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Whither Suburbia

IN 2008, HOUSE PRICES CRASHED, FORECLOSURES SWELLED, AND GASOLINE TOPPED \$4 PER GALLON. WE ASKED TWO NOTED URBANISTS: DOES THIS SPELL THE END OF THE SUBURBAN DREAM?

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For the best part of the last 40 years, planners, pundits, and environmental activists have predicted—and wished for—the demise of suburbia. They have blamed everything from global warming to expanded waistlines on these communities, whose growth has proceeded largely unabated. Indeed, despite predictions of a movement back to the city, the vast majority of all metropolitan growth since 2000—roughly between 80 and 90 percent—has been outside of core cities. Even those cities that have grown most rapidly, like Las Vegas and Phoenix, are largely suburban in character.

Now, of course, we hear that other factors—rising energy prices, an aging population, and the current housing bust—will lead to the reversal of the suburban trend. If so, the census has not captured any such trend. The preferences of most home buyers, young and old, have remained constant for nearly four decades, with no more than 10 to 20 percent wishing to live in dense urban areas. And roughly 80 percent prefer single-family homes to apartments, according to surveys.

Of course, sales of all residential properties, including those in suburbia, have slowed markedly: The mortgage crisis is stopping everyone in their tracks. In the end, it's really all about the economy. The financial industry has continued to cluster in core cities, even as most others moved to the suburbs and smaller towns; as a result, the problems once ascribed to suburbs are now spreading to much-ballyhooed urban cores. In Chicago, there is a reported 73 percent drop in downtown home sales for the first half of the year.

When the smoke clears from the current crisis, it is likely that single-family homes and suburbs will reassert their predominance. One often overlooked reason is that suburbia is where the jobs are: Since 2000, job growth in cities has averaged less than one-sixth that of suburbs, according to research by my colleagues at the Praxis Strategy Group.

This is not to say that suburbs won't continue to evolve. Once exclusively white, they are now increasingly multiethnic; about half of all immigrants now live in peripheral communities. In the future, look for suburbs to become less attached to their traditional cities. Many are already developing their own cultural

and commercial centers. These changes will lead to a more sustainable suburban future, one where people can work, shop, and recreate in the moderate-to-low-density communities they overwhelmingly prefer.

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Introduced in the early 20th century, the low-density, car-oriented suburb was a new way of developing the built environment. Americans loved the space and privacy that it offered, and we in real estate gave the market what it wanted. So much so that, after World War II, the U.S. government put in place de facto domestic policies (like subsidized infrastructure) that made this the largest social engineering experiment in American history.

But in the 1990s, the consumer began to change. The so-called Millennials, raised on urban entertainment like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, want something other than car-dependent suburbia. What they want, but find in short supply, is walkable urbanism. The dearth of walkable urban options has resulted in huge price premiums in such areas, even those that were slums 30 years ago—a process otherwise known as gentrification.

These places have held their value in the housing meltdown, while fringe suburbs have collapsed. When the smoke clears, it might be that this financial nightmare was sparked by building too much of the wrong product—i.e., drivable suburban developments—on the outskirts of our metro areas, the next slums.

But it does not mean the death of the suburbs. It means the transformation of some suburbs. The Washington, D.C., area is a model for where America is heading, with about six significant walkable urban places per million people. And most of these places are in the suburbs: There is Dupont Circle, but also Reston, Va., and Bethesda, Md. In Los Angeles metro, there are currently 13 to 15 walkable urban places; there will probably be 20 to 30 more before long, representing tens of billions of dollars of development. Where will they be? Mostly in the suburbs, following the ever-expanding rail system.

As we address climate change, the biggest issue of our time, energy costs will only get higher. These high energy costs are accelerating, not driving, the transformation of the suburbs. Fortunately, transforming the suburbs will offer a major solution to climate change and the problem of energy security. Walkable urban households use one-third of the energy and emit one-third of the greenhouse gases of households in car-based suburbia.

There's nothing like giving the market what it wants while solving the great challenge of our age.

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