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How SoHo Can Save the Suburbs

Smart 'edge cities' are turning their shuttered malls and aging office parks into hip hotspots

By [RICHARD FLORIDA](#)

In Lakewood, Colo., a long-shuttered mall is being rebuilt into a 22-block area with parks, bus lines, stores and 1,300 new households. Tysons Corner, Va., is undergoing a full transformation from an office park to a walkable, livable community. And officials in Ferndale, Mich., are promoting the arts scene and building affordable housing in an attempt to revitalize the small city outside Detroit. Remaking America's sprawling suburbs, with their enormous footprints, shoddy construction, hastily built infrastructure and dying malls, is shaping up to be the biggest urban revitalization challenge of modern times—far larger in scale, scope and cost than the revitalization of our inner cities.

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SCENES FROM Montclair, N.J.: The view from a rooftop, above, and children at a park after a soccer game, above left.



Just a couple of decades ago, the suburbs were the very image of the American Dream, with their sprawling, large-lot homes and expansive lawns. Suburban malls, industrial parks and office campuses accounted for a growing percentage of the nation's economic output. Planners talked about "edge cities"—satellite centers where people could live, work and shop without ever having to set foot in major cities.

With millions of American homes now "underwater" or in foreclosure, the suburbs and exurbs have taken some of the most visible hits from the great recession. In a stunning reversal, big cities like Boston, Chicago and San Francisco have become talent magnets, drawing ambitious people, empty-nesters, young families and even a growing number of offices back to their downtown cores. As inner-city neighborhoods gentrify, blight and intransigent poverty are moving out to the suburbs. A Brookings Institution study released this week found that the number of poor people in the suburbs has grown by 37.4% since 2000, compared with 16.7% in cities.

The suburbs that have continued to prosper during the downturn share many attributes with the best urban neighborhoods: walkability, vibrant street life, density and diversity. The clustering of people and firms is a basic engine of modern economic life. When interesting people encounter each other, they spark new ideas and accelerate the formation of new enterprises. Renewing the suburbs will require retrofitting them for these new ways of living and working.

Even before the recession, our changing demography had begun to alter the texture of suburban life in favor of denser, more walkable mixed-use communities. The average age of marriage has been rising, households have gotten smaller, and home-buyers—surprising numbers of them single women—are looking for smaller houses closer in, with access to parks and cultural amenities.

Though most suburbanites are happy with where they live, many are unhappy with how much time they have to spend in their cars. A 2002 study found that more than half of Americans would prefer to walk more and drive less. Commuting by car is time-consuming and expensive, and according to research by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman, it is also one of life's least enjoyable activities. Most suburbanites don't want to move to the city; they want the best aspects of city life to come to them.

Walkable suburbs are some of America's best places to live, and they provide their sprawling, spread-out siblings with a model for renewal. Relatively dense commercial districts, with shops, restaurants and movie theaters, as well as a wide variety of housing types, have always been a feature of the older suburbs that grew up along the streetcar lines of big metro areas. A 2007 study by Christopher Leinberger found more than 150 walkable towns in America's 30 largest metro regions—places like Hoboken, Montclair and Princeton, N.J.; Stamford and Greenwich, Conn.; Brookline, Mass.; Bryn Mawr, Pa.; and Royal Oak and Birmingham, Mich. Newer versions of walkable suburbs can be found in regions that developed later, like Palo Alto, Calif.; Boulder, Colo.; Coral Gables, Fla.; Decatur, Ga.; and Clayton, Mo.

These are the places where Americans are clamoring to live and where housing prices have held up even in the face of one of the greatest real-estate collapses in modern memory. More than that, as my colleague Charlotta Mellander and I found when we looked into the statistics, the U.S. metro areas with walkable suburbs have greater economic output and higher incomes, more highly educated people, and more high-tech industries, to say nothing of higher levels of happiness.

Walk This Way

The most successful walkable suburbs in the U.S., ranked by education levels, per capita income and travel time to work.

1. Bethesda, Md.
2. Princeton Township, N.J.
3. Highland Park, Texas
4. Evanston, Ill.
5. Birmingham, Mich.
6. Coral Gables, Fla.
7. Winter Park, Fla.
8. Menlo Park, Calif.
9. Lake Forest, Ill.
10. Kirkland, Wash.

Sources: Martin Prosperity Institute, Christopher Leinberger, U.S. Census Bureau

Of course, not all of America's suburbs have the option of developing compact cores along streetcar lines or transit, and not all are filled with wonderful old housing stock that is ripe for upgrading. Many are relatively characterless places, with spread-out working class populations living in cookie-cutter houses on large lots and commuting long distances to work. These suburbs have to rebuild from the bottom up.

Languishing older malls are a good place to start. In Phoenix, three abandoned strip malls clustered around one corner have been converted into a restaurant, an upscale grocery, a chic bakery and a cocktail bar. It's called La Grande Orange, and it has become a huge attraction, for both customers and local home-buyers. National Harbor, a mix of hotels, residential units, marinas, parks, stores and indoor and outdoor entertainment venues, is being built on the footings of two previous failed projects in Prince George's County, Md. When completed, it will extend along a mile and a quarter of the Potomac. Outside Minneapolis, the parking lot that surrounded a dead shopping center built on landfill was turned back into wetlands—which in turn attracted new "lakefront" townhome development.

Perhaps the biggest retrofit of all is happening in Tysons Corner, Va., the virtual archetype of an auto-dependent, sprawling edge city. Located near the junctions of three major highways, it boasts 25 million square feet of office space and four million square feet of retail space. Decades ago developers hailed it as the wave of the future—one of hundreds of new satellite centers that would render our old downtown commercial centers obsolete. But Tysons Corner has lately been losing out. Its perpetual traffic gridlock and its lack of human energy have caused home-buyers

to choose other places. Some companies that were headquartered there have even moved back into the District of Columbia.

Now developers and landowners are seeking to make it more walkable, with a more integrated mix of uses. In June, the county's Board of Supervisors adopted a comprehensive plan that would transform Tysons Corner into a "24-hour urban center where people live, work and play." Its hallmarks will be green construction, access to public transportation and abundant public amenities, like parks and bicycle trails—something that sounds very much like a real city.

There are countless other opportunities for reclamation, all across America, as Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson document in their 2008 book, "Retrofitting Suburbia." Under-used golf courses can be transformed into parks and nature sanctuaries; abandoned car dealerships can be landscaped and developed as new, mixed-use neighborhoods. Developers can cut streets through formerly walled-off corporate campuses and add restaurants, stores and public spaces.

Historically, America's economic growth has hinged on its ability to create new development patterns—economic landscapes that simultaneously expand space and intensify our use of it. The rebound after the panic and long depression of 1873 was based on the transition to an urban-industrial economy organized around great cities and their early streetcar suburbs. Our recovery from the Great Depression saw the rise of massive metropolitan complexes of cities and suburbs. Today the challenge is to remake our suburbs, to turn them into more vibrant, livable, people-friendly communities and, in doing so, to make them engines of innovation and productivity.

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