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2013

2013 CNU blog posts

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Even In Phoenix, You Can't Build Your Way Out of Congestion

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 12/27/2013 - 2:18pm

A recent [op-ed](#) in Canada's Globe and Mail argued that yes, you can build your way out of congestion by building more roads, because after all, Phoenix built lots of roads and they don't have that much congestion. The author invoked the Texas Transportation Institute's report on Phoenix to show that government spending on highways reduces congestion. However, he should have read the TTI report more carefully: between 1982 and 2011, freeway mileage in Phoenix [increased](#) eightfold, but congestion-related delay per motorist increased from 24 hours to 35 hours, nearly a 50 percent increase.

The Importance of the Margin of Error

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 12/13/2013 - 11:09am

Even the best poll or survey is slightly inaccurate, because a poll of a sample of people may not accurately reflect the entire population. To account for this problem, pollsters have developed the concept of a "margin of error"- a number (usually 2 to 5 percentage points) which shows the range of likely results among the actual population, as opposed to the people who answered the survey. (For a more technical explanation, go [here](#)). So for example, if a poll shows that Hillary Clinton will get 48% of the vote against Chris Christie, and the poll's margin of error is 4 points, this means a poll of the entire population would probably give her between 44 and 52% of the vote.

This concept is highly relevant to transportation data as well, since estimates of commuting habits are often based upon the American Community Survey, a group of polls performed under the auspices of the Census Bureau. A recent [story](#) on Governing.com lists commuting data for every major American city. If you just look at the tables with percentages, you might be surprised in all kinds of ways, noticing that transit commuting jumped in city X, or declined in city Y. But if you consider the margin of error, you will see that some of these trends are in fact nonexistent.

For example, the ACS data shows that the percentage of Atlantans who rode public transit to work declined from 11.7% of the workforce in 2007 to 10.6% in 2012. So you might conclude from this that something is very wrong with public transit in Atlanta (which, of course, might be

the case). But if you look at the margins of error in the 2007 and 2012 estimates you may read the data a bit differently.

If you just look at the Census estimates, you will see that the number of transit commuters decreased from 24,346 in 2007 to 21,880 in 2012- seemingly a dramatic drop. However, both numbers are subject to a margin of error- which, for 2007, is 3702. So in fact, the number of 2007 transit commuters could have been anywhere from 20,644 to 28,048. If the 2007 number is at the low end, transit commuting actually rose in Atlanta between 2007 and 2012. If the number is at the high end, the drop in commuters is even greater. Similarly, the 2012 estimate has a margin of error of 2469, which means the actual 2012 figure could be anywhere from 19,411 to 24,249.

Cities Don't Always Have Higher Taxes Than Suburbs

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 12/07/2013 - 7:46pm

The Brookings Institution just came out with a national [map](#) listing property taxes by county. Before reading this, I would have thought that cities (other than cities like New York, Washington and Philadelphia which have hefty city [income taxes](#)) had higher property taxes than their suburbs.

But this is sometimes not the case. For example, Jacksonville's property tax (0.9% of property value) is slightly lower than that of suburban St. Johns County (0.98%). San Francisco's tax (0.59% of home value) is also slightly lower than that of suburban Marin County (0.68% of home value). Denver's tax rate of 0.55% is lower than that of suburban Jefferson County (0.7%).

Even declining cities may sometimes be less taxed than their suburbs. St. Louis's property tax (less than 1 per cent of home value) is below that of suburban St. Louis and St. Charles Counties (which are 1.2-1.3% of home value). Although St. Louis does have a small city income tax (1% of income), on balance many taxpayers probably come out ahead in St. Louis.

Two Implausible Scenarios

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 12/06/2013 - 2:16pm

The Rand Corporation recently issued a [report](#) sketching out two possible scenarios for America's transportation future. In one scenario, entitled "No Free Lunch", energy prices keep rising, leading to less driving and more compact development. Under this scenario, government regulates greenhouse gases heavily and taxes driving heavily to support transportation. In the second scenario, entitled "Fueled and Freewheeling", energy prices are stable, and neither regulation nor taxes increase. Obviously, there will be more sprawl and more driving under scenario #2.

It seems to me very unlikely that all three elements of either scenario will occur simultaneously. Why? Because if energy prices go up, Americans are not going to want to tax energy further, nor are they going to be eager to impose regulations that cause costs to keep going on. Instead, there will be much populist pressure to reduce energy prices, either by cutting the gas tax (from the Right) or through price controls (on the Left). So high energy prices, although good for conservation based on the market, are bad for conservation through regulation and for transportation funding generally.

On the other hand, if energy prices are lower, taxophobia might be a little less intense, and there might be a little more support for raising gas taxes to fund transportation, or even for more regulation of greenhouse gases.

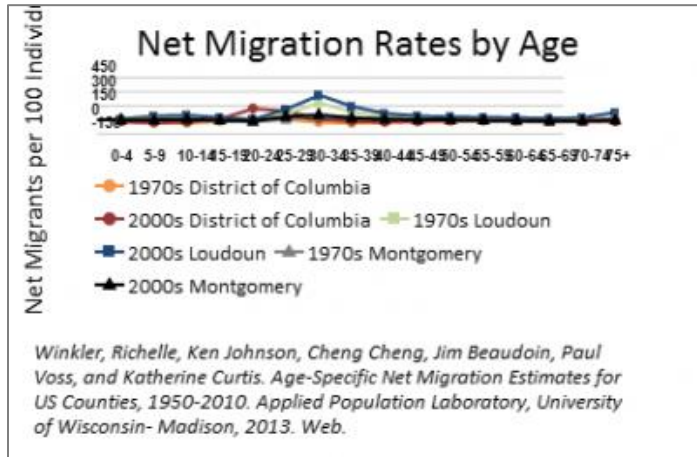
Chanukah Songs for Urbanists

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 12/01/2013 - 3:13pm

One wonderful thing about Chanukah is how easily its songs lend themselves to adaptation. For example, last week I adapted the Chanukah song "Mi Y'Malel" (Who Can Retell) [here](#). Then I created a New York version [here](#). Create some lyrics for your own city!

Great Data on Migration

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 11/04/2013 - 8:40am



I just found an interesting new website full of migration data (link [here](#)). The website contains migration data for almost every county in the US.

One thing I have learned: the migration into cities is still largely driven by twentysomethings. For example, Manhattan and Washington continued to lose older residents to suburbia and to other regions, as they did in prior decades.

How, then, have these places gained population in recent decades? First, twentysomethings are moving to these cities in larger numbers. In the 1970s, Washington, D.C.'s net gain of 20-24 year olds was 6.7 per every 100 people- that is, the number by which in-migrants exceeded outmigrants was 6.7 per 100 twentysomethings. By contrast, in the 2000s the city's net gain was over 100 people per 100 (which I guess means that twice as many 20-24 year olds moved in as left). In addition, people stayed in the city longer: in the 2000s, net migration for 30-34 year olds was positive, though it became negative after age 35.

Second, older people did not leave the city as rapidly as in prior decades. In the 1970s, Washington's negative migration rate among 55-59 year olds was 16.3 per 100 people, as opposed to 6.5 in the 2000s. Similarly, the city's negative migration rate among 40-44 year olds was 31.7 percent in the 1970s and 21.7 percent in the 2000s. So even among people predisposed to move towards suburbia, the city bled fewer people in the 2000s.

Big Boxes Flock Together

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 10/30/2013 - 9:39am

Some planners seek to discourage big box stores, on the theory that such stores are incipient monopolists that crush all competition. (In particular, Wal-Mart seems to strike fear in the hearts of many).

But a new study, by University of Pennsylvania student Ken Steif, suggests that big boxes actually attract competition. The study (discussed [here](#)) concludes that if people are willing to travel long distances to reach a type of store, such stores tend to locate next to each other- for example, gem stores in New York's "Diamond District." In particular, it notes a strong correlation between Wal-Marts and Targets, suggesting that when a Wal-Mart opens up a Target is rarely far behind (and vice versa).

Is this a good thing or a bad thing from an urbanist perspective? On the one hand, it means monopoly-phobia is unjustified. On the other hand, if your town's "big box district" is in an unwalkable suburban area, this is not good news for walkability or for other retail districts. So perhaps a city should try to tame big boxes by encouraging them to locate closer to downtown or in more walkable areas (admittedly, something easier said than done!)

The Problem with the "Induced Demand" Theory of New Housing

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 10/28/2013 - 8:17pm

I was arguing with an acquaintance about New York's sky-high rents, and he made an interesting argument: he suggested that new luxury housing actually makes prices higher, by making the city more desirable to the wealthy and thus encouraging them to bid up housing prices. In other words, the law of supply and demand doesn't reduce housing prices: supply just increases demand rather than reducing prices.

If this argument was right, a high-cost city that allowed no new buildings would stop being a high-cost city. This experiment seems to have been tried in San Francisco. In no year since 2000 has the city allowed more than 1 or 2 new residential building permits per 10,000 people, far lower even than New York City (let alone such production powerhouses as Houston). How'd that work out? According to [City Data](#), housing prices are higher now than they were before 2008.

More on Which Age Groups are Moving to Cities

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 10/20/2013 - 1:11am

I've already [blogged](#) on which age groups are returning to cities- but I recently read something that made me think about the issue a little differently. In past posts, I have noted that city population seems to be increasing among both millennials and 55-64 year olds. Although this is true, it is an after-affect of the nationwide increase in the number of aging baby boomers.

Joel Kotkin (who I have had more than my share of disagreements with) has [suggested](#) that baby boomers are actually leaving cities. His methodology is a bit different than mine was: rather than comparing today's 55-64 year olds with the 55-64 year olds of 2000, he analyzes population by cohort, looking at persons born between 1946 and 1965 (who were 35-54 in 2000 and 45-64 in 2010). I tried to replicate his data, focusing on population-losing Chicago to start with.

Indeed, the number of boomers decreased by just over 20 percent, from about 763,000 in 2000 to just over 601,000 in 2010. The number of people in every age group but two decreased. Persons born after 2000 of course increased (from zero to over 300,000). Also, the number of millennials (persons born between 1976 and 1995) increased from about 865,000 to 931,000.

I then looked at Philadelphia and Manhattan. In both places, every age group born after 1975 decreased (though less rapidly than in Chicago). However, the millennial population increased more rapidly than I expected. In Manhattan, the number of persons born between 1976 and 1995 increased from about 338,000 to about 560,000, an increase of over 50 percent. Among older millennials (persons born between 1976 and 1985) population almost doubled, from just over 195,000 to about 341,000. One might think that Manhattan's high cost of living locked out millennials, but evidently this is not the case. (In Philadelphia, the millennial "bump" was more modest, from about 453,000 to 511,000).

The "Decline of Chinatown" Nonstory

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 10/12/2013 - 10:00pm

The headline in "[Wired](#)" seems to say it all: "Mapping the Alarming Decline of America's Chinatowns." The Wired story breathlessly proclaims that "gentrification" and "development" are causing Chinatowns to "go extinct"- with the apparent agenda of trying to prevent new urban housing because of concerns about gentrification.

But the story is, to put it charitably, misleading. The story claims that the percentage of Asians in the Boston, Washington and Philadelphia Chinatowns is declining. But if you look at the [fine print](#) in the report, the story is based on, you notice some numbers that show a more complicated story. In particular, the raw number of Chinatown Asians has actually increased since 1990. For example, in Boston's Chinatown, the number of Asians has increased from 4881 to 5848, roughly a 20% increase. The Asian percentage has decreased only because the numbers of whites, blacks and Latinos has increased even more rapidly. In Philadelphia, the number of Asians has more than doubled (though again, the white population increased even more rapidly, and the populations of other racial groups also increased). In Manhattan, by contrast, the picture is quite different. The number of Asians in Manhattan has increased only slightly since 1990- but the overall population has actually declined, so the Asian share has actually increased.

Rents have increased in these neighborhoods- but in two of the three Chinatowns (New York and Boston) rents are still below the citywide average. And the Chinatown with the highest (relative to the city as a whole) rents, Philadelphia, is the one with the highest increase in the Asian population.

In sum, the "Asians being displaced by gentrification" story is not supported by the facts.

Is NYC Building Enough Housing?

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 10/08/2013 - 1:11pm

New York city planning director Amanda Burden recently argued that there's not much more that the city can do to make housing more affordable, claiming that the city has given out 30,000 building permits per year, yet prices have failed to go down. But in fact, New York has built housing at a much lower rate than some other cities.

New York [granted](#) around 30-33,000 building permits per year during the boom years of 2005-08 (or about 40 per 10,000 residents), and about 6000 per year during the "bust" years of 2009-10 (or about 8 per 10,000 residents).

How do these numbers compare with Sun Belt cities? [Jacksonville](#) allowed 111 permits per 10,000 people at the top of the boom, and 13 at the trough- two to three times as many as New York. [Houston](#) peaked at the same level as New York, but has been granted more permits during recent years, bottoming out at 12.6 per 10,000. Even [Atlanta](#) (which is "built out" to a greater extent than Jacksonville or Houston) peaked at 44 per 10,000, though its recession-era construction has declined below New York levels.

And because some of New York's suburbs are not building much new housing, New York has to allow more building than other cities just to stay in place. For example, Long Island's [Nassau County](#) only allowed 9 permits per 10,000 people in the mid-2000s, and [Westchester County](#) allowed between 8 and 14 per 10,000 during this period. By contrast, [DeKalb County](#) (Atlanta's inner suburban county) consistently allowed 50-70 per 10,000 between 2000 and 2005, and nearby [Cobb County](#) peaked at 89 permits per 10,000.

Admittedly, New York is already built out- which makes new construction more difficult. But New York's already-high housing prices make new construction more necessary as well.

Explaining the Koontz Decision

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 10/06/2013 - 7:55pm

A few months ago, the federal Supreme Court issued its decision in the case of [Koontz v. St. Johns River Water Management District](#). I just attended a conference at my school (Touro Law Center) discussing Koontz and other constitutional issues relevant to land use planning, so I thought I would share a bit of what learned about this case from the two speakers who focused on Koontz (Chicago attorney [Julie Tappendorf](#) and George Mason University law professor [Steven Eagle](#).)

Koontz is based on the Supreme Court's "exactions" doctrine. Under this doctrine, just as government cannot take your property without compensation under the [Takings Clause](#) of the Fifth Amendment, it cannot always make you give up part of your property in exchange for a permit to build on the rest of your land.

Such a bargain (called an "exaction") is allowed - but only under certain circumstances. The government may require a developer to give up property in exchange for a permit ONLY if the dedication of property advances a legitimate state interest and is roughly proportional to the harmful impact of the development.

So for example, suppose that Wal-Mart wishes to build a new store, and local government wants Wal-Mart to reduce the traffic caused by the new store by building a bike path near the store. The courts will allow this "exaction" only if the bike path is likely to reduce traffic enough to be "proportional" to the traffic caused by the development. So if the Wal-Mart adds 10,000 cars to the neighborhood but the bike path only subtracts 1,000, the city cannot make Wal-Mart give up land for the bike path.

In Koontz, the Supreme Court expanded this exactions doctrine in two ways. First, the Court held that this doctrine applies when the government denies a permit because a developer refuses

to give up land-- not just when the government granted a conditional permit as in prior cases. Second, the Court (by a narrower margin) held that the doctrine applies when the city requires a developer to pay the city money in exchange for a permit - not just when the city requires a dedication of land, as in prior cases. In both these situations, the dedication must satisfy the "rough proportionality" test discussed above.

There has been a significant division of opinion about Koontz; some commentators say it [doesn't](#) change the law very much, while others fear that it [significantly limits](#) local environmental regulation. One reason for this division of opinion may exist because Koontz leaves two major issues open:

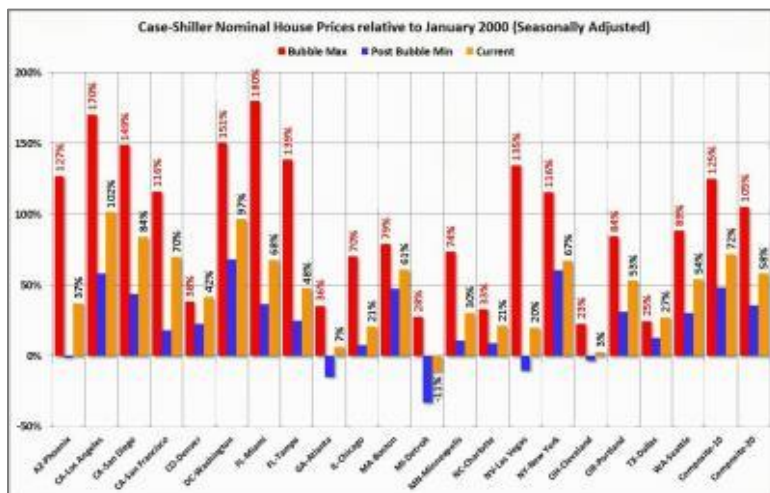
*The exactions doctrine applies only when government demands money or property in exchange for a building permit. But how are courts going to draw the line between permissible negotiation and a possibly impermissible "demand"?

*The exactions doctrine applies when the government wants money in an exchange for a permit, but presumably would not apply to generally applicable taxes and fees affecting all landowners. But how are courts going to draw the line between a monetary exaction and a routine tax or fee?

Over the next few years, the lower courts will have to sort out these issues.

Does smart growth regulation create price instability?

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 09/25/2013 - 10:09am



One argument I've seen in anti-smart growth literature is that regulation generally and/or smart growth-oriented regulation creates housing bubbles that lead to price instability.

Attached is a chart showing the evolution of housing prices between 2000 and today. The two major regions with the most aggressively smart-growth-

oriented regulation are Seattle and Portland (both of which have urban growth boundaries). Neither seems particularly unstable according to the chart. Nationally, prices increased by 105% from 2000 to the peak of the bubble, and by 58% in real terms from 2000 to today. Thus, the national "instability gap" (the amount of housing price increase that did not survive the recession) was 47%. By contrast, Seattle prices were actually more stable than the rest of the nation, with an instability gap of 35% (89% housing price increase to peak of bubble, 54% from 2000 to today); Portland's "instability gap" seems even lower.

So even if regulation generally feeds bubbles, it does not appear that urban growth boundaries, standing alone, do so.

Reality Check on Urban Poverty

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 09/25/2013 - 8:48am

I've read some stories suggesting that poverty is decreasing in cities and increasing in suburbs. Urbanists see this alleged trend as evidence that cities are becoming more popular; egalitarians see it as evidence that gentrification is driving the poor into suburbia.

Last week's poverty data suggest that such commentary is a bit wrongheaded, for two reasons. First of all, most major cities have poverty rates higher than the national average. The national poverty rate is 15.9%, and even relatively gentrified cities like Boston (21.6%), New York (21.2%) and Portland (17.7%) have higher rates. (Data by city [here](#)).

Second, even relatively prosperous cities have far more poverty than their suburbs. For example, San Francisco has a poverty rate of only 15% - but its suburbs have only a 10.1% poverty rate. Similarly, Washington, DC's poverty rate (18.2%) is still far ahead of the suburban poverty rate (7.1%) (Data [here](#) in "Data Appendix" link).

Admittedly, the economic gap between cities and suburbs has narrowed slightly in many metro areas- but even so, cities still have far more than a fair share of regional poverty.

How the Sprawl Lobby Is Totalitarian

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 09/24/2013 - 11:08am

I recently read the following comment justifying sprawl-oriented policies: "people still want the freedom of choice, privacy and flexibility a car affords."

I have often seen this sort of argument; it seems to me to endorse the following chain of logic: (1) an unspecified number of "people" (presumably a majority) want cars and therefore (2) we should enact policies that make car ownership effectively mandatory (e.g. using highways to shift development to places without public transit, building streets too wide to be crossable by pedestrians).

This argument strikes me as essentially totalitarian: it proposes that the majority of people want a certain lifestyle (car-oriented sprawl) and supports policies to turn that majority into unanimity. In other words, the "people want cars" argument is essentially a claim that almost 100 percent of households should be forced to buy what a smaller majority of the people (allegedly) want.

Of course, it could be argued that more balanced transportation and land use policies also force people to buy what they do not want; just as nondrivers pay for roads, drivers pay for bike paths. But car-oriented policies are nevertheless more intrusive, because they require almost all people to purchase the same thing.

To draw an analogy: imagine two nations where supermarkets were controlled by the State, Breshnevland and Marketsocialland. In Breshnevland supermarkets, the health-obsessed bureaucracy only sells water. In Marketsocialland, milk, soda, and alcohol are also available. In Marketsocialland, government's failure to understand consumer preferences sometimes leads to shortages and overpriced drinks. Nevertheless, consumers are undoubtedly freer in Marketsocialland than in Breshnevland.

The car-oriented city is more like Breshnevland; only one product is available. Marketsocialland is not a true free market- but nevertheless, consumers certainly have more choices and are more free to change their preferences there.

High-Speed Streets Cause Tragedy in Jacksonville

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 09/16/2013 - 11:37am

Last Friday night, a woman and her daughter were [struck](#) by a car while crossing the street to attend Yom Kippur services in Jacksonville, Florida. The mother died instantly, the daughter was hospitalized. The driver, though apparently sober, had [killed](#) a six-year old with his car in 2009, and had accumulated 20 traffic citations in the past 15 years (mostly for either speeding or driving with a suspended license). The street is a typical [Stroad](#) (wide street designed for highway speeds); it is nine lanes wide (counting turn lanes). (If you want to look at the street, go to [Google Street View](#) and look at 10140 San Jose Boulevard, Jacksonville, Florida.

What have we learned from this tragedy?

*First of all, the killer's record of recklessness and carnage suggests that reckless driving, including killing someone with a car, may be viewed too leniently by police and prosecutors. Despite his record of traffic violations, he is still on the road- despite the fact that [negligent homicide](#) and [reckless driving](#) are technically crimes in Florida.

*Second, wide, high-speed [stroads](#) are dangerous for pedestrians. Automobile-dependent urban regions with lots of stroads have higher pedestrian fatality rates; according to Transportation for America's [Dangerous by Design](#) study, Jacksonville is the third most dangerous region for pedestrians in the United States. By contrast, Boston is the [safest](#) and New York is the third safest.

Why is this the case? Because a nine-lane stroad by definition is designed to facilitate high-speed driving, and a pedestrian hit by a car going 40 miles per hour has only about a [15 percent](#) chance of survival (as opposed to a 95 percent chance when hit by a car going 20 mph). Stroads also are more dangerous for motorists; for example, Jacksonville had [57](#) non-pedestrian deaths in car crashes in 2011, while Boston (which has a population about 2/3 that of Jacksonville) had only 10 and Washington, D.C. (with a population similar to Boston's) had only [19](#).

Fast traffic is perfectly acceptable for an interstate highway with no pedestrians and nothing to attract them. But 50 mph traffic has no business on any street with lots of shops and other attractions that people may wish to walk to.* Yet in Jacksonville, most shops are on stroads, because highway engineers have a nasty habit of widening commercial streets and thereby turning them into stroads, and zoning laws sometimes limit commercial activities to those streets.

*Third. push buttons at intersections don't do much to protect pedestrians. This intersection has a button that pedestrians can push before crossing.** But I lived near that intersection for several years and never knew what the button was for anyhow. Since I have pushed these buttons many times without any immediate results, it seemed obvious to me that the button did not turn the

light from red to green. I just read that the lights do give pedestrians a few extra seconds to cross the road; however, I lived in Jacksonville for four years and never learned this, so evidently it is not widely publicized. At a minimum, pedestrian push-buttons should have signs nearby explaining their results.

Even where pedestrians have the right-of-way due to a red light, this protection is no substitute for better street design. In such a situation, a pedestrian is still vulnerable not only to motorists running red lights, but also to motorists making left and right turns from other streets at an intersection.

Ultimately, the best pedestrian protection policy is narrower, slower commercial streets. Where a street is too wide, it needs to be calmed through wider medians and wider sidewalks (among other things).

Is there anything you can do about this particular tragedy? The daughter is still hospitalized, and numerous funds have been created to help with her medical bills. To donate go [here](#) or [here](#).

*Especially not a synagogue, since under [traditional](#) Jewish law people may not drive or ride public transit on Sabbaths and holy days. (I note, however, that Jewish denominations are divided on this issue; Orthodox Jews follow the traditional view, Reform Jews reject it, and Conservative rabbis are divided). It seems to me as well that a synagogue has no business on a road.

**The victims of this crash were Orthodox Jews, and thus not allowed to push the button on holy days because activating electric sources violates Orthodox religious law. But the holy day may not have yet begun when they were crossing, so we don't know whether they pushed it or not. But as explained above, the light doesn't help much anyhow.

Exciting New Database

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 09/13/2013 - 9:17am

The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy just came out with a fun [new database](#) of fiscal information about cities. A few of the things I learned after playing around in the database for an hour:

*Highways and transit are really a pretty minor part of most cities' budgets. In the average city, highway and transit spending combined were \$212 per capita, only about 7 percent of all local expenditures (just over \$3,100 per capita). By contrast, education gobbled up about 12 percent of municipal spending, and public safety about 18 percent. So I'm not sure we need worry about either highways or transit bankrupting cities. The most sprawl-happy cities don't seem to spend

more than more compact cities; for example, 800-square mile Jacksonville spent only about 5 percent of its budget on roads and transit (although electric utility spending, which I suppose might be greater in more sprawling areas, were a significant part of the Jacksonville budget).

*Despite media commentary blaming Detroit's bankruptcy on overspending, Detroit spending actually went down in the 2000s, from \$7789 per capita in 2003 to \$4852 in 2010 (adjusting for inflation). (On the other hand, I note that the city's budget increased during the 1990s). Detroit does spend more money than the average city, but by no means has the largest government. Detroit spends about \$4800 per capita, less than such relatively conservative cities as Knoxville and Chattanooga.

*The most tax-happy cities were Washington, New York, Boston and San Francisco. However, this does not mean that older, more compact cities always have higher taxes: Chicago and Portland actually had below-average tax levels per capita, while Richmond and Virginia Beach were in the national "top 10" of taxation. Only six cities (not counting large suburbs such as Garland, Texas) had tax levels below \$500 per capita: Bakersfield, Las Vegas, Flint, Jackson, Wichita and Tuscon. Flint has been economically depressed for a long time, and Las Vegas has suffered horribly from the recession - a fact suggesting that low taxes indicate poverty more than lean government. On the other hand, the high-tax cities, though not rapidly growing, are not losing population either; dying Rust Belt cities such as Detroit and Cleveland tend to have fairly average tax levels.

*The Lincoln Institute also has a "fiscally standardized cities" variable, to account for local spending by counties, school districts, and special districts. The top taxers were still New York, Washington, and San Francisco (although Atlanta of all places was fourth). The lowest tax burden was in Flint, with a variety of small and mid-sized cities close behind (including Grand Rapids and Modesto).

Reviewing a Review of "The End of the Suburbs"

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 09/09/2013 - 1:08pm

In the Wall Street Journal, Joel Kotkin [pans](#) Leigh Gallagher's "The End of the Suburbs." Generally, I don't consider a fight about whether cities or suburbs are winning the future to be of much interest; in reality, there are growing cities and growing suburbs, just as there are declining cities and declining suburbs. However, Kotkin does raise a number of points which I think are worthy of discussion.

Kotkin claims that suburbia is still ascendant because "Four out of five prospective home buyers in the U.S. prefer single-family houses, according to a 2011 survey conducted by the National Association of Realtors and the advocacy group Smart Growth America."

But "single-family homes" and "suburban sprawl" are not the same thing. Much of the United States, both inside and outside the limits of major cities, is dotted with 1920s streetcar and commuter-train suburbs. These communities tend to quite walkable; they usually have grid systems and are close to shops and public transit- yet they have an ample supply of single-family homes. For example, in [Great Neck](#) (a wealthy suburb of New York City) almost three-fourth of housing units are single-family detached houses- but 30 percent of people use public transit to get to work, and the town's [Walkscore](#) is 75. Even outside metro New York, there are plenty of walkable homeowner-oriented places. For example, in Atlanta's Ansley Park neighborhood, most dwellings outside one or two main streets are single-family homes, yet the neighborhood has a [Walkscore](#) of 75.

Kotkin writes that "some American urban centers, most notably New York, San Francisco and Washington, have experienced modest population growth over the past decade or two, although still well below the national average. And even in these cities, there are many neighborhoods that sophisticated urbanites wouldn't really want to set foot in. In newly hip, and now increasingly expensive, Brooklyn, nearly a quarter of residents live below the poverty line. "

Kotkin isn't wrong on his facts- but I can't help wondering, if Brooklyn didn't have a 25 percent poverty rate, would he be celebrating this fact? Or would he be complaining that frou-frou gentrification is pushing the poor out?

Then Kotkin tries to predict the future, asserting that when millenials have children, "they will start to seek out single-family houses in lower-density areas." To which I respond: First, the [growth](#) of the 0-5 population in most major cities suggest that this may no longer be the case. Second, if they leave why doesn't Kotkin think they are will be replaced by more millenials?

Kotkin then beats the drum of families, asserting that "High-density cities repel families." First of all, even if he's right, the number of childless Americans and empty-nesters has grown dramatically over time. In 1960, half of all households had children under 18; now, this number has fallen to [under](#) 30 percent. Thus, the market for urban life has grown. Second, low-density cities aren't that much more successful (unless they happen to have warm weather or a booming job market); for example, Cleveland [lost](#) over 20 percent of its 0-5 year olds between 2000 and 2010.

I actually agree with Kotkin that predictions of the "death of the suburbs" are overblown. (In fact, Gallagher herself writes that she doesn't literally mean what her title implies). But nevertheless, we aren't in the 1970s anymore: in those days, many cities were dominated by low-rent districts. Today, cities are (to some extent) recovering.

Is Sprawl an Example of Libertarian Paternalism?

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/29/2013 - 10:38am

One widely-publicized attempt to find a middle ground between laissez-fair and overregulation is "libertarian paternalism": the idea that (in the words of New York Times columnist [David Brooks](#)), "Government doesn't tell you what to do, but it gently biases the context so that you find it easier to do things" favored by government. For example, a state government could design forms making organ donation the "default option" for driver's license applicants, so one would have to consciously opt out of organ donation.

Much of what I've read about libertarian paternalism seems to assume that this is something new. But in fact, suburban sprawl has always involved more than a whiff of libertarian paternalism.

By deciding where to build highways, government gently biased Americans in favor of suburbia. A late 20th-century American could still live in the city, but why bother when government was building new highways to make it easier to live in the suburbs? And if the majority of housing is accessible by government-built roads but not by buses, isn't government making driving the default option?

The Cross-Bronx Expressway Really Hurt (but Not in the Way You Might Think)

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 08/25/2013 - 10:15pm



A few months ago, I finished reading Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*, a biography of highway/park-builder Robert Moses. Caro asserts that Moses's Cross-Bronx Expressway ruined Bronx neighborhoods near East Tremont Avenue; many houses and apartments were destroyed to build the expressway, and the negative effects of all that deserted land blighted nearby blocks.

Today, I visited a few blocks near East Tremont, and was slightly surprised by what I saw. I would have expected that either (a) the neighborhood would have generally recovered from the expressway and from the other troubles the Bronx suffered in the 1960s and 1970s, or (b) the neighborhood would still be in terrible shape. Neither description was precisely accurate.

The blocks closest to the East Tremont/West Farms subway stop had indeed recovered to some extent. These blocks are definitely a low-income area dominated by "towers in a park" housing projects- but at least they comprise a *populated* low-income area, with places to shop and people who shop there creating "eyes on the street" (at least during the daytime when I was there). So I felt moderately safe walking around those blocks.

By contrast, the blocks closest to the expressway are far more deserted; they appear to be dominated by vacant, fenced-in lots and street-deadening uses such as industrial/warehouse buildings that were closed on Sundays (and perhaps closed every day in some cases). Since those blocks had no open businesses, they appeared much scarier. So after walking to the expressway, I came to my senses and walked back to the subway.

Cities Can't Do Much Alone

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/22/2013 - 1:12pm

I am about halfway through the Metropolitan Revolution (by Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley) and I can't help wondering: how much good can a city do? Of course, quite a bit- but only with a friendly (or at least non-hostile) state government. There are many, many things a state government can do to sabotage a city. For example, a state can:

- *build a highway [through the city's downtown](#), thus turning potentially revenue-generating land into a sewer for commuters;
- *build a highway in the [suburbs](#), taking people and jobs away from the city;
- *pass legislation limiting the city's [taxing powers](#), thus making the city government broke;
- *pass legislation giving municipal unions [more power](#), also forcing the city to spend more; and
- *dictate the details of municipal [land use](#) regulation.

In short, cities are legal creatures of the states.

Is Wal-Mart The Atomic Bomb of Retail?

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 08/18/2013 - 12:02pm

I was reading a conversation on the PRO-URB listserv about whether to oppose an intown Wal-Mart in Washington, and someone asserted that Wal-Mart was different from all other stores because it was a potential monopolist. Evidently, some people believe that Wal-Mart (unlike Costco or Target) is so good at its work that it destroys all other retail.

Having lived near Wal-Marts in both a small town and a suburb, I did not see it that way. My experience (in Jacksonville, Atlanta, and Carbondale in rural Southern Illinois) was that Wal-Mart, like any other big box, was usually surrounded by smaller retail shops of various types.

I then decided to do a bit of research to see if my instincts fit reality, by checking out various stores' Walkscore scores. I reasoned that although Walkscore is a flawed guide to walkability (due to the anti-pedestrian street design of many places with high Walkscores) it is a pretty good guide to how many retail stores are near a given site.

I began by looking at a competing big-box, Costco. Jacksonville, Fla. (where I lived from 2006-11) has one Costco; its Walkscore is a mediocre 52 (4901 Gate Parkway). By contrast, Jacksonville has eleven Wal-Marts. If Wal-Marts indeed wiped out alternative retail, Wal-Marts would have even worse Walkscores than Costco.

This proved not to be the case. Only three of the eleven had Walkscores below 52. The "best" Wal-Mart (8808 Beach) had a Walkscore of 78. The worst Wal-Mart (10251 Shops Ln., walkscore 38) is only a parking lot or two from a major regional mall, indicating to me that retail is not always a zero-sum game: just as New York's jewelers benefit from being near other jewelers, other small shops might actually complement a Wal-Mart or a Costco.

Of course, Jacksonville is a big enough city that its neighborhoods can usually support a Wal-Mart and a wide variety of other stores. It may be that there are certain situations where collective buying power is so low that a large retailer might not be able to coexist so easily with other stores, most notably in very small towns. For example, some years ago, I was with my parents when they drove through the mountains of rural north Georgia, and we shopped at a Wal-Mart that seemed to be miles away from anything.

On the other hand, I think this is likely to be the case only in very small towns. In Carbondale, Il. (pop. 20,000) the Wal-Mart (1450 E Main) has a very low Walkscore (37). So you might think it functions as a retail monopolist. But even this Wal-Mart is on a street with quite a few strip malls. I did a Google Maps search for "Department stores near 1450 East Main" and found not only apparel (TJ Maxx, Pier 1) within a mile of the Wal-Mart, but also a Best Buy, Dollar Tree, Kroger, Kohl's, Lowe's, and a J.C. Penney. So even though there is certainly a population level at which a Wal-Mart can soak up nearly all retail demand, that level is somewhere below 20,000 people.

Don't Take Yearly Census Estimates Too Seriously

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 08/16/2013 - 2:07pm

Every year, the Census comes out with estimates of county population. Because the 2011-12 estimates showed big gains for most urban counties, urbanists were happy to declare victory, and to claim that these estimates showed a movement of population back to cities. In other years, Census estimates showed that older cities were declining, and defenders of the sprawl status quo similarly crowed about those statistics.

Aaron Renn's [recent blog post](#) notes that Census estimates tend to be far different than the population figures shown by the decennial Census; many cities that showed huge population gains in the yearly estimates showed much weaker gains (or even losses) in the "real" Census. So yearly Census estimates should be treated as guesses rather than gospel. (I [blogged](#) about this in 2011).

Responding to Kotkin's Attack on Density

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/12/2013 - 11:23am

In Forbes online, Joel Kotkin came out with a ringing [attack](#) on those who dare to challenge sprawl, asking "How Can We Be So Dense"? I thought this was worth responding to, and so here are a few of his points (with my responses).

I. Social mobility and sprawl

Kotkin: "More recently density advocates span a [much-discussed study](#) of geographic variations in upward mobility as suggesting that living in a spread-out city hurts children's prospects in life. "Sprawl may be killing Horatio Alger," [quipped economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman](#).

Yet the study actually found the highest rates of upward mobility not in dense cities, but in relatively spread-out places like Salt Lake City, small cities of the Great Plains such as Bismarck, N.D.; Yankton, S.D.; and Pecos, Texas — all showed bottom to top mobility rates more than double New York City. And we shouldn't forget the success story of Bakersfield, Calif., a city [Columbia University urban planning professor David King](#) wryly labeled "a poster

child for sprawl.” Rather than an ode to bigness, notes demographer Wendell Cox, the study found that commuting zones (similar to metropolitan areas) with populations under 100,000 — smaller cities that tend to be sprawled by nature — have the highest average upward income mobility

Response: I am not sure the high mobility levels of the smallest cities are particularly relevant to smart growth. Here's why: In a small city, it doesn't really matter that much how dense the city is, because even if you don't have a car, you can walk pretty easily from one side of town to the other, and if the city has a bus service, it can cover all of town pretty easily. By contrast, in a big city (dense or otherwise) the distances between neighborhoods are sufficiently vast that a lousy transit system impedes access to jobs, thus reducing social mobility. Thus, a small city doesn't need density for access to jobs, while a big city like Atlanta does.

Kotkin cites Salt Lake City as an example of a high-mobility larger city: but a Brookings Institution study found that Salt Lake City transit gives [more](#) people access to jobs than transit in any other metro area- thus increasing social mobility. So Salt Lake City actually supports Krugman more than Kotkin. Moreover, many of the most dense cities, such as New York, [have](#) relatively high levels of social mobility.

II. Sprawl and Detroit

Kotkin: “Sprawl” did not kill Detroit, as Krugman suggests in his previously mentioned column, [the city did that largely to itself](#).

Response: To support this conclusion, Kotkin links to an article claiming that Detroit suffers because of its high taxes and powerful unions. But this claim fails to support Kotkin's argument because even if left-wing economics is responsible for Detroit's decline, such policies are related by the very pro-sprawl policies Kotkin no doubt supports. Government built highways to make it easier for people to move to suburbia, so when white middle-class voters left town, the only people left were lower-class blacks, who tend to favor economically liberal Democrats.

III. Sprawl and Consumer Preference

Kotkin: There are at least three major problems with the thesis that density is an unabashed good. First, and foremost, Census and survey data reveal that most people do not want to live cheek to jowl if they can avoid it. Second, most of the attractive highest-density areas also have impossibly high home prices relative to incomes and low levels of homeownership ... Roughly four in five buyers, according to a [2011 study](#) commissioned by the National Association of Realtors, prefer a single-family home.

Response: Actually, survey data reveals that most people want to live within [walking distance](#) of lots of amenities; they may not want midtown Manhattan, but that doesn't mean they want sprawl. The notion that "single-family homes" equal "suburbs" or "sprawl" is just flat-out false: outside Manhattan, most cities have thousands of single-family homes.

And high-density places are expensive partially because of policies that Kotkin might support. Even Manhattan limits density, thus preventing new housing from being built in response to consumer demand. If there was no zoning, developers would be free to build more housing in these areas, thus increasing supply and reducing home prices. But in cities, as in suburbs, [neighbors](#) of a development often have the political power to veto rezoning and thus limit supply.

Kotkin's broader argument is that sprawl happens because sprawl is what people want. To which I respond: sprawl happens because government encourages and mandates it in a thousand little ways. (see for example [my article](#) on how government encourages sprawl in one city).

Kotkin: Let's start with something few density advocates consider: what people want and what they would choose if they could.

*Response: "Few density advocates consider?" Really? Quite a few trees have been killed to build books by density advocates who DO consider these issues: for example, the recent work of Arthur Nelson, and Leigh Gallagher's new book, *The Death of the Suburbs* (which I suspect Mr. Kotkin has heard of).*

IV. Sprawl and Families

Kotkin: And third, and perhaps most important, dense places tend to be regarded as poor places for raising families. In simple terms, a dense future is likely to be a largely childless one.

*Response: First of all, this is terrible writing. The use of the passive voice ("tend to be regarded") is not bad English because it doesn't tell us WHO feels that way. Second, and more substantively, if sprawl was good for birthrates, birthrates should have risen since the birth of auto-dependent sprawl in the 1950s. In fact, birthrates have imploded in the U.S. In 1950, the U.S. had [24 births](#) per 100,000 people; in 2008 only 14, above most of Europe but below such relatively dense places as Israel and Ireland (not to mention Brooklyn's Boro Park, where the birth rate is [still](#) at a 1950s-like 24 per 100,000).**

In sum: we've tried Mr. Kotkin's policies. And those policies have failed.

**I note that even outside Boro Park, there is some evidence that parents might be returning to compact cities. Although the number of children 5-14 has declined in most central cities, the number of children 0-5 in many cities actually increased during the 2000s (see [here](#) for data).*

Sorry Ms. Dunham: Millennials Like New York

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 08/09/2013 - 10:35am

Yesterday, I posted [about](#) the relationship between millennials and cities, showing that in some cities, population growth is indeed due to growth in the millennial (20-34) population, while in others, millennials are leaving the city just like everyone else. But of course, citywide data is often a bit misleading, because most cities have some very suburban neighborhoods.

So I decided to cure this flaw by looking at New York, the only place where the most urban area (Manhattan) is its own county. One might think that millennials are leaving Manhattan, given the widespread complaints (most recently and [notoriously](#) by actress Lena Dunham) about the borough's high housing costs.

In fact, millennials do seem to be moving to Manhattan: between 2000 and 2010, the number of persons aged 20-34 increased by about 7 percent, from 451,776 to 482,792. This increase was most pronounced among persons aged 20-24 (whose population in the borough increased by over 10 percent) as opposed to older millennials.* Similarly, Brooklyn's millennial population increased by about 8 percent, from 572,931 to 621,497.

By contrast, the millennial population was flat or declining in the more suburban boroughs, increasing by less than 1000 people in Staten Island (from 90,480 to 91,305) and actually declining (though by less than 1000 people) in Queens.

And in **actual** suburbs, the millennial population declined. In Long Island's Nassau County, the 20-34 population decreased from 230,756 to 221,932. And in Long Island's more exurban Suffolk, the 25-34 population went down from 267,660 to 257,056.

In both suburbs, the 20-24 population actually increased, perhaps reflecting the presence of college students choosing to live at home or stay in Long Island for school. But the 25-34 population nosedived by over 10 percent in both suburban counties (from 162,558 to 142,556 in Nassau, 191,695 to 166,685 in Suffolk).

So in New York, the verdict seems clear: millennials prefer city life and leave suburbs after graduation.

I note, however, that it may not be a good idea to infer a nationwide trend from Long Island. After looking at Washington, D.C.'s census data, I looked at data for Loudoun County, a job-rich, high-growth suburb of Washington. The millennial population did not increase as rapidly as the total population, but it did increase by about 50 percent.** So millennials will go to suburbs if jobs are there - but not to stagnant bedroom communities.

*The numbers: for 20-24, from 120,624 to 141,558; for 25-34, from 331,152 to 341,234. By contrast, persons aged 35-44 were more likely to leave the borough than to move in, and persons over 65 increased by 15 percent or so, from 186,776 to 214,153.

**The total population increased from just over 169,000 to just over 312,000, while the millennial population increased from 36,828 to 56,113.

Yes, The Millennials Really Are Returning To (Some) Cities

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/08/2013 - 3:09pm

It is becoming almost a cliché that millennials (that is, people in their 20s) are [flocking](#) to cities. But does data bear this out?

I looked at [Census](#) data on two cities that had lost population throughout the late 20th century but gained people in the 2000s: Philadelphia and Washington, DC. (Why them? Because I didn't think population-gaining cities were as interesting, since people of all age groups are moving to those places).

In Philadelphia, millennials are indeed a primary source of city growth: the city's 20-24 year old population increased by about 25% between 2000 and 2010 (from 117,609 to 146,717). The city's 25-34 population similarly increased from 224,864 to 246,062. Similarly, in Washington the 20-24 population increased by over 20 percent (51,823 to 64,110), as did the 25-34 population (101,762 to 124,745). Population continued to stagnate or decrease among 35-54 year olds: the population of this group decreased in Washington (from 162,987 to 156,362) and Philadelphia (from 402,440 to 376,393).*

The other source of urban growth was 55-64 year olds. In Philadelphia, this group increased from 125,216 to 160,808 (about 28%). Similarly, in Washington the number of 55-64 year olds increased from 49,783 to 63,977. It could be that empty-nest baby boomers are moving to these cities in large numbers; however, I suspect that the aging of the baby boom generation is more likely to be the cause. Nationally, the number of 45-64 year olds increased by about 23 percent from 2000 to 2010 ([from](#) about 37.5 million people to about 46 million), while the national population increased by only about 10 percent ([from](#) 281.4 million to 308.7 million).

On the other hand, this growth did not spread into older age groups: the number of over-65 Washingtonians actually decreased slightly** and the number of over-65 Philadelphians decreased by over 10 percent (from 213,722 to 185,309). Working people with adult children

appear to like these cities, but retirees move elsewhere. Similarly, these cities are less successful with children: the number of under-5 residents of each city increased by under 5 percent, and the number of 5-15 year olds continued to decline.

What's happening in more sprawling cities that include large masses of suburban territory within their borders? I looked at sprawl poster child Houston. Houston wasn't quite as successful as Philadelphia or Washington in attracting twentysomethings: its 20-24 population increased by only about 5 percent (from 161,754 to 171,086) as did its 25-34 population (from 354,444 to 373,985). On the other hand, Houston retained older age groups more successfully: its population grew in every age group (except for 5-15 year olds, and then even its decline was quite small).***

What about declining cities? I looked at Cleveland. Its millennial population decreased: moderately for 20-24 year olds (from just over 32,000 to 30,637) and quite precipitously for 25-34 year olds (from 71,847 to 53,996). In fact, the only age group that increased in Cleveland was the middle-aged and empty nesters: 55-64 year olds increased from 35,987 to 44,700, and 45-54 year olds also increased slightly.**** Similarly, in Buffalo, the number of 45-64 year olds increased while every younger age group (and persons over 65) declined as well. But as noted above, this growth is more likely to come from the national increase in fiftysomethings than from migration.

How do I interpret this data? It seems to me that some cities really are very successful at attracting young talent.

*Actually increasing in the 45-54 age group, but only by 1% in Washington (from 75,310 to 75,703) and slightly more in Philadelphia (from 182,530 to 197,970).

**In particular, the city's 65-74 and over 85-population increased slightly, while the 75-84 group decreased. In Philadelphia, the only senior age group that increased was persons over 85, and only by about 3 percent.

***From 294,329 to 288,348, a 2 percent drop.

****From 55,111 to 59,726.

Going the Wrong Way in Atlanta

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 08/07/2013 - 10:33am

Yesterday's New York Times contained [an article](#) about the latest attempt to reform Atlanta's public schools: an eleven-story high school costing about four times as much as the average Southern high school. The city plans to move North Atlanta High, one of the city's more racially diverse high schools, from its existing site in quasi-suburban Buckhead to a larger building at the edge of town. According to the Times story, Atlanta politicians believe that the "new school building is an opportunity to show that a large, urban public high school can be a viable alternative to the rising tide of charter schools, voucher systems and private education."

But there is nothing "urban" about the site of this school- a 56-acre wooded plot formerly used as offices for IBM. From my walkability-oriented perspective, this is a site spectacularly unfit for a public school. The street where the school will be located (Northside Parkway) is five lanes wide and has no sidewalks; cars typically speed by at about 40-50 miles per hour. (I grew up about a mile from the school site, and drive at about that speed). Moreover, the site's [Walkscore](#) is an underwhelming 22, and there is no visible housing on this portion of Northside Parkway. Thus, I suspect this is a school that absolutely no one will walk to. (To be fair, there is regular city bus service). Rather than being a center of a neighborhood, this school will be an island of people in a sea of cars, generating traffic congestion and pollution by students and employees forced to drive there. In sum, the new North Atlanta High is "school sprawl" at its worst.

Presumably, city planners believed that the school's shiny new facilities compensate for its environmental disadvantages. But the record of desegregation in Kansas City shows that a new, expensive school is unlikely to be any more educationally successful than older neighborhood schools. In the 1990s, Kansas City sought to lure white parents to its schools by building luxurious new schools with amenities such as indoor swimming pools and zoos. This experiment failed in its major goals, the schools did not become more racially integrated, nor did test scores [improve](#). And now that its money has run out, the district may have to [close](#) many of its schools.

So what's the alternative? From an urban design perspective, schools should be walkable- that is, in real neighborhoods with calmer streets full of housing.

An Emerging Stereotype?

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 08/06/2013 - 8:40am

The most recent issue of [Better Cities and Towns](#) contained an article about a new urbanist project in [Wyandanch](#), a depressed Long Island neighborhood. The article called Wyandanch "an inner-ring suburb."

But in fact, there is nothing "inner" about Wyandanch. It is over 20 miles from the city limits dividing New York City from suburban Nassau County, and is about 40 miles from Manhattan. If a suburb 20 miles from city limits is not an "outer suburb" I don't know what is.

I wonder if the Better Cities article illustrates a broader trend. For most of my lifetime, the news media often used "inner-city" and "urban" as (often inaccurate) code words for "depressed", "poor" and "African-American." Are Americans starting to use the term "inner-ring suburb" the same way- that is, to stereotype inner suburbs as depressed neighborhoods?

A Choice, Not an Echo

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/05/2013 - 10:09am

In the most recent City Journal, Joel Kotkin wrote an article discussing cities' alleged loss of children, and [arguing](#) that cities would be more successful in retaining children if only they could be more like low-density suburbs.

So I tested his theory out by looking at New York's five boroughs, which include a variety of environments ranging from high-density urbanism (Manhattan) to medium-density sprawl (Staten Island) to in-between levels of density (the other three boroughs). (Census Data for individual age groups is available at the [Quick Facts](#) Census site).

In the four less urban boroughs, the child population declined in every age group. (Data [here](#)). But in Manhattan, the number of children aged 0-5 actually increased. Similarly, the population of younger children (0-5) actually [increased](#) in four of the five most transit-friendly cities in the U.S. (Philadelphia, Washington, San Francisco and Boston, though not Chicago). Evidently, the newest parents are finding that city life is not as objectionable as earlier generations found it to be.

On the other hand, faux-suburban Rust Belt cities like Detroit have followed Kotkin's advice, lowering densities, squeezing transit service and turning downtown streets into speedways. The results have been pretty mixed. Detroit lost about 1/3 of its 0-5 population during the 2000s, and St. Louis also lost population even in the 0-5 age category. On the other hand, cities that extend far into suburbia continue to grow, as well as cities that are part of booming regions where almost every neighborhood continues to grow. What's going on?

Here's one possible interpretation: parents of today's toddlers tend to want either true city life or true suburbia, rather than splitting the difference by choosing a wishy-washy, outer-borough middle ground. So the most urbanized places AND the most suburbanized continue to gain children, while suburb-like city neighborhoods have more mixed results. In other words, parents want a choice and not an echo.

The Myth (?) That City Growth Causes Suburban Poverty

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 08/04/2013 - 2:06pm

One common "story" about the evolution of American cities is that suburban poverty is growing because people are being [driven out](#) of high-priced cities into suburbs. One possible implication of this argument is that cities need to be kept poor and stagnant so that poor people can afford them.

But there are a variety of other possible reasons why poverty might be growing in the suburbs. First, the stagnant economy has caused poverty to grow almost everywhere; thus, people who already lived in suburbia have slipped into poverty. Second, city-to-suburb migration might just be a continuation of the sprawl pattern common in the late 20th century. City residents have been leaving low-income neighborhoods near the city core for further-out neighborhoods for decades; the only change in recent decades is that their new destination is outside city limits. Such migration might increase suburban poverty rates if the city residents are more likely to be poor than their new suburban neighbors.

Having said that, I'm not sure we have data to prove this point: how do we know who is leaving cities for suburbs? Having said that, we do know that cities generally still have higher poverty rates than suburbs, which suggests that cities are not running out of poor people. Even hyper-expensive Manhattan has a [18.3%](#) poverty rate- lower than some other boroughs, but higher than that of New York's suburbs (most of which have poverty rates in the 5-10% rate).

City Crime and Neighborhood Crime

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/01/2013 - 12:37pm

Sprawl supporters occasionally argue that sprawl is less crime-ridden than walkable urbanism. But this argument seems to be contradicted by the reality of citywide crime rates: New York, our country's most transit-friendly city, is also one of its safest.

One counterargument to my argument is that citywide statistics don't matter very much, since in some cities crime is concentrated in only a few neighborhoods. But it seems to me more likely that this is true everywhere: that is, in low-crime cities, both the best and the worst neighborhoods are safer than their counterparts in high-crime cities. Because very few cities have neighborhood crime statistics available online, this proposition is hard to test.

Fortunately, there are some exceptions to this generalization. The [Chicago Tribune](#) has compiled crime statistics by neighborhood. For example, one of the city's worst areas, [Englewood](#), has a population of just over 30,000 and has had 24 murders in the past year (roughly 78 murders per 100,000 people). By contrast, the South Bronx's 40th precinct (dominated by dirt-poor Mott Haven) has [91,000](#) people and had a [dozen](#) murders in 2012, for a rate of roughly 13 per 100,000.* Similarly, Brooklyn's troubled Brownsville (the 73rd precinct) has [86,000 people](#) and [15](#) murders, for a murder rate of 17 murders per 100,000 people (roughly Chicago's citywide average).

How do the cities' better neighborhoods compare? The most affluent suburban parts of both cities (e.g. the South Shore of Staten Island, Bayside in Queens, the area near Chicago's O'Hare Airport) have crime rates comparable to those of affluent inner suburbs. But there is a difference between the cities' intown neighborhoods. New York's 19th precinct (the Upper East Side) had [no](#) murders and 129 robberies in 2012. This precinct had [208,000](#) people in 2000, which gives it a robbery rate of 62 per 100,000.* Chicago's Lincoln Park, another affluent intown neighborhood, also had no murders but a significantly higher robbery rate- a little over 200 per 100,000 (149 robberies in the past year, just over 64,000 people).

Of course, Chicago and New York are more similar than alike compared to most American cities- both are among our most transit-friendly, compact cities.

How do these places compare to Detroit or New Orleans? These cities have just under 55 murders per 100,000 people- more than three times that of the South Bronx and only about 30 percent lower than Englewood. So unless every single neighborhood in these cities has almost identical crime rates, it seems likely that their worst neighborhoods make Englewood seem bucolic, just as Englewood makes the South Bronx and Brownsville seem bucolic.

*If you add the 22nd precinct (dominated by Central Park) the neighborhood adds 15 more robberies, for a robbery rate of about 70 per 100,000- still lower than that of many suburbs.

Suburban Poverty: A Reality Check

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/24/2013 - 10:49am

I just used Amazon.com to look inside a new book on suburban poverty ("Confronting Suburban Poverty In America" by Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube).

I found the following admission: "[since 2000] poverty rates rose by equal degrees in cities and suburbs (roughly 3 percentage points) though the urban poverty rate remained almost twice as high as the suburban rate". (p. 35). So although the gap between cities and suburbs has narrowed slightly, cities are still more poverty-packed than suburbs.

Why does this matter? There is a story loose in the land, one common among both supporters of urbanism wishing to celebrate triumph, and social equity advocates and NIMBYs obsessed with gentrification. According to this story, the United States is becoming Paris, where the elites live in the city and the poor are pushed into exurbia. Urbanists use this story to show that their triumph is inevitable. Others use it as a reason to prevent urban redevelopment oriented towards the middle and upper classes. But (fortunately or unfortunately) this story is still rubbish.

Even if Democrats Killed Detroit, Sprawl STILL Killed Detroit

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 07/22/2013 - 12:42pm

One result of Detroit's recent bankruptcy has been the usual finger-pointing about the cause of that city's problems. Commonly mentioned culprits include deindustrialization, absence of federal support, and the sprawl-induced decline of urban tax bases. Another common argument (especially among conservatives) is that if only Detroit wasn't governed by liberals, Democrats, etc. it wouldn't have become so overextended.

I am perfectly willing to assume for the sake of argument that Detroit was more poorly governed than other cities*, and that it would have been less poorly governed with a few more Republicans.

Why aren't there Republicans in Detroit? In a word, sprawl. Before the "white flight" of the 1960s there were still Republicans in Detroit. In fact, the city had a Republican mayor as late as [1961](#). But as white people left for the suburbs, the city's Republican base disintegrated, causing the city's current one-party system.

The Irony of Minimum Parking Requirements

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 07/21/2013 - 9:37am

As many people (including me) have written, minimum parking requirements encourage sprawl by requiring "[islands of building surrounded by seas of parking](#)." Generally, municipalities trying to end or modify these rules have started with downtowns and worked their way outward.

It seems to be that there is something ironic about this course of action. The traditional justifications for minimum parking requirements are (1) to prevent people from wasting time cruising for on-street parking spaces and (2) to prevent motorists from parking in front of homes (since the people living in the homes want to park there).

But in most American "sprawl suburbs", neither of these justifications apply. There is no cruising in sprawl because there is no on-street parking. And most suburbanites have garages in sprawl, so even if motorists could park in front of a suburban house they do not inconvenience the occupants. Thus, minimum parking requirements may be even more irrational in suburbia than they are in neighborhoods closer to downtown.

Confusing Suburbs with Rural Areas

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 07/19/2013 - 9:08am

A recent article [discussed](#) in the Atlantic blog suggests that suicide rates increase as density goes down, especially below 300 people per square kilometer (i.e. 777 people per square mile). The title of the article: "The Unsettling Link Between Sprawl and Suicide."

What's wrong with that? Such low densities are not sprawl (except perhaps in estate-home suburbs with less than one house per acre). Rather, a density of 500 people per square mile is a more rural density (at least in a built-out area)*. To put the matter in [Transect](#) terms, super-low densities are T2 while densities of 1000-5000 people per square mile are more likely to be T3. For example, Atlanta sprawl suburbs like Alpharetta and Marietta have 2500-3000 people per square mile. Even the estate-home area where I grew up (Northside-Mt. Paran in Atlanta) has 1164 people per square mile.

In other words, commentators who treat all low density as "sprawl" are in error because densities under 1000 people per square mile are more likely to be rural densities.

Conversely, other commentators use terms like "urbanization" to describe the growth of metropolitan areas. (So for example, you may occasionally read that 80 percent of Americans live in urban areas, as [this](#) DOT press release notes). But this is not quite right because most residents of metropolitan areas live in suburbs, not cities.

*Caveat: Counties containing suburbs (or even central cities) often have such low densities- but that's because they may still contain agricultural or undevelopable areas. That's why (as the blog post points out) the density of San Diego County is so low as to be allegedly suicide-inducing.

Obesity, Sprawl and Poverty, Part 2

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 07/18/2013 - 4:31pm

Last week, I blogged about the relationship between sprawl and poverty, using [metro Atlanta](#) as an example. I showed that in Fulton and DeKalb Counties (the two most urban, transit-friendly counties in the region) the obesity rate was only slightly higher than the poverty rate, while in more suburban counties the obesity rate was MUCH higher than the poverty rate. I interpret this data to mean that nonpoor people are probably more likely to be fat in the suburbs of Atlanta than in more urban areas.

Having said that, metro Atlanta might be an aberration, since many of Atlanta's most affluent suburbs are in Fulton and DeKalb Counties. A more accurate measurement would compares cities with suburbs more directly.

Fortunately, there are regions where cities are their own counties. (See [here](#) for all kinds of data). I started with St. Louis, which has an exceptionally poor central city. In St. Louis, the poverty rate is 26% while the obesity rate is 33.9% - a 7.9% gap. In next-door St. Louis County, the poverty rate is much lower (9.7%) while the obesity rate is almost as high as in the city (29%)- a 19.3% gap. And in well-off exurban St. Charles County, the poverty rate is even lower (4.9%) while the obesity rate is comparable to St. Louis County (29.7%)- almost a 25 point gap. In other words, as you move out from the urban core the poverty rate nosedives while the obesity rate barely budges- evidence, it seems to me, that (assuming there is a poverty/obesity connection) if St. Louis city was richer it would probably be thinner than its suburbs, or if St.

Louis County had as many poor people as St. Louis its' residents auto-dependent lifestyle would make them more likely to obese.

Then I looked at Philadelphia, which had a somewhat similar pattern; the city's obesity rate is higher than that of its suburbs (31.5% for the city, 21-27% for Montgomery, Chester, Delaware, and Bucks Counties). But the poverty/obesity gap is much smaller for the city. In Philadelphia, the poverty rate is 25.6% and the obesity rate is 31.5% - a 5.9% gap. By contrast, in the suburban counties the poverty rate ranged from 5.1% (Chester) to 9.5% (Delaware), yielding gaps of about 14-20%. For example, exurban Chester County had a obesity rate of 21.2% and a poverty rate of only 6.7%, a 14.5% gap (though unlike St. Louis exurbs, Chester County had a poverty/obesity gap slightly lower than that of inner suburban counties).

What about where the central city is a bit more affluent? San Francisco is also its own county, and has only a slightly higher poverty rate than most suburban counties. (The city's poverty rate is 12.3 percent; Marin and San Mateo Counties have poverty rates around 7%, and Contra Costa County's poverty rate is around 10%). Of these three suburban counties, two (San Mateo and Contra Costa) have obesity rates higher than San Francisco, despite having less poverty. Marin has less obesity than San Francisco, but even here the poverty/obesity gap is lower in the city. San Francisco has 12.3% poverty and 17.1% obesity (a 4.8% gap) and Marin has 7.2% poverty and 15.3% obesity (an 8.1% gap).

Then I looked at New York, since it is the only city where the central city itself is divided into different counties, so that the most urban part of the city is a separate county from the city's more suburban zones. In the most urban, walkable county (New York County, aka Manhattan) the poverty rate is actually *higher* than the obesity rate (17.6 poverty, 15.1 obesity); this is also the case in the Bronx (28.4% poverty 27.5% obesity). In Brooklyn, which is a little less dense, the poverty rate is 2.4% lower than the obesity rate (22.1% poverty 24.5% obesity). In Queens, which has many car-dominated neighborhoods but also many transit-oriented ones, the poverty/obesity gap is 9.1%, comparable to many American central cities outside New York (13.6% poverty 22.4% obesity).

What about New York's suburbs? If the pattern discussed above holds, New York's suburbs would have poverty/obesity gaps higher than those of any New York borough. On Long Island, this was very much the case. Nassau County has only a 5.2% poverty rate, but a 21.3% obesity rate - a 16 point gap. Exurban Suffolk County had an even bigger gap, with a poverty rate comparable to that of Nassau (5.7%) but a higher obesity rate (25.6%).

North of the city, a somewhat similar pattern existed, but with a slight twist. Westchester County had a 8.9% poverty rate and a obesity rate of 17.3% - only an 8.4% gap, comparable to that of Queens. But more exurban Putnam County looked like the rest of American suburbia, with a 5.4% poverty rate and a obesity rate of 28.7%, higher than that of any other New York-area county, urban or suburban, discussed above.

Health Impact Assessments and the Law

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/17/2013 - 11:53am

If you've gone to conferences addressing the relationship between public health and sprawl, you may have heard of something called a "health impact assessment." If you are a little fuzzy on how this works out in practice, you may want to read a new [article](#) coauthored by Prof. Pamela Ko and the Dean of Touro Law Center, Patricia Salkin. (In the interests of full disclosure, I note that since I teach at Touro, Dean Salkin is my boss).

The article explains that HIAs are generally voluntary: a developer or government agency wants to know how a project can yield improved public health, and asks a foundation or a few public health academics to help out. The article also lists numerous recent examples of HIAs. For example, when the city of Baltimore was revising its zoning code, it asked an institute at Johns Hopkins to make recommendations. The institute recommended "improving access to healthy foods, creating walkable environments and expanding mixed use areas" as well as "the prevention of off-premises alcohol sales in transit-oriented development and industrial mixed use zones".

My additional thoughts: I certainly think HIAs can be a useful tool- but wouldn't want them to be mandatory. It seems to me that (especially in heavily regulated areas such as downstate New York and coastal California) opponents of development already have plenty of ways to delay development. And because a project with plenty of neighbors is likely to attract more opposition than a project with very few neighbors, such delay is especially likely to limit infill development, which in turn means that people will have to move to sprawl suburbia in order to find inexpensive housing.

Why Highways Are Less Harmful in Parks Than on Urban Streets

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 07/15/2013 - 10:41am



When I read Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* (a biography of New York road-builder Robert Moses), one story that didn't quite make sense is Caro's discussion of the Henry Hudson Bridge. Caro writes that Caro's routing of this bridge caused "the destruction of Manhattan's priceless last forest" in Inwood Hill Park. But I visited the park yesterday afternoon, and it didn't look at all

"destroyed" to me. [Inwood Hill Park](#) is still one of the jewels of Manhattan's park system, full of primeval-looking forest. (more photos [here](#)).

Why wasn't the bridge (or the nearby parkway) as destructive as Moses' highways were in some urban neighborhoods? It seems to me that parks and neighborhoods are very different, for two reasons.

First, a typical urban street is small enough for the highway to cover the entire street. By contrast, a large park (such as Inwood Hill) is far larger than an urban street, and thus a bridge or highway might make a much smaller impact by comparison.

Second, a highway has a far wider group of impacts upon a street than upon a park. The major impact of a highway in a park is noise, which (in a park as large as Inwood Hill) does not extend throughout the park. By contrast, a highway may have a much wider variety of impacts in an urban neighborhood: it may require destruction of dozens of homes and business, which in turn means that businesses relying on the residents of those homes lose money. And the people displaced by the highway will create overcrowding if they move to nearby streets, or cause neighborhood businesses to lose customers if they move far away. Thus, an urban highway through a neighborhood is far more toxic than a highway in a large park.

Tisha'b'Av and Urbanism

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 07/14/2013 - 11:09am

Monday night and Tuesday, observant Jews all over the world will be fasting for [Tisha'b'Av](#), a day dedicated to remembering pretty much every major disaster befalling Jews over the past twenty centuries or so, or at least a few of the major ones- especially the destruction of the Jewish Temples by foreign invaders (Babylonians in 586 BC, Romans 656 years later). What does this have to do with urbanism?

Just as Jews remember the destruction of the Temples and the anti-Jewish atrocities caused by the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, urbanists should take time now and then to remember the destruction of American cities in the late 20th century through urban "renewal" and middle-class flight.

And just as Jews need to remember that (despite the triumphs of American Jewry and of the state of Israel) the world in general and Israel in particular remain [highly flawed](#), urbanists need to remember that American cities are, in a sense, unredeemed. Even relatively successful cities like

Boston and New York have a disproportionate share of the region's social ills; they still have more poor people and more social ills than their suburbs, and their more prosperous areas are crushingly unaffordable for many. And many older American cities, like St. Louis, Detroit and Cleveland, are still struggling: still constantly losing people, still far poorer than their suburbs.

I'm not saying that the readers of this blog should fast this week; but it wouldn't hurt to go on [Google Maps](#), look at the east side of Cleveland or the north side of St. Louis, and remind themselves that just as the Temples have not been rebuilt, neither have large chunks of urban America.

Another Way to Measure the Sprawl/Obesity Relationship

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 07/12/2013 - 6:49pm

One dispute in the literature about sprawl and obesity is whether the impact of sprawl is significant compared to the impact of social class. It could be argued that obesity is primarily a function of poverty and lack of education, rather than of automobile dependency.

It occurred to me that one way to measure this is to somehow control for poverty levels. For example, if urban counties had lower obesity levels than poverty levels, while the reverse was true in affluent suburbs, it would then appear that urbanites were less likely to be obese controlling for poverty. On the other hand, if the obesity/poverty ratio was the same everywhere, it would appear that suburbanization had little impact.

I began by looking at data from my native Atlanta (from the [Community Commons](#) site). In the most urban counties, DeKalb and Fulton, the poverty rate was about 8 to 10 pts lower than the obesity rate. (Fulton has 15.9% poverty and 23.8% obesity, DeKalb 17.1% poverty and 26.3% obesity). If we measure the gap by ratio, these counties' poverty rate is about 2/3 of their obesity rates.

In two reasonably well-off inner suburban counties, Cobb and Gwinnett, the poverty/obesity gap was somewhat greater, about a 12-13-point gap (Gwinnett 12.5% poverty 25.5% obesity; Cobb 11.2% poverty 23.6% obesity). If we measure the gap by ratio, these counties' poverty rate is about half their obesity rates. In Clayton County, a less affluent outer county that extends far into the suburbs, the 18.3% poverty rate is nearly doubled by the 35.1% obesity rate, a 17 point gap.

In well-off exurbs (Henry, Fayette, and Forsyth Counties) far from the city, the gap is far greater: typically 17-19 points. In these counties, the poverty rate was about 6-10% (ranging from 5.9 in

Fayette to 6.5 in Forsyth to 9.5 in Henry) and the obesity rate was 23-28% (23.3 in Forsyth, 24 in Fayette, 28.2 in Henry). In these counties, the obesity rate was three or four times the poverty rate.

So the evidence from Atlanta supports the view that suburbanization is related to obesity, as the more exurban areas have a greater poverty/obesity gap.

Cities Just Can't Win With Some People

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/10/2013 - 3:47pm

I just read an [attack](#) (or at least an expression of concern about) gentrification of urban neighborhoods in the [New Geography](#) blog; Cleveland blogger Richey Piiparinen complains that the people moving back to the city are mostly white, and that this is bad their wealth is failing to "trickle down" to blacks.

On the **same** blog, Wendell Cox [responded](#) to claims of gentrification with a post asserting that "Core City Growth Mainly Below Poverty Line." In this post, Cox asserts that the 2000s were no different from any other post-World War II decade, and that central cities continue to lose wealth.

Cities just can't win in some circles (and certainly not in New Geography): if they *are* getting more prosperous, someone on the Left will complain that this is somehow inequitable. But if they *aren't* getting more prosperous a traditional sprawl apologist will argue that it is just more evidence that only poor people and eccentric hipsters want to live in cities.

The Times' Attack on Gentrification: Sloppy, Sloppy, Sloppy

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 07/07/2013 - 9:16pm

In a recent article entitled "[Gentrifying Into the Shelters](#)", the New York Times blamed homelessness on middle-class New Yorkers who dare to move into the city's poorer neighborhoods. The article focused on Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, noting that this

neighborhood "has ranked among the city's top five communities sending families into the shelter system." The obvious implication of this claim is that gentrifying neighborhoods are "sending families into the shelter system."

This claim would have more weight if the other four "top communities sending families into the shelter system" were also gentrifying neighborhoods. But according to the [survey](#) cited by the Times, the other neighborhoods in the top five were not gentrifying areas like Bushwick and Williamsburg.

Instead, they were East New York (one of the poorest neighborhoods in Brooklyn, and one at the borough's eastern edge, far from gentrification), and three neighborhoods in the decidedly non-gentrifying south and central Bronx (Highbridge, Fordham and Parkchester). According to city-data.com, three of these four areas have lower rents than either Bedford-Stuyvesant or the citywide average, and the lone exception (Parkchester) is in the north central Bronx, far from gentrifying areas in Manhattan.

Ironically, the Times story ends by asserting "how important economic diversity is to the health of neighborhoods." But if middle-class people are moving into poorer areas, isn't that "economic diversity"?

Learning from Seattle, Part 2: Streets

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 07/04/2013 - 5:27pm



Normally, sidewalks in residential areas are surrounded by short planting strips with grass and (sometimes) street trees. But in Seattle recently I saw something interesting: a planting strip that I would guess is twice the size of a typical one. I thought the king-size strip was a very nice touch in two

ways. First, it narrows the street and calms traffic. Second, it beautifies the street.

Learning from Seattle: Transit

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 06/21/2013 - 12:59pm

Before attending the [Livable Cities](#) conference in Portland, I am visiting Seattle for a few days. As in Salt Lake City, there are some things I like and some I don't.

Seattle seems to have an extensive bus system. Ideally, a bus system would give riders a way to pay without having to fumble for dollar bills and quarters- New York's metro card system comes to mind.

Seattle has such a system; however, to get a metrocard you have to pay a \$5 start-up fee- not exactly a tempting option for visitors and occasional users.

On the other hand, Seattle seems to do well in giving riders information. Most bus stops have a list of times that the bus will leave a particular stop. A few "Rapid" lines even list frequencies **and** list every stop that a route will make.

Neighborhood Character vs. Diversity

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 06/16/2013 - 10:03am

The conventional zoning wisdom is that all structures in a neighborhood should have the same density, in order to preserve "neighborhood character." So even in mixed-use urban areas, this sort of zoning leads to a kind of monoculture: high-rises attract high-rises, low-rises attract low-rises.

In a recent [article](#), Vishaan Chakrabarti proposes an interesting alternative: "cap and trade" zoning. Under this scheme, a city would "allow the free flow of air rights within an urban district, with an understanding that the overall amount of developable area would be capped in relation to proximity to mass transit." In other words, instead of mandating a maximum height of 20 stories throughout a neighborhood, 50-story buildings could be balanced out by low-rises, creating a mix of densities (and perhaps of uses, to the extent that some uses are more appropriate in taller buildings).

A (Possible, Partial) Myth About Suburban Poverty

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 06/14/2013 - 9:45am

A recent [blog post](#) commenting on the growth of suburban poverty has the headline: "As Cities Prosper, Poor Move to Suburbs." The headline seems to imply a simple story: poor people priced out of the city are moving to suburbs. (In fairness, the story itself is much less simplistic). But it seems to me that there are a variety of other possible explanations for the growth in suburban poverty:

1. Because of the economic downturn, people already living in suburbia are more likely to lose their jobs and thus have poverty-level incomes.
2. Poorer neighborhoods have been spreading for decades past the central core, as poor people who are just well-off enough to avoid the city's poorest neighborhoods move into slightly less poor neighborhoods to escape the violence and other social problems of their prior neighborhoods. Now, these "improving poor" are spreading past the city limits where they had not done so in the past.

To what extent are these scenarios truer than the "priced out of the city" scenario? I don't know; to answer this question, one would have to ascertain: (1) the extent to which suburban poor were poor before the late 2000s recession; (2) where they lived before the recession; and (3) why they left.

Another Way to Measure Car Dependence

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 06/12/2013 - 9:30am

I got into an argument on Twitter about how widespread car ownership was in NYC's outer boroughs, which in turn caused me to go to city-data.com to answer the question: how do you measure how many people own cars, anyhow? The [City Data](#) website has data not just for cities and counties, but for individual neighborhoods within a city. In particular, the site gives data for household size and for the number of cars per household.

For example, I grew up in Northside-Mt. Paran, one of the most car-dependent neighborhoods in car-dependent Atlanta. In this area, there are about 1.6 cars per household* and the average

household has 2.0 people. Thus, 80 percent of individuals have cars. Since about 20 percent of the neighborhood's residents are in K-12 school, this means roughly every adult has a car.**

Even New York's more car-dependent outer borough areas are not as car-dependent. In Douglaston, at the outer edge of Queens, there are 1.4 cars per household and 2.3 people per household. Thus, about 60 percent of individuals own cars (and, deducting the usual 20 percent for people under 18, about 75 percent of grownups).

By contrast, Forest Hills in central Queens (where I lived for a year and a half) has about 0.9 vehicles per household, and the average household size is 2.1 persons. Thus, only about 45 percent of Forest Hills residents own a car. (16 percent of individuals are in K-12 school, so that means about 55-60 percent of grownups).

As you get closer to Manhattan, the number of cars declines still further. In Long Island City across the East River from Manhattan, there are 2.4 people per household and about 0.8 cars per household- which means only 1/3 of people have cars.

What about Manhattan? Manhattan's East Village boasts only 0.3 cars per household, in an area with 2 people per household- which means only 15 percent of people have cars, and about 20 percent of grownups (assuming 20% of people are under 18).

How do low-income neighborhoods compare to the (mostly affluent) neighborhoods discussed above? Mott Haven is in New York's South Bronx, and its data contain a slight wrinkle: a huge gap between homeowners and renters. Homeowners have 1.6 cars per household, renters only 0.3. The City-Data site lists the number of rooms for owner and renter-occupied households, so with a little mathematics I could guess the number of each: roughly 10,000 owner-occupied, 30,000 renter-occupied. So weighing the results appropriately, I came up with about 0.6 cars per household for the neighborhood as a whole. Since Mott Havenites have larger households (3 individuals per household) that means about 20 percent of people have cars. Because Mott Haven is a very young neighborhood (with 37.9% of individuals over 3 in K-12 school) this means that about 1/3 of grownups have cars.

*Actually, 1.2 per household for renters and 2.0 for owners. But since there is a fairly even division between the two I split the difference for most neighborhoods, which I realize is an oversimplification.

**There are also some high school students who have cars - but this number is probably canceled out by the number of people under 3 who are not included in my 20 percent.

Environmental Law and Road Widening: A New Ruling in Wisconsin

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 06/06/2013 - 10:29am

A federal district court in Wisconsin recently [ruled](#) that Wisconsin highway officials failed to prepare an adequate environmental impact statement about a proposed highway widening in Milwaukee.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires government agencies to issue an environmental impact statement (EIS) for every federal action significantly affecting the environment. In the EIS, agencies must describe the environmental results of the proposed action, and discuss reasonable alternatives to such an action. The EIS requirement does **not** prevent government from engaging in environmentally harmful actions; however, it does ensure that government knows (and is willing to disclose to the public) the environmental consequences of its actions.

In the Wisconsin case (MICAH v. Gottlieb), the court suggested that an EIS was inadequate for the following reasons:

1. The EIS failed to consider the environmental results of expanding highway capacity in a region that had been reducing its transit service for a decade. The agency thus must consider such impacts, and must discuss less environmentally harmful alternatives such as increasing transit service. However, the agency does not actually have to adopt such an alternative- just discuss the alternatives. I note that this ruling is rather narrow, because it does not apply to cities that have increased transit service.
2. The government's assessment of the highway project's air quality impacts assumed that transit service would increase- an assumption not borne out by the facts. Thus, the government's EIS was deficient. Again, this ruling is quite narrow, since it is based on (1) the agency's willingness to assume that transit service would increase and (2) the lack of evidence for this assumption.
3. The failure to include the impacts of highway projects on suburban sprawl. In particular, the court urged the agency to consider not just the impacts of the project at issue, but the "cumulative impact" of both this project and other highway-widening projects. This portion of the decision is perhaps the broadest; it tells us that if a government agency is widening numerous highways, it cannot just analyze one project at a time, but must address the collective impacts of all projects.

Having said that, this is still a fairly narrow ruling; it seems to apply to a situation where government agencies (1) are engaged in numerous highway-widening projects, (2) are cutting public transit service at the same time, and (3) fail to discuss (1) and (2) in their EIS. Moreover, the court is not likely to halt the project for good, but to require the government to draft a new EIS addressing these factors and their environmental impact.

Evidence That Gentrification is Overrated

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 06/05/2013 - 10:45am

A recent article in [Better Cities](#) points out that while some transit-heavy neighborhoods in Chicago became more expensive (especially those on Chicago's north side) "transit sheds" in Chicago's south and west shed actually **lost** value relative to the region as a whole. In other words, rich intown neighborhoods are getting pricier, but poor ones are actually losing value.

This is relevant to the debate about gentrification. One common concern is that gentrification is driving poor people into suburbia, as they are priced out of urban neighborhoods. But, at least in Chicago, poor urban neighborhoods are actually getting cheaper- at least relative to the region as a whole.

What about other cities? The Better Cities article is based on [this](#) report; however, I am not as familiar with the other cities discussed in the report as I am with Chicago. I leave it to you, dear readers, to look at the original report and see if Chicago is typical.

Highlights of CNU 21, Part 2

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 06/03/2013 - 11:21am

I saw a few more panels on Friday, and spent much of the weekend visiting Salt Lake City's various neighborhoods.

Sarah Susanka's plenary address contained one line that spoke to me. She spoke about an "appreciation for space", comparable to an appreciation for music. I think one reason I don't fit in with my relatives and friends who have gotten used to sprawl is that I have a highly developed, perhaps overdeveloped, sense of space. My relatives in Atlanta have gotten used to things (such as streets without sidewalks) that horrify me.

A panel on financing explained the problem of FHA financing. The FHA will insure purely residential mortgages, but will not support mixed-use developments, because it views its mission as primarily support of housing. Until recently, the FHA would only allow 20% retail space in a project; thus, a building with retail on the ground floor had to be at least five stories. It has increased the permissible amount of retail to 35%, so a three-story building with retail on the bottom is fine with them. However, they still will not support a mainstay of new urbanist development- the two-story building with retail on the bottom (which is thus 50% retail, above their 35% quota).

A panel on local government showed how some local governments were trying to promote smart growth. Matthew McElroy spoke about El Paso's steps- a form-based code for city-owned land, and tax incentives for more walkable development.

Annick Beaudet spoke about Austin's "complete streets" program. The program focused on adding sidewalks and bicycle lanes - fairly modest steps, but a good start towards retrofitting sprawl. According to Beaudet, as the number of bike lanes rose, the number of bicycle crashes went down.

On Sunday, I visited some of Salt Lake City's suburbs and some of its more walkable areas. I saw some good things and bad things. On the negative side, streets were often too wide to be interesting or comfortable for pedestrians, especially downtown where more people normally walk. (However, in some non-downtown neighborhoods, this was less true). The light rail system closes at 7 PM on Sundays - a serious hardship for travelers taking late flights. The bus system closes around 10 pm, and around 7 pm on weekends. On the other hand, there are some nice walkable neighborhoods; as in the south, these areas tend to be dominated by single-family homes, the occasional duplex, and the occasional small apartment complex. There are almost no rowhouses or similar attached dwellings.

On the positive side, I was amazed that a city as small as Salt Lake City would have three light rail lines and a commuter rail line, even if their hours don't always make sense. I didn't see a single street without a sidewalk, even in sprawling Sandy. There is lots of undeveloped land near suburban light rail stops; this means that the system doesn't go where people now live (bad) but it also means that the system has ample room for growth (good) as areas near rail stops get filled in with housing.

My Salt Lake City photos are [here](#).

Highlights of CNU 21

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/31/2013 - 12:58am

One interesting part of today's CNU session was Andres Duany's keynote speech. Duany focused on the relationship between environmentalism and New Urbanism. He suggested that the fear of climate change was actually more important in shaping public policy than climate change itself, because this fear may create long-term demoralization (especially, I suspect, among environmentalists - though I'm not sure if Duany was saying this).

In response, Duany said that New Urbanism could stop such demoralization by making environmentally responsible conduct pleasant and desirable. Good urbanism turns the apparent limitation of life without a two-car (or three- or four-car) garage into a virtue. Duany also

emphasized that our job as new urbanists is to focus on adapting to climate change rather than prevention. Why? Because in the absence of international action, there's not all that much that can be done to prevent climate change.

Duany also discussed city design, emphasizing that one problem with the process of public hearings is that issues are sometimes decided at the wrong level. For example, infill development may involve issues of citywide or regionwide importance, yet the interests of one neighborhood are often given overwhelming weight. He also suggested that new building doesn't need to be multistory; when a neighborhood is being developed, one-story buildings might be the cheapest form of real estate and thus most appropriate. As the neighborhood becomes more popular over time, multistory building might be more practical.

Another interesting panel was on form-based codes. The panel responded to concern that such codes had become too complex. Brenda Scheer suggested that codes were too focused on good design rather than good urban fabric. Sandy Sorlien suggested that codes often involved too much nonmandatory explanation and too many photos.

Finally, John Massengale and Victor Dover led a panel on street design. They showed us photos of supposedly "complete" streets (that is, streets with sidewalks and bike lanes, or that had been narrowed to make pedestrian crossing easier) that are still basically ugly and car-oriented. In addition, they showed us car-oriented avenues in Manhattan, reminding us that even pedestrian-friendly places have some very car-dominated streets. Finally, they showed us examples of one-way streets and pedestrian malls (both of which tend to be unpopular among New Urbanists) in walkable towns, showing us that ideas that make little sense in much of America might make sense in the context of a network of small, interconnected streets.

Property vs. Sales Taxes

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/29/2013 - 12:44pm

The first CNU 21 speech I went to was by attorney Craig Galli, who briefly outlined the history of Salt Lake City. He pointed out that one of the region's problems was the dependence of local cities on sales taxes; to attract tax revenue, local governments need to attract sales-generating retailers. As a result, the region became oversupplied with big box stores, some of which are now vacant due to competition from other big box stores.

I am certainly not going to endorse vacant stores. On the other hand, property taxes (the dominant source of local government revenue in much of the U.S.) may be even worse. The more expensive homes are, the higher a city's property tax revenue. Thus, a city in search of

revenue has a strong incentive to use zoning to keep housing supplies scarce in order to keep home prices high- hardly a beneficial development.

In addition, property taxes seem especially burdensome to homeowners, because they receive one (often constantly-growing) bill every year, rather than paying a bit at a time with each purpose. The sheer noxiousness of property taxes leads to periodic tax revolts, which in turn cause state-level politicians to enact limits on municipal property taxes. These limits choke off local public services, and in addition choke off local autonomy over taxes and spending- also undesirable results.

What the Height Limits Debate Is Really About

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/24/2013 - 8:20am

It seems to me that the debate among new urbanist/smart growth types about height limits for office buildings* is really about one question: if businesses can't find enough office space in a low-rise business district, will they:

1. move a few blocks away, thus improving a neighborhood adjacent to downtown?
2. move to a suburb with more lenient height restrictions or cheaper land?

[This](#) story is strong, but anecdotal, evidence for view 2.

*I emphasize office buildings because, except in a couple of the largest American cities, the tallest buildings tend to be commercial rather than residential.

Suburban Poverty? So What?

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 05/20/2013 - 12:54pm

Because of the release of a new [book](#) about the growth of poverty in the suburbs, there has been all sorts of chatter on Twitter and the urbanist blogosphere about the growth of suburban poverty. Obviously, poverty anywhere is not a good thing. But as long as there is poverty, is it such a terrible thing that some poor people now live in suburbs?

Not necessarily. In the 20th century, when poverty was more concentrated in the cities than it is now, some people argued that this was really bad because poor suburbanites were isolated from suburban tax bases and suburban jobs. Why is this argument any less persuasive now than it was in 1975?

Moreover, I'm not sure conditions have changed that much. I don't have the data at my fingertips, but I strongly suspect that urban poverty rates are still far higher than suburban poverty rates; all that has happened is that the city/suburb gap has narrowed slightly. For example, even hyper-gentrified San Francisco has a poverty rate slightly higher than its metro area (12.5% for the city, 10.9% for the region).*

*Data on city and metro poverty rates can be found [here](#).

Speed Bumps Are Not All Bad

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 05/19/2013 - 12:25pm

I have generally been pretty skeptical of speed bumps (also known as "speed humps"); they can be harmful to cars, but don't do as much to calm traffic as some other techniques.

But I became more appreciative of speed humps yesterday. For reasons not of much interest to the readership of this blog, I had to walk on a residential street that had no sidewalks (and no lawn to walk on, as is [often](#) the case in Atlanta). In the ordinary case of events, such streets are very dangerous, because if you walk on a street with 40 mph traffic, you are not likely to survive a collision.

However, the speed bumps made the cars on this street go less rapidly; as a result, walking on the street was only moderately life-threatening. So my position has changed from "Speed Bumps Are Bad" to "Speed Bumps Are One Way to Make Streets Without Sidewalks Less Bsd."

How (Some) Drivers Suffer From One-Way Streets

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/17/2013 - 2:34pm

Generally, supporters of a less car-dependent society are critical of one-way streets, while supporters of the sprawl status quo favor them.

But I have a somewhat different perspective after driving around downtown Atlanta today. I drove there to do an errand for my mother, and the maze of one-way streets added 10 minutes to my drive time, as I searched in vain for a southbound street to get me home. So it seems to me that one-way streets are actually inconvenient for someone who has business downtown and is trying to navigate his or her way home.

So who does benefit from one-way streets? Someone who knows where they are going, has no business downtown and wants to escape downtown as speedily as possible.

So it seems to me one-way streets are not necessarily a "driver vs. pedestrian issue." They are more of a "driver vs. driver issue." In particular, diverse interests include drivers who aren't used to an area (who suffer from one-way streets) vs. locally knowledgeable drivers (less so), and neighborhood business owners (who suffer as drivers speed away from businesses on one-way streets) vs. suburban commuters (who do not suffer).

So unqualified support of one-way streets isn't necessarily pro-driver. Instead, one-way streets are anti-hospitality (because nonnatives are inconvenienced) and anti-business, though possibly pro-sprawl (at least where they make speeding easier).

The Homeownership Myth

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 05/13/2013 - 10:28am

One common myth about American sprawl is that it is somehow related to Americans' support for homeownership. But in fact, Americans are more likely to rent than residents of many other countries: 33 percent of us do so, as opposed to 26 percent of EU residents, 22 percent of New Zealanders, and 30 percent of Australians and British. (Denmark's rental rate is about the same as ours).

We are also more likely to live in multifamily dwellings than residents of many European nations; 24 percent of Americans do so, as oppose to 3 percent of Irish, 4 percent of New Zealanders, 13 percent of Australians, and 14 percent of British. (I note, however, that many European nations are more likely to live in apartments or condominiums).

Where do Americans differ? Our single-family homeowners are almost entirely in single-family houses, while in other nations people are more likely to own rowhouses. Only 5 percent of us live in attached single-family homes, less than one-fourth the EU average and about one-half the number in New Zealand, Australia and Canada. And of course our houses are bigger than in other nations.

The Myth of Overcrowding

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 05/06/2013 - 9:11am



York stereotype- a sea of people.

Last week, I had a conversation with a faculty colleague about densification in Manhattan. He said he visited Philadelphia, and he liked Philadelphia better because it wasn't so crowded.

But I responded that Manhattan wasn't as crowded as he thought it was. To be sure, there are a few places in Manhattan (especially at certain times) that are very crowded indeed- in particular, the blocks closest to Penn Station. When I get off a train and get into the station during rush hour, I am met by the New

But then I walk a couple of blocks north, and as soon as I turn onto 35th Street (the first street north of Penn Station that is not a major east-west street, and only two blocks north of the station) suddenly the street becomes less occupied- not exactly deserted, but just enough so that I can walk home unimpeded by pedestrian congestion.

More Density for Bigger Cities

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/02/2013 - 9:29am

I recently have noticed lots of comments in blogs and listservs on ideal densities. But the ideal density for a city or a neighborhood (if there is such a thing) depends on context.

Why? The smaller the city, the less density you need for walkability. In a city with 20,000 people, 20,000 people per square mile (roughly equivalent to a gross density of 15 units per acre, assuming two persons per household) means a one square mile city- an extremely walkable small town.

But in a region with 20 million people, 20,000/square mile means that these people are spread out over 1000 square miles (the size of Long Island), the kind of geographic expanse that leads to really long commutes even if lots of people have good transit. In other words, this density level just gives us dense sprawl (and we've seen how well that worked for Los Angeles!) . This problem is, I think, one reason why LA, with only 30 percent less central-city density than Washington or Chicago, is far more than 30 percent more car-oriented than those cities. Thus, a high density for a small city would still be too low for a big city to be anything but Traffic Hell.

Documenting NIMBYism

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 04/25/2013 - 11:05am

Because much of the literature on anti-density "exclusionary zoning" involves suburbs, you might think that cities tend to favor development and density. But according to a recent [paper](#) by Vicki Been of NYU Law, this is not the case. The study examines rezonings proposed by the New York Department of City Planning, and shows that the city downzones property more often than it upzones.

Why does this matter? When the city downzones (that is, zones for less housing or commerce) that means a smaller supply of residences and jobs - which in turn means higher prices and more consumers forced into suburbia because there are simply not enough urban residences and offices to go around.

Are The Poor Being Forced Into Suburbia?

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 04/21/2013 - 8:47pm

I recently read a blog [post](#) explaining that smart growth and urban infill are not so smart because it forces poor people into suburbia. The logic behind this claim is, as far as I can tell, as follows: 1) infill means rising real estate values in cities, (2) rising real estate values means people can't afford to live there, and (3) therefore smart growth shunts the poor into suburbs.

If this theory was true, it would be most true in high-cost New York. But in fact, today's New York Times shows that 46 percent of New Yorkers are close to the poverty level (150 percent or below), and 19 percent have incomes below the poverty level- as opposed to 17 percent before the recession. In other words, there are MORE poor people in the city than there were five years ago.

So the whole "poor people being displaced from the city and forced into the suburbs" claim appears to be factually wrong.

I doubt this reality will change anyone's mind, because the argument is essentially a "heads I win, tails you lose" one from the standpoint of sprawl defenders and smart growth critics. If poverty goes up in the city, they will say, in so many words, "Aha! More evidence that only the shiftless poor are willing to live in cities!" If poverty goes down, they will say "Aha! We need to regulate infill to death because gentrification is driving the poor out of the city!"

Where Job Sprawl Happens Most

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 04/19/2013 - 10:42am

I just saw the Brookings report on [job sprawl](#)- the movement of jobs to exurbs. Do some metros have more job sprawl than others? If so what correlates with it?

I haven't quite figured what I'm most interested in. But I started off by looking at the six most transit-friendly regions: Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, and New York. Three metros have a higher-than-average share of jobs within three miles of a central business district- New York (30.9), Boston (29.2) and San Francisco (25.2).

Three others have a below-average share of downtown jobs- Philadelphia (15.2), Chicago (19.5) and Washington (21.8). In all but Philadelphia, the downtown share of jobs was stable or growing between 2000 and 2010 (contrary to the national trend).

The strongest correlation I saw (from this admittedly small sample) is that strong cities tend to have stronger commercial downtowns. In Chicago, the city population declined between 2000 and 2010. In Philadelphia and Washington, city population rebounded in the 2000s, but only after fifty years of decline. By contrast, in New York, Boston, and San Francisco, city populations declined in the 1960s and 1970s, but started recovering as early as the 1980s.

Two Cheers for Cheap

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 04/15/2013 - 11:38am

In new urbanist circles, "cheap" is often a dirty word; for example, I recently noticed a reference to "cheap" suburbs in a blog. I find this objectionable for two reasons. First, in a nation where many regions suffer from insanely expensive housing projects, we should be striving for cheaper housing. To be fair, sometimes planners and architects use "cheap" as a synonym for "badly designed"- but this is imprecise. If we want to say something is badly designed, we should say exactly that.

Second, it implies that sprawl that is not "cheap" is somehow less objectionable. American suburbs are full of mammoth estate homes on multi-acre lots. These houses are usually expensive, but no matter how expensive their building materials, they are even worse than "cheaper" sprawl from a pro-urban perspective. This is so for (at least) two reasons. First, estate homes take up so much land that their residents can't even walk comfortably to a neighbor's house, let alone a bus stop. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for an example or two.) Second, as a result these anti-neighborhoods are even less likely to have sidewalks and buses than cheaper suburbs. Moreover, I suspect these homes are also more environmentally harmful than smaller, cheaper homes since they probably require more energy to build.

Part of What We Don't Know About Sprawl and Obesity

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 04/07/2013 - 12:59pm

Numerous studies (such as the one referenced [here](#)) have suggested that there is some connection between sprawl and obesity, because residents of sprawl walk less and are thus more likely to weigh more.

However, people in low-income urban areas are [more likely](#) to be overweight- even in relatively walkable places. One hypothesis is that poorer people tend to have poorer diets, and that this effect simply overrides the positive effects of walkability. An alternative theory is that poorer people actually do walk less because of fear of crime and traffic. Which hypothesis better fits reality?

It seems to me that to answer the question we would have to find out how much low-income urbanites walk. Do they walk more than anyone else? Do they walk more than suburbanites but less than high-income city residents? Or do they walk as little as suburbanites?

Similarly, high-income suburban communities tend not to be as obese as the rest of America. Is this because they get more exercise? Or is it purely because of diet? To find out, we'd have to get a better sense of who gets how much exercise, either through walking or by other means.

Light and Height

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 04/05/2013 - 5:27pm



One common argument against tall buildings is that they block out light, creating shadows that block the sun. But as I was walking down Avenue of the Americas (one of Midtown Manhattan's most skyscraper-oriented streets) I saw plenty of sun- just not on my side of the street. What was going on?

I was walking on the east side of the street, where most buildings were 5-20 stories. On that side, some combination of skyscrapers and

the sun's natural direction created shade. By contrast, the west side of the street, where all the skyscrapers are, was quite sunny. So this particular street had a nice balance of sun and shade- if you wanted shade you could go to the east side of the street, and if you wanted sun you could just cross the street.

It therefore seems to me that if city planners wanted pedestrians to be able to choose between sun and shade, it could impose height limits on only one side of each street; the side across from the skyscrapers could be shady, and the skyscraper side would normally be sunnier. On the other hand, this sort of regulation does mean that the urban fabric is less consistent; instead of causing a neighborhood to have a coherent look, setting different rules for different sides of the street would create a divergence between two sides of a street. Is this a bad thing? I'm not sure.

How Single Use Can Be Mixed Use

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 04/04/2013 - 12:32am

Howard Blackson's latest [post](#) on the Placemakers blog clarifies the concept of "mixed use." A narrow definition of mixed use limits the term to mixed-use buildings: for example, buildings partially devoted to housing and partially devoted to other uses.

But Blackson points out that a walkable mixed-use neighborhood can include purely residential buildings or even purely residential blocks, as long as those blocks are within walking distance of commercial places.

It logically follows that Euclidean zoning (that is, zoning that requires some buildings or blocks to be purely residential or commercial) is actually consistent with walkable mixed-use development, as long as the zones are small enough for people to walk from one zone to another. For example, if one block is zoned residential and the next block is commercial, the zoning is Euclidean in principle- but the blocks are far more walkable than most American neighborhoods.

The Pros and Cons of Elevator Suburbs

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 03/31/2013 - 9:40am



As I was looking through my Twitter feed last night, I noticed an article on Canada's "[elevator suburbs](#)" - suburban streets (often, but not always, in low-income areas) filled with mid- and high-rise apartment buildings and shops, with lower-density housing on side streets. How do these places stack up (pun intended) from an urbanist perspective?

I lived in Toronto for a year, and visited some of these places - most memorably the corner of Jane and Finch (one of Toronto's poorest neighborhoods) and the corner of

Bathurst and Steeles (a much more affluent area, but one with a pretty similar urban fabric). On the positive side, these places are dense enough to support transit: although the Toronto subway does not serve them, bus service is regular enough that you don't have to carry around a bus schedule. And both corners have [walkscores](#) in the 60s and 70s, because shops tend to be within a couple of blocks of apartment buildings.

What's not so good about these places? Street design. The streets in these areas tend to be wide enough to be uncomfortable for pedestrians, and most buildings are separated from the street by parking lots (though on the positive side, the parking lots are not the size of football fields - but from a pedestrian perspective any setback is too much).

Passover and New Urbanism

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 03/28/2013 - 12:47pm

A few days ago, I came to Atlanta to spend the Jewish holiday of Passover with my family, a holiday commemorating the departure of Hebrew slaves (also known as "the Exodus") from Egypt about 3300 years ago.

At one level, this liberation was about freedom- and so is new urbanism. Just as the Exodus liberated the Hebrews from Egyptian kings, new urbanism seeks to liberate Americans from the four-wheeled kingdom of automobile-dependent sprawl.

But both the Exodus and new urbanism are more complex. The Hebrews may have left Egypt merely to be free from slavery, but ultimately they decided to impose responsibilities upon themselves, by creating a Jewish legal system that in some ways (especially [during Passover](#)) can seem restrictive. And over the past two centuries, Judaism has been racked by conflict over how to balance freedom and responsibility- in particular, whether to strictly follow premodern rules and customs, or whether to become more flexible in order to enable Jews to function more effectively in the modern world.

New urbanism also involves a tension between freedom and responsibility. At the festive meal on the first two nights of Passover (the Seder) participants usually focus primarily on freedom from Egyptian slavery. Similarly, some new urbanists are primarily interested in freedom from sprawl.

But the Exodus ultimately became merely a means to the broader end of creating a new religion. Similarly, new urbanists see urbanism as merely a means to broader ends such as social equity and environmental responsibility.

One major difference between these movements is that in the Bible, God partially resolves the conflict by giving the Jews commandments. But in our world, we will have to resolve these tradeoffs on our own.

Hollywood's Suburban Role Model

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 03/25/2013 - 2:02pm

Hazel Borys's recent post on [joggable](#) suburbs reminds me of something I had meant to blog about during Oscar time: a movie that gives us a fairly good role model of walkable suburbia: The Silver Linings Playbook.

In this movie (set in a suburb of Philadelphia*) the main characters are consistently meeting each other while jogging. Sidewalks are a given, and you occasionally see shots of trains coming in from Philadelphia. And the regional downtown (Philadelphia's Center City) is presented not as a scary ghetto, but as a magical place where the leading characters realize that they love each

other. Their relationship grows as they prepare for a dancing contest at a Center City hotel that is now an [apartment building](#).

Although this movie was (from an urbanist perspective) the best of the Oscar nominees, it was still missing a bit. The elements of a walkable place are (reasonably high) density, diversity (of land uses), and (pedestrian-friendly) design. The residential streets looked pretty walkable, so they do well on the "design" element of this trinity. The houses were on small lots, so the neighborhoods were probably dense enough to support the trains. But the neighborhood seemed to lack diversify; even though the characters had no problem walking from house to house, they never walked to anything that wasn't a house.

*Just from looking at the trains, my guess is that it is set in one of the South Jersey suburbs served by the PATCO train line, such as Collinwood or Haddonfield.

Kotkin and Florida, Part II

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 03/21/2013 - 11:03am

Richard Florida has [responded](#) to Joel Kotkin's attack on "creative class" centered policies. Kotkin doesn't really deny Florida's point that places with high-skilled workers have higher wages, but says that wage gains in high-skill cities are outweighed by high housing costs. Florida agrees.

It seems to me that despite the culture-war hipster-bashing, Kotkin sounds awfully leftist to me, and Florida a little less so. Kotkin's position sounds to me like: "we don't want too much growth, or at least not the 'wrong' kind of economic growth, because it leads to higher housing costs." In other words, Kotkin buys (at least selectively) into the traditional leftist argument that what helps the middle class hurts the poor: distribution trumps growth.

By contrast, Florida comes across as the pro-growth moderate, saying that growth is good, even if we need a "new social compact" and housing deregulation to help those left behind.

Mr. Kotkin and Mr. Florida

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 03/20/2013 - 5:23pm

Joel Kotkin tried to [take down](#) Richard Florida today, arguing that trusting the "creative class of the skilled, educated and hip...to remake American cities" is "pernicious." Mr. Florida can speak for himself, but I do have a few thoughts about the article.

1. Can Both Ideas Be True?

On the one hand, Kotkin says that "the benefits of appealing to the creative class accrue largely to his members- and do little to make anyone else any better off ... the wage increases that blue-collar and lower-skilled workers see disappear when their higher housing costs are taken into account." On the other hand, he complains that appealing to the creative class has "been less than successful in many of the old rust belt cities". For example, he writes that subsidizing the arts in Michigan "didn't exactly work."

So let me get this straight: on the one hand, the creative class is bad, bad, bad because it drives up housing costs. On the other hand, it is bad, bad, bad that Buffalo and Utica aren't getting the creative class. How can both propositions be true? Shouldn't he be celebrating Buffalo and Utica as role models for exporting their middle and upper classes?

2. Failed and Impractical Remedies

Kotkin quotes a Cleveland blogger for the proposition that Rust Belt cities should "emphasize their intrinsic advantages, such as affordable housing, a deep historic legacy tied to a concentration of specific skills as well as a strategic location." He also notes that "less dense, more affordable cities" have grown. But Cleveland and Buffalo have been de-densifying, and have had low housing costs for decades. What has it gotten them except more decline and more decay?

He also points out that "the fastest job growth has taken place in regions ... whose economies are based not on 'creative' industries but on less fashionable pursuits such as oil and gas, agriculture and manufacturing." In particular, three of his four examples (Houston, Dallas, and Oklahoma City) are in oil-dominated Texas and Oklahoma. But unless large amounts of oil are discovered in Ohio or upstate New York, I don't really see how Cleveland or Buffalo can duplicate the success of those places.

3. An Argument About Nothing?

Both Kotkin and Florida (or more precisely, both Kotkin and Kotkin's interpretation of Florida) write as if cities can control what sort of businesses move there- whether they become the sort of "hip" cities that some praise or the brawny industrial cities that Kotkin glorifies.

But I wonder. Both in the United States and Europe, government seems at a loss as to how to bring employment back to pre-2008 levels. And if a nation can't figure out how to do that, what makes us think that a city or state government would- let alone try to micromanage what type of jobs they get?

Using Terminology to Frame the Debate

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 03/15/2013 - 1:57pm

I recently saw a listserv post with the headline "the costs of automobilism." The phrase "automobilism" makes automobile dependence seem like an alien ism, a sinister ideology like communism or fascism.

By contrast, sprawl lobby types prefer the term "auto-mobility." By associating driving with mobility, they suggest that cars equal freedom and opportunity. After all, who would be against being mobile (or at least having the opportunity to be mobile)?

I have to admit that I prefer the former term- not just because of my own ideological biases, but also because I think automobile-dependent places, nondrivers are in fact less mobile than they would otherwise be.

No, We Don't Need Walk-Ups (Or At Least Not Just Walk-Ups)

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 03/04/2013 - 12:59pm

In reading arguments about Washington's height limits, one anti-height argument that I occasionally see is: "We don't need height for density- we can just build 5-6 story buildings." These kind of "walk-up" buildings typically can't afford elevators (except maybe at the high end of this range).

Such walk-ups are perfectly fine for 30-year-old hipsters. But in an aging society, walk-ups will become worthless for more and more people. Here's why: old people with brittle bones often have lots of trouble climbing stairs; in my experience this applies to people as young as 60. So they simply cannot live in buildings where they have to climb a lot of stairs. This means that multistory rowhouses are not a possibility; in fact, even single-story rowhouses (or the ground floors of multistory rowhouses) are often not usable by the elderly without significant retrofitting, since they often have stairs to create a sense of privacy and insulation from the street.

So our constantly growing stock of seniors will either have to live in single-family-house sprawl, or they have to live with elevators. And elevators require height. That doesn't mean they have to live in 100-story skyscrapers- but it does mean that more of them will live in smaller mid- and high-rise buildings than some urbanists might like.

Good Trees, Bad Trees

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 02/28/2013 - 3:11pm

Normally, trees on a street are a good thing. Good trees (like this [row of trees](#) in Forest Hills, Queens) provide shade for a sidewalk. But not all trees are so-well behaved. Where there is no sidewalk, a tree can actually endanger pedestrians by preventing them from walking on grass. For example, [these](#) trees (in a condo development in Jacksonville) actually endanger pedestrians by depriving them of grass to walk on and forcing them into the street.

Getting Serious About Affordable Housing

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 02/21/2013 - 3:27pm

When I was at the New Partners for Smart Growth conference in Kansas City, I saw a speaker argue that walkability increases property values (a proposition I'm not taking a position on, at least not in this blog post). When someone asked about affordability, he suggested inclusionary zoning as a solution.

I am perfectly willing to stipulate for the sake of argument that inclusionary zoning may be an appropriate solution in a cheap city like Kansas City, where housing is affordable for most people most of the time, and only a few poorer people have great difficulty finding housing. But in expensive cities like New York and San Francisco, affordability isn't just a problem for the poor; it's a problem for the middle and upper middle class. In such places, setting aside a few units for "affordable" housing is not going to prevent housing prices from affecting the region's quality of life. Instead, we should seriously think about whether it is good for a city to have housing prices far exceeding incomes.

When One-Way Streets Go Bad

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 02/19/2013 - 5:31pm

In some places (e.g. Midtown Manhattan) one-way streets are relatively harmless. In others, one-ways turn streets into speedways, threatening pedestrian safety and gutting neighborhood businesses (since someone going 50 mph is going to be less likely to stop for any reason). How do you tell the difference?

In an area where auto traffic is fairly slow, one-ways are pretty harmless. In an area with very narrow streets, the one-way doesn't speed up traffic enough to threaten pedestrian safety. For example, Forest Hills, Queens has a tangle of one-way streets. But because each street contained two lanes of parking and only one full lane (or perhaps two very narrow ones) for actual traffic, cars still go pretty slowly.

By contrast, in midtown Kansas City there are numerous three-lane one-way streets- and at those streets, cars proceeded at a brisk pace. As a result, it is very easy for people to speed home to suburbia, and perhaps less tempting for people to stop and shop at city businesses. So naturally, Kansas City has become a very car-dependent, [suburbanized](#) region.

A common argument for one-way streets is that they increase pedestrian safety because pedestrians don't have to look both ways to cross the street. However, to cross these one-way streets you still have to watch out for people making left and right turns onto the street; thus, one-way streets can present the same kinds of risks as two-way streets.

My conclusion: if cars go 50 mph on a one-way street, the street probably should be converted into a two-way street, because the costs of such speed outweigh the benefits.

The Problem With Traffic Lights

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 02/14/2013 - 11:56am

I had always thought that traffic lights calmed traffic. But last week at the [Partners for Smart Growth](#) conference in Kansas City, I learned that at least sometimes, there was a better alternative. Some of us went on a tour of the city's Westside neighborhood. The neighborhood's major intersection once had traditional red, yellow and green lights, and now has a blinking red light telling drivers to slow down (essentially a kind of electronic stop sign).

Why were the regular traffic lights replaced? The neighborhood activist leading the tour explained that drivers speed through green lights trying to get away from the intersection before the light turns yellow, and speed through yellow lights so they can leave the intersection before the light turns red. Such fast travel increases traffic noise even when there are no pedestrians walking through the intersection, and creates a high risk of inadvertent red-light running and the resulting accidents. By contrast, stop signs and blinking red lights cause every car to slow down, making intersections less noisy and less scary for pedestrians.

Another Example of the Fragility of Sprawl (Maybe)

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 02/11/2013 - 9:07am



After last week's snowstorm, New York City rebounded smartly: the streets are plowed, the subways are running. By contrast, the school where I teach (40 miles out in Suffolk County) is closed. Why? Because the students mostly live in suburbs near the school, and many of them are snowed in because the county can't plow the roads fast enough. Cars and blizzards

simply do not mix, and evidently it is easier to repair a few train lines than it is to plow thousands of miles of roadways.

To be fair, Long Island did have appreciably more snow than New York City. However, the Long Island Rail Road is mostly up and running- evidence that, at least after a snowstorm, it is easier to fix transit than roads.

What I (Sort of) Wish I'd Said

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 02/10/2013 - 10:10pm

Last Friday, I gave a [speech](#) on conservatives and smart growth at the [New Partners](#) for Smart Growth conference. At the panel discussion after the speech I was asked "what if you want to build something nice and your neighbor wants to build a car wash?" I gave an honest but nuanced answer about how zoning is fine in the right hands, but that it is so often abused that I wonder about whether the benefits are worth the costs, etc.

A pithier (though admittedly simplistic) answer would have been: if we tolerate massacres to get the benefits of the Second Amendment, we can certainly tolerate a car wash here and there.

An Animated Transit-Oriented Romance

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 01/30/2013 - 11:12pm

Feeling like you could use a good boost of pro-transit, pro-urban romance to brighten up your day? Go online and see Paperman (link [here](#)), an Oscar-nominated short in which a romance arises on a downtown train that looks an awful lot like Chicago's El.

Urbanism and TV Theme Songs

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 01/12/2013 - 11:30pm

In Walkable City, Jeff Speck points out that 1990s sitcoms tend to be more urban and more pro-urban than those of the 1950s and 1960s (which tended to be set in small towns or rural areas) or even the 1970s (often set in [depressing](#) or [depressed](#) urban locations, with the exception of "[Mary Tyler Moore](#).")

But some of the 1970s shows sent a strong pro-urban message - if not in the shows themselves (which are usually so indoors-oriented that the city is rarely a major presence in the show) at least in memorable and (to me) inspiring opening sequences.

For example, take a look at the [intro](#) to the Bob Newhart show- sending the message that Chicago (a) is the star of the show and (b) is pleasant enough to deserve that stardom.

A more obscure show, Angie, [highlights downtown Philadelphia](#) while singing about love, leading the viewer to associate Independence Hall with love (and why not?)

And in an anti-urban area, no show's opening is as defiantly pro-city as the [Jeffersons](#). It identifies city life as "moving on up... to a deluxe apartment in the sky"; rather than presenting city life as a pale echo of suburbia, sailing against the wind like Barry Goldwater in the liberal mid-sixties. While some see good cities as just bigger versions of walkable small towns, this song says to its often-suburban viewers: [A Choice, Not An Echo](#). (And since, barring a last-minute disaster, I plan to move to Manhattan in a few weeks, this was exactly what I want to hear right now!)

Walkable Regions and Real Estate Values

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 01/09/2013 - 12:43pm

Pundit Matt Yglesias has dug up some interesting Federal Reserve-compiled [data](#) on regional housing prices. He compares today's housing prices not to those of the mid-2000s real estate boom, but to 1998 pre-boom housing prices. The Fed's data shows that some regions have experienced long-term price increases despite the recession, while in others housing prices have not recovered to pre-boom levels.

Of course, what new urbanists are most likely to be interested in is whether the most walkable, transit-oriented regions (e.g. New York, Washington, Chicago, Boston) have shown different trends than the most sprawling regions.

Yglesias has data for five of the United States's six most transit-friendly regions (New York, Boston, Washington, Chicago, and San Francisco). In four of the five (all but Chicago), housing prices are above their pre-boom levels: for example, Washington's housing prices are about 50 percent over their pre-boom levels.

On the other hand, the most sprawling cities vary widely. The three regions where prices have gone down the most (by about 20-40 percent between 1998 and 2012) are sprawl capitals Atlanta, Las Vegas and Detroit. However, Los Angeles, Miami and Tampa, all heavily car-oriented regions, have experienced long-run appreciation. So these figures don't prove that regionwide transit access is a major factor in real estate prices.

However, this data does seem to contradict the theory that anti-sprawl regulation caused the bursting of the real estate bubble. If this was the case, the regions with urban growth boundaries (Portland and Seattle) would have experienced the most instability, and would either (a) have housing prices far below their 1998 levels or (b) have a housing bubble so seductive that their prices continue to radically appreciate. In fact, both Portland and Seattle are in the middle of the pack. Out of 19 regions listed, Seattle and Portland are 8th and 10th in long-run appreciation respectively. On the other hand, Atlanta and Detroit (neither of which has regional development limits of significance) have suffered massive price losses.

‘Quality of Life’– A Term With Lots of Meanings

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 01/08/2013 - 12:12pm

I am in the middle of Jeff Speck's *Walkable City*, and noticed his statement that walkable cities "provide a better quality of life." (p. 70). But when I lived in car-oriented cities like Jacksonville and Atlanta, I talked to more than one ex-northerner who said they preferred the "quality of life" of the suburbs where they lived. Clearly, not everyone understands this term the same way.

My sense from talking to these northern expatriates is that to them, "quality of life" means the ability to afford a single-family house. By contrast, to Speck "quality of life" means something very different- as far as I can tell, some mix of interesting street life and overall walkability.

But I think Speck and my suburban friends would probably agree that northern suburbs are an unhappy median: not walkable enough for Speck's version of quality of life, not cheap enough for southerners' version.

New and Worth Reading: A Friendly Critique of Form-Based Codes

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 01/07/2013 - 4:19pm

Nicole Garnett of Notre Dame Law School is publishing a sympathetic critique of form-based codes (available [here](#), soon to be published in Brooklyn Law Review). She supports the aims of form-based codes, but wonders whether they would be more appropriate as voluntary codes than as citywide zoning overlays. She has three concerns.

First, she worries that the architectural detail required by form-based codes adds to building costs, especially where these codes are overlays to existing zoning rather than replacements of existing zoning. (The obvious remedy to this problem is to make up for the costs of more expensive materials by removing other costly regulations- but I realize this might not always be politically possible).

Second, she wonders whether the transect is universally applicable to American cities where density is not always significantly greater in the core than in the periphery (e.g. Los Angeles). In theory, this problem doesn't seem to me to be quite as serious as the problem of cost. Not every area needs to include all of the transect zones; for example, a suburban single-family area could be coded as completely T3 (suburban).

Third, she worries that form-based codes sometimes include jargon that might be hard to understand, especially for developers unfamiliar with new urbanism. Of course, existing zoning codes are also often quite vague.

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