

HAIL TO THE SUBURBAN OASIS

METROPOLITAN TYPES WHO
THINK EXPENSIVE OIL WILL
DRIVE PEOPLE INTO CITIES
FACE A RUDE AWAKENING.
SUBURBS WILL BE THE BIG
WINNERS. BY JOEL KOTKIN

TO MANY ACADEMICS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS and urban boosters, the long-term prospect of high energy prices has stirred hopes of a mass exodus to the dense cities of the past. Unable to bear the cost of filling their tanks, chastened suburbanites will now abandon their homes, SUVs and shopping malls, and clamor for their own piece of the Manhattan dream.

It's a nice fantasy, but not likely. Rather than spark a wholesale hegira back to the central city, big gas and electricity bills are more likely to produce a bracing new era of innovation in suburban and even exurban life. The paradigm shift—oft trumpeted in the media—between energy-sucking McMansions and cramped, transit-oriented apartments will be trumped by the drive to develop better, and greener, suburbs.

For evidence, look at the experience of the 1970s. In that decade, Americans, Europeans and Japanese faced an even steeper price rise than the one we face today. Worse, we were hopelessly unprepared for it, and far more jobs, particularly high-paying ones, were located in the urban core.

So what happened? People adapted, eschewing the long commutes into the central city for generally shorter ones to new office and industrial parks on the periphery. Worldwide, almost every country continued to suburbanize, from Orange County, California, to Grand-Couronne around Paris. In the United States, the '70s proved to be the only decade in the 20th century in which overall urban population *dropped* in actual numbers.

The 1970s technology explosion—what Japanese social theorist Taichi Sakaiya saw as the harbinger of our transition out of the “petroleum era”—played a key role. Microtechnology, Sakaiya suggested, created a new source of wealth, one that relied less on fossil fuels and more on ingenuity and knowledge. The new employment clustered close to the leafy suburbs where most scientists, engineers and managers chose to live. Silicon Valley, located in the sprawl south of San Francisco, epitomized this trend.

There were other significant changes as well. American drivers abandoned gas guzzlers for fuel-efficient cars long favored by commuters in other countries, where the price of petrol runs two to three times higher. The 1970s also saw builders begin to adapt energy-saving methods, including a greater emphasis on better insulation, thicker windows and more-efficient appliances. After decades of mindless housing-tract construction, there emerged the first great rise in “village”-oriented developments. Places like Reston in Virginia, The Woodlands outside Houston and Valencia in the northern suburbs of Los Angeles all sought to lessen commutes by placing jobs, town centers and recreation closer to where suburbanites lived.

A long-term increase in energy prices is provoking an acceleration in back-to-the-'70s-type innovations. Developers in all advanced countries today talk increasingly of building “communities,” as opposed to bedroom communities. Larger new developments—such as the proposed 30,000-home New Model Colony in Ontario, California—emphasize placing jobs, shopping and recreation along with new houses.

One key appeal of such communities is

a cut in commute time for the average resident. “Village” developments historically allow for as many as 40 percent of residents to work close to home; in conventional suburbs this figure can be less than 20 percent. Commuters based in Reston, for example, on average take 14 minutes less time to get to work than people in neighboring communities, a nearly one-third reduction.

But the greatest potential for energy savings lies with a technology that did not



WORK IN TOWN:
That's the plan at
The Woodlands

most \$6 billion annually in energy costs. These telecommuters saved some 200 million gallons of fuel—at minimal public cost—with attendant reductions in greenhouse gases.

Our new energy realities will have their most powerful impact on the suburbs, exurbs and beyond, where most people in advanced countries prefer to live. Ladera Ranch in Orange County, California, for one, has integrated the electronic cottage into its floor plans, with separate entrances for business clients. Planned communities like Valencia and Playa Vista, each skirting Los Angeles, and The Woodlands in Houston have also incorporated expanded broadband coverage. “The biggest jolt the Industrial Revolution administered to the Western family,” suggests historian Peter Stearns, “was the progressive removal of work from the home.”

The Internet revolution now gives us the opportunity to reverse this historic trend, allowing the postindustrial community of the future to function something like its preindustrial counterpart. We can envision in our postindustrial communities something akin to—albeit updated by the sexual revolution—the family life portrayed by the master oil painters in their portraits of 15th-, 16th- and 17th-century bourgeoisie. Historian Philippe Ariès has pointed to artwork that expresses how, in the bustling cities of Europe, the paterfamilias worked at home, often aided by his wife and children. In advanced 21st-century society, the home worker may more likely be a female professional, no longer forced to choose between commitment to family and to career.

The imperative to reduce energy usage is forcing a new focus on locality, which could bring unintended benefits to city-dweller and suburbanite alike. The increasingly necessary changes in patterns of work and community development, compelled by our looming energy crisis, could usher in not only a greener, but a better, way of life.

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