

Creative Class Group; Richard Florida

What's The Difference Between Glendale and Palmdale? Don't Ask Joel Kotkin!

Bill Fulton, as appearing in California Planning & Development Report

7 July 2008 - 11:36am

Joel Kotkin is at it again. In yesterday's *Los Angeles Times Sunday opinion section*, the *enfant terrible* of L.A. urbanism dissed the "suburbs as slums" thesis of Brookings' Christopher Leinberger. But in once again coming to the defense of "suburbs", he has revealed that he can't tell the difference between Glendale and Palmdale.

For the last year or so, Leinberger has been trumpeting the idea that "Walkable Urban Places" – he sometimes calls them WUPs – are likely to have a competitive advantage over suburban driving neighborhoods in the decades ahead. As Leinberger himself admits, his [methodology is a bit ragged](#). Still, he has a point. The job-rich city neighborhoods and inner suburbs that childless professionals favor, especially those with access to rail transit, are on the rise – and they are doing well in the current real estate downturn.

More recently, Leinberger [suggested in the Atlantic Monthly](#) that not only will the WUPs have a competitive advantage going forward, but that auto-oriented suburbs will become the new slums – especially starter-home suburbs like Elk Grove in Sacramento and the Victor Valley in Southern California, which have been hammered hard by the subprime mortgage crisis.

This was apparently too much for Kotkin, who responded in Sunday's *Times* with a screed that once again came to the defense of the "suburbs" against the "city". In a similar fashion to last [summer's debacle](#) – when he decried Pasadena-sized densities as "Manhattanization" – Kotkin has now confused Glendale with Palmdale.

He argued that Leinberger is wrong because people and jobs are not flowing to Downtown Los Angeles in huge numbers. He claimed that Leinberger and his sympathizers base their research mostly on anecdotes, rather than facts. And he concluded that "rather than cramming more people and families into cities," high energy prices and similar trends "may instead foster a more dispersed, diversified archipelago of self-sufficient communities."

As examples he lists Burbank, Ontario, and West L.A. – all job-rich "suburbs" where commutes are shorter than they are in inner-city L.A. Take that, Leinberger!

Except that Leinberger, like practically every other advocate of urbanism in America, agrees with him. In a [Brookings paper last year](#) – admittedly qualitative in its approach – Leinberger took a stab at identifying WUPs in the nation's 30 largest metropolitan areas. He came up with 15 existing or emerging WUPs in the Los Angeles area, including ... Burbank, Glendale, Century City, Westwood, Culver City, and Beverly Hills. In other words, he included *all* the “suburbs” that Kotkin is always defending against the “city”.

The inescapable conclusion is that Kotkin is about 30 years out of date. His mind lives in a ring of older suburbs that circle downtown L.A. – Burbank, the San Gabriel Valley, the Westside, Irvine, all built between the 1920s and the 1960s as residential suburbs. Kotkin always casts the “urban v. suburban” battle as a battle between Downtown Los Angeles and these “suburbs”.

But Burbank and Westwood are no more suburbs than is Downtown. And the Americana at Brand, Rick Caruso's new mixed-use project in downtown Glendale, may seem manufactured – but it's definitely not suburban.

Why can't Kotkin see that these are emerging as urban places in their own right, with diversity and liveliness and jobs and amenities and all the things that are driving the yuppies to the WUPs, as Leinberger keeps saying?

And has Kotkin ever even been to Palmdale or Victorville or Hemet? These are the emerging slum suburbs created by the subprime fiasco. Over the last year or so, Kotkin the great expert on cities has been strangely silent about them.

Maybe it's about time he visited some of these places. It's really not that hard, especially for a fan of auto-oriented suburbs. All Kotkin has to do to find Palmdale is get on the Hollywood Freeway near his house and head north – up the 170 freeway, then I-5, and the 14 freeway – for about 60 miles. Maybe when he returns to Valley Village, he'll feel safely ensconced in suburban living because he has a back yard with trees. But at least he will have spent a little time out in a real suburb.

-- Bill Fulton