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Q&A

How to Save the Suburbs: Solutions from the Man Who Saw the Whole Thing Coming

Posted on Tuesday February 10th by Jebediah Reed



For a half century, it's been easy to mock suburbia for being too comfortable, white-bread and conformist.

That's all changed in the last 18 months as many suburbs have abruptly taken on a sense of tragedy and desperation—a fact that underlies Obama's trip to [devastated Lee County, Florida](#), later today. Drug violence, gangs [pillaging](#) half-empty subdivisions for scrap metal, skateboarders reclaiming the [pools](#) of abandoned McMansions, and whole streets of dead lawns [spray-painted green](#) have emerged as the new symbols of life in the 'burbs.

One man who foresaw all the ugliness is Christopher Leinberger. The Brookings Institute fellow and distinguished scholar of the suburban living arrangement has decades of experience in real estate development and urban planning. The meme of doomed suburbs went mainstream with his cover story for the Atlantic magazine last March, [“The Next Slum?”](#) The problem, he says, goes much deeper than the foreclosure crisis. It's part of a painful societal adjustment that will take a generation or more to work through.

After heralding the crash of America's predominant living arrangement, his latest efforts are devoted to showing how suburbs can adjust and reemerge as healthy communities. In this conversation he analyzes the roots of suburbia's current plight and explains how three straightforward adjustments to infrastructure can save a community.

The suburbs are really suffering. What's the short-form diagnosis?

Americans are undergoing a fundamental shift in where they want live, work, and play. So this is not just a normal cyclical downturn. We've structurally overbuilt retail, office, and housing, and we've done so in the wrong places.

So where's the bottom? Or, rather: Is there a bottom?

It's not a matter of waiting for two or three years to absorb the overproduction. It's a matter of drastically reducing real estate prices to well below replacement cost. And when you sell something for below replacement cost – that might sound like, well, “Somebody takes a hit but life goes on as usual.” No, life doesn't go on. For the owners of that retail or housing space, every dollar that they invest will be money they don't get back. That is another definition of a slum. There's no incentive to invest in a slum. So here you are. You buy a 4,000 square foot house 40 miles outside town. You think, wow, I got great value. But when the roof begins to go, you just patch it, because if you put a new one on it'll cost \$20,000, you'll still be at the same selling price. So, why do it?

You mentioned 40 miles outside town. Last year people were talking about high energy prices as the one of the prime causes of suburban collapse. But gas is back under \$2 a gallon.

Energy prices have nothing to do with it. I said that at the time. They can accelerate the process, but what drives it is the shift in consumer preferences. Gen Xers and Millennials want a lifestyle closer to *Friends* and *Seinfeld* (that is, walkable and urban) than to Tony Soprano (low density and suburban). It's not that nobody wants Tony Soprano. About 50 percent of Americans actually *do* want that configuration. But if we've built 80 percent of our housing that way, that's the definition of oversupply. The other 50 percent of Americans want walkable urban arrangements and yet that's just 20 percent of the housing stock. That's called pent-up demand. So the market is just responding.

So rather than asking about a bottom, the better question might be: How long will it take for supply and demand to get back into equilibrium?

Upwards of 30 years. In a good year we only add 2 percent to the built environment. So even if we only produced walkable urban product for the next 20 years, it would take that long to get caught up.

That prognosis seems a tad glum. Give us some hope. How can a suburb save itself?

It can adapt. The Washington DC metro area is a useful model. A year ago I came out with a survey for Brookings looking at walkable urban places in the top 30 metro regions. DC was at the top on a per capita basis.

I imagine people are surprised to hear it's not New York.

New York ranked tenth. When that came out I actually got a phone call from the *NY Post* and they were pissed. But only 8 percent of metro New Yorkers live in Manhattan. Most of the other 92 percent are spread out over four states at a density lower than Los Angeles.

Interesting. So what can DC teach us as an example?

What we're learning about the DC area is that there are 30 of these walkable communities here. I'm only talking about regionally significant places, not individual neighborhoods. So, for instance, downtown DC, Reston, Bethesda and so on. Of these places, 90 percent are on the metro system and most of the rest will be linked into it in the next five years. So that's a pretty obvious correlation right there. But most of these walkable places are *in the suburbs*.

What's the lesson?

This structural trend is about the transformation of the suburbs into something else. I've been doing some research looking at the price premiums on a per-square-foot basis for walkable communities. They get a price premium between 40 and 200 percent. I've also been looking at what I call the "penumbra." A walkable place is typically 50 to 500 acres in size. The penumbra, that area around it, can be even bigger.

Almost like micro suburbs.

Yes. These places are still suburban but they are within walking distance of the walkable places. This "penumbra" is seeing premiums of 20 to 80 percent over the rest of the market.

What's an example?

Look at Tyson's Corner outside DC. It has that giant suburban mall – 40 million square feet of retail and the largest suburban downtown in the country. It's a traffic nightmare. They've been trying to get a Metro link that the Bush administration finally allowed to go through after years of trying to kill it. (The Bush people *despised* public transit.) The head of the neighborhood group that was involved in with this torturous three year planning process told me, "I've seen Arlington." Arlington is one of the great models in the entire country of a redeveloped suburban commercial strip. Arlington has tripled its square footage and traffic has gone down ten percent. The people in Tyson see that and they want it too. They want that kind of urban excitement.

Plus there's the incentive of protecting their property values.

Well, I'm not sure they know that they're feathering their nests financially. But once this kind of

information gets out hopefully they'll understand it's not only a higher quality of life for them, it's better financially.

But Tyson's Corner has a more lot going for it than, say, [Lehigh Acres](#). What about those places that can't adapt—will they just disappear?

Well, they're probably not going to bulldoze these places. Though that may happen at some point. I'll just repeat from the Bible: There will always be poor among us. The only model we have is the '50s and '60s when the middle class decamped from center cities to the fringes. The poor got very good housing at very low prices. A lot of that housing was broken up into apartments. I was just talking to a reporter from a major newspaper the other day who is covering this same thing. He had been spending time out at the fringe and he was shocked to see house after house of unrelated single men living together there. They're flop houses.

But it's tough to compare a brownstone in Brooklyn to the some house in the Antelope Valley made of particle board and paint.

There will be losers. And, yes, this is junk we're putting up now. What's the life expectancy particle board and plywood under even the best of circumstances?

So you have a suburb full of flimsy houses in the middle of nowhere, with no incentive for upkeep. That's an ugly situation.

Exactly. It fails. Good lord, I'm a great amateur student of ancient cities. At some point they're just going to collapse upon themselves and blow away — unless there is some massive redevelopment agency steps in.

In very practical terms, how do towns get on the right side of this multi-decade imbalance between supply and demand?

You need to get the right infrastructure in. Doing so is a three-step process. First, is getting a transit connection that can anchor a walkable urban core. Second, is putting in overlay zoning districts around the train stations that will allow for much greater density and mixed use development. We're talking about a hundred, two hundred, three hundred acres. The third step is to get in place an entity to manage the thing, which generally takes the form of a non-profit business improvement district. These things are very complex, but we know how to do it now. We didn't 50 years ago, but we do now.

That's a tight plan.

And we have hundreds of examples of it working.

Is there a resource where, say, one might be able to find all the compiled case studies?

That's my next book.

Well, I'm sure you'll have no shortage of interested readers. Thank you.

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3 Responses to “How to Save the Suburbs: Solutions from the Man Who Saw the Whole Thing Coming”

1. *Roadrunner* Says:
[February 10th, 2009 at 11:10 am](#)

I live in Arlington, VA—the county he mentions that tripled its square footage and dropped traffic by 10%. I assume that’s only the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, and not the whole county, but still—that’s an amazing statistic. And I can confirm that it’s a fantastic place to live. My boyfriend and I don’t own a car, live three blocks from the Metro, and spend many a weekend going no further from home than a 15 minute walk. But that 15 minute walk includes dozens of (good!) restaurants, two grocery stores, a couple small concert venues that bring some great local bands, and lots of retail. And we’re a five minute Metro ride from the shopping mall at Ballston, which has a traditional department store and your more usual mall stores. And a five minute Metro ride from downtown DC. And a twenty minute morning commute on the Metro to our offices.

And, unlike almost everywhere else in the country, my neighborhood is experiencing a construction boom. There’s a new Marriott hotel opening a couple blocks away, and five separate high rise apartment buildings going up within five blocks of my building. And I can’t wait for the new residents of those buildings to move in, because the more people who live close by, the more successful the local businesses will be, and the more diversity in retail our neighborhood can support.

2. *The Bellows » More on Saving the Suburbs* Says:
[February 10th, 2009 at 1:21 pm](#)

[...] and testify in support of the Brookland small area plan. So, submitted for your parsing is this, from the Infrastructurist: You mentioned 40 miles outside town. Last year people were talking [...]

3. *BruceMcF* Says:
[February 10th, 2009 at 4:15 pm](#)

Note that 50 acres is just over a quarter of a square mile ... a rail corridor with a regional “stopping train” service with each station at the core of a main “walkable” district that has a quarter mile zoned for ground floor multiple use with stacked townhouses around the train station not only adds to the effective supply of walkable zone, but extends the “penumbra” out along both sides of the rail corridor.

And given the access at the train station to a major walkable district, only partial redevelopment of a suburban “village” around a given train station would convert the existing suburban development in the immediate hinterland of the village into more valuable property than the standard emerging suburban slum.