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Don't Trust The Natives



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/15/2015 - 2:05pm

An otherwise reasonable Denver Post [article](#) on the relationship between density and smart growth stated: "but every now and then nearby residents who loudly protest a proposed project really do understand their long-term interests."

Maybe they do, but they don't necessarily understand the interests of the city or the state or humanity. It may be in the interest of a neighborhood's residents to keep housing scarce, but its not in the interests of the people priced out of that neighborhood. It may be in the interest of the residents to favor policies that keep the neighborhood car-oriented (e.g. minimum parking requirements) but if those policies mean increased citywide car emissions, it might not be in the interests of the city as a whole (or of broader regions to the extent pollution goes beyond city lines).

Throwing The Poor Out of Suburbs



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/15/2015 - 11:40am

Much has been written about gentrification and about the specter of poor people being displaced from cities- despite the fact that nearly every central city still has higher [poverty rates](#) than most of its suburbs.

But the City Observatory blog has an interesting post about one Atlanta suburb's attempt to gentrify not through market forces, but by using [public money](#) to buy up and destroy an apartment complex domianted by low-income African-Americans. On other words, the city's goal isn't gentrification that might result in displacement- it is displacement as a goal in itself, gentrification or no gentrification.

Maybe Urban Schools Aren't So Bad



Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 06/22/2015 - 3:28pm

It is conventional wisdom that big cities have problems retaining the middle class because of poor schools. But many older cities labor under a disadvantage that their suburbs don't have- lots of students from underprivileged background.

A recent [study](#) suggests that when one controls for social class, Chicago schools are actually not so bad. This study compared the test scores of Chicago's elementary schools with those of other Illinois schools with similar poverty rates, and calculated a "Poverty-Achievement Index" (PAI) based on this comparison. As it happens, 55 of the 100 schools with the best PAIs were in Chicago- which is to say, their test scores were better than those of suburban or small-city schools with similar student bodies.

What Robert Moses Got Right (And Kansas City Got Wrong)



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 06/09/2015 - 11:52am

Robert Moses is most famous (or perhaps infamous) for paving over large chunks of New York City with highways. But he also built and rehabilitated thousands of acres of parks and playgrounds; and in this area his contribution to the city was more unambiguously positive.

Moses believed parks should be used not just for leisurely contemplation but for active recreation; for example, he added [eighteen](#) playgrounds to Central Park alone. Moses also commonly added ballfields, tennis courts and other sports-oriented spaces to city parks.

By contrast, Kansas City has many chunks of lawn that include no active uses whatsoever; some of them don't even include benches to sit on. These grasslands (see [here](#) for an example) waste lawn that could be used for housing or commerce, artificially reducing city density and value without creating any compensating value.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Bad Transit



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 06/09/2015 - 10:56am

One common argument against public transit is that transit doesn't pay for itself. A recent [article](#) in Citylab points out that the best transit systems (that is, high-ridership systems like New York's) actually lose less money per rider than the minimal transit systems that are more common in the U.S. For example, New York's transit loses less than \$1 per trip, while Dallas transit loses over \$4 per trip.

So creating a car-oriented transportation system on the grounds that transit doesn't pay for itself creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: reduced service means reduced ridership, which actually means more subsidies per rider.

Reading Le Corbusier in 2015



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 03/03/2015 - 8:41pm

I just finished reading *Concerning Town Planning*, a short book of essays by Le Corbusier. Before reading this, all I knew about him was a few key phrases: "Radiant City" and "towers in a park." And Le Corbusier did indeed like high-rises surrounded by greenery.

But I was surprised by what he had in common with today's urbanists. He thought expanding suburbs caused waste of infrastructure, and accordingly was for strict urban growth boundaries. Sounding a bit like Jane Jacobs, he pointed out that "Nature melts under the invasion of roads and houses and the promised seclusion becomes a crowded settlement." He also was for pedestrian malls, suggesting that "The heart of the [typical] town will be forbidden to vehicles by chains of bollards." He would have hated **stroads**, writing again and again and again that pedestrians and cars belonged on different streets.

But I don't think he would like most new urbanist developments; the more suburban versions of new urbanism (such as Denver's Stapleton) would have struck him as too similar to sprawl, and the more urban versions as disgracefully old-fashioned.

Downtowns are Booming (Sometimes)



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 02/27/2015 - 1:24pm

The University of Virginia just created a [set of tables](#) based on recent Census data. These tables measure the affluence, age, etc. of neighborhoods measured by miles from downtown. For example, in Chicago, the neighborhoods within a mile of downtown have the highest per capita income in the region (though I wonder what the results would have been had the researchers focused on household income) and the number of occupied household units has doubled. However, downtown's poverty rate has dropped only slightly (from 18 percent to 16 percent) since 1990.

However, Chicago is atypical. In a composite of the 50 largest metro areas, the downtown population has increased but only by about 10 percent or so (from 1.31 million to 1.44 million); poverty rates are actually higher than the mile surrounding downtown than anywhere else. But even in the national composite, per capita incomes have risen faster downtown, and are higher downtown, than anywhere else.

Some cities still lag behind the national trend. In Detroit, for example, incomes declined in every ring less than 30 miles from downtown, and decreased by more than the regional average in the first mile from downtown. And despite all the positive publicity about urban Detroit, downtown population actually decreased. (Caveat: the estimates are based on 2008-12 five year estimates, so it may be that this data is just behind the times).

Rich Foreigners Like Suburbs, Too



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 02/10/2015 - 8:56am

One common argument against new construction (especially high-rise construction) in cities is that rich foreigners will soak up any new housing supply. This argument is of course based on the assumption that urban high-rises, and only urban high-rises, are irresistible to rich foreigners. But an [article](#) in today's New York Times says that foreign investors actually prefer suburbs to cities: 46 percent of real estate deals involving foreigners are in suburbs, as opposed to 37 percent in cities.

Don't Blame the Koch Brothers (for Low Gas Taxes)



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 02/05/2015 - 2:15pm

After a variety of conservative groups (including some funded by the Koch brothers) sent a letter to Congress opposing gas tax increases, the liberal and urbanist blogospheres were chock full of stories like [this](#) one, complaining that Congress can't reach a transportation deal because (in the words of grist.org) "of the right-wing and Koch network's coordinated national attack on transit" There is certainly an

element of truth in these stories; indeed, conservatives don't like tax increases and are often not particularly supportive of public transit.

But this narrative misses a huge fact: its not just the far Right (or even the not-so-far Right) that hates tax increases, especially gasoline tax increases. For example, a 2013 Gallup poll asked respondents if they "would support a state law that would increase the gas tax by up to 20 cents a gallon, with the new gas money going to improve roads and bridges and build more mass transportation in your state." [Only 29](#) percent of respondents would support the new tax. It wasn't just conservatives or residents of conservative areas who were against the tax either; only 40 percent of Democrats, and only 32 percent of northeasterners, supported the tax hike. Even in Massachusetts, voters recently voted to [eliminate](#) a law indexing the gas tax for inflation.

In sum, if you think we need to spend more money on transportation, don't blame a cabal of conservatives, blame the American people, who believe (rightly or wrongly) they can have good roads and good transit without paying more money for them. We have met the enemy and he (or she) is us.

More Evidence that Urbanists Should Support School Choice



Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 01/26/2015 - 10:19pm

A recent [article](#), "School Choice Programs: The Impacts on Housing Values" reviews literature relating to the impact of charter schools and various types of school choice programs on housing values. The article discusses studies from Minnesota, North Carolina, New York City, and Vermont (among other places) and finds that the traditional American "neighborhood school" system, which locks children into nearby schools, creates a hierarchy of housing values: places with disfavored schools (as a practical matter, anyplace urban or socially diverse) experience degraded housing values, while places with highly reputed schools (usually suburbs) become more desirable.

By contrast, the authors find that school choice programs disrupt this hierarchy.

For example, in Minnesota students can now attend schools in any school district in the state. Even though transportation difficulties prevent many students from taking advantage of this program, property values rose in school districts with weaker academic reputations. Similarly, in New York City the presence of charter schools and magnet schools increased values for nearby property, regardless of the prestige of nearby public schools.

These findings suggest that school choice will make areas with weaker school districts more desirable- an important finding for weak-market cities with weak

public schools. Today, parents often shun such cities because of their weak public schools. If school choice programs of various types allow parents to stay in the city without sending their children to typical urban schools, cities will become more desirable.

Do Tall Buildings Attract Foreigners?



Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 01/16/2015 - 12:31pm

I was discussing Washington, D.C.'s height limits with some acquaintances on Twitter; one of them suggested that allowing taller buildings might turn Washington into a "global city", which in turn would cause foreigners to surge into Washington and drive up real estate prices (as has arguably been the case in parts of Vancouver and New York).

This argument seems to be based on two assumptions that are at best unprovable:

1. Washington is just attractive enough to attract foreign demand if height limits are lifted. Since I don't know of any evidence of a surge in foreign investment in the Washington suburbs (which lack height limits) this seems hard to believe.

It could be argued that the blocks near Congress or the White House are so prestigious that they have an attraction that the District of Columbia's more urban suburbs lack. Even if this was true, it seems to me that (a) this is not true of most of the District, and (b) if it was true, the District's townhouses and existing stock of mid-rise buildings would be just as attractive to the rich foreigners as high-rises.

2. Rich foreigners will only invest in urban high-rise condos (as opposed to other types of buildings). This argument could be true in theory, but I don't see any evidence that this is the case. In fact, at least some low-rise areas are attractive to foreign buyers; for example, [41 percent](#) of trulia.com searches in Los Angeles's suburban Bel Air district come from foreigners, as opposed to 13 percent of searches in Los Angeles generally. Thus, it seems to me that if a well-off area lacks foreign demand absent high-rises, high-rises will not create such demand.

From The Department of Worst Practices: Two-lane stroads



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 01/14/2015 - 10:37pm

One phrase that has become common in transportation planning circles is "stroad"- a street that is oriented towards cars (like a major road) but is full of intersections (like a traditional, more pedestrian-oriented street) and thus doesn't function well as either a street or a road. When I think of a stroad, I think of six-to-eight lane streets like San Jose Boulevard in Jacksonville, or Queens Boulevard in Queens.

But under the wrong conditions, even a two-lane street can function almost as badly as a stroad. My parents in Atlanta live near Mt. Paran Road, a two-lane street that functions like a high-speed road for three reasons. First, the absence of sidewalks scares off pedestrians- especially since many residences are surrounded by woods or bushes rather than by more walkable lawns. Second, despite its curves, the street is just straight enough and wide enough to accommodate 40-45 mph traffic. Third, this part of the city lacks a grid of east-west streets, so Mt. Paran and two or three similar streets have become the easiest way to get from the western edge of the city's affluent northside to north-south streets further east. As a result, Mt. Paran combines speed and congestion, much like a true stroad. And when it is congested, a driver feels tremendous peer pressure to drive as fast as possible, because he or she is part of a long line of cars that cannot switch into another lane.

What can be done about two-lane stroads? I'm not sure. Sidewalks would be a major improvement; given the difficulty of getting anywhere nearby without driving on Mount Paran, I'm not sure traffic calming would be politically feasible. But planners of future neighborhoods can certainly learn something from the difficulties of streets like Mount Paran: the best way to avoid turning residential streets into de facto regional arterials is to build a grid of streets that accommodate both drivers and pedestrians more effectively.

Best Practices In Publicizing Data : Pittsburgh Shows How



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 01/13/2015 - 4:43pm

It is fairly common for city planning departments to publish demographic data about city neighborhoods - usually containing basic demographic information such as age, income and poverty. But Pittsburgh's planning department has created an unusually impressive set of data tables. It has created a set of six online spreadsheets (available at

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Ag0xdSSLPcUHdEo0ST1kRVBpcVZ...>) with the following information for each of 90 city neighborhoods: population for every decade since 1940, housing data, employment data, transportation mode share statistics, environmental and land use/zoning data, income/poverty/education data, and even crime statistics (something that most municipalities do a terrible job of collecting on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood level).

Seniors And Walkable Neighborhoods



Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 01/08/2015 - 11:34am

I occasionally read that seniors are likely to be a strong constituency for walkable, public-transit oriented neighborhoods. This argument runs as follows: seniors gradually lose the ability to drive as they get older. Thus, they are eventually going to need more transit and more walkable neighborhoods, and designers of walkable neighborhoods should be especially focused on the needs of seniors.

But after spending the last few weeks with my parents and (occasionally) their eightysomething friends and acquaintances, I notice that most of them can drive (unless they are disabled with Alzheimer's or another major disease)- and the ones who can't drive often can't walk much either. In fact, a major area of conversation among seniors I know and their children seems to be the dangers of walking- not danger from cars, but danger inside the house from falls, leading to broken hips and knees. (In 2011, more than [three times](#) as many seniors died from falls as from motor vehicle accidents).

So it seems to me at least possible, based on this highly anecdotal evidence, that seniors' ability to get around without driving may degrade over time- and may even degrade more rapidly than their ability to drive.

Having said that, I don't really have any data on this issue, and I can't pretend to have met a representative sample of American seniors. It seems to me that there are really a few questions that might be worth knowing the answer to:

1. How many seniors can't drive? (One website says [20 percent](#)).
2. How many seniors in category (1) owned cars and could drive at the age of 60, as opposed to being perpetually unable to drive due to low income or disability?
3. How many seniors in category (2) can walk enough to use public transit and otherwise get around on their own in a walkable neighborhood?

Learning from London's Comeback



Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 01/07/2015 -

A recent [post](#) on Citymetric.com suggests that after losing population for decades, London will soon reach its pre-World War II peak of 8.6 million people. London last achieved this population level in 1939, and lost nearly two million people after World War II, [bottoming out](#) at 6.7 million in 1988. Can we learn anything from this? Why, yes we can. To name a few things:

1. One common pro-sprawl argument has always been that sprawl exists in Europe and is thus inevitable. But the recent growth of London reminds us that in Europe as well as the U.S., cities can rebuild and become more desirable again.
2. But this growth comes with a cost. London's rebirth has been accompanied by exploding housing costs, perhaps because more people creates more demand for housing. (Or to put the matter another way: it does not seem to be the case that foreign rich people buying condos are the primary cause of high housing costs).
3. The common anti-market solution to high housing costs is to limit construction, on the theory that new construction creates more demand. But London seems to have more or less tried this solution; according to the Citymetric article, "Since 1992, when London started to grow again, housebuilding has been barely a quarter of the 1930s rate."

Rents CAN go down, even in high-cost markets



Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 01/06/2015 - 9:59am

One common argument often used to frustrate infill development is that in high-cost markets, the law of supply and demand simply does not apply, and that new housing will somehow fail to increase rents. But a recent Washington Post [news story](#) shows otherwise: in Washington, DC (undoubtedly a high-cost market) a recent construction boom has increased apartment inventory and caused rents to go down.