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Utilities, Schools and Induced Demand

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 11/27/2014 - 9:48pm

Numerous commentators have [questioned](#) the view that increased highway spending reduces congestion, pointing out that highways may increase demand for driving, thus leading to more traffic. In a recent newsletter, Robert Poole responds to the “induced demand” concept by writing:

And this gets back to the question of how a highway provider should respond to increased demand from its customers. Should it tell the customers they are wrong to prefer personal mobility? Should an electric utility tell its customers they should switch to wood-burning stoves, rather than adding generating capacity? Should a school district not add schools to serve a growing population of families with kids? Infrastructure providers are supposed to provide the vital facilities that people need (and are willing to pay for), not tell them their preferences are wrong.

But the comparison between highways and other goods strikes me as not quite right. The utility customers are presumably paying for their electricity. By contrast, even if gas taxes were equal to highway spending (which they often [aren't](#)) the highway system is rotten with cross-subsidies: because all drivers pay into the same gas tax trust fund, taxes paid by urban drivers can be used predominantly to serve rural drivers, or vice versa. Moreover, highway spending may create externalities, because increased driving leads to increased pollution. So yes, sometimes preferences are “wrong”, in the sense that accommodating them creates social costs.

What about the school district analogy? Poole seems to think that it is axiomatic that of course school districts should add population where there are more children. But it seems to me that this need not be the case: school districts can always enlarge classes. Here, as in the situation of highways, the right answer depends on externalities: do larger classes create worse educational results, thus creating societal externalities (such as stupider graduates who are less productive or more criminal)? And does such harm outweigh the social costs of raising taxes to build more schools? I suspect the right answer is: sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Not A 'War on Suburbia' Election

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 11/18/2014 - 10:42am

According to Joel Kotkin, this month's elections were really about the ["progressives' war on suburbia."](#) According to Kotkin, the Democrats lost because they are "aggressively anti-suburban." Since I didn't vote for President Obama, I leave it to his supporters to defend him.

However, I do think it is worth pointing out that cities and suburbs moved in the same direction this year. The Republicans gained several governorships this year (Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusetts). I couldn't find city election statistics for Arkansas, but I was able to find city board of elections statistics for the other three states. In each, the Republican candidates for governor improved on their 2010 showing. In Massachusetts, Republican Charlie Baker gained 30 percent of the Boston city vote, up from 23 percent in 2010. This 7 point gain was equal to his 6.5 point statewide gain (from 42 to 48.5 percent) and exceeded his 4 point gain in suburban Middlesex County. In Illinois, the Republican vote share increased from 17 to 20 percent. Kotkin asserts that this is a "laughably pathetic" vote share, but in fact the Republicans gained almost as much in Chicago as they did statewide. They gained 3 percentage points in Chicago, and 5 points statewide (from 46% to 50.8%). (To be fair, the Republican gained a little more in the Chicago suburbs, but that may reflect the fact that he is from suburban Chicago while 2010 nominee Bill Brady was from downstate). In Maryland, the Republican vote share in Baltimore city increased from 16 percent to 22 percent, a 6 point shift, more than the vote shift in Prince George's County near Washington (4 points) and almost as much as the 7-point vote shift in Montgomery County. (However, the Republican gained more votes in the Baltimore suburbs, which by Kotkin's logic means that they must have revolted against a "progressive war on Baltimore.")

Transit Riding: Its NOT All About New York

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 11/11/2014 - 4:05pm

Commentators who seek to minimize the importance of recent growth in public transit ridership argue that this increase is predominantly a result of New York's rising ridership. There is a grain of truth to this argument: New York is so big that rising ridership in that city alone can affect national ridership trends. On the other hand, New York is hardly the only city experiencing rising ridership. In fact, [this](#) graph shows that transit usage per capita in many Sun Belt cities has risen more rapidly than New York ridership. While New York ridership rose by 26 percent between 2002 and 2013, ridership in Phoenix rose by 50 percent, in Raleigh by over 100 percent.

One (Or Maybe Two) Cheers for Cincinnati

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 11/03/2014 - 10:04pm

A recent article in New Geography points out that some of his friends who feel priced out of San Francisco have [moved](#) to Rust Belt cities like Cincinnati. Given all the wonderful historic neighborhoods of Cincinnati or Kansas City or similar cities, why would anyone live in New York or San Francisco instead?

I cheerfully concede that for many people, Rust Belt cities are easier to live in, especially if you have the kind of job that can be performed anywhere and share the religious or cultural preferences of the average person. Admittedly, many Rust Belt cities are more dangerous than New York; for example, Cincinnati had [15](#) murders per 100,000 people in 2012 (three times the murder rate of New York⁰). But if you can take advantage of the low cost of Rust Belt housing to live in one of the city's better neighborhoods, this difference arguably need not concern you.

But the more unusual your career or tastes are, the more you benefit from being in a bigger, more diverse city.

I will write about myself as an example. Ideally, I would be in a place with A) some sort of traditional Jewish life (by which I mean, at the very minimum, an Orthodox or at least Conservative synagogue) B) in a non-car-dominated part of town so I won't have to drive to work (or better yet, won't have to own a car at all), and preferably C) with enough traditional Jewish life that I have a minimal pool of ideologically appropriate Jewish women to date.

Rust Belt cities of Cincinnati's size rarely flunk element A (though smaller cities often do). But the suburbanization of the middle class (and thus of the Jewish population) creates big problems on elements B and C. In Kansas City, for example, the only relatively traditional Jewish congregation meets just once a month, and the suburban congregations are all in Overland Park and Leawood, Kansas, two suburbs where buses only run 9-5 (and not at all on weekends). So Kansas City doesn't do well on element B. (Cincinnati is a little better but not much: the only intown option is a [Chabad House](#) oriented towards University of Cincinnati students, which means that most of the city's neighborhoods aren't within walking distance of anything Jewish-kind of a big deal if you follow the Jewish tradition of [walking](#) to synagogue). And in a Kansas City or a similar city, the Jewish dating pool will not only be very small but very suburban, so you had better plan to do a lot of driving to the suburbs. So element C is problematic in Kansas City as well, and I suspect in other cities of comparable size.

By contrast, in New York there are more Jews (and especially more single Jews) than anywhere else in the United States- so New York is the best possible place for A, B and C. So for me personally, it might be worth giving up a few hundred square feet in order to live in New York. (I note that some relatively affordable cities have much bigger and more urbanized Jewish communities than Cincinnati and Kansas City; for example, Pittsburgh's considerable Jewish community is centered in the intown Squirrel Hill neighborhood).

Similarly, there are some occupations that don't exist in Cincinnati to the extent that they do in New York. To take one exotic example, I went to yellowpages.com and looked up furriers. I found only half a dozen in Cincinnati, and over 200 in Manhattan alone (and of course more in the outer boroughs). So if selling deceased animals is your line of work, Cincinnati is not for you. I then looked up actors (which primarily seems to mean listings of acting coaches): I found only three or four within the city limits of Cincinnati, and over 100 in New York.

On the other hand, if your professional and religious life is such that you can be equally happy anywhere (say, if you are a Methodist dentist) the advantages of New York are much wobblier. But then again, so are the advantages of Cincinnati. Why live in either New York or Cincinnati when you can live in a real small town, living as cheaply as in Cincinnati without having to worry about that city's urban ills? The issue of small-town competition illustrates the real weakness of the claim that you should live in the most affordable place: there are so many affordable places that even if Rust Belt City X looks like a good deal next to San Francisco or New York, it may not look like such a bargain compared to the thousands of cheaper, safer small cities out there.

The Attack on Airbnb

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 10/23/2014 - 9:55am

The room-sharing service [Airbnb](#) has become controversial in high-cost cities like San Francisco and New York, in part because of concerns about affordable housing. In fact, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein has recently written an op-ed [attacking](#) Airbnb. (In the interests of full disclosure, I note that both I and the Senator have financial axes to grind: I am an Airbnb customer, and Sen. Feinstein is an [investor](#) in a large hotel).

The public benefits of Airbnb should be fairly obvious to anyone who is not a hotel owner. Visitors and new movers can pay less for their lodging by renting a room in someone's apartment than by renting a hotel room, thus enabling longer trips, thus enabling city economies to benefit from more tourism. So it might appear that Airbnb might make housing more affordable, at least for visitors and movers. But Feinstein argues that Airbnb allows landlords to "vacate their units and rent them out to hotel users, further increasing the cost of living." In other words, Airbnb opponents see lodging as a zero-sum game: what benefits visitors must harm existing renters. By this logic, government should just outlaw hotels, since every hotel unit is a potential apartment.

More seriously, this argument assumes that every room rented to a visitor would otherwise be rented to a roommate. But the two "products" are not reasonably interchangeable; roommates

involve advantages (such as familiarity and a regular rent check every month) and disadvantages (such as a 365-day relationship) that differ from those of Airbnb "temporary roommates."

Moreover, the supply of Airbnb rooms is actually pretty limited; for example, I just searched for Airbnb rooms renting for under \$100 (and thus cheaper than private hotels) and found a grand total of 486 rooms (not counting entire apartments, which compete more with ordinary landlords than with hotels). When I searched for rooms cheaper than the cheapest hotel on hotels.com, I found only 74 rentals- hardly enough to affect housing prices.

Feinstein argues that renters should at least be kept out of single-family neighborhoods, because temporary renters would create "a blanket commercialization of our neighborhoods. " This argument makes no sense to me; renting a room in a house is no more "commercial" than renting the whole house.

Announcement: New Paper on Smart Growth and Government Regulation

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 10/21/2014 - 10:58am

I recently [coauthored](#) a paper on government regulations designed to promote smart growth and green building (published by the Mercatus Institute). The paper examines the prevalence of minimum density requirements, maximum parking requirements, and green building-related regulations.

We conclude that:

*Minimum density requirements are quite rare. Only two of twenty-four cities surveyed only two have such regulations.

*Maximum parking requirements are somewhat more common. Only three cities of the twenty-four have citywide parking caps; however, parking caps for certain land uses or certain parts of a city are more common (though hardly as universal as minimum parking requirements). We found almost no data on the effects of these regulations.

*Only a few cities mandate green building (e.g. LEED certification) for private developments, but more cities have incentives for such developments. LEED certification has been studied somewhat more, and is a bit more controversial (see [here](#) for a critique).

Americans Are More Multimodal Than Some Might Think

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 10/20/2014 - 7:26am

Because most Americans drive to work on any given day, one might think that they don't use any other mode of transportation, ever. But a recent [review](#) of federal transportation surveys shows otherwise. In fact, 65 percent of American commuters take at least one non-car trip per week, and 48 percent take three or more.

Announcing....

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 10/12/2014 - 11:57am

I am happy to announce the birth of my new site, [Auto-Free in Kansas City](#). The purpose of this site is to help readers learn about Kansas City's neighborhoods and how to navigate them through public transit. The site links to my Kansas City photos, as well as to my "Auto-Free in...." websites I created for some other cities I have lived in (Cleveland, Buffalo, Jacksonville, Atlanta- though I note that these statistics have not been updated in years, so their bus route data is no doubt a bit outdated).

Is the Creative Class Really Taking Over Cities? Verdict: Not Proven

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 09/29/2014 - 7:04pm

In today's Washington Post, Emily Badger uses a set of maps to prove her claim that an affluent "creative class" is taking over urban cores, and as a result "service and working-class residents are effectively left with the least desirable parts of town, the longest commutes and the fewest amenities." But her maps don't seem to support her point. In the article's color-coded [maps](#), gray and pink mean "service class" and purple means "creative class."

If her claim was correct, every neighborhood for miles around downtown would be purple. But in Chicago and Washington and Houston, there seems to be a small purple ring around downtown- but except for that, the city is divided into a purple side (in Washington and DC, West; in Chicago, north) and a gray/pink side. Badger supplies approximately zero evidence that the pink side has worse transit service than the purple side. I'm not saying her claim is wrong- but her maps haven't proven the case.

Are Suburbanites Happier?

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 09/24/2014 - 2:46pm

A recent survey called “State of the City” has gotten significant media coverage, in part because of its claim that rural and suburban Americans are happier than city-dwellers. For example, a Citylab [description](#) of the survey stated that 45 percent of suburbanites rated the quality of life in their community “excellent” as opposed to only 1/3 of city residents.

However, this claim overlooks a key fact: city residents are more likely to be poorer and (in some cities) less educated.* When these factors are controlled for, the results are a bit [different](#). 40 percent of urban college graduates rated their community “excellent” – only slightly below nonurban college graduates (44 percent). However, there was a significant gap between urban and nonurban people who had not graduated from college; 24 percent of the former group rated their community “excellent” as opposed to 39 percent of the latter.

The survey sought to control for income by comparing people earning under \$50,000 to people earning over \$50,000- an instrument so blunt as to be useless, since \$50,000 is barely a middle-class income in high-cost regions. I note that urbanites earning over \$50,000 were only slightly less happy with their communities than nonurbanites, with 45% rating them as excellent (as opposed to 50% for nonurbanites). By contrast, only 27 percent of urbanites earning under \$50,000 were equally satisfied. It seems clear that the poorer and less educated you are, the less satisfied you are- but without more data on people at the higher and lower end of the income spectrum, it is not clear whether urban/nonurban distinctions fade as income goes up. Based on this data, I would guess that residents of well-off city neighborhoods are probably as happy with their city as suburbanites, while residents of poorer neighborhoods are not.

*Data on education by county is available [here](#). For example, New York's major suburban counties, Suffolk, Nassau and Westchester Counties, have a higher proportion of college graduates (between 27 and 40 percent) than all but one of New York City's boroughs.

A Myth Exploded

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 09/09/2014 - 9:40pm

Every so often I read the following argument: "We shouldn't upzone popular urban neighborhoods, because if we freeze the status quo in those areas, the people who are priced out will rebuild our city's devastated neighborhoods." This argument has a conceptual flaw: most middle-class peoples' choices aren't limited to rich urban areas and poor urban areas, because they can always move to suburbia.

A recent [blog post](#) by Chicago blogger Daniel Kay Hertz makes the point decisively. He shows that Chicago has been so effective at limiting redevelopment in its affluent lakefront areas that such neighborhoods actually lost population in the late 20th century. If people priced out of rich urban areas inevitably moved to poorer ones, then Chicago's traditionally poor south and west sides would be growing and gentrifying. Instead, many such areas have lost more than half their 1950 population.

Beauty and Boredom in Kansas City

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 09/08/2014 - 9:39pm

Every so often, I walk forty-five minutes to work rather than taking a bus. My walk takes me through Kansas City's [Brookside](#) neighborhood, an area full of distinguished-looking old houses on gridded streets with sidewalks. Sounds great, right?

Yet my walk is missing something: variety. Once I leave the commercial area a couple of blocks from my apartment, I see almost nothing but single-family homes until I get to work. One lesson of my walk is that even if an area is incredibly well-designed, it gets boring without diversity of uses.

Best Practices In Sprawl: Apartments

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 09/07/2014 - 10:00pm



When I visited [Fargo](#), North Dakota, I saw a few things I liked, such as a nicely fixed-up downtown and a beautiful historic district just south of downtown.

But I also saw something I liked in the suburb-like west side of town. An apartment complex was right in front of a far-too-wide suburban commercial street, rather than being set back behind a giant driveway as is often the case in

suburbia.* Why is this a good thing? Because when an apartment building is right next to the sidewalk, its occupants can easily walk to nearby bus stops and stores (even in a suburb where crossing the street is a problem).

*For excellent examples of what NOT to do, go to Google Street View and look at Big Tree Lane in Jacksonville, Fla.

Too Early To Declare Victory on Affordability

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/25/2014 - 7:37pm

I just read numerous discussions about how high-cost cities really are cheaper than you might think, based on a study by New York's Citizens' Budget Commission purporting to show that when housing and transportation costs are [combined](#), New York is actually one of the most

affordable cities in the United States. Since I just left New York, this seemed a bit too good to be true.

And indeed it is. The study assumed that the average New York household of renters pays \$14,700 in rent- about \$1200 a month. But anyone who has lived in New York knows that there's not much you can get for \$1200 per month, unless you are living with roommates (and not even then if you live in Manhattan) or are living in a very poor neighborhood indeed. I just did a search on Streeteasy.com and found that even in the Bronx (New York's poorest borough) only 40 or so out of 169 one-bedroom units rented for less than \$1200, and only 11 of 32 studios. In Queens, only 8 out of 150 studios rented for less than \$1200, and only 3 out of over 500 one-bedrooms. And in Brooklyn, only about 20 of 466 studios rented for less than \$1200.

So why would anyone think that the average rent is \$1200? My guess is that this figure includes government-subsidized housing and rent-controlled housing, mostly occupied by long-time tenants. But for someone making locational decisions today, such housing is irrelevant: there are often long-waiting lists for the former, and rent-controlled apartments are also rare. So if you are comparing cities, it makes more sense to compare what is on the market today: for example, by comparing the \$2500 per month I paid in Manhattan to the \$900 per month I pay in Kansas City. (In fairness, I earn so much less here that I still came out ahead in New York, even though unlike most Kansas Citians I do not have a car there).

Mr. Kotkin Talks About What "People Really Want"

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 08/22/2014 - 10:15am

Joel Kotkin recently [wrote](#) in the Washington Post that unspecified urban planners want "to create an ideal locate for hipsters and older, sophisticated urban dwellers" rather than focusing on the needs of "most middle-class residents of the metropolis." He claims that these people want "home ownership, rapid access to employment throughout the metropolitan area, good schools, and 'human scale' neighborhoods" as well as "decent-pay [job] opportunities." He doesn't really explain how these goals can be achieved, other than noting that Sun Belt cities continue to grow more rapidly than high-cost northern cities, and thus must have somehow achieved these goals. Kotkin's claims miss three realities.

First, smart growth-oriented planners seek to achieve some of these goals. By improving public transit and substituting street grids (which allow traffic to flow through a broad range of streets rather than being confined to a few major streets) for cul-de-sacs, they seek to expand "rapid

access to employment throughout the metropolitan area." Smart growth-oriented planners also seek to make cities more "human scale" by making them more friendly to pedestrians as well as automobiles. By contrast, much of America is "car scale" rather than "human scale." And by expanding the urban housing supply, smart-growth oriented planners seek to make more homes available to more people. (Having said that, I agree with Kotkin that planners in "luxury" cities have failed to meet the latter goal- partially because density-phobia has limited development and thus artificially constricted housing supply).

Second, some of Kotkin's worthy goals are beyond the reach of urban planning. Nearly all Americans are for "good schools" but urban planners don't have any special expertise in how to create them. Other central-city policymakers have struggled with this problem for decades, usually without much success. Similarly, urban planners have no special expertise in how to create jobs, especially in the teeth of the post-2008 worldwide economic downturn. Even before the 2008 recession, Rust Belt metros like Buffalo struggled with job creation.

Third, to the extent a city can't solve the "school problem", it might as well try to attract the people who don't need schools: singles and empty-nesters. Although Kotkin may sneer at these groups as "hipsters", the fact of the matter is that the number of nonfamily households has exploded over time. In 1940, [47 percent](#) of households were either married couples with children or single parents with children; today, only 30 percent do. Kotkin may bemoan the growth of nonfamily and empty-nester households, but they exist and need places to live too.

What Ferguson Tells Us About Working-Class Suburbia

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/14/2014 - 10:07pm

Recently, Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis, has received lots of attention because of a police officer's questionable decision to shoot an unarmed civilian, followed by demonstrations, followed by some even more questionable decisions by police (such as arresting journalists and tear-gassing the citizenry).

But [Ferguson](#) is also interesting as a case study of modern suburbia. Like many of St. Louis's northwestern suburbs, Ferguson has become majority black, and its median income is well below the statewide average.

Conventional wisdom about demographic change in American suburbia is that it is somehow a result of gentrification, as working-class minorities are allegedly forced into suburbs by high housing costs. But if this was true, the spread of working-class minorities into suburbia would be limited to gentrified "superstar" cities like New York and San Francisco.

However, St. Louis is anything but gentrified: its median household income of about \$32,000 is even lower than Ferguson's (let alone the statewide average of about \$45,000). Yet its working-class minorities have left the city for places like Ferguson, for (I suspect) pretty much the same reasons that upper and middle-class households have done so; even if the very poor are still stuck in the city, the somewhat-less-poor can afford to move one step up the social ladder into working-class older suburbs. Similarly, the eastern suburbs of Cleveland have become far more racially diverse in recent years, and some suburban neighborhoods (especially in the city of East Cleveland) are as poor as most city neighborhoods.

The "Chains Are Ruining Our City" Myth

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/11/2014 - 12:32pm

I recently read about a [blog](#) complaining that New York was "suburbanizing" due to the "disappearance of small stores and restaurants" and their alleged replacement by national chains.

So I thought I would investigate: how rare are local stores, anyhow? I discovered that even in suburbia, some industries are still dominated by non-chains. For example, I went to menupages.com and looked at restaurants in Jupiter, Fla. (a sprawling Palm Beach County suburb). Of the first 50 restaurant listings I saw, only 11 were recognizably chain restaurants - including a couple of local chains with two restaurants in Jupiter.

How does New York compare? I looked at the East Village (the [primary subject](#) of the blog in question). Among the first 50 restaurants listed in Menupages, only 8 were chains- and I recognized all of them as local, rather than national chains. Moreover, the overall number of East Village restaurants is still overwhelming; Menupages shows 635 restaurants, which means (assuming that my initial sampling is representative) over 500 non-chain restaurants.

Admittedly, some sectors appear to be more heavily dominated by chains, such as pharmacies. But even so, a Google Maps search revealed half a dozen pharmacies in the East Village (and about that many in Jupiter).

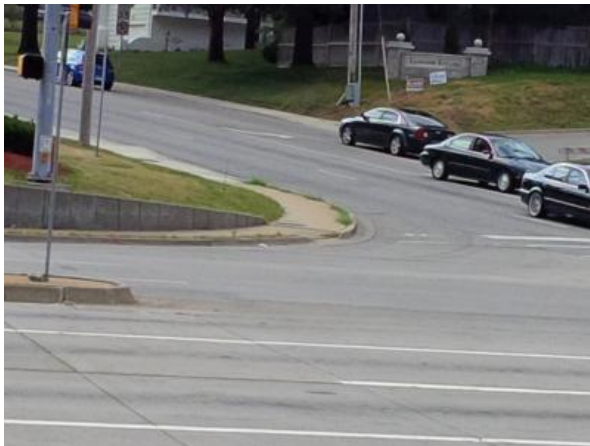
The "Building Boom" Myth

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 08/06/2014 - 12:25pm

One common argument against new infill development is "my city has already experienced a building boom, and rents keep going up." But in New York City, one of the nation's most expensive cities, this claim is built on false assumptions. A recent [study](#) by the Citizens Budget Commission shows that New York has experienced lower growth in housing supply than all but 3 of 22 cities surveyed- and 2 of the 3 (Detroit and Chicago) lost population over the past decade. Moreover, the city's vacancy rate is only 3.6 percent, less than half the national [average](#) of 7.4 percent.

Worst Practices: Vanishing Medians

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 08/06/2014 - 10:56am



One thing that can make suburban roads less intolerable for pedestrians is a large median, so that the pedestrian can cross a huge road two or three lanes at a time, instead of having to cross an entire six- or eight-lane highway in one mad dash.

I recently saw an excellent example of how **not** to design a median: instead of being parallel with the sidewalk and ending at an intersection, the median ended 20 feet or so south of the intersection, thus forcing pedestrians to choose between using the median (but having to jaywalk to do so) and crossing at the intersection and accompanying traffic light. Obviously, this sort of design makes the median less useful to pedestrians.

The Toxic Results of NIMBYism

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/04/2014 - 9:54am

An [article](#) in today's New York Times discusses population growth patterns over the past several years, and suggests that population growth is fastest in the inland Sun Belt-places combining relatively warm weather and cheap housing. A look at the charts accompanying the article suggests that it overstates its case; there are clearly some high-growth regions with above-average housing costs. Nevertheless, there is one statistic that lept out at me:

But of those who moved more than 500 miles, the share who said they were chiefly motivated by housing has risen to 18 percent in 2014, from 8 percent in 2007, the earliest year such data is available, according to the Census Bureau.

In other words, the number of movers motivated by housing costs has doubled. It logically follows that regions that can't control housing costs are losing people and talent- a warning for policymakers in high-cost regions like New York and San Francisco. In those places, the political dialogue is dominated by NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) activists who oppose new housing construction, and by leftists who are focused on increasing the supply of affordable housing for the poor rather than on the broader issue of housing cost and supply for the middle class.

Interesting Blog Post on Congestion Pricing

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 07/28/2014 - 9:41am

At the Smart Growth for Conservatives blog, analyst Michael Brown has written a series of interesting posts about congestion pricing, most recently one on how to make congestion pricing (that is, tolling highways during peak periods to reduce congestion) sound [appealing to the general public](#). He also suggests that congestion pricing will increase [transit ridership](#) and reduce driving, because congestion pricing will encourage people to avoid car travel in peak periods, and because revenues from congestion pricing could be used to support transit. Each of his posts contains links to his other posts.

Fraudo-Mobility

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 07/25/2014 - 12:05pm

One common buzzword used by defenders of the sprawl status quo is “auto-mobility”- a phrase calculated to imply that auto-dependent sprawl equals mobility. But of course, this is not the case. When other modes of transportation are made impossible or impractical, automobile dependence makes us all less mobile.

A related argument is that “automobility” empowers the poor (or women, or minorities) by enabling them to reach jobs and other destinations. But this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: if government policies are based on the assumption that everyone can/should/must drive, then more and more destinations will be accessible only by automobile, and thus people will need cars. If government policies are based on the assumption that people should be free to use other options, then fewer destinations will be accessible only by car.

To give a simple example: imagine two towns: Freetown and Sprawltown. In Sprawltown, everything is arranged for the convenience of fast-moving cars: roads are too wide to cross safely, there are few buses or trains interfering with car traffic, “jaywalking” laws ensure that pedestrians may only cross streets at dangerous intersections, and if you let your child walk to soccer practice you will be arrested for child neglect (since the police, like most right-thinking citizens, assume that a child is safe only when inside a parent’s fast-moving automobile or house). In Sprawltown, someone without a car does lead a very difficult life, and ownership of a car is indeed liberating.

In Freetown, cars exist, but are not dominant. Streets are narrower, transit options are many, and children are freer. In Freetown, cars are more of a luxury and less of a necessity. In a region comprised of many Freetowns, far fewer people will find a car to be liberating.

Don't Blame the Rich for High Rents

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/23/2014 - 2:44pm

One common explanation for the high housing costs of New York and San Francisco is that the wealthy are pricing everyone else out of the market. According to this narrative, there are so many obscenely wealthy people in such cities that developers are only building housing for the rich, thus making it impossible for the law of supply and demand to function.

But a recent article on CNBC's web page suggests that although New York does indeed have the [highest](#) percentage of millionaires in the United States, the second-place finisher is relatively low-cost Houston. It therefore appears that a city can have lots of wealth and still have relatively low housing costs, if government makes it reasonably easy for people to build housing.

This does not mean Houston is a perfect role model: although Houston's regulations don't disfavor all new construction, they still [favor](#) sprawl by limiting density and mandating parking. As a result, Houston's low housing costs are balanced out by [high](#) transportation costs. Ideally (from a smart growth perspective) a city would make new housing construction easy without mandating sprawl.

Highways Don't Pay For Themselves, Even When They Do

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 07/18/2014 - 8:41am

One common argument for the highway-centric status quo is that highways pay for themselves, while trains and buses are government-subsidized. This argument has been [debunked](#) again and [again](#), and the debunking itself has even been [debunked](#).

But even if the road system as a whole pays for itself (that is, the amount of vehicle-related taxes is equal to the amount of road spending) many roads are still highly subsidized by government.

Why? Because roads are heavily cross-subsidized: that is, the users of one road pay not for that road, but for other roads used by other people. For example, suppose I live in an inner suburb at the edge of a small city three or four miles from downtown, and 90% of my travel is within the city limits. However, most of my state's road spending goes to suburban highways that shift development to suburbs far from my neighborhood. In this scenario, my gas tax money is *not* going to the roads I drive on; in fact, it is going to roads that benefit people who live far from where I live. Thus, I am essentially subsidizing suburban and rural drivers.

The only way to eliminate such subsidies would be to make every road a toll road, so that my taxes would only go to roads I drive on. This may be practical for limited-access highways, though I do not see how it could become practical for surface streets.

How Much Does Diversity Matter?

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 07/13/2014 - 4:39pm

This weekend, I visited Kansas City, Mo. to look for apartments (since I am moving there in August to teach at the University of Missouri at Kansas City Law School). I focused my search on the Brookside and Country Club Plaza neighborhoods, two areas within a 45-minute walk of the law school.

Country Club Plaza is especially interesting- one of the first American shopping centers accessible by automobile. In some ways, the Plaza is a great urban place, full of pedestrians in a city designed around the automobile. Although residential and commercial uses are rarely on the same blocks, they are within a short walk of each other: the commercial areas are ringed by apartment buildings and condos, with single family houses a few more blocks away.

But one thing troubled me: the retail seems limited to restaurants and specialty shops (mostly national chains). However, many daily needs cannot be met at the Plaza- no grocery stores, no pharmacies, no place to get (for example) a small container of yogurt or a granola bar. This lack of retail diversity makes it a less-than-perfect urban place by my lights. On the other hand, does it keep people from going there? Evidently not.

Jungle Shmungle

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 06/30/2014 - 12:28pm

Recently, as I was scrolling through some blog post comments, I noted that more than one person feared that new development would make their city “a concrete jungle” (or worse still, lead to “Manhattanization.”) After a little Google searching, I learned that the former term has not been limited to high-rise neighborhoods, but that neighborhood activists and the media had suggested that Chicago, Houston, Chattanooga, Philadelphia’s Main Line suburbs, and Pompano Beach, Florida were or might become “concrete jungles” if the wrong thing was built.

It seems to me, therefore, that this sort of term can be used to describe anything that even slightly varies from the status quo. If you live in a rural area and someone wants to build a one-lot-per-acre subdivision, one of your neighbors will probably argue that this extremely low-density subdivision is turning your patch of paradise into a “concrete jungle.”

If you live in one-lot-per-acre sprawl, and someone wants to build a more conventional four-lots-per-acre subdivision, one of your neighbors will probably argue that this suburban subdivision is

going to turn your area into a “concrete jungle”- even though, to someone living a truly rural life, your area is just as much of a jungle.

If you live in four-lot-per-acre suburbia, and someone wants to build some garden apartments or duplexes or smaller single-family homes, one of your neighbors will probably claim that these small dwellings are turning your neighborhood into a “concrete jungle”- even though to residents of estate-home suburbia, your neighborhood is a concrete jungle.

And if you live in a streetcar suburb full of duplexes and small-lot houses, and someone wants to build a walk-up apartment building near you, one of your neighbors will probably claim that these apartment buildings will turn your neighborhood into a “concrete jungle”- even though the buildings may look more like Paris or Copenhagen than midtown Manhattan.

And if you really do live in Manhattan, and you live in a fifteen-story high-rise that seems unimaginably urban to the residents of streetcar suburbs and walk-up apartments, this does not mean your neighbors will be immune from density-phobia. If a developer wants to build a twenty- or thirty-story high-rise near you, your neighbors as well will complain that the new building will turn your neighborhood into a “concrete jungle”- even though to 99 percent of Americans, your neighborhood will already seem so far gone that another high-rise here and there won’t matter.

In sum, terms like “concrete jungle” and “Manhattanization” can mean nearly everything, which means they mean absolutely nothing. And because these terms are meaningless, they should usually be treated as schoolyard insults rather than as a form of rational argument.

Good Density and Not-So-Good Density

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 06/22/2014 - 11:05am

After seeing another blog post about how density is bad because Los Angeles is dense, it occurred to me to suggest that just as there is good and bad cholesterol, there is good and not-so-good density.

From a new urbanist perspective, good density is density that contributes to walkability: density near public transit, density within walking distance of shops and jobs in a place where walking is possible.

Density in the middle of automobile-dependent sprawl can be more problematic. For example, Los Angeles may be dense overall, but its density is spread out evenly over the region (thus

reducing the city's ability to have a strong transit-oriented core) and antiquated street design or single-use zoning may make some dense areas less walkable than they could be.

This "bad" density is not always absolutely bad, since sometimes it is a stepping stone on the way to good density. For example, a dense apartment complex surrounded by nothing but other housing and high-speed roads is not particularly walkable, but can be retrofitted over time if the road network is made more walkable or if commerce is added.

It seems to me that if a place has a high level of transit use (or, in a smaller city, walking to work) it probably has a lot of good density. On the other hand, if a place has high density but lower levels of transit use than one might expect for that level of density (e.g. Los Angeles, Miami) it has more not-so-good density.

Great Post On How Regulation Really Is Expensive

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 06/20/2014 - 9:51am

Those of us who believe in the laws of economics keep trying to explain that land use regulation really does make development (especially infill development) more expensive. A recent blog post by James Bacon includes a wonderful essay [quantifying the impact](#) of regulation in Austin, hardly one of the nation's most expensive or regulation-happy cities. The article points out that these regulations tend to be more restrictive in center cities. Read it.

New York's Problem (Or More Broadly, the Problem of Medium Density)

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 06/18/2014 - 11:37am

After reading yet another blog post talking about how New York is losing migrants to other cities, I had an extremely insightful date. My date was with a woman who lived in Flatbush, at the outer, more car-oriented edge of Brooklyn. She drives everywhere. When I told her about

my youth in Atlanta, she seemed downright envious: where I saw slavery to cars, she saw "quality of life" (English translation: cheap land).

And I can see why. If you are going to drive to work, there's no profit to living in New York: you get all the hassles of the city (high rent, heavy traffic) without the benefits of a pedestrian-oriented lifestyle- and that applies not just in suburbia, but even in urban areas with Walkscores in the seventies. Just the fact that you can walk to the grocery store does not compensate for the high rent.

So it would seem to me that migration from the outer boroughs is more common than Manhattan- and in fact that is the case. Out-migration statistics show that Manhattan gets as many domestic newcomers as it loses to the rest of the state, while Brooklyn and Queens (as well as the majority of suburban counties) have [lost](#) migrants and gain population only due to birth and international immigration.

This explains why so many New York suburbanites have moved to the South and West: once you cross the line from subways to driving, a little additional driving is outweighed by cheap real estate. So it doesn't make sense for New York or any other city to keep replicating suburbs and imitation suburbs. To compete for people, New York either needs more Manhattans or lower rents.

Now of course, there are some medium-density neighborhoods in New York that are very attractive places to live. But it seems to me that to compete with the Sun Belt, they have to be a lot more attractive than they would be in a lower-priced market.

Thoughts on Rails and Buses

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 06/13/2014 - 1:58pm

Randall O'Toole recently published a [paper](#) attacking rail transit, focusing in particular on four transit lines (Los Angeles' Regional Connector train, San Francisco's Third Street train, Seattle's University line, and Honolulu's new rail system). These transit lines are essentially hybrids between light and heavy rail; that is, they use smaller light-rail-type cars but are separated from streets. By and large, his discussion is pretty technical and I don't live in the cities he writes about, so I am reluctant to take a position on his overall argument. But there are a few points that I thought were worth discussing:

1. O'Toole asserts that buses on dedicated bus lanes can move more people per hour than trains. But bus riders are not a politically powerful constituency, and political resistance from drivers may make dedicated bus lines especially infeasible. For example, in Nashville, a bus rapid transit project was so controversial that the state legislature [almost voted](#) to prevent the local

government from building it. To be fair, O'Toole refers to buses running 60 miles an hour, so he is probably thinking of buses using interstate highways. Even if highway bus lanes were more politically feasible than bus lanes in surface streets, interstate highway exits are not necessarily the best places for bus riders to congregate; outside downtowns, many highway interchanges are in low-density, auto-oriented areas unlikely to support high transit ridership.

2. O'Toole criticizes the abovementioned new transit lines (which he calls "high-cost, low capacity") on the ground that the cost per mile is higher than that of light rail or heavy rail. But their absolute cost is generally less than heavy rail, and in some cases less than light rail. Three of the four lines he mentions (all but Honolulu's) cost between \$1.3 and 2 billion. Every heavy rail line cited by O'Toole costs more than \$2 billion, as does one of the light rail lines (Baltimore's). It might be that the shorter length of the new transit lines attacked by O'Toole will lead to lower ridership than light rail, in which case they will indeed be less efficient than light rail. But O'Toole doesn't really prove that this will be so; it might be that the grade separation will make the lines speedier and more appealing, or that the lines are in places inherently better suited for transit. (On the other hand, O'Toole does point out that Latin American hybrid lanes have not outperformed Latin American light rail, so perhaps they are analogous).

3. O'Toole quite correctly points out that politicians love to get the credit for building shiny new rail stations, but then skimp on maintenance because "accidents, delays and other problems can always be blamed on someone else." But as the [Strong Towns](#) blog has noted, this is also true of roads and other suburb-oriented infrastructure.

4. O'Toole claims that the high cost of rail transit will actually reduce growth by adding to a region's tax burden, because there has been a negative correlation between per capita transit expenditures and population growth. This argument is meritless for two reasons. First, for most of the United States, transit spending means bus spending as well as (or, in some regions, as a substitute for) rail spending. Thus, O'Toole's use of statistics does not support his anti-rail conclusions. A more careful analysis would be sought to differentiate between rail-related costs and bus-related costs. Second, state and local spending on public transit (and for that matter, highways) are a pretty small percentage of state and local spending. In 2008, state and local governments [spent](#) \$51 billion on transit (including both buses and rail)- only 2 percent of [overall](#) state and local spending (\$2.8 trillion). State and local governments spent three times as much on highways (just over \$153 billion, but still far less than 10 percent of state and local spending).

What I Got Out of CNU 22

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 06/13/2014 - 4:45am



My favorite CNU 22 panel was one on street design. The panelists (including Victor Dover and John Massengale, authors of a new book on street design) discussed a variety of walkable streets. For me, the most memorable point was Massengale's discussion of a gigantic arterial in Barcelona; he pointed out that this seemingly very wide street accommodated pedestrians by 1) placing its slowest lanes (with on-street parking that slows down traffic) on the outside, so that at least part of the street did not have

dangerously fast traffic and (2) using medians and street trees to make the faster lanes less ugly and less lethal (because pedestrians could get shade from the trees, and did not have to cross the entire street at once).

Afterwards, I thought about how this would apply to Queens Boulevard, a half-reformed arterial in Queens. On the positive side, Queens Boulevard has element 1- slower lanes with on-street parking on the outside. On the negative side, the Queens Boulevard medians are so narrow that it might be a bit scary to stand on them while waiting for traffic (see photo above).

Supply, Demand and Housing Costs

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 06/02/2014 - 11:38am

I've read numerous blog posts and articles asserting that gentrification or rich foreign investors increase housing costs by increasing demand. But people who raise this argument aren't always sensitive to the role of supply in the law of supply and demand: for example, one [New York Times](#) article states that increasing demand has raised rents, yet cites one housing advocate's statement that "Increasing the supply is not going to increase the number of affordable units; that is a complete and utter fallacy." So in other words, increasing demand increases prices, yet increasing supply doesn't lower them.

Of course, this doesn't make sense- if demand matters, so does supply.

The Rise of De-Gentrification

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 05/25/2014 - 12:31am

A recent [study](#) by a Portland-area consultant and professor analyzed the rise of high-poverty neighborhoods, finding that only 105 census tracts with poverty rates over 30 percent in 1970 had poverty rates below 15 percent in 2010. By contrast, 1231 tracts with 1970 poverty rates below 15 percent have poverty rates over 30 percent today. (However, the study does not address the location of either group of tracts- that is, to what extent the gentrifying tracts are urban, and to what extent the "falling star" tracts are urban).

If You Don't Want an Apartment, Don't Have One

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/09/2014 - 2:23pm

One of my favorite political slogans (more because of its catchiness than because of its wisdom)* is "If You Don't Want An Abortion, Don't Have One."

It occurs to me that this slogan would be quite appropriately adapted to an urbanist context. In response to NIMBY attacks on compact development, one might create bumperstickers with slogans like:

"If You Don't Want An Apartment, Don't Live In One."

"If You Don't Want A Small House, Don't Buy One."

*I realize that as a substantive argument, pro-lifers may find it unpersuasive, because it overlooks the interests of non-slogan-reading fetuses.

Cities, Suburbs and Commute Length

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/08/2014 - 5:20pm

I recently discovered a fun tool: the Census Bureau's [Census Explorer](#), which is full of maps about all kinds of things. In particular, I spent some time exploring commute length.

One common argument against more transit-oriented cities is that because transit rides often take more time than car rides, city residents actually have longer commutes than suburbanites. For example, New York is the nation's primary transit hub, and yet New Yorkers have longer commutes than anyone else. This argument has a large element of truth: New York's outer boroughs have average commutes of over 40 minutes, longer than the city's suburban counties. (On the other hand, Manhattan's 30-minute average is lower than that of some but not all suburban counties). Similarly, Philadelphia's average commute is 32 minutes, higher than that of surrounding suburbs.

But is New York typical? Not really, not even as to transit-oriented cities. The United States has three other urban counties where over 1/4 of commuters use transit: Suffolk County (Boston), Washington, DC, and San Francisco.* Suffolk County has an average commute of 29 minutes, slightly lower than that of neighboring Norfolk County and only one minute higher than Middlesex and Essex Counties. In Washington, D.C., the average city commute of 30 minutes is lower than that of every suburban county but Arlington and Alexandria (the two least car-dominated suburbs). Exurban Charles County, Md. tops the commute-hell list at 43 minutes, longer than New York's outer boroughs.

In this regard, San Francisco does better than some suburbs and worse than others. San Francisco's 30-minute average is lower than that of Contra Costa County (clocking in at 33 minutes) but higher than that of some other suburbs.

A related argument is that because so many jobs have moved to suburbia, suburbanites actually have shorter commutes. If this argument was true, residents of car-oriented urban cores would have longer commutes than everyone else. But this appears not to be the case: for example, in Atlanta Fulton County (which includes most of the city of Atlanta) boasts shorter commutes than suburban counties.

*Transit use is equally high in the city of Chicago; however, it is part of a largely suburban county.

One Reason Why NYC Is So Expensive

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/07/2014 - 6:00pm

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of renter-occupied housing units in New York [increased](#) by only 1.8 percent, while the number of households increased by 2.9 percent. I would imagine that if you add that to the increased demand arising from the post-recession difficulty of financing a home, you should have expected zooming rents, which is of course exactly what New York has.

DeBlasio's Unimpressive Housing Plan: No Substitute for the Free Market

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 05/06/2014 - 9:22am

New York's new mayor, Bill DeBlasio, has just [proposed](#) to spend \$8 billion in taxpayers' money to create 80,000 new housing units. 80,000 is certainly better than nothing.

On the other hand, New York has 3 million occupied housing units today, so even if the DeBlasio plan works, the city's housing supply will increase by a grand total of 2.7 percent over the next decade- barely enough to keep up with population.

It seems to me that government spending on housing may be perfectly acceptable as a way to keep the very poor from being homeless- but as a way to keep the middle class in the city, it is simply no substitute for allowing people to build housing without government interference.

The Infrastructure Argument Against Infill

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/02/2014 - 5:29pm

One common (if vague) argument against upzoning and infill development is that infrastructure in place X (wherever the proposed development is) will somehow be overwhelmed by more important. When I see this argument I want to ask:

1. What infrastructure are you talking about?

2. How is it currently inadequate in place X?
 3. If you don't want more people to live and work in place X where do you want them to live and work instead?
 4. Do you really think the infrastructure there is any better than in place X? Why? Can you prove it?
-

Are Wider Streets More Congested?

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/01/2014 - 9:32am



In a recent Planetizen [blog post](#), Brett Toderian had an interesting insight: "When vehicles are moving, they take up much more space. The faster they move, the more separation distance and space between vehicles is needed." This makes intuitive sense to me: when I am driving on a 20 mph street, I am willing to drive only a few feet behind other cars, while when driving 60 mph I don't feel comfortable getting so close to the car in front of me.

This statement illustrates why wide streets doesn't always reduce congestion. If the road is wider, drivers move faster. If drivers move faster, they take up more space- which means that making cars move faster is like dumping extra cars on the road. So even if making traffic move faster doesn't increase the overall number of drivers on the road*, it may actually increase the likelihood of congestion.

*Which it often does by making long-distance commuting more desirable.

Yes, Upzone The Nice Areas Too

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 04/30/2014 - 9:38pm

An interesting and provocative blog post by Chicago planner Pete Saunders [argued](#) that urbanites should not be pressing too hard for upzoning well-off urban neighborhoods because "maybe they ought to consider more of the city to live in. For every highly desirable attractive urban neighborhood, even in the most in-demand metro areas, there are just as many languishing neighborhoods that aren't even part of the conversation." Saunders goes on to worry that if cities are too successful in upzoning "nice" areas to meet consumer demand, there will be less movement into low-income areas, causing lots of segregation.

But it seems to me that this sort of argument puts would-be urbanites in a no-win situation. If they stay in the traditionally upper-class parts of the city they are accused of segregating themselves- but if they move to the poor parts of the city they are accused of gentrification. Either argument can easily be used to prevent construction of new housing.

Moreover, this argument assumes that the demand for urban life is so fixed that people will actually be willing to move into low-income areas if housing in higher-income areas becomes more expensive. This is certainly true in New York - but I think it is less true in higher-crime cities (by which I mean, most cities). Middle-class renters and homebuyers usually have three choices: well-off urban neighborhoods, not-so-well-off urban neighborhoods and suburbia. Some may be willing to choose down-at-the-heels areas if they cannot afford the best areas, but others will just pick suburbia over marginal neighborhoods.

Two Cheers For Negative Thinking

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 04/17/2014 - 10:41am

I recently read an [article](#) suggesting that Cleveland's problems were in part due to "negative thinking"- some fuzzy "vibe of negativity" that discourages people from moving to Cleveland. I am skeptical of this claim for two reasons.

First, it doesn't really fit my own experience. I lived in Cleveland in 1996-97 and then in Buffalo in 1997-99. Buffalo was chock full of negativity; educated Buffalonians were happy to discuss the city's economic and social decline and the causes of that decline. But outside my tiny band of Sierra Club friends, Clevelanders were much less negative. My exurban friends were happy to explain how wonderful it was that they lived in a place with rich exurbs and a city that was

drowning in its own decay. But by my lights, Cleveland was worse off than Buffalo; for example, only 4 of the 60 lawyers in my Cleveland law firm lived in the city of Cleveland, as opposed to about 1/3 of the lawyers in my Buffalo firm.

Second, all that positive thinking gets in the way of reform. Because Clevelanders couldn't quite bring themselves to admit that they had created a disastrous mess, they kept following the same policies that got them into the mess. For example, when I was there, a bipartisan majority of the county commission voted to widen an expressway leading to suburbia, thus ensuring that middle-class flight to the suburbs grew even further. By contrast, where citizens admit they have done something not-so-great, better policies are not so unthinkable.

Suburbia Not Always Cheaper

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 04/04/2014 - 9:28am

A story from a coworker of mine: Mr. X (the coworker) and his family move from Queens to Long Island to take advantage of the allegedly better public schools. As a result, they are able to save money by pulling their children out of Catholic school. Were they better off? Apparently not. Mr. X explains that what they saved in tuition was more than balanced over time by the cost of having to have a car for every adult, and later for every teenager.

Auto-Oriented Transit in Israel

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 04/02/2014 - 11:30pm

Tonight I saw lawyer [Kevin Dwarka](#) speak on smart growth in Israel, focusing on the weaknesses of Israel's railway system. Although Israel's major cities have rail service, that nation's major rail stations are a classic example of auto-oriented transit: stations surrounded by huge parking lots instead of housing and shopping.

Israel's cities are more compact than most American cities; Tel Aviv has almost 20,000 per square mile, while Jerusalem has 17,000- both fewer than New York City but more than any

other major U.S. city. Israel is also less motorized than the U.S. Israel has [one](#) motor vehicle for every 3 people, less than half the U.S. level. However, Israel's trend is towards more car use; the number of cars per person increased by 10 percent between 2006 and 2010 alone, while that ratio declined in the U.S. and many other industrialized nations.

As in the United States, population has shifted to automobile-dependent suburbs and rural areas, partially due to road construction facilitating such moves. Dwarka pointed out that Israeli motorization has created significant pollution problems, such as widespread asthma and roughly 1400 pollution-related deaths a year.

One unique feature of Israel is that most undeveloped land is publicly owned; thus, auto-based design cannot be blamed on the free market. However, the political momentum behind change is a little weaker than in the United States; the environmental movement is not as aggressively pro-urbanist in Israel as in the U.S., because many environmentalists still view sprawl as closer to nature.

The "Cheap Cars" Myth

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 03/06/2014 - 2:47pm

One sprawl lobby argument I have occasionally heard: "So what if people have to drive to reach jobs in sprawling areas? Used cars are so cheap that even poor people can afford them!"

But these used cars still cost money to maintain. A recent Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel story gives us one reason why this argument doesn't quite work: the story of one person who bought a cheap used car, only to discover that the rundown vehicle had "[stalled for the last time](#)." A charity saved this particular woman by getting her a slightly newer used car- but presumably, that car will age too, and require lots of money for maintenance before it too breaks down.

In addition, used cars, like new ones, require insurance. Unfortunately, insurance rates are higher in rundown urban neighborhoods- and in fact, some insurers [won't insure](#) some drivers in such areas.

Because of these costs, used cars are not a substitute for a better transit system and for making suburbs less car-dependent.

Always Room for More

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 03/03/2014 - 1:38pm

One common argument against infill: "but there isn't room for any more people!" (or, alternatively, "we can't have more people without turning into a skyscraper monoculture!")

Manhattan is far from a skyscraper monoculture- even in midtown there are lots of 2-6 story buildings of all types. And yet our housing density is 70,000 people per square mile- more than four times that of San Francisco, more than seven times that of Washington.

In other words, at Manhattan densities San Francisco could accommodate more than 3 million people.

And Manhattan isn't even the densest place in the affluent world- Mongkok, a neighborhood in Hong Kong, has over 300,000 people per square mile. So San Francisco could accommodate about 14 million people at Mongkok densities. And even the tiniest look at Google Street View should persuade you that even Mongkok isn't all skyscrapers (though it does have 5-10 story buildings where Manhattan might have 2-4 stories.)

Religion and Urbanism

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 02/24/2014 - 12:51pm

(Cross-posted, with some additions, from my [personal](#) blog).

Recently, someone asked me an interesting question: what type of Jews are most likely to live in cities as opposed to suburbs? For example, are Orthodox Jews (the most religiously traditional ones) more likely than other Jews to live intown because they value walkability, or in suburbs because their large families need more space? Is the aging Conservative movement more suburban than other movements because younger Americans tend to prefer city life? I don't think I have the resources to do a full demographic survey, or even to dig up accurate information, since there are not that many cities that have recently conducted surveys of their Jewish population.

However, I can do an informal survey of mid-sized cities I know something about (excluding the most vibrant cities, which have all kinds of Jews downtown, and super-suburbanized cities like Jacksonville, where there really is no organized Jewish presence in the presprawl parts of the city). So let's look at a few places:

Washington- In close-in Washington (within two miles of the White House) most congregations seem to be Orthodox or nearly so. Keshet Israel is the closest full-service congregation, while Rosh Pina and DC Minyan straddle the boundary between Orthodox and Conservative. In addition, there is a [Chabad](#)* in Dupont Circle. On the other hand, in the “outer city” (between downtown and the city limits) Jewish life becomes more diverse: there are two Conservative shuls (Adas Israel in Cleveland Park and Tifereth Israel in Shepherd Park), three Reform in upper NW DC (Temple Micah, Washington Hebrew, Temple Sinai) and Orthodox Ohev Shalom (also in Shepherd Park). So I would say there is a strong Orthodox presence close in, but there is a strong non-Orthodox presence in places that aren’t downtown but aren’t quite the suburbs. (Having said that, the red hot center of Orthodoxy in Washington is in close-in suburbs like Rockville and Silver Spring).

Atlanta- In Atlanta, unlike Washington, there is no downtown Jewish life. In the “intown but not downtown” neighborhoods of Midtown, Virginia Highland and Morningside 2-4 miles from downtown, there is a fairly even denominational split: Chabad (Orthodox), Anshei Sfard (ditto), Shearith Israel (Conservative) and the Temple (Reform). Again, the Orthodox heartland is in the inner ring suburbs of Toco Hills and Sandy Springs.

Buffalo- There is no downtown Jewish life, but here the liberal branches of Judaism tend to be a bit closer in. Beth Zion (Reform) is two miles or so from downtown, Beth Abraham (Conservative) is a bit further out, and the Orthodox synagogues start five miles out and go from there. However, most Jews live in the suburb of Amherst.

Cleveland- When I lived in Cleveland there was only one synagogue within the city limits, Beth Israel (Reform) on the West Side several miles from downtown. However, there is now a Chabad at Case Western at the eastern edge of the city. But from the webpage it’s not clear to me that they even have a Saturday morning minyan, so I’m not sure they count as the functional equivalent of a shul. In the suburbs, there is a sharp division: the inner suburb of Cleveland Heights has a strong Orthodox presence, but more liberal denominations have moved to outer suburbs.

St. Louis- The only congregation of any sort in the city of St. Louis is Central Reform Congregation (Reform) in the Central West End a few miles from downtown. The inner suburbs are pretty diverse though, with a strong Orthodox presence in University City and a conservative synagogue in Richmond Heights.

Seattle- Seattle has two synagogues almost right next to each other about a mile from downtown: one Orthodox, one Reform. In the “intown but not downtown” areas about 4-6 miles out, there is a real mix of congregations: Orthodox synagogues clustered in the Seward Park area of Southeast Seattle, a Reform congregation in Southwest Seattle, one or two of everything in North Seattle.

Miami- According to its website, Chabad now has a minyan at 11th and Brickell in the heart of downtown Miami (!) – though I don’t know how often they actually have the minyan. Temple Israel (Reform) and Beth David (Conservative) are a mile and a half or so from downtown. The dominant Orthodox areas are Miami Beach and North Miami Beach (essentially 50s suburbia).

There does seem to be a few patterns. Many cities don't have any synagogues downtown (that is, within a mile of City Hall)- but where there is a downtown synagogue, it is often Orthodox- usually either a new Chabad House or a old synagogue that never moved to the suburbs. Midtown areas (2-5 miles from downtown) vary a lot. Where there is more than one midtown synagogue, there is no clear pattern: midtown synagogues can be Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or a mix of the same. But in weak Jewish communities where there is only one midtown synagogue (Cleveland, St. Louis) it is Reform.

*For those of you unfamiliar with Chabad, it is an Orthodox outreach organization that establishes mini-congregations, often in neighborhoods without other synagogues.

Presidential Heroes of Urbanism

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 02/17/2014 - 10:18pm

Since the weekend that just ended was Presidents' weekend, I thought now would be a good time to acknowledge some especially pro-urban Presidents. I don't plan to focus on their actual policies (a complicated topic, and one not very relevant to most pre-New Deal presidencies) but on their post-White House personal lives. The majority of Presidents have retired to resorts, estate-home suburbia, or (in the 18th and 19th century) country plantations.

However, I would like to honor a few exceptions to this rule:

*Harry Truman, who spent his retirement years in the heart of small-town Main Street America, a street in Independence, Mo. seven blocks from City Hall with a Walkscore of 75.

*Chester Alan Arthur, who grew up in Vermont but moved to 127 Lexington Avenue in Manhattan (between E. 28th and E. 29th) after his Presidency. (By the way, if you are in Manhattan and notice a wonderful little grocery store called Kalyustan's, be aware that Arthur's townhouse was almost right above it!)

More details about Presidential residences can be found this [Zillow](#) site.

Steps vs. The Elderly

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 02/12/2014 - 12:44am

I am currently reading *White Flight/Black Flight* by Rachael Woldoff of West Virginia University. The book discusses a neighborhood at the edge of a northern city (Philadelphia, I suspect) which was overwhelmingly Jewish as late as 1990, and became black in the 1990s. One area of interest to new urbanists is its discussion of white "stayers" - elderly people who are not at all displeased with integration. What drives them out is not crime or social disorder, but steps. As they get older, they have more difficulty walking, and in particular using steps - which, as I have learned from watching my own parts, are much more treacherous for the elderly than level surfaces. Because this is a neighborhood of rowhouses with lots of steps, a person who loses the ability to navigate steps usually has to leave the neighborhood and move to a retirement home.

What does this have to do with urbanism? I've seen some commentary (usually in the context of defending height limits) that treat walk-up apartments as the ideal urban form. In an aging society, this ideal is simply not realistic. Walk-ups are certainly fine for young people on the way up (pun intended) but they simply cannot be the dominant urban form unless we are prepared to have communities denuded of seniors.

Some Cities Have More Children Than Their Suburbs

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 02/07/2014 - 4:51pm

Today, I read a [blog post](#) by Joel Kotkin asserting, for the umpteenth time, that families with children prefer suburbs. But at the bottom of the post is a chart comparing the child population (as a percentage of total population) for dozens of cities and their suburbs.

And guess what? Children are actually a higher percentage of the urban population than of the suburban population in many places, including not only Sun Belt metros like Jacksonville, Oklahoma City and Orlando, but unlikely suspects like Buffalo, Cleveland, Hartford, Milwaukee, Providence, and Rochester.

Does this mean Rust Belt cities are especially child-friendly? My guess is that it means that poorer people have more children, and these poor, declining cities are full of poor children.

Looking at Another Republican Governor's Transit Record

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 02/06/2014 - 11:14am

A few weeks ago I posted an entry on [transit ridership](#) under several Republican governors who might be running for President; since most governors are judged based on one or two high-profile decisions (e.g. support of high-speed rail) I thought it might be valuable to use another means of judging a governor's effect on day-to-day transit service. I found that one governor's anti-transit reputation was indeed backed up by ridership statistics: in Scott Walker's Wisconsin, transit ridership has gone down over the past few years. By contrast, in the home states of Gov. Chris Christie (New Jersey) and Rick Perry (Texas) ridership has continued to rise.

I recently read an article suggesting that Gov. John Kasich of Ohio might also run for President. Kasich does not have a pro-transit reputation; he opposed both high-speed rail and the Cincinnati streetcar. But his not-so-visionary leadership has not prevented Ohioans from being able to access buses (and in Cleveland, trains). Cleveland transit ridership has risen from 34 million trips in the first three quarters of 2011 to 36.4 million in the first three quarters of 2013. Smaller agencies have not done as well, but have not suffered either. Cincinnati's transit ridership has risen very slightly, from 12.533 million trips in 2011 to 12.639 million in 2013. Columbus ridership has declined but just barely, from 14.040 million in 2011 to 14.007 in 2013. If you judge the Kasich record by short-term results, it seems moderately positive.

Review of Emily Talen's Book Online

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 02/01/2014 - 9:17pm

My review of Emily Talen's book *City Rules* is now [online](#). To briefly summarize the book: in addition to explaining how land use and street design regulations promote sprawl, Talen shows how those regulations have become stricter over time. In addition to addressing oft-discussed issues like single-use zoning, Talen discusses issues like curb radii (the measurement of the edge of a block). Pre-automobile streets have small curb radii, which means that streets end at right angles and cars have to slow down to make right turns. By contrast, many sprawling suburbs have 30-50 foot curb radii, which shave space from sidewalks and make speeding easier.

Coexist

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 01/28/2014 - 5:38pm

While walking around I occasionally see the "Coexist" bumper sticker, showing the symbols of various religions in order to suggest that it would be nice if they all coexisted peacefully.

While walking around Manhattan's Upper East Side a week or so ago, I saw a luxury high-rise a block from public housing a block from low-rise retail, all coexisting without any obvious harm. So it occurred to me that it would be quite nice if someone with a talent for design created something like the "Coexist" sticker for buildings in order to show that tall buildings and small buildings and houses and stores really can coexist at least as easily as different religions.

Urbanism and the Oscars

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 01/22/2014 - 12:20pm

I just finished watching all [nine](#) Best Picture nominees, and thought I would discuss what the front-runners should be from an urbanist perspective. Which films occur in an urban or walkable environment? Which films present such environments favorably (or at least not unfavorably)?

Many of the Best Picture nominees, are of course, generally not very relevant to urbanism of any sort. For example, *Gravity* occurs in outer space, and most of *12 Years A Slave* occurs in rural plantations. *Captain Phillips* mostly occurs in the high seas (except for a brief scene at the title character's home, which looks like cabin-in-the-woods suburbia) while *American Hustle* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* are mostly indoors.

Two other films are pretty suburb-oriented, though location isn't a major part of the plot. *Dallas Buyers Club*'s outdoor scenes mostly occur in the main character's apartment and hotel room in Dallas. These places seem to be dominated by their parking lots, like most hotels and apartments in Sunbelt cities.

In *Philomena*, the main characters (a woman searching for her long-lost son and a journalist covering the story) drive around suburban Washington looking for information about the title character's son; both houses they visit seem to be in cabin-in-the-woods suburbia, where there are plenty of houses and trees but no sidewalks or even lawns for pedestrians to walk on. The characters do visit a small Irish town, but rather than walking around the town they quickly drive to the isolated convent where the son was briefly reared.

So if I was giving an Oscar for Best Urbanism, there would be only two contenders (among the nine Oscar nominees, that is) for Best Picture: *Nebraska* and *Her*. The latter film is more conventionally urban, occurring in a future Los Angeles where the major characters commute to work on a clean subway and live in high-rises. But in *Her* I see no children living in those high-rises: *Her* seems to combine the smart growth vision of transit-oriented development and the [common](#) concern that more walkable urbanism is somehow incompatible with creating the next generation.

Nebraska shows no evidence of such concern. Most of that film occurs in Billings, Montana and the fictional small town of Hawthorne, Nebraska- two small cities. Everyone has cars, but (unlike in the suburbs portrayed in *Philomena*) sidewalks are everywhere, and characters do walk around Hawthorne's highly walkable downtown. Although urban public transit plays no role in the movie, intercity buses are mentioned in the movie. The matriarch of the main character's family suggests that if her husband wants to visit Nebraska he should take the bus. When the husband and their son drive to Nebraska instead, she takes the bus to meet them in Hawthorne. In this film, taking the bus is not something only poor people do: it is as normal as driving, and no one suggests that it is odd to do so.

Which film is more pro-urban? I think it is a close call, but I vote for *Nebraska*, only because the characters seem capable of reproducing.

Mini-Book Review: Regional Planning Can Be Pro-Sprawl, Too

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 01/17/2014 - 2:28pm

I have [written](#) about how local comprehensive plans sometimes favor sprawl over urbanism. But a recent book by planning scholar Carlton Basmajian, [Atlanta Unbound](#), shows that regional planning can suffer from similar defects.

Basmajian's book discusses the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the regional planning agency for metropolitan Atlanta. While other planning agencies have focused on environmental protection, ARC has until recently been focused on economic development, especially suburban development. So throughout the late 20th century, ARC and its predecessor agencies favored building highways further and further out into suburbia, and used its computer models to generate predictions of continued sprawl. These models in turn justified additional highways, thus creating additional sprawl.

Comparing Christie with Other Governors: Public Transit

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 01/12/2014 - 8:18pm

In view of the recent scandal involving the politically-motivated closing of some bridge lanes in New Jersey, I thought I would start to take a look at how New Jersey Gov Christie's record compares with those of some other governors who might be running for President. But rather than going program-by-program, I thought I would look at actual transit ridership. ([Statistics here](#)).

Two other Republican governors are, I think, reasonably likely to run for President: Rick Perry of Texas and Scott Walker of Wisconsin. Walker has a reputation of being [pro-highway and anti-transit](#). Has this been reflected in transit ridership? Gov. Walker took office at the start of 2011. Between the first three quarters of 2011 and the first three quarters of 2013, transit ridership in Milwaukee (the state's largest city) went down from 33.6 million trips to 32.3 million trips.

During the same period, ridership on New Jersey Transit (the state's main travel agency) went up from 190 million trips to 198.6 million trips, despite the disruptive effects of Superstorm Sandy on New Jersey transit. Advantage: Christie. Gov. Christie has not been a leader on transit issues (except for his opposition to a new rail tunnel under the Hudson River), but his inaction has allowed New Jersey transit to follow the same trends as that of other states. Nationally, ridership increased from 7.7 billion trips to 7.9 billion, a level of increase slightly lower than that of New Jersey Transit.

How does Perry's Texas compare? Because Texas has several large cities, it is somewhat difficult to compare it with New Jersey or Wisconsin. However, ridership rose in the state's two largest transit systems: by about 3 percent in Houston (from 61.2 to 63 million trips) and by about 10 percent in Dallas (from 45.6 million to 50.7 million trips). Like Gov. Christie, Gov. Perry has not been a leader on public transit, but has not been aggressively harmful either.

I note that several possible Republican candidates are legislators rather than governors; thus, it is difficult to imagine how their records as chief executives would be. Marco Rubio [supports](#) Orlando's Sunrail commuter train system, and Rick Santorum often [supported](#) transit funding when he was in the Senate. On the other hand, Paul Ryan generally does [not](#) have a pro-transit voting record, and Senators Rand Paul and Ted Cruz are too new to have much of a record (though Sen. Paul is [hostile](#) to federal bicycle/pedestrian funding).

More Evidence That There Are Still Poor People in Cities (Or, I Told You So)

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 01/07/2014 - 12:31pm

In numerous blog posts (most extensively [here](#)) I have pointed out that despite the enormous amount of writing about suburban poverty and urban gentrification, cities still have a disproportionate share of regional poverty.

A [chart](#) attached to a recent New York Times article on property backs up this view: it maps out poverty rates, placing census tracts with poverty rates below 10 percent in light blue and those with higher poverty rates in darker shades. In most metro areas, the central city is a checkerboard of light, dark and inbetween, while suburbs are a sea of light blue with chunks of dark here and there. Even in New York (where large chunks of Manhattan are quite rich) northern Manhattan and the outer boroughs have plenty of dark blue mid- and high-poverty areas, while Long Island and Westchester County are dominated by light blue.

In poorer cities like Baltimore the contrast between city and suburb is even more stark: the city looks like a big dark blot, while the suburbs are a mixed bag close in and become the traditional suburban sea of low-poverty light blue further out, as poverty spreads from city to inner ring suburb.

A Threat to Retrofitting Sprawl?

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 01/05/2014 - 11:43pm

Because Houston has no formal zoning code, one might think that infill is easier there than in other cities. But a few neighborhood activists may create a new obstacle to infill: nuisance law.

Historically, a landowner may be liable for nuisance only if their behavior unreasonably interferes with another's use of land. Nuisance law has usually been applied only to polluting industries. But in Houston, residents of a wealthy Houston neighborhood are suing to prevent a developer from building a [high-rise](#) on a nearby street. Instead of following the traditional nuisance standard, the judge [instructed](#) the jury to find a nuisance if the high-rise was "abnormal and out of place in its surroundings." Not surprisingly, the jury said "yes" and found a nuisance. If other courts applied this "out of place" standard, nuisance law could be used to enshrine sprawl and eliminate new urbanism forever, since even low-rise walkable development is "abnormal" and "out of place" in most of the United States. Fortunately, the developer will appeal this ruling.

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