

WHYY: It's Our City (Philadelphia)

Suburbs Worth Saving?

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Prescription for the burbs: shrink 'em and move 'em a little closer together

I just got around to finishing this [two part](#) piece at the New York Times' [By Design blog](#) by Allison Arieff. As anyone who reads what I post on It's Our City knows, I'm fascinated by all aspects of the interplay between urban, suburban, exurban and rural living and how this region could strike a better balance. In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that as a city dweller who grew up in inner ring, walkable suburbia, my biases are towards higher density, smaller living spaces, bicycle and pedestrian friendliness, convenient transit and desirable common spaces like parks. That's not to say that I fall into the category of folks described by Arieff who advocated "either burning suburbia down or simply letting nature take its course."

In my life I've gone from inner ring suburbanite, to small city urbanite to exurbanite and finally to hard core, big city dweller. I see the merits of all of them but have finally come to realize that if we're going to deal with climate change and spare future generations from the catastrophic conditions - both economic and climatic - that we are headed towards, we're going to give up a lot of the things that we have come to think of as natural rights.

Fortunately, some folks out there are figuring it out:

While many in the development/building/construction industries continue to argue the financial impossibility of sustainable developments (and insist that consumers aren't really interested in sustainable homes), KRDB architects in Austin, TX, went ahead and proved them wrong with [SOL](#) (solution-oriented living) Austin. Included in the 38-home, net zero energy development are 16 affordable [modular housing units](#) (for cultural and economic diversity), tree plantings and community parks, joint-access drives (to reduce impervious cover), varied setbacks (so, unlike most developments, one isn't confronted with a sea of identical houses but rather a more heterogeneous array). Recognizing a trend away from larger homes for both economic and environmental reasons, the architects have designed the largest property at 1,816 square feet, the smallest at 1,090.

And these don't necessarily have to be in traditional "urban areas" but it helps for them to be near the transit that can carry people to and from major employment and entertainment centers. Consider your own home. Think about how much square footage you have and then ask, "how much do I need?" Would you be willing to see your suburban neighborhood changed into something with greater density, smaller houses, more on-street activity, less parking? Basically, would you mind seeing it become "urbanized?"

Infrastructurist has [an interview with Christopher Leinberger](#), writer of the Atlantic magazine cover story "[The Next Slum?](#)" and expert on development and urban planning. They ask Leinberger about what can be done to bring the

suburbs in line with more sustainable principles. What can be done to convince folks who want, as he calls it, the "Tony Soprano" neighborhood that they "Friends" or "Seinfeld" neighborhood is better? How about rising property values:

This structural trend is about the transformation of the suburbs into something else. I've been doing some research looking at the price premiums on a per-square-foot basis for walkable communities. They get a price premium between 40 and 200 percent. I've also been looking at what I call the "penumbra." A walkable place is typically 50 to 500 acres in size. The penumbra, that area around it, can be even bigger.

Almost like micro suburbs.

Yes. These places are still suburban but they are within walking distance of the walkable places. This "penumbra" is seeing premiums of 20 to 80 percent over the rest of the market.

Best of all, Leinberger lays out in clear, concise terms what kind of plan would be needed to make sure that the suburbs of the future don't become the next slums:

First, is getting a transit connection that can anchor a walkable urban core. Second, is putting in overlay zoning districts around the train stations that will allow for much greater density and mixed use development. We're talking about a hundred, two hundred, three hundred acres. The third step is to get in place an entity to manage the thing, which generally takes the form of a non-profit business improvement district. These things are very complex, but we know how to do it now. We didn't 50 years ago, but we do now.

So are the suburbs worth saving? Yes. But the economic model may have to change so that only the super rich can afford the largest (3000+ sq. ft.), furthest-flung houses on the biggest plots (.5 acres +) of land while the other 98 percent of us live just a little closer together.

What does this mean for Philly? More Amblers and Narberths, fewer Extons and Oxfords and more folks in Philly.