he said. "Not sticks and bricks."

Density

Kotkin is quick to point out that in his vision, cities will grow, too. "I'm seeing 20 million new urbanites," he told me. "That's probably more than our cities can handle!" The bone he has to pick with his critics and proponents of density had to do with social engineering: "You're not going to change the way people live by forcing them to live a way they don't want to live," he told me. "I don't think you're going to sell that very well. This is what's happening to President Obama--the agenda he picked is not the right agenda. I don't think it's a winning business strategy and I don't think it's a winning political strategy." But at the heart of Kotkin's argument is a tautology: eighty of the next hundred million will choose suburbia because we have always chosen suburbia -- if by always you mean since 1950.

In his 2008 book [The Option of Urbanism](#), Leinberger makes a remarkable assertion (one he repeated Wednesday night): by the end of the 1950s, the Big Three auto companies and the industries they spawned or converged with--oil, steel, mining, finance, insurance, repairs, highways, and the construction of a vast suburbia navigable only by car--were responsible for as much as a third of US GDP. Before Richard Florida (a *bête noire* of Kotkin's) presented a [similar thesis](#) in [The Great Reset](#), Leinberger suggested suburbia was the urban product of a manufacturing-oriented America--an America that's [long gone](#).

"The market wanted this," he said of suburbia. "This is not something GM coaxed our parents to do. The market made this, and the government made sure it did." He went on to describe the trillions of dollars in highway subsidies, FHA mortgages and the like as "the largest social engineering program the government has ever attempted." If he's correct (and I think he is), then any urban paradigm--including the current one--is a function of social engineering, guided by what the market demands.

Interestingly, Kotkin's suburban America in 2050 actually sounds a lot like Leinberger's urban one. His "archipelago of villages" are relatively dense places where people live, work and play, rather than someplace you drive until you qualify. Telecommuting will reduce the need for long, daily trips--making electric cars more feasible. His ideal community is Valencia, California, a master-planned development thirty miles north of Los Angeles originally designed by Victor Gruen, the Austrian émigré most famous for [inventing the mall](#). But what Gruen had really wanted to do was to make American cities more like Vienna.

On Wednesday night, as Kotkin yielded the floor to Leinberger, the latter smiled and said, "I worked on Valencia," consulting on its new town center. They two debaters finally found something they agreed on.