

# The New Republic

## The Reading List: 'Trading Places' by Alan Ehrenhalt

What to read if you want to learn more about the changing nature of American cities.

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[\*How Cities Work\*](#), by Alex Marshall

[\*The Option of Urbanism\*](#), by Christopher Leinberger

["The Next Slum"](#) by Christopher Leinberger

[\*The Death and Life of Great American Cities\*](#), by Jane Jacobs

[\*The City\*](#), by Joel Kotkin

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## Trading Places

**The demographic inversion of the American city.**

Alan Ehrenhalt, *The New Republic* Published: Wednesday, August 13, 2008



Will Chicago, the city of slaughterhouses and skyscrapers, soon look like haute bourgeois nineteenth-century Vienna?

Thirty years ago, the mayor of Chicago was unseated by a snowstorm. A blizzard in January of 1979 dumped some 20 inches on the ground, causing, among other problems, a curtailment of transit service. The few available trains coming downtown from the northwest side filled up with middle-class white riders near the far end of the line, leaving no room for poorer people trying to board on inner-city platforms. African Americans and Hispanics blamed this on Mayor Michael Bilandic, and he lost the Democratic primary to Jane Byrne a few weeks later.

Today, this could never happen. Not because of climate change, or because the Chicago Transit Authority now runs flawlessly. It couldn't happen because the trains would fill up with minorities and immigrants on the outskirts of the city, and the passengers left stranded at the inner-city stations would be members of the affluent professional class.

In the past three decades, Chicago has undergone changes that are routinely described as gentrification, but are in fact more complicated and more profound than the process that term suggests. A better description would be "demographic inversion." Chicago is gradually coming to resemble a traditional European city--Vienna or Paris in the nineteenth century, or, for that matter, Paris today. The poor and the newcomers are living on the outskirts. The people who live near the center--some of them black or Hispanic but most of them white--are those who can afford to do so.

Developments like this rarely occur in one city at a time, and indeed demographic inversion is taking place, albeit more slowly than in Chicago, in metropolitan areas throughout the country. The national press has paid very little attention to it. While we have been focusing on Baghdad and Kabul, our own cities have been changing right in front of us.

Atlanta, for example, is shifting from an overwhelmingly black to what is likely to soon be a minority-black city. This is happening in part because the white middle class is moving inside the city borders, but more so because blacks are moving out. Between 1990 and 2006, according to research by William Frey of the Brookings Institution, the white population of Atlanta has increased from roughly 30 percent to 35 percent while the black population has declined from 67 percent to 55 percent. In this decade alone, two of Atlanta's huge suburban counties, Clayton and DeKalb, have acquired substantial black majorities, and immigrants arriving from foreign countries are settling primarily there or in similar outlying areas, not within the city itself. The numbers for Washington, D.C. are similar.

Race is not always the critical issue, or even especially relevant, in this demographic shift. Before September 11, 2001, the number of people living in Manhattan south of the World Trade Center was estimated at about 25,000. Today, it is approaching 50,000. Close to one-quarter of these people are couples (nearly always wealthy couples) with children. The average household size is actually larger in lower Manhattan than in the city as a whole. It is not mere fantasy to imagine that in, say, 2020, the southern tip of Manhattan will be a residential neighborhood with a modest residual presence of financial corporations and financial services jobs. What's happening in Lower Manhattan isn't exactly an inversion in the Chicago sense: Expensive condos are replacing offices, not poor people. But it is dramatic demographic change nevertheless.

If you want to see this sort of thing writ large, you can venture just across the Canadian border to Vancouver, a city roughly the size of Washington, D.C. What makes it unusual--indeed, at this point unique in all of North America--is that roughly 20 percent of its residents live within a couple of square miles of each other in the city's center. Downtown Vancouver is a forest of slender, green, condo skyscrapers, many of them with three-story townhouse units forming a kind of podium at the base. Each morning, there are nearly as many people commuting out of the center to jobs in the suburbs as there are commuting in. Two public elementary schools have opened in downtown Vancouver in the past few years. A large proportion of the city's 600,000 residents, especially those with money, want to live downtown.

No American city looks like Vancouver at the moment. But quite a few are moving in this direction. Demographic inversions of one sort or another are occurring in urban pockets scattered all across America, many of them in seemingly unlikely places. Charlotte, North Carolina, is in the midst of a downtown building boom dominated by new mixed-use high-rise buildings, with office space on the bottom and condos or rental units above. Even at a moment of economic weakness, the condos are still selling briskly.

We are not witnessing the abandonment of the suburbs or a movement of millions of people back to the city all at once. But we are living at a moment in which the massive outward migration of the affluent that characterized the second half of the twentieth century is coming to an end. For several decades now, cities in the United States have wished for a "24/7" downtown, a place where people live as well as work, and keep the streets busy, interesting, and safe at all times of day. This is what urbanist Jane Jacobs preached in the 1960s, and it has long since become the accepted goal of urban planners. Only when significant numbers of people lived downtown, planners believed, could central cities regain their historic role as magnets for culture and as a source of identity and pride for the metropolitan areas they served. Now that's starting to happen, fueled by the changing mores of the young and by gasoline prices fast approaching \$5-per-gallon. In many of its urbanized regions, an America that seemed destined for everincreasing individualization and sprawl is experimenting with new versions of community and sociability.

**Why has demographic inversion begun?** For one thing, the deindustrialization of the central city, for all the tragic human dislocations it caused, has eliminated many of the things

that made affluent people want to move away from it. Nothing much is manufactured downtown anymore (or anywhere near it), and that means that the noise and grime that prevailed for most of the twentieth century have gone away. Manhattan may seem like a loud and gritty place now, but it is nothing like the city of tenement manufacturing, rumbling elevated trains, and horses and coal dust in the streets that confronted inhabitants in the early 1900s. Third-floor factory lofts, whether in Soho or in St. Louis, can be marketed as attractive and stylish places to live. The urban historian Robert Bruegmann goes so far as to claim that deindustrialization has, on the whole, been good for downtowns because it has permitted so many opportunities for creative reuse of the buildings. I wouldn't go quite that far, and, given the massive job losses of recent years, I doubt most of the residents of Detroit would, either. But it is true that the environmental factors that made middle-class people leave the central city for streetcar suburbs in the 1900s and for station-wagon suburbs in the 1950s do not apply any more.

Nor, in general, does the scourge of urban life in the 1970s and '80s: random street violence. True, the murder rates in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cleveland have climbed in the last few years, but this increase has been propelled in large part by gang- and drug-related violence. For the most part, middle-class people of all colors began to feel safe on the streets of urban America in the 1990s, and they still feel that way. The paralyzing fear that anyone of middle age can still recall vividly from the 1970s--that the shadowy figure passing by on a dark city street at night stands a good chance of being a mugger--is rare these days, and almost nonexistent among young people. Walk around the neighborhood of 14th and U streets in Washington, D.C. on a Saturday night, and you will find it perhaps the liveliest part of the city, at least for those under 25. This is a neighborhood where the riots of 1968 left physical scars that still have not disappeared, and where outsiders were afraid to venture for more than 30 years.

The young newcomers who have rejuvenated 14th and U believe that this recovering slum is the sort of place where they want to spend time and, increasingly, where they want to live. This is the generation that grew up watching "Seinfeld," "Friends," and "Sex and the City," mostly from the comfort of suburban sofas. We have gone from a sitcom world defined by "Leave It to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best" to one that offers a whole range of urban experiences and enticements. I do not claim that a handful of TV shows has somehow produced a new urbanist generation, but it is striking how pervasive the pro-city sensibility is within this generation, particularly among its elite. In recent years, teaching undergraduates at the University of Richmond, the majority of them from affluent suburban backgrounds, I made a point of asking where they would prefer to live in 15 years--in a suburb or in a neighborhood close to the center of the city. Few ever voted for suburban life.

I can't say that they had necessarily devoted a great deal of thought to the question: When I asked them whether they would want to live in an urban neighborhood without a car, many seemed puzzled and said no. Clearly, we are a long way from producing a generation for whom urban life and automobile ownership are mutually exclusive. In downtown Charlotte, a luxury condominium is scheduled for construction this year that will allow residents to drive their cars into a garage elevator, ride up to the floor they live on, and park right next to their front door. I have a hard time figuring out whether that is a triumph for urbanism or a defeat. But my guess is that, except in Manhattan, the carless life has yet to achieve any significant traction in the affluent new enclaves of urban America.

Not that cars and the demographic inversion aren't closely related; they are. In Atlanta, where the middle-class return to the city is occurring with more suddenness than perhaps anywhere in the United States, the most frequently cited reason is traffic. People who did not object to a 20-mile commute from the suburbs a decade ago are objecting to it now in part because the same commute takes quite a bit longer. To this, we can add the prospect of \$5-per-gallon gasoline. It's impossible at this point to say with any certainty just what energy costs will do to American living patterns over the next decade. Urbanists predicted a return to the city during previous spikes in the cost of gasoline, notably during shortages in the 1970s. They were wrong. Gas prices came down, and the suburbs expanded dramatically. But today's

prices at the pump are not the result of political pressures by angry sheiks in the Persian Gulf. They are the result of increased worldwide demand that is only going to continue to increase. Some suburbanites will simply stay where they are and accept the cost. But many will decide to stop paying \$100 every few days for a tank of gasoline that will allow them to commute 40 or 50 miles a day, round-trip.

Ultimately, though, the current inversion is less the result of middle-aged people changing their minds than of young adults expressing different values, habits, and living preferences than their parents. The demographic changes that have taken place in America over the past generation--the increased propensity to remain single, the rise of cohabitation, the much later age at first marriage for those who do marry, the smaller size of families for those who have children, and, at the other end, the rapidly growing number of healthy and active adults in their sixties, seventies, and eighties--have combined virtually all of the significant elements that make a demographic inversion not only possible but likely. We are moving toward a society in which millions of people with substantial earning power or ample savings can live wherever they want, and many will choose central cities over distant suburbs. As they do this, others will find themselves forced to live in less desirable places--now defined as those further from the center of the metropolis. And, as this happens, suburbs that never dreamed of being entry points for immigrants will have to cope with new realities. It should come as no surprise that the most intense arguments about hiring and educating the undocumented have occurred in the relatively distant reaches of American suburbia, such as Prince William County, Virginia.

**The reality of demographic inversion** strikes me every time I return to Chicago, the city in which I was born and grew up. My grandfather arrived there in 1889, found his way to the Near West Side, and opened a tailor shop that remained in business for 50 years. During that time, the neighborhood was a compact and somewhat culturally isolated enclave of Jewish and Italian families. (It was also the location of Hull House and the original home of the Chicago Cubs.) The building that housed my grandfather's store was torn down in the 1960s when the University of Illinois built its Chicago campus in the neighborhood. The street corner where the store stood now houses part of the university science complex.

The UIC campus is, to my eyes, one of the ugliest in America. But I have made my peace with that. What interests me is what is going on all around that neighborhood, now called University Village. For a while after the school was built, its environs were a sort of residential no-man's-land, dangerous at night and unattractive to the young academics who taught there. Today, assistant professors at UIC generally don't live there either, but for a different reason: They can't afford it. Demand for the townhouses and condominiums on the Near West Side has priced junior faculty out of the market. One can walk a couple of blocks down the street from where my grandfather's shop once stood and order a steak for \$24.

You might respond that there is nothing especially noteworthy in this. A college setting, liberal academics, houses close to the city's cultural attractions: That's garden-variety gentrification. What else would you expect?

If you feel that way, you might want to ride an elevated train going northwest, to the lesser-known Logan Square, a few miles beyond the Loop. Whatever Logan Square might be, it is not downtown chic. It is a moderately close-in nineteenth-century neighborhood with a history fairly typical for a city that A.J. Liebling once called "an endless succession of factory-town main streets." Logan Square was developed primarily by Scandinavian manufacturers, who lived on the tree-lined boulevards while their workers, many of them Polish, rented the cottages on the side streets. By the 1970s, nearly all the Poles had decamped for suburbia, and they were replaced by an influx of Puerto Ricans. The area became a haven for gangs and gang violence, and most of the retail shopping that held the community together disappeared.

Logan Square is still not the safest neighborhood in Chicago. There are armed robberies and some killings on its western fringe, and, even on the quiet residential streets, mothers tell their children to be home before dark. But that hasn't prevented Logan Square from changing dramatically again--not over the past generation, or the past decade, but in the past five years. The big stone houses built by the factory owners on Logan Boulevard are selling for nearly \$1 million, despite the housing recession. The restaurant that sits on the square itself sells goat cheese quesadillas and fettuccine with octopus, and attracts long lines of customers who drive in from the suburbs on weekend evenings. To describe what has happened virtually overnight in Logan Square as gentrification is to miss the point. Chicago, like much of America, is rearranging itself, and the result is an entire metropolitan area that looks considerably different from what it looked like when this decade started.

Of course, demographic inversion cannot be a one-way street. If some people are coming inside, some people have to be going out. And so they are--in Chicago as in much of the rest of the country. During the past ten years, with relatively little fanfare and surprisingly little press attention, the great high-rise public housing projects that defined squalor in urban America for half a century have essentially disappeared. In Chicago, the infamous Robert Taylor Homes are gone, and the equally infamous Cabrini-Green is all but gone. This has meant the removal of tens of thousands of people, who have taken their Section 8 federal housing subsidies and moved to struggling African American neighborhoods elsewhere in the city. Some have moved to the city's southern suburbs--small suburbs such as Dixmoor, Robbins, and Harvey, which have been among the poorest communities in metropolitan Chicago. At the same time, tens of thousands of immigrants are coming to Chicago every year, mostly from various parts of Latin America. Where are they settling? Not in University Village. Some in Logan Square, but fewer every year. They are living in suburban or exurban territory that, until a decade ago, was almost exclusively English-speaking, middle-class, and white.

There are responsible critics who look at all this and see a lot being made out of very little. They argue that, in absolute numbers, the return to the urban center remains a minor demographic event. They have a point. In most metropolitan areas, in the first few years of the twenty-first century, many more people have moved to the suburbs than have moved downtown. A city of half a million that can report a downtown residential population of 25,000--5 percent of the total--can claim that it is doing relatively well. Charlotte, for all the local excitement it has generated about upscale in-town living, still has no more than about 12,000 residents downtown. Moreover, these 12,000 are not representative of the area's populace; there are few families with school-age children. Downtown Charlotte is mostly attracting the familiar gentrification cohort: singles, couples, older people whose children have left home. The bulk of the married-with-children middle-class has not only been living in the suburbs, it has been moving to the suburbs. Joel Kotkin, perhaps the most prominent of the downtown debunkers, declares flatly that, until families begin turning up in significant numbers on downtown streets, we are talking about a blip rather than a major cultural phenomenon.

But it's not just a blip. The evidence from most American cities--carefully presented by Christopher Leinberger, the real estate developer and University of Michigan urban planning professor, in his recent book, *The Option of Urbanism*--suggests that the number of downtown residents these days depends more on supply than demand. Few in Charlotte dispute that, if there were 30,000 upscale residential units in the center of that city, there would be 30,000 people living in them before long. The residential population of lower Manhattan has not just increased substantially since 2001; it has all but exploded in the last 18 months. And the strollers have reached Wall Street. Take a walk down there some Saturday morning, and you will see for yourself.

But, even if the critics are mostly right--even if the vast majority of cities never see a downtown residential boom of massive proportions--there is no doubt that a demographic inversion, in which the rich are moving inside and the poor are moving outside, is taking place. The crucial issue is not the number of people living downtown, although that matters. The crucial issue is who they are, and the ways in which urban life is changing as a result.

**What would a post-inversion American city** look like? In the most extreme scenario, it would look like many of the European capitals of the 1890s. Take Vienna, for example. In the mid-nineteenth century, the medieval wall that had surrounded the city's central core for hundreds of years was torn down. In its place there appeared the Ringstrasse, the circle of fashionable boulevards where opera was sung and plays performed, where rich merchants and minor noblemen lived in spacious apartments, where gentlemen and ladies promenaded in the evening under the gaslights, where Freud, Mahler, and their friends held long conversations about death over coffee and pastry in sidewalk cafes. By contrast, if you were part of the servant class, odds were you lived far beyond the center, in a neighborhood called Ottakring, a concentration of more than 30, 000 cramped one- and two-bedroom apartments, whose residents--largely immigrant Czechs, Slovaks, and Slovenes--endured a long horse-car ride to get to work in the heart of the city.

Paris was a different story. It had always had a substantial inner-city working class, the breeding ground for political unrest and violence over and over again in French history. But the narrow streets that housed the Parisian poor were largely obliterated in the urban redesign dictated by Baron Haussmann in the 1850s and '60s. The Paris that Haussmann created was the city of fashionable inner-ring boulevards that remains largely intact a century and a half later. The poor and the newly arrived were essentially banished to the suburbs--where they remain today, though they are now mostly Muslims from North Africa rather than peasants from the south of France.

Nobody in his right mind would hold up the present-day arrangement of metropolitan Paris, with its thousands of unemployed immigrants seething in shoddily built suburban high-rise housing projects, as a model for what twenty-first-century urbanism ought to look like. Indeed, in the worst case, demographic inversion would result in the poor living out of sight and largely forgotten in some new kind of high-rise projects beyond the city border, with the wealthy huddled in gated enclaves in the center. But I think this is an unlikely scenario. The people who are moving to the downtowns of American cities today are doing so in part to escape the real or virtual "gated-ness" of suburban life. The condos that house them in the coming years may feature elaborate security systems, but the inhabitants will not be walled off from the street. They want to be in contact with the street. Nor do we have to worry about the return of the idea of warehousing the poor in vertical Corbusian ghettos. That is one beast we have managed to slay.

Less dystopian are the prophecies of Leinberger, who believes that a dramatic increase in middle-class central-city population will in fact take place, and that one consequence will be the deterioration of today's car-dependent, suburban tract homes into the slums of 2030. I don't think this will happen either, at least not in such extreme form. There simply are not enough lofts and town-houses to double or triple the number of people living in the center of a mid-sized American city. As the central-city population continues to grow, so will the demand for skyscrapers--something cities are sure initially to resist. Nor does it seem likely that exurbia will turn into a wasteland. The price of the houses will go down and render them more attractive for newcomers trying to rise in the U.S. economy and society. Urbanists have complained for years that immigrants and poor people in the inner city have a hard time commuting to the service jobs that are available to them in the suburbs. If they live in the suburbs, they will be closer to the jobs. Transportation will remain a problem, but not one that can't be solved.

Somewhere in between, there lies the vision of Jane Jacobs, who idealized the Greenwich Village of the 1950s and the casual everyday relationships that made living there comfortable, stimulating, and safe. Much of what Jacobs loved and wrote about will not reappear: The era of the mom-and-pop grocer, the shoemaker, and the candy store has ended for good. We live in a big-box, big-chain century. But I think the youthful urban elites of the twenty-first-century are looking in some sense for the things Jacobs valued, whether they have heard of

her or not. They are drawn to the densely packed urban life that they saw on television and found vastly more interesting than the cul-de-sac world they grew up in. And, by and large, I believe central cities will give it to them. Not only that, but much of suburbia, in an effort to stay afloat, will seek to urbanize itself to some extent. That reinvention is already taking place: Look at all the car-created suburbs built in the 1970s and '80s that have created "town centers" in the past five years, with sidewalks and as much of a street grid as they can manage to impose on a faded strip-mall landscape. None of these retrofit efforts look much like a real city. But they are a clue to the direction in which we are heading.

In the 1990s, a flurry of academics and journalists (me among them) wrote books lamenting the decline of community and predicting that it would reappear in some fashion in the new century. I think that is beginning to happen now in the downtowns of America, and I believe, for all its imperfections and inequalities, that the demographic inversion ultimately will do more good than harm. We will never return--nor would most of us want to return--to the close-knit but frequently constricting form of community life that prevailed 50 years ago. But, as we rearrange ourselves in and around many of our big cities, we are groping toward the new communities of the twenty-first century.

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