

The Suburban Archipelago

The case for smart sprawl.

IN 1971 GEORGE MITCHELL, a Texas oilman, began to imagine what kind of community he would build on the thousands of acres he had acquired in an east Texas forest outside of Houston. The son of Greek immigrants, Mitchell had a clear idea of what he wanted to create and, since he alone controlled the development for over thirty years, he was able to see it further along to fruition than most visionaries. He was greatly affected by the failures of American cities, and concluded that he could not turn around their problems. Instead, he looked to develop his huge parcel west of Houston into something that would be environmentally attractive and commercially successful,

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and would also reflect the dreams of the 1930s New Dealers: a community available to a broad range of income groups.

Mitchell was not interested in simply building housing—he wanted to build a self-sufficient community. Roger Galatas, a close associate and former CEO of the Woodlands Operating Company, observes that Mitchell “wanted people to live and work in The Woodlands.” His original plans contained a “business crescent” designed to attract a broad diversity of enterprises. Galatas believes it was the atmosphere in The Woodlands that lured business and entrepreneurs. “The quality of life has been what has brought business to the area,” he suggests. “Good public places, good schools, a good quality of life. It’s a place where you can grow but feel you are in a protected environment.”

Today The Woodlands, with a population of more than 77,000 people, serves as the commercial hub for the roughly one million people who live within a half hour of the development. With more than 1,200 employers, the area now boasts nearly 40,000 jobs. Yet at the same time, the area retains much of its natural amenity as a water-rich forested area—thus its name—and its surprisingly rustic feel. In many ways, The Woodlands represents a model of what could be the future for a large portion of the next hundred million Americans. Not only has it been successful economically, but it has thrived as a com-

munity with a strong web of religious and civic organizations, and a powerful sense of its own identity, distinct from the surrounding metropolis. A thirty-year resident put it succinctly: “If you live here for a while you don’t think of yourself just as a resident of a part of Houston. You say you’re from The Woodlands.”

S U B U R B I A

Places such as The Woodlands are likely to remain the predominant locale for most Americans. The age of highly centralized cities as the fulcrum of American life has ended, and has been replaced by new forms that conform to an increasingly “centerless” world without strict distinctions between city and suburb, country and urbanized area. Cities will continue to play an important role in this future, of course, but only a relatively small percentage of the nation’s future population growth will take place in or around the urban core. For at least four decades the portion of the population that wants to live in a big city has consistently been in the 10 percent to 15 percent range, while roughly 50 percent or more opt for suburbs or exurbs. This has been true despite the “flight from suburbia” that researchers and publicists have proclaimed periodically since at least the 1960s.

In the future the primary challenge will not be to stop or even limit “sprawl,” but to find ways to make it work that are more sustainable for people, for the economy, and for the environment. The most logical way to do this is to construct an archipelago of villages—from the inner suburbs to the farthest periphery—that gradually comes to provide a self-sustaining and sustainable way of life for the tens of millions who will inhabit suburbia over the coming decades.

Over the coming decades, suburbia itself will change. As land prices rise, the one- or two-acre lot may become less common, and some forms of mid-range density, even in the exurbs, may become prevalent. But the basic pattern will be built upon a predominately suburban matrix, dominated by cars, road connections and construction that will remain familiar to the far-flung denizens of contemporary Los Angeles, Phoenix or Houston.

The population of twenty-first-century suburbs will be increasingly diverse. In 1970, nearly 95 percent of suburbanites were white. At that time suburbia represented to journalist William Whyte “the anti-city,” not an extension of the metropolis but its negation.” He complained, “In some suburbs, [you] may hardly see a Negro, a poor person, or, for that matter, anyone over fifty.” In sharp contrast, by 2000, over 27 percent of suburbanites were minorities. In coming decades immi-

grants, their children, and native-born minorities will become a dominant force in shaping the suburban future. In fast-growing Gwinnett County outside Atlanta, in 1980 minorities made up less than 10 percent of the population; by 2006, the country was on the verge of becoming “majority minority.”

Whatever disdain some long-settled Americans feel towards the suburbs of their childhoods, these attitudes do not appear to be widely shared by recent immigrants. Immigrants, particularly from Latin America, seem overwhelmingly to favor single-family homes, and seek houses on the suburban periphery. One reason may well be that the two primary immigrant groups, Latinos and Asians, are far more likely to live in married households with children than are other Americans.

The other big demographic change will be the progressive “graying” of suburbia. Due largely to boomers, by 2030 more than one of five Americans will be over 65. Despite all the anecdotal stories that these “downshifting boomers” are joining the hip and cool “back in the city,” far more seniors are migrating from city to suburb than vice versa. Thus, although a handful of relatively wealthy older suburbanites do establish residences in some inner-city locations, the overall flow goes heavily the other way. This may have some impact on housing patterns in the suburbs and exurbs. Over time, some boomers—as well

as most immigrants—may be more amenable to smaller homes, condos, and townhouses located in suburban areas, where the population can be expected to become older than in the core cities. Many express a preference for areas that are safe and close to outdoor recreation. Finally, they will stay in suburbia for their children. Some 40 percent of baby boomers anticipate that their children will at sometime move back in with them. Many boomers also plan to continue working, and could still require space to do so from home—space that is generally more plentiful in suburban locales than in expensive city areas.

DENSITY AND COMMUNITY

Critics of contemporary suburbia are correct when they point to national surveys that indicate that many suburbanites prefer shorter commutes and more walkable communities. But that does not mean that they will embrace substantially higher density. A 2005 *Kansas City Star* poll of suburbanites found that while most favored closer proximity to places they want to go, they also expressed strong preferences for limits to growth in their communities. Simply put, there is little reason for most suburbanites to favor radical changes in the densities of their communities. Critics sometimes suggest that this desire to pre-

serve modest density stems from racist, elitist motives. Yet opposition to development, notes public opinion surveyor Mark Baldassare, is commonplace not only in suburbs, but also in residential communities in urban neighborhoods.

Once settled into what they consider an attractive community, residents have a vested interest to protect it. Political orientation seems to matter little. Some of the strongest anti-growth neighborhoods in the nation are in areas such as Fairfax County, Virginia with high concentrations of “progressive” well-educated people who ostensibly might be seen as amenable to politically and environmentally correct “smart growth.” One planning director in a well-to-do suburban Maryland county noted that “Smart growth is something people want. They just don’t want it in their own neighborhood.” Fred Hirsch, in his study *Social Limits to Growth*, attributed this to what he called “the paradox of affluence.” He believes that the idea of land as a “leisure” good, at one time a luxury of the aristocracy, has become increasingly commonplace. This is particularly true for what might be considered “scenic land” with majestic mountain, ocean, riverfront or lake backdrops. Opposition to densification and development in areas with such characteristics tends to be particularly heated in places like the Front Range of the Rockies, the Hudson Valley, or the California coast.

Such opposition to development may be further reinforced by structural changes in the economy. Today, fewer local people own shops that directly benefit from increased population; many basic local needs are now met by giant retail chains whose managers are themselves often tied more to a corporate identity than to one particular place. A skilled “knowledge worker” whose business is conducted electronically with national and global customers naturally has a less keen interest in localized growth than did the traditional Main Street merchants who often propelled local pro-development policies.

Although suburbanites are skeptical of density, this does not mean they do not want some aspects of a traditional community. One of the great urban legends of the twentieth century maintains that suburbs are made up of largely alienated, autonomous individuals, while the inner urban core is animated by residents with a deep sense of belonging. “If suburban life is undesirable,” noted Herbert Gans in 1969, “the suburbanites themselves seem blissfully unaware of it.” Indeed on virtually every matrix—from jobs and environment to families—suburban residents express a stronger sense of identity and civic involvement with their communities than do those living closer to the core.

One recent international study found that density did not, as is often assumed, increase social contact between neighbors

or overall measurement of social involvement. Instead, researchers found the exact opposite to be true: people in less dense areas tended to be more involved with their communities and with each other. For every 10 percent reduction in density, the chances of people talking to their neighbors increases by 10 percent, and their likelihood of belonging to a local club by 15 percent. The study leader, Jan Brueckner of the University of California at Irvine, concluded that the reasons for “a negative density effect” varied, from greater urban distractions such as cultural facilities, to the greater need for privacy in a highly dense environment. Crime, which many times was more prevalent in dense urban areas, might also discourage urbanites from more intense social involvement.

Such assertions have been supported by other studies. A Los Angeles Times survey, for example, found “high levels of satisfaction throughout suburbia, and the degree of contentment increased every step from the city of Los Angeles.” Another study, conducted across the country in the Miami Valley area around Dayton, Ohio, revealed a seemingly wide gap in the level of satisfaction between suburbanites and city dwellers. These same attitudes also surfaced in surveys in the Philadelphia area. One would imagine that residents of Philadelphia, a city renowned for its well-established neighborhoods, would have a strong sense of identification with their

communities. But suburbanites, many of them in relatively new and far-flung communities, were considerably more likely see their neighborhoods as “home,” rather than just a place to live.

TOWARDS THE ARCHIPELAGO

A concern for community will be among the major drivers in creating a new suburban archipelago. So, too, will be concerns over energy and the environment, changes in the economy, and new telecommunications technology. Life on the periphery will change radically, perhaps even more than life within the core. Over the coming decades, suburbs and exurbs will continue to evolve from “bedroom” communities into something more self-sustaining. Higher land prices, growing congestion, and the dispersion of work will create what author D. J. Waldie has described as “a new consensus of place making” throughout the vast suburban landscape.

This new suburbia will not fulfill the expectations of most urban planners. Vastly greater densification is unlikely, since many suburbanites fear the negative aspects of urbanization such as greater risks of crime, crowding, and increased traffic. Because of the continued dispersion of workplaces, suburbanites of the future are equally unlikely to fit the model

of train-riding commuters so beloved by many planners and urban theorists. Such social, technical and economic factors will drive development farther out towards the edges of the periphery during the next three decades. The need to accommodate fifty to sixty million more suburbanites is likely to result in developments that “leapfrog” each other, as one area after another becomes more restrictive towards development. “Growth,” notes one California research study, “is like toothpaste. Squeezed out of one location, it must go somewhere else.”

It seems likely that there will be a tendency for growth to head farther out, often to poorer areas seeking economic stimulus or to places where local landowners can still dictate key planning decisions. These new areas will be even more economically and socially disconnected from the historic core than today’s peripheral communities. The new areas will become, as one observer put it, not suburbs of great cities but “suburbs of interstate highways.” These future communities will need to replicate or replace many of the forces that animated traditional cities, from jobs and culture to religious institutions, but scaled down to a level acceptable to the suburban population. They will be less like extensions of industrial age cities, and more akin to pre-industrial villages, which supplied most of the employment, cultural and social needs of their people.

The earliest attempts in this direction included the notion of the Garden City movement, promulgated in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century by the British visionary Ebenezer Howard—a full century before the “new urbanism” and “smart growth.” A peculiarly American take on this notion came from architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who imagined a sprawling, decentralized metropolis. His Broadacre City consisted of single-family homes, connected by highways. This would be an urban area of an entirely new kind of urbanization—as he put it, both “everywhere and nowhere”—with its center not downtown, but in the individual home.

Wright’s notion proved unworkable, but there continued to be new attempts to create a community that accommodated the desire for both the single-family home and the automobile. In the ensuing decades, other attempts were made to develop a practical village model—in Radburn, N.Y., in the “new towns” of the New Deal era and later in such developments as the Woodlands, Columbia, Maryland and Reston, Virginia.

It was in Southern California—birthplace of so many late-twentieth-century urban innovations—that the village concept became married to the emerging technological economy. Developments such as Irvine in Orange County, and Valencia, north of Los Angeles, sought to build

communities around the knowledge-based and service industries that flourished in the surrounding region. Valencia, converted from oil and cattle ranches, drew companies and residents from the vast San Fernando Valley, a leading center of aerospace and other advanced technologies of the day. The developers, Newhall Land and Farming, had the advantage of already owning their property. Newhall also benefited from its visionary planner, the Viennese Victor Gruen. Gruen declared that suburban America constituted “an avenue of horrors... flanked by the greatest collection of vulgarity—billboards, motels, gas stations, shanties, car lots, hot dog stands, wayside stores—ever collected by man.” His notion of suburbia was distinctly European: he saw the suburbs as a “middle landscape” that combined access to nature with what he considered “the advantages of urban life.” His goal was to build a new American town, with mixed housing organized into neighborhoods, a well-preserved natural environment, and a thriving town center.

Even before Valencia was developed into a housing community, Newhall was actively engaged in promoting industrial and office development in the area. Valencia developers lured businesses that initially had been located in the San Fernando Valley to their new office and industrial park. The notion was to appeal to companies or individuals by offering a

location in a coherent, safe and well-planned community, with lots of nearby open space and recreational facilities.

Over the past half century, places like Valencia have been at the forefront of a process by which suburbs have evolved, as one historian asserts, into “a new and influential kind of urbanism.” The periphery, which initially grew as a response to the dysfunctionality of the urban core, will begin increasingly to provide the critical elements that are the heritage of the traditional city, such as promoting community, identity, and the creation of “sacred space.”

Ever since the technological changes of the 1960s, particularly the ubiquity of auto transit, the essential nature of cities has shifted; cities are comparatively bounded places. Suburbs, noted American sociologist Melvin Webber, instead give us “non-place urban realms”—they are not bound to a particular place. Yet suburbs and exurbs are not without a sense of place. As they mature, they take on more distinctive character; many older suburbs already have distinct, often thriving town centers. In the future, this retail function could occur in a revitalized suburban mall; many of the mall’s traditional functions as a pure retail center have been undermined by competition from big box stores or Internet marketing.

Early versions of this evolution can be seen in the growth of a new generation of “lifestyle centers,” which, if not exactly

downtowns, provide opportunities for walking and venues for the kind of spontaneous social interaction long associated with urban centers. Malls, strip centers and even abandoned industrial facilities provide the focus for social and cultural rendezvous in an area that remains primarily dominated by single-family homes. Such developments have taken hold in Canoga Park in the suburban San Fernando Valley, in the sprawling suburbs around Washington, D.C., in Dallas and Chicago, and around Denver’s Front Range.

Attempts to recreate the best aspects of urbanism in frankly suburban settings will not please critics of the dispersed communities. Yet throughout history, new developments—even in cities—have been criticized as inauthentic. Nineteenth-century European visitors to booming Chicago and Cincinnati saw these cities as hopeless, inauthentic fakes. Much of what is now “classic” Los Angeles—Hollywood, Los Feliz, Echo Park—engendered snickers from East Coast and British observers a generation ago.

Ultimately, all of these trends represent only the early stages of a new era for American communities and families. The development of suburban villages can provide an opportunity to break free from the commuter culture that has been so oppressive a part of the industrial era. Already there are suburbs such as Bellevue, Washington; Reston, Virginia; the

Woodlands; and Irvine, with strong town centers, where between 40 percent and 50 percent of local residents work close to their homes. In more conventional suburbs this can be less 20 percent. Over the ensuing decades, growth in cyberspace communications will intensify this tendency. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Americans working at home increased by 23 percent, to more than four million. An additional twenty million—more than 10 percent of American adults—work part-time at home. According to the Hudson Institute, telecommuting is growing at the rate of about 15 percent a year, most of it among the self-employed. The number of telecommuters should reach forty million by 2008. Such developments will make dispersion increasingly feasible. The ability to work full-time or part-time from home, notes one planning expert, expands “the computer sheds” of metropolitan areas to areas well outside their traditional limits. In exchange for the preferred rural or exurban lifestyle, this new commuter—who may go in to “work” only one or two days a week—will endure the periodic extra-long trip to the office.

SMART SPRAWL

The mid-twenty-first century may see the emergence of a landscape that resembles

the network of smaller towns that characterized America in the nineteenth century. The nation is large enough—less than 5 percent of the United States is currently urbanized—to accommodate this growth, while still husbanding our critical farmland and open space. One writer, Wally Siembab, has dubbed the process of creating low- or moderate-density work environments as “smart sprawl.” Smart sprawl will require a reduction in gas usage during commutes through more fuel-efficient cars. It will also require the generous purchase of open space by public agencies, perhaps with support of private developers, in the areas between the continually leap-frogging communities.

Smart sprawl seems like a far more reasonable way to meet our environmental needs than shifting our communities back to the transit-based models of the industrial age. The auto has left an indelible imprint on our communities. Cars meet the needs of our dispersed economy, which is one reason why suburbanites and exurbanites experience, on average, the shortest commutes, while those in the more densely packed areas endure the longest ones. And it helps explain why attempts by new urbanist and smart growth advocates in Los Angeles to design dense so-called transit-oriented development generally have been far less successful than hoped. This is not to say that transit cannot play a useful role in serving those who cannot, or would

rather not, drive, perhaps in cost-efficient and flexible dedicated busways, or local shuttles within “villages.” But short of a crippling shortage of fuel or some other catastrophic event, it is highly unlikely we will ever see a widespread growth of the dense, transit-oriented communities envisioned by some urbanists.

To succeed over time, the new suburban archipelago will need to make the case that it represents not only a better social model, but also a new and more harmonious relationship with the natural world. Although suburbia is often castigated as bad for the environment, much literature suggests that modest and low-density development actually uses less energy and less water than denser urban forms. Denser urban centers, according to some researchers, can generate up to six to ten degrees Fahrenheit more heat than the surrounding hinterlands. Tall buildings are particularly harmful. Recent Australian studies show that townhouses, small condos and even single-family homes generate far less heat per capita than residential towers. In terms of energy conservation, the easiest—as well as the least expensive—option may be to retrofit single-family houses and townhouses.

Two- or three-story houses or townhomes often do not require more than double-paned windows to reduce their energy consumption; one Los Angeles study found that white roofs and shade

trees can reduce suburban air conditioning by 18 percent. Such techniques are particularly suitable for low-rise housing; after all, a tree can cool a two-story house more efficiently than a ten-story apartment building. In this pragmatic sense, the creation of an archipelago of low-rise “villages” may be the best way to reduce the environmental effects of growth in the new century. By limiting commutes and trips by the dispersion of workplaces—as well as through home-based employment—the archipelago could promote a wider but less intrusive impact of humans on the environment.

GETTING THERE

Humanity’s relation to nature does not have to be seen as adversarial. Over the past twenty years of rapid suburban development, for example, the nation’s forest cover has actually increased, as less-productive farm and pasture land has been taken out of production. The residents of the new archipelago could promote “greening” through acquisitions of open space. The goal would be to nurture communities that are separated from their neighbors by belts of open recreational or agricultural land.

Greenways that cut through the path of existing and future residential areas could provide a break from the monotony

of landscape; they would be “lungs” for residents of the periphery as well as ideal landscapes for the preservation of wildlife. In some cases, this open space can actually lower the cost of infrastructure development, and it can serve as a buffer against flooding.

Humans can have their own space and also provide space for nature and agriculture. Such notions go back to Frederick Law Olmstead, Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Victor Gruen, and James Rouse. More important, these ideas have already been put into practice. Visionaries like Gruen saw their efforts, as USC researcher Patrick Wirtz put it, as a “suburbia redeemed,” a place where both the urban and rural spirit could mingle. The elaborate network of twenty-eight miles of car-free paseos developed by Gruen in Valencia helped make the development he envisioned accessible to the residents. He also recognized the commercial appeal of such an environment. A 1992 ad for Valencia featured a smiling girl saying, “I can be in my classroom one minute and riding my horse the next. I don’t know whether I’m a city or country girl.”

These thoughts were also very much on the mind of Texan George Mitchell in the early 1970s. The Woodlands name, suggests Roger Galatas, was more than “just real estate hype.” Mitchell commissioned plans that allowed the community to grow without destroying the forest lands

and natural drainage. Local residents often cite this substantial preservation effort as one of the most appealing aspects of The Woodlands. Twenty eight percent of the community is dedicated to nature, and there are 135 miles of hiking and bike trails. This model—a thriving city amidst the trees—will be a critical element of any successful American future. It is the best way to accommodate our next hundred million people, in a way that satisfies both the needs of nature and the basic aspirations of the bulk of American society.