



IN THIS ISSUE: NEWGEOGRAPHY.COM

NewGeography.com is a web site devoted to analyzing and discussing the places where we live and work, offering insights on economic development, metropolitan demographics, and community leadership.

The following three essays by Roger Selbert have recently been published on the site (with more to follow!). The Executive Editor at NewGeography.com is Joel Kotkin. Check it out!

1 – THE COLLEGE TOWN IS OBSOLETE

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1 – THE COLLEGE TOWN IS OBSOLETE

The college town occupies a special place in the American consciousness. Small, leafy, brimming with intellectual activity, preparing tomorrow's leaders – if we haven't spent years, dropped off kids, or attended a football game in a college town, we have at least passed through one.

But nothing lasts forever and nostalgia is not the surest guide to the future. Colleges claim their presence brings great benefits to their surrounding regions. Many conduct studies to quantify these benefits, and several come up with figures in the billions of dollars (you can Google the subject for examples).

Hundreds of articles proclaim the college town as the retiree's ideal. You can walk on campus! Take workshops! Audit classes!

Forbes magazine editor Rich Karlgaard has written extensively about college towns being excellent places to start and run small businesses. Available, affordable, high-skill labor! Amenities! Good coffee and wine! Low cost of living (a place where even I can afford to belong to the country club)!

And every down-on-its luck town wants to become a college town to attract population, businesses and jobs; they dream of becoming the

next Silicon Valley, or at least Alley, by providing just the right mix of public policy and social/cultural atmosphere.

In fact, college towns are stifling, boring, and obsolescent.

Colleges and college towns have become bastions of intolerance and enforced conformity. Political correctness? That's not the tenth of it. I'm talking about the stifling of speech, dissent, or any deviation from orthodoxy. Colleges have gone from citadels of intellectual openness to dungeons of intellectual coercion. And in support of what? High ideals such as the canons of Western thought (freedom, liberty, justice, sovereignty of the individual, the inviolability of property rights)? More often, it's the undermining of the same.

If this is news to you, you haven't been paying attention, and you certainly haven't experienced being flunked for your views (not your scholarship), having your perfectly reasonable points of view confiscated and trashed and/or burned (if they appeared in print), being shouted down, prevented from gaining a hearing, or having your audiences intimidated and threatened, your tenure denied, your application rejected, or your grant stripped. [Consult www.Studentsforacademicfreedom.org, or see the film, "Indoctrinate U."]

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Secondly, for most people college is a waste of time and money. As Charles Murray points out:

College is not all it is cracked up to be. Dumbed-down courses, flaky majors, and grade inflation have conspired to make the term B.A. close to meaningless. Another problem with today's colleges is more insidious: they are no longer good places for young people to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Today's colleges are structured to prolong adolescence, not to midwife maturity.

In fact, the entire American system of post-secondary education is wasteful; Murray calls it cruel and insane. The four years and thousands of dollars you spent in that college town to earn a bachelor's degree in a field such as sociology, psy-

chology, economics, history or literature certifies little and qualifies you for less.

Advances in technology are also making the brick-and-mortar facility increasingly irrelevant. Distance learning, remote learning – call it what you will – will doom the college town. The Internet renders the college library unnecessary; CDs and DVDs obsolete the 8 AM lecture; email and other advanced communication capabilities make office hours unneeded. Giving up the trappings of a campus will reduce costs dramatically, particularly in an era of high energy prices. Once higher education is exposed to market forces, the rationalization of education will be rapid and profound.

Of course college towns will still exist: after all, there are still football, hockey and basketball games. There will just be far fewer of them.

2 – THE FUTURE OF SUBURBS? SUBURBS ARE THE FUTURE

I entered the field of futures research in 1981. No, not futures – contracts to deliver a certain commodity at a certain price at a date certain (God, I wish I had) – futures research, as in scenarios, trends, strategic planning and market planning. Unfortunately the place was soon lousy with what I call “futurism”: extrapolations of the unsustainable to make the improbable look inevitable.

A current example: suburbs are doomed because of high energy prices (peak oil!), the housing bubble, the obsolescence of the internal combustion engine, and yes, global warming (and what hasn't been blamed on global warming?). Besides, the urban renaissance is underway; people want to live in the city for the culture, food, music and hipness, don'tchaknow. This is what I read in the Freakonomics quorum on the future of suburbia (*New York Times*, 8/12/08), and in *The Atlantic* magazine (“The Next Slum,” Christopher Leinberger, March

2008), *The International Herald Tribune* (“Life on the fringes of U.S. suburbia becomes untenable with rising gas costs,” 6/24/08), and elsewhere, ad infinitum.

Well, I could be clever and say that predictions of the demise of suburbs are premature, be in fact they are just plain apocalyptic and absurd. Suburbs are the nexus of American life, have been for decades, and will certainly remain so (because, like, where else are we going to put the next 100 million Americans?). Suburbs are where the majority of Americans today, and in the future, live, work, shop, create, consume, recreate, educate and, perhaps most importantly, procreate.

Suburbs remain home to a majority of Americans and a plurality of American families. Suburban population, business and job growth each outpace those of cities, have done so for decades and will likely continue to do so. In fact, from 2001 to 2006:

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- 90% of all metropolitan population growth occurred in the suburbs (American County Survey, US Census Bureau)
- Job growth in suburbia expanded at 6 times the rate of that in urban cores (Praxis Strategy Group)

A small recent surge in mass transit won't really change this. Of the 130 million Americans who commute to work every day, 41 million – by far the largest number and share – commute within suburbs (i.e. to the same or another suburb). Only 18 million, or 14% of commuters, commute from a suburb to a central city. To put it another way, 60% of commuting is suburb-related in some way. [IAC Transportation (July, 2008)] By the way, 75% of all commuters drive alone in their cars.

Repeat after me: “multi-centered metropolitan region.” This is the model that characterizes most city/suburban regions in the US, where the urban core is just one of several nodes of development or centers of economic, residential, office, industrial, educational and recreational facilities and life. This is the model that, planned or unplanned, has evolved in the United States. It works, we like it, we're keeping it. I know, congestion is horrible,

but it's horribly unnecessary: as explained by both Roth in *Street Smart* and by Stanley and Balaker in *The Road More Traveled* (both books published last year), we have the knowledge and means to reduce or even eliminate traffic congestion (more capacity, and more rational use of current capacity), but we don't have the political will to deregulate, privatize and build.

Repeat after me again: “mixed-use.” OK? I'm not talking about New Urbanism or smart growth, which are concepts whose utility and desirability are debatable. I'm talking about the availability, in a suburban setting, to access services and amenities, or what Wally Siembab calls “smart sprawl” – retrofitting suburbs of any density so that residents can shop, obtain services and work all within a mile or two of their home.

One last point: Telecommuting, small home-based businesses and self-employment make suburban living all the more plausible and sustainable. If you add the number of part-time and full-time telecommuters plus home-based businesses, you're talking about 36 million Americans, more than a fourth of the workforce.

Welcome to the future: suburbia.

3 – THE MIDDLE CLASS IS KEY TO ANY CITY'S FUTURE

What are your favorite cities, in the US and abroad? Chances are you like cities for their vibrancy, diversity, people, foods, smells, sights, sounds, opportunities for work, learning, play and life.

These cities can only exist with vibrant middle classes to do the work, pay the taxes, and sustain life (and by that I mean, including having the kids that are a city's future).

I have had the opportunity to live, work and visit cities around the world. I have noticed that cities that are dependent on one industry

or activity (such as resort tourism, for example), are not interesting, exciting, vibrant, dynamic, or sustainable. They are missing a middle class. There is nothing more depressing and dispiriting than to visit a resort where you are surrounded by the wealthy attendees and minimum-wage attendants. It is laughable when such wealthy patrons then try to ameliorate the situation with low-cost housing and other half-baked solutions. Raising wages for the largely itinerant labor force does not work. You need a middle class.

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Some of our “normal, regular” cities are heading down this path. They are losing their middle classes.

In a recent article in *City Journal* (Summer 2008), “Houston, New York Has a Problem,” Edward Glaeser compares Houston to New York and comes to the conclusion that Houston is preferable because it welcomes the middle class, while a heavily regulated and expensive New York drives it away. It is a devastating comparison:

“Houston’s great advantage, it turns out, is its ability to provide affordable living for middle-income Americans, something that is increasingly hard to achieve in the Big Apple. That Houston is a middle-class city is mirrored in the nature of its economy. Both greater Houston and Manhattan have about 2 million employees.

“In Manhattan, almost 600,000 of them work in the idea-intensive sectors of finance, insurance, and professional services; only 2% are in manufacturing, and fewer than that in construction. Finance increasingly drives New York City’s economy as a whole. By contrast, Houston is a manufacturing powerhouse that makes machinery, food products, and electronics, with a retail sector twice the size of Manhattan’s and lots of middle-class jobs.”

Joel Kotkin has also written extensively on what makes Houston a great city, and comes to the same conclusion. In “Lone Star Rising” (*The American*, March/April 2008), he first takes note of the disdain in which Houston is held by most journalists, academics and urbanists. But the facts and numbers don’t lie: Houston is more of a city with a future, due to its openness and welcoming of middle class populations, businesses and jobs. He writes:

“Ultimately, it’s a question of defining what makes a city great. Many city planners today focus largely on aesthetics, the arts, and the perception of being “cool.” Academics and many economic-development experts link urban success to cities’ appeal to the “creative class” of college-educated young people. In this calculus, the traditional practice of gauging a city’s success by studying patterns of population or employment growth, or noting the opportunities available for working-class or middle-class families to flourish, rarely registers as important.”

One academic quoted has even offered a formula for “growth without growth,” or rising incomes without more people, businesses and jobs. This displays a basic misunderstanding of the process of creative destruction, a necessary city dynamic.

Living cities must be growing cities, going through constant cycles of renewal of people, economies, and industries. This means private sector job creation. That requires healthy business growth, which adds to the tax base, not public sector job growth, which drains funds from the system.

Growth-without-growth cities sound like resort cities to me: nice to visit but not a model for the urban growth that will need to be accommodated over the next 40 - 50 years in the US.

There is in fact a “Virtuous Circle” of metropolitan wealth creation: it starts with business growth, leading to job growth, leading to tax revenue growth, making more government services and infrastructure possible, enhancing quality of life for all inhabitants. This is the economic food chain on which we all draw from and contribute to. Without it, cities cannot have real life.