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Michael Lewyn



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Two Middle-Class(?) Neighborhoods

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 12/31/2012 - 11:52am

A few days ago, I [partially responded](#) to Joel Kotkin's defense of Sun Belt sprawl and attack on more "urban" cities like New York and Washington, arguing that the latter group of cities seem to be more attractive to the wealthy and more able to generate wealth. But of course, I didn't really address the broader argument that New York is a two-class city. Although Kotkin ferociously attacks environmentalists, his argument seems pretty similar to the left-wing argument that America is losing its middle class; the only difference is that Kotkin treats this as a problem of cities (and in particular, less-sprawling cities) rather than of the nation as a whole.

There is some truth to the argument; certainly, income distribution has become more unequal in the United States in recent decades. Having said that, the argument in its purest form is something of an exaggeration; in city and suburb alike, there are places that are not dominated by the wealthy and the poor- both in urban and in suburban neighborhoods.

For example, my current neighborhood, Forest Hills, seems to be to be pretty middle-class (especially the northern part of it where I live, as opposed to wealthier Forest Hills Gardens to the south). When I go to my synagogue or nearby synagogues, I don't meet anyone who seems to be obviously poor or fabulously wealthy- no big-firm lawyers, for example. So I decided to look at actual statistics to see if my feelings are backed up by reality.

Only 11% of households in my census tract earn less than \$25,000 per year- and given that 20 percent of the tract's residents are over 70, some of them are probably retired people living off savings. 15% earn \$25-50,000 (which I think of as lower-middle, or maybe working class), about 30% earn \$50-100,000 (which to me is middle-middle class, at least given NY housing costs), 26% earn \$100-200,000 (which people in Iowa might not think of as middle-class, but seems to me to be upper-middle class) and only 16% earn over \$200,000 (pretty close to the Obama-approved definition of the upper class).

I compared these numbers to my old census tract in Mandarin (a suburban part of Jacksonville, Florida). I'm not sure what sprawl defenders' idea of paradise is, but I'm guessing it is someplace like Mandarin: a car-oriented area where you can still get a house for under \$200,000. Surprisingly the shares of households in each income class seemed almost identical: there were more households earning below \$25,000 in Mandarin (21% as opposed to 11%) and fewer rich household (only 9%) but the share of households earning between \$25,000 and \$200,000 was about the same (71% in Mandarin, 73% in northern Forest Hills).*

What do these middle-class people do? Oddly, there is a significant occupational difference between Mandarin and Forest Hills. Since Mandarin is a more politically conservative area, one might think that its residents are more likely to be entrepreneurs. But 26% of Forest Hills residents are engaged in retail or wholesale trade, as opposed to 16% of Mandarin residents. On the other hand, "eds and meds" (education and health care), which tend to be heavily government-regulated if not government-owned, seems more popular in Mandarin: 29% of

employed Mandarin residents are in this sector, as opposed to 15% of my current census tract's residents. On the other hand, Forest Hills has more public employees (9% as opposed to 3% of Mandarin residents). The proportions of employed people in finance, insurance, real estate, and miscellaneous professional positions are about the same.

To dig up similar information on your neighborhood go to the Census Bureau's [American Fact Finder site](#).

*Though given cost of living differentials, this means Mandarin is probably somewhat wealthier.

Responding to a little New York-bashing

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 12/27/2012 - 11:17am

Joel Kotkin just wrote a [blog post](#) on New Geography explaining why today's Obama voters will eventually turn into Republicans - a subject not particularly relevant to urbanism. But a few paragraphs of the essay grabbed my attention, in particular this one:

The Holy Places of urbanism such as New York, San Francisco, Washington DC also suffer some of the [worst income inequality, and poverty](#), of any places in the country. The now triumphant urban gentry have their townhouses and high-rise lofts, but the service workers who do their dirty work have to log their way by bus or car from the vast American banlieues, either in peripheral parts of the city (think of Brooklyn's impoverished fringes) or the poorer close-in suburbs... Not surprisingly, this prospect is not exciting to many Americans. So instead of heading for the blue paradises, but to lower-cost, those who move now tend towards low-cost, lower-density regions like Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Atlanta, Austin, Charlotte and Raleigh.*

I am certainly not going to deny that New York is more unequal than some Sun Belt cities, and that it has a serious affordable housing problem. But I would add that to some extent this is a happy problem: New York is more unequal because it is attractive to people who can afford to live anywhere (and who are rich enough to bid up the price of real estate) and because its economy generates vast amounts of wealth for rich people. Inequality is not a problem in places without rich people (e.g. Third World and communist economies).

On a personal note, I lived in one of Mr. Kotkin's low-cost paradises (Jacksonville, Florida) - low-cost because its blue-collar economy doesn't generate enough wealth to generate much of an upper class. Now it is even lower-cost, because like many other low-cost markets that aren't tied to the oil industry or to state capitals and universities, housing values have collapsed and even its middle-class neighborhoods are a wilderness of vacant storefronts.

I didn't live in Jacksonville because I wanted to live there; I lived there because I HAD to live there for a job. When I got a job in one of the Holy Places, I got out. Now I live where I WANT to live (or at least closer to where I want to live; I might move to Manhattan next year). For me, the Sun Belt was my internal exile, where I lived for lack of an alternative. And of course, just as the rich people bid up the price of real estate, so does the presence of me and others like me.

**By the way, if you look at the link cited by Kotkin, it doesn't prove quite everything he wants it to prove. He links to a study that is intended to show that if you adjust for cost of living, California's urban areas have higher poverty than official measures seem to suggest. According to the claims of this study, the "real" poverty rate for San Francisco is 19 percent. But even according to this study, San Francisco's poverty rate is lower than that of low-cost St. Louis, Los Angeles or New Orleans.*

Urban and Suburban Gun Issues

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 12/17/2012 - 8:52am

It seems to me that the public argument about gun control should really be two separate arguments:

1. How do we reduce gun crime generally? This argument is primarily an urban argument, to the extent that gun crime disproportionately occurs in central cities, and especially in poorer central cities such as St. Louis and Detroit.

And because gun crime tends to be committed with handguns, this is an argument about handgun control in particular, since handguns are portable and thus easily used both for crime and for self-defense. So the issues worth arguing about are: is it feasible or desirable to reduce the number of handguns in circulation? And if not, how do we keep handguns out of the hands of the most dangerous people>

2. Given that some people will always want to shoot others, how do we prevent murderers from shooting lots and lots of people at a time? As to this issue, the key issues are: given a heavily armed society, should we prohibit the guns with the most firepower, the ones that can kill dozens of people in ten minutes instead of just a few? And is there any practical way to draw a line between the first type of guns and the second?

I don't think issue 2 is an urban issue at all, because mass shootings tend to be in rural and suburban areas.*

Mind you, I'm not expressing an opinion about either (1) or (2); there are people out there who have given a lot more thought to gun issues than I, and far be it from me to tread on their turf.

*I express no opinion on why this is the case. Suffice it to say that some people think suburbia breeds mental illness, while others think that the sort of people who tend to commit these sort of crimes (white males who can afford big, expensive semiautomatic rifles) tend not to live in cities.

Yet Another Way to Look at Density

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 12/13/2012 - 9:20am

Some commentators note that the Los Angeles metropolitan area has more people per square mile than other regions, and use this alleged fact as an argument why density doesn't affect a region's level of car dependency. One region this argument is silly is that Los Angeles density is quite different from that of more transit-oriented cities. The most transit-oriented cities (New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco) have a core that is far more compact than their suburbs, while the city of Los Angeles is not significantly more dense than its suburbs.

Another way to compare densities is to look at comparable neighborhoods. Are the inner neighborhoods of car-dependent cities as compact as those of transit-oriented cities?

Answer: no. Let's start with Jacksonville (one of the most car-dependent cities in America, where [less than 2](#) percent of city residents use public transit to get to work). Two of Jacksonville's non-downtown core neighborhoods (that is, those closest to downtown) are San Marco in the south, Riverside in the west. According to city-data.com, San Marco has only 2290 people per square mile. Riverside has 3505 people per square mile.

Similarly, in San Diego just under 4 percent of commuters use transit. One of its near-downtown neighborhoods, Little Italy, has 5597 people per square mile- more than Jacksonville's more compact areas, but not much more.

Los Angeles is slightly less car-dependent, with a transit market share of just over 10 percent for city residents (as opposed to suburbanites). One of its just-outside-downtown neighborhoods, Silver Lake, has 9858 people per square mile.

In Boston, about 1/3 of city commuters use transit. Beacon Hill, an elite neighborhood just north of downtown, has 21,088 people per square mile. Washington is about as transit-oriented as Boston, and one of its just-outside-downtown neighborhoods are Dupont Circle (17,252 per square mile) and

And in New York, of course, transit usage is higher than in any of those cities- and the citywide density is higher than in any of the neighborhoods discussed above. For example, Murray Hill is just east of midtown New York City- and it has 67,775 people per square mile, three and four times the density of Washington and Boston's comparable neighborhoods.

Notice a pattern?

Of course, a more scientific survey would go through every neighborhood within a 2-mile radius of downtown. But the above data should at least give you an idea of what distinguishes the most car-oriented cities from the least car-oriented cities.

Obama, King of Sprawl

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 12/10/2012 - 1:23pm

In recent years, a variety of commentators have treated national politics as a battle between city and suburb. On the Right, some have accused President Obama of being anti-suburban. On the Left, others have emphasized the correlation between density and political liberalism.

But the 2012 Presidential election returns show a more complex picture. To be sure, in the most conservative states (especially in the South), only the most urban neighborhoods are Democratic. In swing states, however, President Obama steamrolled Republicans in much of suburbia. For example, let's look at two of the states that most closely mirrored national results: Virginia and Colorado.

President Obama of course carried the District of Columbia and its most dense Virginia suburbs. But his support extended far beyond the transit-oriented, traditionally Democratic suburbs of Arlington and Alexandria. He carried Fairfax County, home of sprawl Edge City Tyson's Corner, by about a 60-40 margin. He even carried Loudoun County, home of Dulles Airport, though by only a 51-47 margin. These suburbs are hardly urban; Loudoun County has less than 600 people per square mile, and out of Loudoun's 300,000 or so residents, only 1056 used a bus or train to get to work.

Similarly, in Colorado, Obama carried not only Denver, but all three suburban counties bordering Denver (Adams, Arapahoe, and Jefferson). All 3 counties have fewer than 800 people per square mile, and have transit market shares in the 3-4 percent range.

In both states, the Republican vote was less suburban than rural; small cities and the most remote, rural-like suburbs voted for Romney. And in both states, the Democratic strength in the suburbs is a new development. The last comparable elections were 2000 (in which George W. Bush lost the popular vote by a narrower margin than Romney) and 1992 (in which his father lost the popular vote by a slightly larger margin). In both these elections, the Republican ticket carried Fairfax and Loudoun Counties in Virginia- Fairfax narrowly, Loudoun handily. And in both these elections, the Denver suburbs were divided. Similarly, in Colorado, the Republican ticket carried two out of Denver's three major suburban counties in 1992 and 2000 (losing Adams)- but lost all three in 2000.

What's going on here? My guess is that as upper-middle-class jobs moved to suburbs, so did upper-middle-class people. And highly educated professionals have been trending towards Democrats. For example, Obama lost college graduates, but [handily won voters](#) with postgraduate degrees.

My Generation Chooses Urbanism (More Than Its Parents, Anyhow)

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 12/09/2012 - 11:55pm

While I was rummaging through some old files at my parents' house, I discovered two books that I thought were pretty interesting: the school directory for the boarding school I attended in the late 1970s, and the 1999 alumni directory for the same school.

As a new urbanist, my first thought was: I wonder where people lived then? And what have they chosen today? This was a pretty fancy boarding school so I figured its student body was a pretty good sample of people who can afford both urbanism and sprawl.

I decided upon a fairly limited sample: students in my graduating class (the class of 1980) whose addresses could be ascertained for both their school years and 1999 (by which time they were in their late 30s). I used about half the alphabet (A-K) and found 78 alumni. To simplify the inquiry, I divided addresses into cities and suburbs: a pretty simple division for older northern cities with small city limits. (For small towns and suburb-annexing cities like Charlotte, I looked at Walkscore.com to see which addresses were more urban and which more suburban)

Not surprisingly, I found that the overwhelming majority of my classmates (65 of the 78) lived in suburbs of some sort in 1980. But a big chunk of those 65 had defected to urban life by the time

they grew up: 21 of the 65 now lived in cities (or downtowns of small towns). On the other hand, 7 of my 13 urban classmates had defected to suburbs of some sort. On balance, the sample was much more urban than their parents: 27 of the 78 now lived in big cities or small-town downtowns, up from the original 13.

Gentrification and Rent- A Fuzzy Connection

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 12/04/2012 - 10:17am

One common argument for allowing cities to continue to decay or de-densify is the specter of gentrification: the fear that a retrofitted city might price out the poor.

A recent Federal Reserve [report](#) on Philadelphia is relevant. At first glance, the report seems to endorse these fears. Rents in Philadelphia have been skyrocketing as incomes have declined; thus, affordable housing is more scarce than five or ten years ago.

But if gentrification caused the problem, then we would find that the rise of rents was concentrated in metro Philadelphia's central city (Philadelphia). But this is not the case.

One measure of out-of-control rents is the share of renter households spending more than 30 percent of income on rent. In the city of Philadelphia, the percentage for all renters who paid over 30 percent of income in rent increased from 54 percent in 2005 to 57 percent in 2010- hardly good news.

But the same problems have afflicted suburbia as well. In the entire Philadelphia metro area, the percentage of overburdened renters increased from 49 to 53 percent, and each suburban county listed (Camden, Delaware, Montgomery, and New Castle Counties) experienced similar increases. In fact, in three of the four suburban counties, the percentage of overburdened renters increased faster than in Philadelphia.*

What about rents for the poor? Here, the results are more ambiguous: the Federal Reserve study breaks renters out into three groups, those earning under 30 percent of median family income, those earning 31-50 percent, and those earning 51-80 percent. In the very lowest income group, the percentage of overburdened renters actually *decreased* in city and metro area alike (though in both places, over 80 percent of renters paid over 30 percent of income in rent). In the 31-50% category, the percentage of renters who were so burdened increased in both city (from 74 to 77 percent) and metro area (from 77 to 81 percent). Only in the 51-80 percent category did the percentage of overburdened renters increase faster in Philadelphia than in its suburbs.

In sum, rent did become less affordable in the late 2000s- but no more rapidly in Philadelphia than in its suburbs.

*The relevant percentages: from 49 to 53 percent in Camden County, from 46 to 50 in Delaware County, from 43 to 44 in Montgomery County, and 45 to 52 in New Castle County.

Against "Community Character"

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 12/03/2012 - 9:25am

In an interesting [article](#) entitled "The Case for Listening to NIMBYs", Kaid Benfield mentions "that municipal planners would benefit by being more sensitive to building types that fit well with existing neighborhood character." He writes that pro-infill planners should encourage such infill to be consistent with the character of the existing neighborhood. Of course, he has a point: if a landowner wants to add housing units to a neighborhood, everyone is happier if those housing units look like existing housing.

But I would limit this principle in a couple of ways. First of all, neighborhood character often stinks. Thanks to decades of auto-oriented zoning and transportation planning, the neighborhood character of most of America is auto-dependent sprawl. If we think auto-dependent sprawl stinks, we need to change neighborhood character rather than accommodate it. (Or, if we are more libertarian-minded, allow developers to do so).

Second, even in walkable places, any new building is by definition a (small) change in neighborhood character. If you believe that new housing should go in existing neighborhoods, you are for changing neighborhood character. (And even if you are for sprawl, you are for changing neighborhood character- but you want to change it in different places). We can soften those changes by requiring new infill to look as much like current housing as possible- but we are not going to satisfy those who insist on the status quo in the name of "neighborhood character."

The Onion or San Francisco Chronicle? Hard to Tell the Difference

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 11/28/2012 - 2:10pm

Today's headline: "[S.F. Called Model For Affordable Housing](#)."

Really? The same San Francisco where the average house is worth over [\\$800,000](#) (about eleven times the median household income)? At first glance, the story seems at least as insane as any of the comedy stories on the [Onion](#).

But seriously, the newspaper story goes on to explain that San Francisco is a role model because its taxpayers spend a lot of money on affordable housing.

What's wrong with this logic? It assumes that "affordable housing" is only a problem for a few poor people, and thus is easily solved by throwing public money at housing programs that benefit a small minority of the public. But where housing is as expensive as in San Francisco, even the middle class cannot afford to live there, let alone the working poor- and as a result, people other than the wealthy and the residents of low-income housing are forced to drive to suburbia to seek affordable housing. In that situation, affordable housing is a problem not just for a poor, but for most people.

So can we do about the San Franciscos of the world? The sprawl lobby answer is to build lots of highways to suburbia: suburbs become affordable as real estate is opened up for development, while cities became affordable because they are deserted, terrible places to live (as are the most affordable parts of Rust Belt cities like Detroit, Cleveland and St. Louis).

Sprawl creates affordable housing, but only by imposing heavy social costs on Americans forced to drive, on those trapped in dying neighborhoods, and on the physical environment.

What's the new urbanist alternative? Like the sprawl lobby, urbanists should support building lots of housing units to keep prices down- but those housing units should be in walkable urbanism instead of in sprawling suburbia.

Where Republicans Carried the City Vote

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 11/26/2012 - 11:29am

Today's New York Times has an interesting graphic showing the [precinct-by-precinct vote](#) in this year's Presidential election. Although Republican nominee Mitt Romney did very poorly in Manhattan and in most of New York City, he carried numerous outer borough precincts.

You might think, based on the amount of [internet chatter](#) about the relationship between density and political ideology, that only the least dense, most suburb-like parts of the city voted Republican. But in fact this was sometimes not the case. For example, areas dominated by Orthodox Jews (who tend to be hawkish and to view Obama as insufficiently pro-Israel) voted overwhelmingly Republican. Kew Gardens Hills (21,934 people per square mile, pretty close to the citywide average) voted Republican, as did Borough Park (47,520 per square mile). By contrast, the easternmost, most suburban edges of Queens voted narrowly for Obama, as did Staten Island (which has one-fifth the density of Borough Park). And the heavily black and very suburb-like southeastern edges of Queens voted overwhelmingly for Obama, just like Maryland's sprawling, majority-black Prince George's County (which gave Romney only 9.3% of its votes).

What's my broader point here? I think this illustrates that density per se is not necessarily a major factor in voting. Race, religion, and age matter more.

Smart Growth In Not-So-Dumb Places

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 11/24/2012 - 9:01pm

Not long ago, Brigham Young's law review published a provocative article entitled "[Smart Growth in Dumb Places](#)." The basic theory of the article is that building near the water is dangerous, and where downtowns are near the water, infill development is thus dangerous.

The article's premise is interesting in theory. But it does seem to be contradicted by the evidence. In my lifetime, I have lived through two major natural disasters: Hurricane Andrew (in Miami) and Superstorm Sandy (in New York).

Andrew was expected to be most harmful in coastal areas, and so residents of those areas were told to evacuate. But in fact, the storm's greatest impact was from wind rather than water: the wind destroyed tens of thousands of homes not in downtown Miami, but in the region's

sprawling southern suburbs, from Kendall (where the city's Metro Rail system ends) to Homestead 30 miles south of Miami.

Sandy did create some flooding and power outages in lower Manhattan- but by and large, lower Manhattan was up and running after a week or two. Within the city of New York, 43 people died in the storm: 23 were in suburban Staten Island, and only two in Manhattan. The southernmost (and thus most suburban) areas of Brooklyn and Queens were also hard-hit.

How come both storms primarily affected suburbia? Andrew created more wind damage than water damage; thus, proximity to the coast was simply not a major risk factor for damage. It may be too early to fully analyze why some places suffered more than others this month. One factor favoring Manhattan is that Sandy's storm surges drowned single-family homes, but was obviously less dangerous to Manhattan mid-and high-rises where people could retreat to higher floors.

What I Am Thankful For

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 11/22/2012 - 10:07am

Since today is Thanksgiving, I thought I would post about what I am thankful for (instead of complaining as usual about what I am **not** thankful for):

I am thankful that in the year 2012, urbanism is, in some ways, winning over sprawl: (some) cities are being repopulated, transit ridership is rising, and "urban" is no longer a dirty word in popular culture to the extent that it was a decade or two ago.

I am thankful that I live in a revitalized city (New York) rather than a city that is still declining.

I am thankful that I can walk to the park and the grocery store.

I am thankful for the subway- both for its ability to withstand natural disaster and for the fact that it runs 24 hours a day (instead of until 8:30 like the municipal bus system in the last city I lived in).

Nonsense about Nixon and Reagan

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 11/14/2012 - 11:33am

A recent [article](#) in the New Republic has the reassuring (to me) headline: "Republicans Can't Afford to Ignore Cities Anymore." I'm certainly all for Republicans not ignoring cities, but there was a passage in the article that made me want to bang my head against the nearest brick wall.

"Kevin Phillips' seminal 1969 book [The Emerging Republican Majority](#) outlined a "southern strategy" to wrest white people away from the Democrats—by demonizing the black inner cities. [One academic commented] "If you look at who he's talking to, it's a 'suburban strategy,'" ... The approach was validated in 1980, when Ronald Reagan won the presidency without carrying a single major city. From then on, the GOP and cities seemed to be antithetical..."

The article's implication is that Republicans were doing fine in cities until 1968, and then Nixon and Reagan alienated city residents with antiurban policies. But in fact, Nixon and Reagan did much better in cities than Romney or other recent Republican nominees.

For example, John McCain got only 16.3% of votes in the city of Philadelphia, and Mitt Romney did even worse (14%). By contrast, Reagan got 34% of the city vote in both 1980 and 1984, and Nixon got almost 30% in the 1968 three-way race and 43.9% in 1972. The Nixon/Reagan vote was an improvement over the Republican showing in 1960 (31.7%) and 1964 (26.2%).

Philadelphia is not alone. In San Francisco, the Nixon/Reagan share of the city vote ranged from 31.4% (Reagan '84) to 41% (Nixon '72), more than twice Mitt Romney's 13% share of the city vote. ([More data at USA Election Atlas](#), if you're interested in digging deeper).

What changed? That's a subject for another essay. My conjecture: I don't think voters are really all that obsessed with whether a candidate is addressing urban (or suburban) issues. Instead, I think that the white working/lower-middle class (which has been [trending towards Republicans](#) over the years) moved to suburbs, while whites with postgraduate educations (who have been trending towards Democrats) have moved to cities. But that's a subject for another blog post.

The Real Swing Voters

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 11/10/2012 - 9:46pm

My sense is that the conventional political wisdom is that urban voters are Democrats, rural voters are Republicans and suburbanites are in the middle.

New York certainly shows not only that this is the case, but that this is far more true than a few decades ago. For example, let's compare the 1976 and 2012 presidential elections, both narrowly lost by Republicans. In 1976, the GOP vote in the four urban boroughs of New York City (excepting more suburban Staten Island) ranged from 25.5 percent (Manhattan) to 38.9 percent (Queens). President Ford carried both Westchester County and Long Island's two counties with percentages ranging from 51.8 (Nassau) to 54.3 (Westchester). By contrast, by 2012 Republican support in the four boroughs had collapsed; in the most Republican urban borough, Queens, Gov. Romney only got 20.3 percent of the vote. Republican support also nosedived in suburbia: Romney received only 38.3 percent of Westchester's votes, and lost Long Island by a somewhat narrower margin.

This does not mean, however, that suburbanites are necessarily "swing voters", in the sense of people whose votes change from election to election. Between 2004 (the last Presidential election in which a Republican won nationwide) and 2012, the Republican vote share decreased by only 0.4 percent in Long Island's Nassau County (from 46.6 to 46.2), 0.5 in Suffolk (from 48.5 to 48.0), and 2.1 in Westchester (from 40.3 to 38.2).

By contrast, Republican losses were larger in parts of urban New York City: the Republicans lost 6.7 percent in Brooklyn (going from 24.3 in 2004 to 17.6 in 2012), 8.2 in the Bronx (going from 16.5 to 8.3), and 7.2 in Queens (from 27.5 to 20.3). (Manhattan was more consistent, giving President Bush 16.7 percent of the vote, only 2.3 percent more than Romney).

Philadelphia's trends were pretty similar. The Republican vote share in Philadelphia has rapidly declined over the years, from 32 percent in 1976 to 19.3 percent in 2004 to 14 percent in 2012. Republicans have also nosedived in the suburbs but somewhat less rapidly. In affluent, inner suburban Montgomery County, Republicans declined from 56 percent of the vote in 1976 to 44 percent in 2004 to 42.4 percent this year. In exurban Chester County, the decline was slightly more gradual: from 60.4 percent in 1976 to 52 percent in 2004 to 49.7 percent this year. Again, note that the Republican losses since 2004 were greater in Philadelphia than in the suburbs.

So in a sense, urbanites were the real swing voters.

The News from Sprawl is not Good

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 11/02/2012 - 8:01am

Given the widespread public transit closings in the 48 hours before Hurricane Sandy, it could be argued that one advantage of a car-centric society is that cars enable quick evacuation (assuming that people aren't stuck in traffic).

On the other hand, New Yorkers are learning that their cars might be useless after a hurricane. Sandy damaged ports and oil refineries, thus keeping gasoline away from gas

stations, thus causing a [gasoline shortage](#). To make matters worse, many suburban gas stations are closed due to lack of power.

Taller Buildings = More Storm Safety (Up to a Point)

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 10/31/2012 - 11:14am

Hurricane Sandy is over (at least as far as we New Yorkers are concerned) and commentators are already beginning to discuss its meaning for urbanism-- for example, whether coastal cities like New York may have to [do more](#) to protect their citizens.

But one area in which New York City has an advantage over suburbs and less compact cities is its ample supply of multi-story buildings. Why does that matter? Because in this storm, the most dangerous indoor spaces were basements and single-family homes.

Most indoor fatalities seem to have [involved](#) people who (1) drowned or (2) were crushed by falling trees- both of which are less likely in multi-story structures. If you are on the first floor of a single-family house or garden apartment (let alone a basement, which seems to have been the most [dangerous](#) indoor space during the storm), the only way to escape flooding by going to higher ground is to leave your house and risk your life going outside. By contrast, if you in a multistory apartment building, you can escape to higher ground just by climbing the stairs.

And in a multistory building, your danger from falling trees is less significant as well: unless you are the top floor, a falling tree is unlikely to hit you- and if you are on the top floor, you may well be above the nearest tree. By contrast, if you are in a single-story house or apartment, the only thing between you and a tree is the ceiling- which is not always enough protection. (For examples of tree-related indoor deaths, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

In sum, New York's mid- and high-rise structure wasn't enough to prevent an economic disaster- but if New York had been a low-rise city like New Orleans, more people probably would have died.

This does not mean that cities need more skyscrapers: it seems to me that the benefits discussed above exist even for a three-or four-story building.* But it does mean that low-rise sprawl is not the safest place to be in a storm.

*Assuming, of course, that nothing above the first story of a building is flooded.

Sprawl and Obesity, Part 2

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 10/29/2012 - 5:38pm

After yesterday's [post](#) on obesity in New York, I thought I would do some more research comparing obesity in cities and suburbs, focusing on central cities that (a) were coterminous with their counties (so I could find obesity statistics for cities alone) and (b) were sufficiently transit-oriented and compact that city residents might be more physically active than suburbanites. The results were mixed.

The more affluent cities seem to me to be thinner than their suburbs. For example, in San Francisco the obesity rate among adults is 16.1% - less than any suburban county, even affluent Marin County (17.1%), inner-ring San Mateo County (16.9%) or Silicon Valley's Santa Clara (19%). (Alameda and Contra Costa Counties also had higher obesity rates than San Francisco).

In Washington, D.C. which has significantly more poverty than San Francisco but also enclaves of great wealth, the results were more mixed. The District of Columbia's 22 percent obesity level was higher than that of some suburbs but lower than that of others. In particular, the suburbs with strong Metro Rail service tended to have the lowest obesity rates: Montgomery County's 18.8 percent was as low as some San Francisco suburbs, and Arlington and Alexandria, two rail-heavy Virginia suburbs, had obesity rates of 20.7 and 21.4 percent respectively.

On the other hand, Fairfax County (which has a couple of Metro stops but is generally more car-dependent than Montgomery or Arlington) has an obesity rate about the same as the District (22.2%). Exurbs, by contrast, tend to be fatter than the District. Affluent but rail-less Loudoun County has a 23 percent obesity rate, outer suburb Howard County clocks in at 23.9%, and Prince William County's obesity rate is a disappointing 28.2%. In sum, inner suburbs with good transit service were thinner than the city of Washington, but the most car-oriented suburbs were not.

In declining or poorer cities, however, cities were actually fatter than suburbs. Despite recent gentrification, Philadelphia's median household income is only about \$37,000, less than 2/3 that of the District of Columbia. Like many low-income cities, Philadelphia has weighty obesity issues (pun intended); 29.1% of its adults were obese, far more than in any close-in suburban county. (Chester, Montgomery, Camden and Delaware Counties all had obesity rates in the 22-26 percent range).

I also looked at two cities that (unlike Philadelphia and Washington) have lost population even in recent decades: Baltimore and St. Louis. Both cities have obesity rates over 30 percent- partially because these cities are more car-oriented than Washington or Philadelphia. Even their suburbs are fatter than those of the transit-oriented cities discussed above. Baltimore's suburbs of

Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, and Harford County all have obesity rates in the 25-27 percent range, a little higher than that of most Washington, Philadelphia or San Francisco suburbs. Similarly, St. Louis County and St. Charles County near St. Louis both have obesity rates of around 28 percent.

(Note: all of my statistics come from [City Data](#)).

Sprawl and Obesity: NYC As a Case Study

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 10/28/2012 - 8:22pm

The [City Data](#) web page contains, among other things, county-by-county statistics on obesity. Because each New York borough is a county, I thought that looking at New York might be more informative than looking at other metro areas where a county can include a wide range of cities and suburbs.

Manhattan (New York County) is especially instructive. In Manhattan, the obesity rate is only 15.4 percent- well below the state average of 23.8 percent.

Suburban areas suffer somewhat more from obesity: inner-ring Westchester County, which includes many of the region's more affluent suburbs, has an obesity rate of only 19.1 percent. Nassau County's obesity rate is 20.9 percent, while further-out suburbs (Suffolk, Dutchess, Putnam, and Rockland Counties) have obesity rates in the 23-25 percent range.

But on the other hand, New York's outer boroughs have obesity rates as high as those of the suburbs: the Bronx's obesity rate is over 25 percent, and the other three boroughs (Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island) have obesity rates in the 23-25 percent range. What's going on?

Here's my educated guess: both poverty and sprawl correlate with obesity. Manhattan is richer than the other boroughs and pedestrian-oriented, and thus has the least obesity. The outer suburbs have sprawl but wealth (and thus moderate levels of obesity) and the outer boroughs are less sprawling than the suburbs and poorer than Manhattan (and thus also an equivalent amount of obesity). Inner ring suburbs are as well off as outer suburbs and less car dependent than outer suburbs, and thus have less obesity than outer suburbs. In other words, obesity, at least in New York, is a function of wealth (or the lack thereof) and sprawl.

No rural place in New York is as poor as the Bronx- but nationwide the highest levels of obesity are in poor counties and the [rural South](#). For example, Greene County, Alabama has only 14 people per square mile, a 34 percent poverty rate, and a 43 percent obesity rate- a perfect storm of car dependence and poverty.

Is New York Really Cheaper than Miami?

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 10/26/2012 - 9:45am

The Center for Neighborhood Technology recently issued a [report](#) suggesting that compact cities with high housing costs (such as New York or San Francisco) might actually be less expensive than otherwise cheaper but car-dependent areas such as South Florida and Southern California. As provocative as this report is, it seems at first glance to be the opposite of my own personal experience: I am definitely saving less in New York than I was in Jacksonville. How come?

*I don't work downtown. If I worked in the urban core I could take a subway to work, and the subway is of course far cheaper than car ownership. But because my job is in sprawl, I have to spend about \$200-300 per month in commuter train fare, which means I am not much better off than if I had brought my car to New York.

*I am in a business where wages don't keep pace with the cost of living. I earn about 30 percent more in nominal dollars than in Jacksonville- an amount quickly swallowed up by taxes and rent. But in some occupations, wage differentials are much greater; for example, in the finance industry New Yorkers probably earn far more, if only because there are occupations in New York that probably don't exist in Jacksonville.

This doesn't mean that CNT's insights are misguided; it does mean, however, that your occupation and where you work within a city may affect your prosperity more than what city you live in. And in particular, "job sprawl" to suburbia means that even if you live in an urban area you may be subjected to suburban-style transportation costs.

Sprawl and Postwar Growth

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 10/24/2012 - 9:51pm

I just read the "Curbside Chat" booklet on the [Strong Towns](#) blog and found one observation that surprised me. The booklet notes that after World War II, there was some public concern about the possibility of another Great Depression, "but another 'spatial fix' prevented that from happening... Only through the deployment of resources in building this new living arrangement was the United States able to sustain the demand needed to stabilize prices and grow the economy." In other words, midcentury sprawl kept the economy afloat.

But Europe and Japan had far more balanced development patterns- and yet European and Japanese economies grew more rapidly than the United States. For example, [in 1950](#) American per capita GNP was about 7 percent higher than that of Switzerland, about 60 percent higher than that of the Netherlands or France, and five times that of Japan. In [1973](#), after a quarter-century of sprawl, U.S. per capita GNP had fallen behind that of Switzerland, was only about 30 percent higher than that of France and the Netherlands, and was only about 50 percent higher than Japan. Admittely, some of these countries were growing from a very low base due to World War II-induced devastation- but this was not true of Switzerland (which was not bombed or invaded during World War II).

If the United States grew less rapidly than less automobile-oriented nations, what evidence is there for saying that sprawl was necessary for postwar growth?

Downtown Revival: Where It Happened, Where It Didn't

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 10/15/2012 - 1:01pm

The Census Bureau recently issued a [report](#) on population patterns in metropolitan areas. Most of the report is about metro-wide population patterns generally, as opposed to urban cores. However, page 27 of the report caught my eye. This table refers to "Percentage Change in Population in Metropolitan Statistical Areas by Distance From City Hall and Population Size Category: 2000 to 2010." In other words, it allows us to see whether intown areas are growing, rather than having to rely on the blunt instrument of citywide population. (The latter is a questionable tool because some cities encompass only a few dozen square miles, while others encompass hundreds).

Reviewing this data, we find that all types of neighborhoods gained population overall, but suburbs grew more rapidly than either downtowns or other intown areas. This pattern, however, masked a difference between the largest metro areas and smaller regions.

In metro areas with over 5 million people, downtowns (that is, areas within 2 miles of City Hall) grew almost as rapidly as exurbs. Downtown population grew by 13.3 percent, while the highest-growth exurban category (60+ miles away) grew by 17.2 percent. However, intown areas (between 2 and 9 miles from City Hall) actually lost population. A roughly similar pattern occurred in regions with 2.5-5 million people; downtowns gained population but not as rapidly (6.5 percent), areas just outside downtown lost people, and areas further out gained people.

By contrast, smaller metro areas continued to suburbanize. In regions with between 1 and 2.5 million people (including such Rust Belt metro areas as Buffalo and Cleveland) the average downtown actually lost a little population (1.4 percent over the decade). Areas 2-4 miles from City Hall also lost population. However, areas 5 or more miles out gained population- not just the outer suburbs 10-20 miles out (the biggest gainers) but, to a lesser extent, the inner suburbs 5-10 miles out.

I look forward to seeing further research. In particular I am curious about: (1) whether the "true" downtown (within a mile or even less of City Hall) showed different patterns than areas 1-2 miles out, and (2) whether some types of cities showed more of a downtown/intown revival than others.

Let LA be LA (And New York, And Cleveland...)

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 10/14/2012 - 12:56pm

I recently read a blog post asserting that Los Angeles must be a suburban city, because ["what makes LA LA is that people do want to live in a suburban environment."](#) Since I don't live in Los Angeles (and have never been tempted to move there) perhaps this is none of my business.

But it seems to me that a city as large as Los Angeles (or even, for that matter, as large as Cleveland or St. Louis) should offer a variety of living arrangements. Some people will want big houses, some people will want small houses, some people will want garden apartments, some people will want high-rises, and so forth.

Contrary to what some people might believe, that's the way things are here in New York where I live. Even in Manhattan not everyone lives in a high-rise; plenty of people live in rowhouses (though admittedly detached single-family homes are hard to come by). But if you want a

single-family house with a yard, it is simply not true that you have to move to Los Angeles to get home. All you need do is move to my neighborhood in Queens (and of course suburbs as well). A city with millions of people has room to accommodate all of these preferences.

So if the current residents of Los Angeles want to live in houses, they should be able to buy them. But that doesn't mean they should use zoning to prevent the city's future residents (or the non-homeowner minority of current residents) from choosing other options.

Nonsense About the City

Submitted by MLewyn on Sat, 10/13/2012 - 10:54pm

As I was reviewing the Planetizen web page, I noticed a bizarre headline: "[Are Cities Driving Us Crazy?](#)" I then clicked the link, finding a story in Nature magazine: "[Stress and the City](#)". The article suggests that the stress of city life is a "breeding ground for psychosis."

And the evidence for this is, um, um... well, nothing. The article begins with a study stating that schizophrenia had increased in one London neighborhood between 1965 and 1997- one neighborhood in just one city, hardly proof of anything about city life generally.

If the neighborhood, Camberwell, had urbanized between 1965 and 1997, this fact might provide just a tiny bit of evidence for the article's claim. But in fact Camberwell is one of London's venerable urban neighborhoods. It follows that if Camberwell had become more stressful, this shows only that one urban neighborhood had become more stressful, not that urban life is always stressful.

The article also claims that in Germany, the number of sick days taken for psychiatric ailments doubled between 2000 and 2010. Since not everyone in Germany lives in cities, this fact is simply irrelevant to the article's claim.

Finally, the article cites a study with only 55 volunteers, in which volunteers were given arithmetic problems and constantly given negative social feedback. Urban residents apparently were more unhappy with the results. The Nature story does not tell us how many of the 55 were urbanites; however, it seems to me common sense that any study with less than 55 people has little probative value, just as an opinion poll with a few dozen respondents would be worthless. Furthermore, saying that "city residents don't like to be insulted" (the apparent result of the 55-person study) is quite different from saying "city residents are psychotic. "

On the other hand, maybe the article is right. I live in New York City, and certainly had negative brain activity after reading this article.

The (Not Quite So) Suburban Jewish Holiday

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 10/12/2012 - 12:22am

I have [written](#) about the uneasy relationship between Judaism and suburbanization: low density makes it difficult for Jews to live within walking distance of synagogues and generally makes it difficult to create a cohesive community.

But the holiday of Sukkot (which I just finished observing) may seem at first glance to create a counterexample. During this holiday, Jews should eat meals in a hut called a [sukkah](#). This is obviously not so easy where (as in my neighborhood) most people live in apartment buildings, since you cannot easily create a sukkah inside, and most apartments in my neighborhood do not have balconies. Most synagogues have enough space for a sukkah- but I suspect that in denser areas such as parts of Manhattan, even this might not always be possible. Thus, it seems that apartment-dominated neighborhoods are not the easiest place to observe Sukkot.

It does not follow, however, that sukkahs are only viable in suburban sprawl. In the heavily Jewish Queens neighborhood of [Kew Gardens Hills](#), two-family residences seem to be the dominant form of housing. Because it is much easier to build a sukkah in the back (or front) of a duplex than it is in an apartment building, sukkahs seem to be quite common in Kew Gardens Hills.

But Kew Gardens Hills is hardly typical sprawl; it has just over 21,000 people per square mile (more than any American city outside New York) and only about half of its residents drive to work (despite the fact that the neighborhood's core is about a 30 minute walk from the nearest subway stop). Thus, the apparently high number of sukkahs in Kew Gardens Hills is evidence that Sukkot coexists well with low-rise urbanism.

Compact Cities Have Fewer Car Deaths

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 09/27/2012 - 8:49am

When traffic engineers widen roads and build new roads, they often cite "safety" as an argument. Under this theory, the widest, straightest, fastest roads are the safest. If this were true, car-oriented cities dominated by such roads would be safer than more compact, transit-oriented cities. Right? Wrong.

I tested the theory by going to city-data.com and examining traffic fatality rates for two groups of large cities: large cities where over 20 percent of workers use public transit (Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, and Boston- for some reason the website lacked data for New York and Washington) and for the largest cities where under 10 percent of workers use public transit (Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego and Dallas).

The four "transit cities" consistently had lower fatality rates than state and national averages: Boston (the safest) had only 3.8 traffic deaths per 100,000 per year between 2005 and 2009. San Francisco (at 5.0), Chicago (at 6.3) and Philadelphia (at 6.6) were slightly less safe.

The largest "car cities" did not do so well: the safest, San Diego, had 7.1 fatalities per 100,000 people in the average late 2000s year, slightly more than any of the transit cities. The others were significantly worse: San Antonio averaged 9.4 traffic fatalities per 100,000, Houston 9.8, Dallas 10.8, and Phoenix 12.3.

One might think that the car cities are more dangerous for pedestrians but not for motorists and their passengers. But even when pedestrian fatalities are excluded, the car cities do worse. The compact cities' non-pedestrian fatality rates ranged from 2.4 per 100,000 per year (Boston) to 3.9 (Chicago and Philadelphia). The car cities' non-pedestrian fatality rates ranged from 5 (San Diego) to 8.2 (Phoenix). Even the most dangerous compact city was safer for non-pedestrians than the safest of the larger car cities. I suspect that this is probably due to road design: in car cities, streets are more likely to be designed for higher speeds, which means that crashes are more likely to be fatal.

It seems to be pretty [well settled](#) that car cities are more dangerous for pedestrians; but when driver fatalities are included, such cities are on balance more dangerous for everyone.

Conservatives, Liberals and Urbanists

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 09/25/2012 - 1:29pm

After reading all manner of political posts on Facebook and various listservs, it occurs to me that conservatives and liberals are more alike than they think. Both groups are driven in part by an emotional fear of concentrated power - sometimes sensible, sometimes not. Conservatives fear being oppressed or cheated by overwhelming, distant political power- for example, the federal government or the United Nations. Liberals and environmentalists fear concentrated corporate power- for example, Wal-Mart.

So for example, liberals find it easy to accept scientists' suggestions that fossil fuel emissions causes climate change because they are more likely to fear generally that big scary corporations are poisoning us; climate change fits nicely into this framework. By contrast, conservatives fear that climate change will become an excuse for overbearing government regulation.

What does this have to do with new urbanism? Urbanists have trouble plugging into the power grid of conservative emotion, because even though urbanists do suffer from pro-sprawl government regulation, anti-urbanist regulation usually comes from NIMBY-oriented local government rather than from centralized power on high. So even if urbanists can rationally persuade conservatives that sprawl is caused by government, they cannot easily do so in a way that ignites conservative emotions.

What about liberals? On the one hand, small-scale walkable urbanism sounds more appealing to corporation-fearing liberals than does big-box sprawl. But fighting bureaucratic NIMBYism is hardly likely to get liberal juices flowing to the same extent as fighting corporate power. So my sense is the smart growth/transit/urbanism complex of issues is more likely to attract passive support from liberals than fervent enthusiasm.

Children Have More Freedom in the City

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 09/11/2012 - 9:24am

Two phrases you might hear from parents who live in sprawl:

1. "We moved so our kids could play on the lawn."
2. "We can't let the kids go outside because there are molesters/crazy drivers everywhere."

I don't see how both these propositions can be true. If you can't let your children play on the lawn, what's the point in having one? And as a practical matter, I think #1 is outdated because (in my limited experience with nieces) the children would really rather be inside playing video games anyhow.

More broadly, my experience is that children in urban areas (outside the worst, most crime-ridden areas) actually have more freedom. In the suburban area where I grew up (and the similar suburban area where my nephew grew up), I never see children outside because no one other than the occasional dog walker or the most hardened cyclist goes outside except in a car: everyone drives or is driven.

By contrast, in middle-class urban neighborhoods (especially high-birthrate areas such as the Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods of New York's outer boroughs) I see children running around fairly frequently.

Getting Multifamily Right in Forest Hills Gardens

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 09/07/2012 - 3:55pm

I was walking through Forest Hills Gardens today, and noticed yet another way in which Forest Hills Gardens is superior to a typical steetcar suburb. In most neighborhoods that have a variety of housing types, smaller residences are quite visibly different from bigger ones, thus maing the smaller houses look out of place.

The designers of Forest Hills Gardens found a way to make more affordable housing fit in with the rest of the neighborhood. Instead of having small dwellings that look small and cheap compared to the neighborhood's mansions, or apartment houses that tower over the mansions, Forest Hills Gardens has rowhouses and duplexes that are about the same height and have about the same "look" as single family homes. So at first glance, you might confuse them with mansions. The only thing that reminds you otherwise are the multiple doors. For example, go to Google Street View and look at the duplex at [76 Greenway North](#), or the rowhouses at [210 Burns Street](#).

A Nice Middle Ground

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 09/05/2012 - 8:31pm



I was reading a book ("A Modern Arcadia" by Susan Klaus) about [Forest Hills Gardens](#) (a neighborhood in Queens a few blocks south of my current apartment in northern Forest Hills, designed in the 1910s by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr) and noticed one thing I'd never noticed before: that it creates an interesting middle ground between the curvilinear streets typical of even 1920s suburbs and the urban grid. North-south streets such as Ascan and Continental Avenues create the bones of a grid, while the east-west streets are a mix of east-west curvilinear streets connecting Ascan and Continental with the neighborhood's eastern edge, one-block streets connecting the curvilinear streets with each other, and even the occasional cul-de-sac, creating an oasis for people who want the (real or imagined) privacy of cul-de-sacs. (See map [here](#)).

But the cul-de-sacs are so short that one is never far from a grid; thus, even someone who lives on a cul-de-sac can walk from one residential street to another without having to go through the neighborhood's commercial center (unlike [where I used to live](#) in Florida, where trips from one subdivision to another often required visiting the neighborhood's eight-lane commercial street).

So what Forest Hills Gardens tells us is: you don't need a pure grid for walkability; a few curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs are OK as long as they don't dominate the landscape.

I also discovered that when it was built, Forest Hills Gardens was subjected to the same kind of criticism as today's New Urbanist developments: critics described it as too artificial (or in Klaus's words, "like a stage set for an operetta") and too expensive (since it was clearly not a working-class community).

Good News and Bad News About Carmel

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/23/2012 - 11:17am

The most recent "Better! Cities and Towns" has a [glowing](#) profile of Carmel, Indiana, an Indianapolis suburb that has rebuilt its downtown.

Carmel illustrates some new urbanist successes and some of our challenges as well. On the positive side, their downtown (or at least one address I picked out) has a [Walkscore](#) of 74: pretty impressive for a suburb of a pretty car-oriented city. On the other hand, the town's overall Walkscore is a dreadful 27, and there is no bus service to downtown except for ["rush hour only"](#) express service.

CNU CITY SPOTLIGHT: Pedestrian Plaza in Jackson Heights, Queens

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/20/2012 - 9:54am



This post is part of a new series on the CNU Salons, CITY SPOTLIGHT. City Spotlight shines a light on the latest news, developments and initiatives occurring in cities and towns where CNU members live and work.

The below post is a City Spotlight on the Jackson Heights neighborhood in Queens, NYC, and comes courtesy of longtime CNU member and assistant professor at Touro

Law Center, Mike Lewyn.

Jackson Heights is a neighborhood in Northwestern Queens, mostly built in the 1920s to take advantage of the extension of the New York subway to this part of Queens. The community was initially planned as a “garden suburb” for middle- and upper-income commuters. 74th Street, one of the main streets of Jackson Heights, is dominated by shops appealing to the neighborhood’s large South Asian community (that is, people with roots in India, Pakistan and nearby nations).

Until 2011, the intersection of 73rd Street and 37th Road, near one of the neighborhood’s subway stops, was plagued with traffic and with traffic accidents. New York City’s Department of Transportation sought to eliminate this problem by eliminating the traffic- in particular, to create a one-block pedestrian plaza on 37th Road.

The mall has been quite controversial. Although it has received some favorable press coverage (most notably on streetsblog.org), newspaper coverage of the plaza has been quite critical. Stories by neighborhood and citywide newspapers have emphasized merchants’ complaints that the plaza’s street furniture attracts panhandlers and drunks, and that the elimination of car traffic, bus traffic, and parking spaces deprived the merchants of customers. I visited the plaza recently, and what I saw was somewhere in between those extremes: I saw a couple of down-and-outers, but many solid citizens; on the other hand, the plaza seemed to me to be slightly less busy than nearby commercial streets.

Why hasn’t the plaza been more successful? What separates this plaza from successful pedestrian malls such as Miami Beach’s Lincoln Road, or from the successful pedestrian islands near Manhattan’s Times Square? I can’t say for sure, but I do have a few possible explanations:

*Most pedestrian malls (both successful and otherwise) are in downtowns, creating a guaranteed source of visitors, at least during daytime office hours. Others are in places that would be tourist destinations even in the absence of a pedestrian mall (e.g. Miami Beach, Times Square). By contrast, Jackson Heights is just one middle-class area among many in Queens.

*Most pedestrian malls are at least a few blocks long, and thus have a critical mass of stores that might attract customers. By contrast, the Jackson Heights plaza’s stores are merely a drop in the bucket of Jackson Heights commerce, so you wouldn’t go there unless you really wanted the “pedestrian mall” experience.

*Many pedestrian malls are in cities more car-dependent than New York. I’m not sure whether this factor helps the Jackson Heights plaza. Here’s why: in car-dependent Denver or Miami, a pedestrian mall is such a novelty that people may want to visit it to get an experience that they cannot get in most parts of the otherwise car-clogged city or region. By contrast, in Jackson Heights less than ¼ of commuters drive alone to work, so walking is not such an exciting and unusual experience. Moreover, the nearest commercial strip, 37th Avenue, is full of interesting South Asian-oriented businesses, so the pedestrian mall has lots of competition.

Another possible problem with the mall is its purpose. Larger pedestrian malls are usually created in order to make a downtown busier and/or more walkable. By contrast, much of the

press coverage of the plaza suggests that the city was motivated in large part by congestion concerns- not always the wisest reason for an urban policy decision, since the city's desire to reduce congestion might not be completely consistent with its desire to bring commerce to a neighborhood.

The city is trying to save the plaza by cleaning more regularly and installing security cameras.

Photo: Photo: Marcus Woollen/Flickr, courtesy, Streetsblog

Who Should Really Favor "Burning Down The Suburbs"?

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 08/15/2012 - 8:20am

National Review's website contains an article accusing President Obama of "[Burning Down the Suburbs](#)." The article's basic claim is in the first paragraph: *"Obama is a longtime supporter of 'regionalism,' the idea that the suburbs should be folded into the cities, merging schools, housing, transportation, and above all taxation."*

Since the federal government has zero power over municipal boundaries, this argument is at some variance with factual reality.

But let's look at the substantive issue instead: let's imagine that instead of being President Obama, we were talking about Governor Obama. Suppose Gov. Obama wants Chicago to annex its suburbs. Is this really something conservatives or Republicans should oppose?

I'm not so sure. In many Sun Belt cities, cities have been able to annex their suburbs to a much greater extent than in Rust Belt states like Illinois; for example, Jacksonville encompasses 800 square miles. But these cities are hardly liberal-dominated dens of redistribution. Jacksonville has had Republican mayors for most of the past twenty years (though a split in the Republican Party caused a Democratic upset in 2011). Dallas had a Republican mayor until 2011. San Diego and Oklahoma City currently have Republican mayors, and Charlotte's Republican ex-mayor Patrick McCrory is likely to become governor. Even Democrats in these cities are often more conservative than Democrats in 40-square-mile cities; for example, Jacksonville's Alvin Brown won Republican votes by running as an anti-tax moderate. Such super-cities" tend, I think, to be less tax-happy than cities which (like New York) are stuck in their 1950 boundaries.

In sum, conservatives may actually benefit politically when suburban and urban areas are politically integrated. Canada's Conservatives actually realize this, which is why in the 1990s Ontario's [Tory provincial government](#) forced Toronto to merge with many of its suburbs (against furious left-wing opposition). As a result, Toronto has a right-wing mayor today, rather than being a left-wing ghetto.

Ryan: Not Great News From A Transportation Perspective, But....

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 08/14/2012 - 8:17am

The [Transport Politic blog](#) has a post on Paul Ryan's anti-transit voting record, and concludes that "we should be clear about what direction the United States may head after November's election." I disagree, for two reasons.

First of all, the post says "We can only assume that Mitt Romney's decision to share the platform with Mr. Ryan implies an endorsement of the latter's view." It seems to me that in most Administrations, the Vice President's job is not to be the chief policymaker; the Vice President's job is to get votes for the ticket and (after the election) to stand around waiting for the President to die.

This is especially true when, as in 2008 and 2012, the Republican nominee is perceived to be to the left of his party's mainstream. To unify his party, he will naturally seek to balance his ticket. (Conversely, in 1980 conservative Ronald Reagan balanced the ticket with the more moderate George Bush- but Bush wound up changing his public views to fit Reagan's rather than vice versa). Given this pattern, Ryan's views were an asset to Romney insofar as they will help unify the Republican Party behind Romney, and not as a predictor of Romney's Presidency.

Second, the post assumes that the President is actually relevant to transportation policy. But the pro-transit Obama Administration has been accompanied by a plague of transit cutbacks nationally, and by stagnant federal transportation spending. Why? Because Congress has the power of the purse, and (especially if one or both chambers is controlled by the opposition party) doesn't give much deference to the President's budget.

The Results of De-Gentrification

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 08/13/2012 - 10:11am

When a city recovers from the urban decline of the late 20th century, there is often a lot of media blather about the evils of gentrification. According to gentriphobes, working-class (mostly black) people lived together in peace and harmony before the onslaught of (mostly white) hipsters and yuppies drove up rents.

A [recent article](#) in (of all places) the Atlantic lends a dose of reality to the gentrification argument. It points out that Washington's U Street neighborhood (one of Washington's newly gentrifying areas) lost 1/3 of its (mostly black) population between 1980 and 2000, when U Street was a poorer and more troubled area than it now is. In fact, black population loss slowed over the past decade.

Why? Because black people (even not-so-well-off black people) don't like living in crime-ridden hellholes any more than anyone else does. As a result, a poor, troubled neighborhood exports its neighborhoods far more rapidly than one which is desirable but more expensive.

Having It Both Ways, Another Example

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 08/10/2012 - 8:55am

When listening to transit critics, I sometimes see the following arguments:

1. density [doesn't increase](#) transit ridership
2. My city/suburb just [isn't dense enough](#) for better transit.

I don't see how both arguments can be true.

If density doesn't matter, we can just build transit anywhere (say, in the middle of the Mojave Desert), and people are equally likely to ride. If density does matter, allowing more compact development means more transit riders. (I am pretty sure the latter is true and not the former-otherwise it would just be a coincidence that Manhattan, with 50,000 people per square mile, just happens to have more transit ridership than anywhere else in North America).

Maybe Character Shouldn't Count

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 08/08/2012 - 11:13am

A common justification for downzoning is "community character" - the idea that a given place has a (usually suburban) character, and that this "character" justifies legal rules freezing the status quo in place.

But when city councils adopt this principle, they freeze sprawl in place forever, and make it impossible to increase a city's housing supply, thus increasing housing prices. Moreover, if new households are kept out of neighborhood A due to concerns about "character", they have to move someplace else, usually changing the other place's "community character." So from the standpoint of the region as a whole, reliance on "community character" is not rational.

But can anything be done about such NIMBY-oriented regulations? It seems to me that municipal legislators have a strong incentive to listen to their constituents rather than doing what is good for the city as a whole. So the state should act- either through legislation barring reliance on this argument, or through judicial action. Judges generally uphold any zoning decision that has a "rational basis"; an intelligent state appellate court could hold that this particular rationale for zoning decisions is simply irrational.

How to Run a Bus System

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 08/07/2012 - 10:47am

I was taking a long-distance bus to my parents' house in Atlanta and we had a layover in Charlotte, NC. I noticed a couple of things that I thought were fairly impressive:

First, all of the region's bus schedules were in the Greyhound station. Since bus riders are (I suspect) pretty likely to be using public transit once they arrive in town, I thought this was a pretty good idea. (Though a regionwide bus map in the station would be still better).

Second, each individual bus schedule listed some key facts on the front of the schedule: not just major destinations, but the times of the first and last bus on an individual route (so you can see without digging through a two or three-page timetable whether you are too late for the last bus, or too early for the first).

Guess We Don't Have To Worry About Gentrification (Or Do We?)

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 08/02/2012 - 1:06pm

The Pew Research Center just came out with a [much-touted new study](#) showing that American neighborhoods are becoming more economically segregated (or at least purporting to show this)

I was a little curious, so I actually clicked on the link to the Pew report's maps for individual metro areas. The Philadelphia [map](#) showed that most urban neighborhoods are either mixed-income or lower-class; in fact, it showed only one homogenously high-income area within the city limits of Philadelphia (the easternmost part of downtown near the Delaware River) At first glance, I thought: well, at least gentrification isn't driving out poor people.

But then I zoomed in on the map and found some even more interesting results. The area where I used to live, just north of Rittenhouse Square between Broad Street and the Schuylkill river, was labelled "low-income." Rittenhouse Square? Low-income? What are these people smoking?

Then I looked at Boston; at least Back Bay and Beacon Hill weren't labelled as poor- but they did count as mixed, the same category as my truly middle-class neighborhood in Queens. That can't be right!

What went wrong here? The study [defines lower-income](#) as having a household income below \$34,000 and upper-income as a household income above \$104,000. Back Bay and Beacon Hill are just below the \$104,000 threshold.

But this methodology makes no sense in the context of urban areas. Urban areas (especially close to downtown) tend to have smaller households, and thus smaller household incomes even if they are well off. For example, even if every single person in Beacon Hill made \$100,000, it would be poorer (according to Pew's methodology) than a drive-to-qualify suburb where every household contained a husband and wife earning \$51,000 apiece. And in some cities, such as Philadelphia (where two major universities are within commuting distance of downtown) urban areas may be more student-heavy than suburbs, thus artificially depressing household incomes in cities (since students are often not earning money at all). So relying solely on household income makes city neighborhoods look artificially poor.

But of course, the purpose of the study was not to compare city and suburb but to see whether rich areas are becoming more homogenously rich. I'm not sure I can answer that question, but I think to do so I'd want to see if other income measurements yield the same result as Pew's methodology.

Three-Cornered Politics

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 08/01/2012 - 9:38am

Yesterday, the voters of ten Atlanta counties voted "no" in a referendum on a regional sales tax to expand both roads and public transit. The new tax was favored by the region's business establishment, and opposed by groups as varied as the Sierra Club and local Tea Party groups.

The Atlanta referendum exemplifies modern transportation politics. As taxophobia has risen, transportation issues are no longer a battle between the road lobby and the transit lobby. Instead, transportation funding issues involve a kind of three-cornered politics: the road lobby, the environmental/transit coalition, and anti-tax and anti-spending conservatives. Any two groups can usually prevail, but no group can win alone unless it peels off a few voters from one of the other two coalitions. For example, in Atlanta the transit coalition was divided; some environmentalists and transit supporters favored the new sales tax because of the transit projects that the tax would finance, while others urged a "no" vote to stop new road projects. As a result, the anti-tax lobby was able to win by splitting the pro-transit and pro-roads coalitions.

In Congress, on the other hand, the anti-spending lobby mostly lost, as Congress chose to finance transportation spending at current levels. The road lobby and the transit coalition were able to win their key priorities, although the transit coalition did lose on some issues (such as bike/pedestrian funding).

Making CNU 21 more accessible

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 07/26/2012 - 9:21am

I recently ran across one of the CNU 20 panels on [Youtube](#). As useful as it was, I'm not sure how many hours I want to spend in front of a computer screen trying to keep my attention on a video presentation. I started to wonder: is there a way for people to access CNU panels without spending hours on Youtube?

It seems to me that it takes a lot less time to read a printout (either of a transcript or a Powerpoint outline) than it does to watch the same presentation on video. On the other hand, complete transcripts of CNU panels are impractical, since they would require paying someone to transcribe every word of a panel. So is there a third way?

Here's my idea: presenters would be asked to give someone at CNU speech transcripts (if they had written out their speech beforehand) or their notes or outlines (if they were speaking from notes). Of course, not every presenter has them, since I assume some speak off-the-cuff. But I

would guess that many of the presenters have created something in writing. CNU could then post the transcripts, notes etc. on the CNU 21 website.

Would this be as useful as the Youtube presentations? Admittedly, readers would still miss the question-and-answer sessions after the panels. But by reading the notes, readers could at least get the condensed version of the panels, and if they found any panel especially interesting, they could always go to the Youtube version for me.

How To Create A "Vertical Suburb"

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/25/2012 - 9:06am



At CNU, Richard Florida quipped that high-rises were "vertical suburbs". At the time, I couldn't quite figure out what he was trying to say.

But when I visited Long Beach in Long Island, I think I understood his point. I saw (or thought I saw) high-rises as far as the eye could see. This arrangement struck me as dull and "suburb-like", probably because it seemed to exclude all other uses. A housing-only

monoculture looks boring whether the housing is high-rise or single-family. In other words, a single-use environment is sterile no matter what the uses are.

But this doesn't mean that tall buildings are bad. The buildings in Long Beach aren't really that tall- only six or seven stories apiece. They just seem like high-rises because they are really wide.

Paradoxically, skyscraper-phobia actually encourages the blight of mid-rise dullness. Why? Because if you want to build 100 apartments, and you can't build tall, you have to build wide. And if a building is wide, it takes up most or all of a block, which leaves no room for the nonresidential land uses that make places less sterile. By contrast, tall, thin buildings make room for nonresidential uses (either on the first floor of a high-rise or in a separate building).

So height limits may actually create, rather than discouraging, vertical suburbia.

Sprawl With a Human Face

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 07/23/2012 - 9:27pm

I just did something I wanted to do since moving to New York: visited Levittown, a historic postwar suburb. Photos of my visit are [here](#).

The residential streets of Levittown compare favorably to the Sunbelt sprawl I grew up with. Sidewalks are (at least in the part of Levittown I was in) universal, unlike in Atlanta's 1940s and 1950s neighborhoods (even some only four or five miles from downtown). And even though Levittown is not a pure grid, it also does not pile cul-de-sac on top of cul-de-sac; instead, there is just enough street connectivity that a child who knows what he/she is doing can get from one residential street to another without having to walk through a six-lane arterial. Residential streets (and even some non-residential ones) have on-street parking.

On the negative side, land uses are definitely more segregated than is ideal; Levittown's collective [Walkscore](#) is about a 55, not terrible but not great either. Levittown's commercial streets are pretty bad from a pedestrian perspective; Hempstead Turnpike, apparently the major street, ranges from six to eight lanes wide (though it does have a median in the middle, unlike some of Atlanta's comparable streets). Even here there is some good news; if you survive crossing Hempstead Turnpike, you will find commercial buildings that aren't always set back from the street (or if they are, are often 20 or 30 feet from the street instead of hundreds).

On balance, Levittown is sprawl with a human face: more automobile-oriented than most pre-World War II development, less so than much of what was built in the late 20th century.

A Smaller Deal Than You Think

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 07/19/2012 - 6:43am

There's been a lot of hubbub about the Bloomberg Administration's proposal to make city-owned land available for [275-square-foot](#) apartments. The city proposes to allow developers to build these "micro-units" and rent them for \$2000 a unit. If you read some of the comments in the press, you might think this was somehow unprecedented.

But when I lived in Toronto, I had 140 square feet of living space (not counting the bathroom) and had enough space for everything but houseguests.

In New York, as in Toronto, 275 square foot units are not unprecedented. I just went on zillow.com and did a search for rental units of 100-275 square feet, and found eleven. Moreover,

all of them are cheaper than the Bloomberg proposal; the cheapest, a 250-square-foot unit in northern Manhattan, rents for only [\\$1000](#). Moreover, there are plenty of larger units in the \$2000 range; i went on [Streetasy.com](#) and found over a thousand units in the \$1000-2000 range.

If the government wants to make housing more affordable, it is going to permit units smaller and cheaper than those currently at issue; a 275-square foot unit merely duplicates the current housing stock, and one renting for \$2000 isn't even a good deal by Manhattan standards.

Does Statewide Planning Matter Very Much?

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/18/2012 - 6:44am

When California passed [SB 375](#) (a law requiring local planners to create strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions) environmentalists [were enthusiastic](#), while pro-sprawl commentators used [hyperbolic rhetoric](#) to attack the law.

But regional planning organizations are now starting to create "sustainable community strategy" (SCS) plans mandated by SB 375 and it appears that they might not do very much at all. A San Francisco Bay planning agency just released its SCS, and it apparently [doesn't do very much](#) to spur infill development other than saying it would be a nice thing.

The No-Lose Argument

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 07/16/2012 - 7:46am

There will always be those who argue that the suburb-dominated status quo is inevitable.

When cities were declining, they had an easy case to make. They could argue: "look, cities are declining so suburbia is inevitably the wave of the future!"

Then when cities started to gain population, defenders of suburbia moved the goal posts. They [argued](#): "Sure, cities are growing, but suburbs are growing faster."

Now, there is [some](#) (admittedly pretty [minimal](#)) evidence that cities are growing faster than suburbs. But a recent Atlantic Cities post says some commentators are moving the goal posts

yet again, [saying](#): "Well, the cities are growing faster in percentage terms, but the suburbs are adding more people in raw numbers."

Why Front Lawns?

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 07/15/2012 - 4:02pm

In a recent post on Planetizen's group blog, Todd Litman [discusses the pros and cons](#) (mostly cons) of lawns.

It seems to me that there is a difference between front yards, back yards, and parks. Back yards are useful as a play space for children (though in an age when children tend to prefer video games and similar forms of indoor entertainment, this benefit is not as important as it once was). Unlike front lawns, back yards are insulated from traffic and obnoxious strangers of various types. For the same reason, a back yard may be more useful for some families some of the time than a park.

By contrast, front lawns are not particularly private, and in my experience they are rarely used for any legitimate purpose whatsoever, either by children or adults. They don't necessarily have positive ecological consequences, since they are chock full of chemicals. They take away space that could be used either for housing or for more expansive back yards. Why do they exist?

Basically because most zoning ordinances require single-family houses to be 25 feet or so from the street, and those 25 feet are usually gobbled up by lawns because that is the least aesthetically offensive thing you can put on those 25 feet. Why not just abolish setback requirements so people can build up to the street?

Why the Rent Is Too High

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 07/05/2012 - 4:43pm

Today I began my apartment search, looking at an apartment in the neighborhood next to mine (a neighborhood less high-income than Forest Hills, Queens, where I now live). In addition to being in a cheaper area than mine, the building is a fairly long walk to the subway (about 15 minutes, farther than numerous competing buildings) and across the street from a cemetery. Yet

the cheapest apartment in this new building rents for 30 percent more than in my current building (closer to the subway and in a fancier area). Why?

Part of the reason is that new construction is generally more desirable. But I don't think that's the only reason. The building has only 50 or so units, which means the fixed cost of construction are spread out over less units than in older buildings, which means the landlord has to charge more in rent to make a profit.

And why does it only have 50 or so units? I would guess that the neighborhood NIMBYs held up rezoning until the height/density of the building was reduced (even though there are 20-story buildings only a block or two away).

Imagine this story repeated over and over again throughout New York or San Francisco, and you'll understand why anything new costs a ton of money.

How Road Subsidies Might Cause Transit Subsidies

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 07/04/2012 - 10:36am

A recent article by Josh Barro admits that cars are subsidized through road spending, but [argues](#) that roads are less subsidized per capita because so much of car-related spending is private.

It seems to me that (even leaving aside the issue I pointed out [here](#), and environmentalist [concerns](#) about externalities) this argument overlooks the interrelationship between road subsidies and transit subsidies.

Often, gas tax revenues are used to build new roads and widen existing ones. When these roads are in newly developing suburbs (or at least facilitate travel to those suburbs), the roads open up those suburbs for development- that is, they shift people and jobs from cities to suburban areas with limited or nonexistent transit service.

Thus, the new road reduces transit ridership, which means farebox revenues from transit are lower, which means government has to choose between (1) subsidizing transit more heavily to achieve the same level of service or (2) reducing transit service. Even if government chooses strategy 1, transit riders are effectively less mobile, since they can reach fewer of the region's jobs than they could before the road was built.

It follows that this type of road spending creates one or more of the following harmful externalities:

1) it harms transit users by effectively reducing the number of available regional destinations (i.e. it effectively reduces transit service) and/or

2) it actually increases transit subsidies by making transit less economical and thus more highly subsidized.

Thus, gas taxes lead to expenses not accounted for by a simple look at the road budget.

The Transportation Bill- Not As Bad As You Might Think

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 07/02/2012 - 9:36am

Congress recently passed a two-year transportation funding bill, to [less-than-glowing reviews](#) from environmentalist-oriented transportation lobbies.

But compared to the last time Congress swung sharply to the right (after the 1994 midterm elections) public transit did pretty well. The new law increases transit spending slightly, and streamlines the "New Starts" program governing construction of new transit facilities. By contrast, in the mid-1990s federal operating assistance for public transit was [virtually cut in half](#) while highway spending continued to increase.

Bicycle/pedestrian spending did not do as well. However, transit spending is much more significant: roughly \$8 billion per year as opposed to less than \$1 billion for bike/ped spending. Thus, federal transit spending has a much bigger impact on Americans' daily lives, which means that from the pro-transit point of view the transportation bill is, if not a victory, at least a bullet dodged.

No, Cities Aren't Losing Their Poor

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 06/27/2012 - 1:59pm

According to some media commentary, any form of civic improvement (such as, say, light rail) is dangerous because it might lead to something called gentrification (i.e. middle-class people

moving back into cities) which allegedly leads to displacement (i.e. poorer people being priced out of an area by rising rents).

I think its time for a little reality check. It is true that cities and suburbs have been economically converging to some extent. In 1999, the national urban poverty rate was [2.1](#) times the suburban rate (18 percent in cities, 8.5 in suburbs) while in 2009 the urban poverty rate was just under [1.9](#) times the suburban poverty rate (20.9 percent to 11.4 percent). But that still means that cities still have a disproportionate share of the region's poor in most places.

Similarly, even though the number of high-poverty areas (where over 40 percent of individuals live below the poverty line) rose faster in suburbs than in cities over the past decade, poor people in cities are still [four times as likely](#) to live in such neighborhoods as their suburban counterparts.

In sum, the gap between city and suburb is smaller than it once was- but it isn't zero.

Sprawl Lobby Wants To Have It Both Ways

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 06/26/2012 - 10:57am

A recent [video](#) on the Reason Magazine website criticized Washington, DC's bikeshare program, on the ground that the program's primary beneficiaries are well-off whites.

But when (as in most southern and western cities) the transit system primarily serves the transit-dependent poor, are people who are generally critical of public transit any more supportive? Not in my experience. Instead, they are even more eager to reduce public transit, arguing that low ridership means that transit doesn't reduce congestion or is uneconomic (among other arguments).

In other words, the sprawl/highway lobby raises a "heads I win, tails you lose" argument: if well-off people ride transit, that means transit is a subsidy to the upper class. If poor people ride transit, that means transit is just welfare for the undeserving poor. They have created an argument which is simply immune to falsification.

New Urbanists are to Environmentalists as Republicans are to the Tea Party

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 06/20/2012 - 12:09pm

After participating in the PRO-URB listserv while following the Republican primaries, it occurs to me that there's some similarity between the Republican Party's problems with its more extreme activist wing and the relationship between the new urbanist/smart growth movements and environmentalists.

Just as the Tea Party (by which I mean, the most right-wing element within the Republican Party) is the Republican activist base, environmentalists are urbanists' mass base. That is to say, environmentalists are the only politically organized mass movement that is likely to support more pedestrian- and transit-friendly policies. (And no, I don't consider the American Planning Association or big-city mayors a mass movement).

But Tea Party types often say things that make the general electorate cringe; for example, they tend to be more willing than most Republican politicians to attack noncontroversial government programs such as Social Security, and more willing to engage in reckless parliamentary tactics. So Republicans who want to actually be elected should probably be careful about endorsing the Tea Party 100 percent.

Similarly, when I listen to my environmentalist friends, I hear things that would make most swing voters (or even most Democrats) cringe- remarks about how everybody should pay more for just about everything, and how we should have fewer children and have less of everything. So as much as urbanists need and respect the smart growth movement, we aren't going to get a lot of swing voter or Republican support for our priorities if we are perceived as being among the most extreme environmentalists.

The Lion Can Lie Down With the Lamb

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 06/05/2012 - 9:10pm

There's been a lot of argument on a new urbanist listserv about DC's height limits. (In the interest of full disclosure I note that I'm doing some of the arguing!) I think one of the concerns animating opponents of taller buildings is the fear of a high-rise monoculture.

Coincidentally, I was walking down Fifth Avenue in New York, just a block or two from the Empire State Building. But in addition to that famous skyscraper, I saw a whole row of four-story buildings- evidence that the high-rise lion can lie down with the low-rise lamb.

What I don't know is whether that reflects the market's lack of interest in more tall buildings in that area or whether it reflects political regulation.

Jane Jacobs on Height

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 06/03/2012 - 6:54pm

"I think the specific scheme of diversity zoning, or the specific combination of schemes, that an outstandingly successful city locality requires is likely to differ with the locality... A park being surrounded by intensive duplications of tall offices or apartments might well be zoned for lower buildings along its south side in particular, thus accomplishing two useful purposes at one stroke: preserving the park's supply of winter sun, and protecting indirectly , to some extent at least, its diversity of surrounding uses." (Death and Life, p. 253).

These words don't sound like those of someone who was opposed to tall buildings. Rather, they read to me like the words of someone who opposed a monoculture of tall buildings, but didn't mind them as part of a diverse urban neighborhood.

Who Walks To Transit and How Much?

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 06/01/2012 - 5:10pm

At CNU, I picked up a short [article](#) written by Lilah Besser and Andrew Dannenberg of the Center for Disease Control on walking to public transit.

The article first compared persons who walked to public transit with the adult population as a whole (based on the 2001 National Household Travel Survey). Transit walkers were more likely to be poor; 23% of walkers come from a household earning under \$15,000, as opposed to 9% of the whole sample. They were also younger; 34% were under 30, as opposed to 22% of the sample. Only 38% were white, as opposed to 73% of the sample. They were more female; 55% were female as opposed to 51% of the sample. Density really mattered; only 17% of transit walkers lived in census block groups with under 4000 people per square mile, as opposed to 63%

of the entire adult sample. Thus, transit walkers were younger, poorer, and more urban than the rest of America. So far no surprises (as far as I was concerned).

But within the universe of transit walkers a different pattern emerged. The porrest transit walkers walked longer distances; the mean walk time of transit walkers earning under \$15,000 was 29 minutes, while the mean walk time of walkers from households earning over \$70,000 was 20 minutes. Breakdowns by age and education showed similar patterns. "Choice" riders (that is, those who were the primary driver in their household) who were also transit walkers walked an average of 20 minutes, while transit walkers from carless households walked an average of 28 minutes.

In other words, within the universe of transit walkers, people who could afford to drive are more likely to live near transit stops than those who cannot. This data supports the view that there is significant market demand for housing close to transit.

No Freedom for Me

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/30/2012 - 10:19am

The auto lobby likes to claim that automobile dependence means "freedom." But this certainly did not reflect my experience last week. I visited Atlanta (where my parents and siblings live) for a vacation, and lost my drivers' license a couple of days into the vacation. Since my license is a New York license, I couldn't get it replaced while I was in Atlanta. And because my parents live in one of the city's most automobile-dependent areas*, I couldn't get anywhere without getting rides from family members.

In other words, my supposed instrument of "freedom" made me totally dependent on state bureaucracy, since to get around I needed a car, and to drive the car I needed a license. By contrast, to walk I don't need a license, and to take a bus all I need is cash.

*How bad is it? If you want to go to Google Street View, go to 1678 Mount Paran Road, Atlanta GA (the nearest major street to where my parents live, and the street I would have to use to reach the nearest bus stop).

Rebuilding Urban Judaism

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/23/2012 - 7:37pm

In most car-oriented American cities, Jews moved to the suburbs as rapidly as anyone else, if not more so. As a result, most such cities lack a Jewish presence anywhere near downtown. For example, until recently the most "urban" synagogues in Dallas and Kansas City were six or seven miles from downtown, and there is only one synagogue left within the Cleveland city limits (only a few blocks from said city limits).

But the times are changing, thanks in large part to [Chabad](#), a Hasidic movement specializing in outreach to unaffiliated Jews (and also to travelers; in the interests of full disclosure, I note that while attending CNU I spent Friday night and Saturday afternoon with [Chabad in Palm Beach](#)). While other Jewish movements build huge, capital-intensive synagogues, Chabad tends to operate out of small, relatively cheap-to-establish houses. As a result, Chabad is able to operate in singles-dominated intown neighborhoods, where Jews are less able and/or willing to spend large amounts on the dues that larger synagogues demand. For example, there are now Chabad mini-synagogues within a mile or two of downtown [Dallas](#) and [Kansas City](#), and in the heart of downtown [Miami](#) and [San Diego](#). Similarly, if you plan to visit CNU 21 in Salt Lake City next year, the closest synagogue will be [Chabad of Utah](#) (about 3 miles out).

Of course, Chabad's rigorous brand of Orthodox Judaism is not for everyone. But it is blazing a trail that other Jewish movements will (I hope) follow.

High-Rises and New Urbanists: How to Attack Both

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 05/22/2012 - 8:33am

I realize that high-rises aren't perfect. They may consume more energy than smaller buildings, and under the wrong circumstances, high-rises can coexist with bad urbanism (for example, a tall building in the middle of a suburban office park, or surrounded by ten-lane roads). Having said that, I do think some criticisms of tall buildings go overboard.

Ed McMahon of ULI wrote an op-ed attacking high-rises, and I responded with a [critique](#) on my website. I'm not going to recite everything I said on my blog, but I did want to point out that the arguments McMahon uses are perhaps a bit toxic for New Urbanists. Why? Because his arguments are similar to those commonly raised against compact development.

For example, McMahon writes that high-rises turn cities into "tower cities"- which sounds to me like "if we allow any high-rises they will take over the neighborhood." This argument seems to me pretty similar to the "War on Suburbia" arguments against smart growth and new urbanism- that is, it implies that any change from the status quo will somehow lead to the destruction of single-family homes and suburban subdivisions.

McMahon also argues that high-rises threaten "neighborhood integrity" (i.e. change the status quo). But since most of what has been built in America since 1950 is sprawl, compact development often changes the status quo as well. Thus, the "neighborhood integrity" argument is really an argument against any increased density anywhere.

Similarly, McMahon draws a line between "high-rise cities" like New York and Chicago and "mid-rise cities"- implying that high-rises are fine for the largest cities but not for anywhere else. It could just as easily be argued that any form of walkable development is fine for older cities but not for the Sun Belt or for suburbia.

If we are going to build more compact, walkable neighborhoods we are going to have to change neighborhood character in lots of places. So if new urbanists rely on such arguments, they are giving their enemies lots of ammunition.

How Much Density Is Enough? It Depends

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 05/21/2012 - 11:43am

Los Angeles has over 7000 people per square mile, yet doesn't have a reputation as a particularly walkable place. By contrast, I was pretty happy living without a car in Carbondale, IL (a small college town with 2178 people per square mile). How come?

I would suggest that the bigger a city is, the more dense it needs to be to be walkable and transit-friendly. For example, suppose that city X has 4000 people and encompasses only 1 square mile, while city Y has 2.1 million people and 300 square miles. City X is less dense than city Y- it has 4000 people per square mile as opposed to city Y's 7000. But obviously city X is more walkable: a person of average walking speed can get from any point to any other point in 20 or 30 minutes on foot. In such a small place, only the elderly and disabled will need public transit.

By contrast, in a 500-square-mile city, walking outside your neighborhood will be pretty time-consuming. So you will need New York-level density and transit service to enable most people to function without cars.

So this reality explains Los Angeles: it is dense enough that if it were a small city, it would probably be pretty transit-friendly, but because of its sheer enormousness it isn't.

This reality is relevant to the ongoing debate about high-rises: some commentators seem to be quite focused on the virtues of low-rise urbanism. In a city of 100,000 people, that might create a lot of lovely, walkable places. In a city of 3 or 4 million, maybe not.

Against "Sustainability" (The Word, Not the Policy)

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/16/2012 - 1:45pm

(Cross-posted with my personal [blog](#))

Literally (i.e. in normal, non-jargon English) “sustainable” means that it is capable of being sustained over time, whether it is good or bad.

But in environmentalist jargon, “sustainable” means “environmentally friendly” or “non-polluting.” It seems to me that this jargon creates a completely unnecessary barrier between professional environmentalists/planners and the rest of humanity.

If we want to say policy X is climate-friendly or otherwise reduces pollution, why not just say “X reduces pollution”?

How Not to Make Public Transit Tourist-Friendly

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 05/15/2012 - 10:28am

After CNU, I rode Tri-Rail and Miami-Dade transit to visit a friend in Miami Beach. The Tri-Rail trip was fine; Miami-Dade transit, however, was more of an adventure.

When I left Tri-Rail, I transferred to Metro Rail (Miami's heavy rail system). At this particular Metro Rail stop, there was a schedule for a bus which went to Miami Beach. When I looked at the [map](#), it appeared to me that the bus stopped at Tri-Rail. But when I looked at the [timetable](#) I didn't see Tri-Rail. So I wasn't quite sure whether the bus stopped at Tri-Rail or not. Lesson: bus schedules should reflect the maps and vice versa.

Just to be sure, I waited at a bus stop for 10 or 20 minutes. But the bus stop didn't even say which buses arrived at the stop, let alone list bus times. Bad, bad, bus stop.

Rather than waiting forever, I went to another Metro Rail stop that (according to the citywide route map) went to Miami Beach. Unfortunately, there were no route maps available at the Metro Rail stop, nor were there any available at the nearest bus stop. At this point I realized I had no idea when the bus would come. So I figured I would go downtown and find another bus. So I got on Metro Rail again, going to the downtown station (which I assumed would have plenty of bus maps). But again, no maps to be had!

At this point, I was almost ready to take a cab to Miami Beach. I went on Metromover (Miami's downtown-only monorail) to the stop closest to Miami Beach, and was lucky enough to find a bus there. Total commute time: 6 hours.

I think my odyssey is a fine example of how a transit agency can make a trip difficult and confusing, by (1) providing inadequate information (confusing bus schedules) or (2) by simply failing to provide bus schedules at bus or rail stops.

Calthorpe on Chinese Urbanism

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 05/11/2012 - 12:16pm

Peter Calthorpe spoke this morning on Chinese urbanism- the good and the bad. From a new urbanist perspective, the good includes density and transportation: Chinese cities tend to be more compact than ours, and the government seeks to limit car use to a 20% modal share (i.e. 20 percent of all trips by car- still an increase over the current 12 percent share).

The bad: lots of streets that are too wide to comfortably cross, and lots of blocks that tend to be on the long side.

Calthorpe noted that there are four major types of Chinese streets: the traditional, pre-grid, pre-1900 street, the 20th-century grid street, the enclave (a Maoist-era superblock but with every

conceivable use inside) and the more recent superblock. The traditional street has the most pedestrian and least car travel, the superblock is the most auto-oriented, and the other two types are somewhere in between.

He also noted that on-street parking is virtually nonexistent in Chinese cities- after all, if you have valuable street space, why waste it on parking? (By contrast, American street space is so devalued that on-street parking is often the lesser evil).

How Walking Became a Crime

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/10/2012 - 4:14pm

I just heard an amazing set of presentations by Eric Dumbaugh and Peter Norton (author of a new book, *Fighting Traffic*). Dumbaugh begin with a statistical table listing causes of pedestrians being killed by cars; nearly every cause somehow showed pedestrians at fault (e.g. jaywalking, pedestrian using electronic device, etc.). In essence, our culture presumes that if a pedestrian is killed by a 2-ton vehicle, the pedestrian rather than the driver is generally at fault.

Norton showed that this was not always the case. Before the 1920s, streets belonged to pedestrians; it was the norm that the pedestrian could walk wherever he or she pleased, and that children could play in the street; popular culture often blamed car speed for pedestrians being killed in the street. (For example, Norton showed photos to monuments to dead pedestrians in two or three cities). The idea of jaywalking was simply not part of the popular vocabulary. Obviously, this was a problem for the car industry; citizens begin to campaign for lower speed limits (and in Cincinnati, there was even a referendum on speed governors that would mechanically limit car speed).

So they and their allies (e.g. AAA) created "safety" campaigns designed to redefine car/pedestrian crashes as the pedestrian's fault. For example, they would have people hand out cards to pedestrians defining "jaywalking" and telling pedestrians they shouldn't do it. They also ridiculed jaywalking, for example by having people walk in clown costumes with signs stating "I'm a jaywalker." Eventually, cities passed anti-jaywalking laws. The most extreme example of the "streets are for cars" mentality is something like the Raquel Nelson incident, in which an Atlanta-area county sought to punish a mother when her child was killed by a drunk driver while crossing the street.

Similarly, auto clubs sought to keep children off streets by passing out coloring books stating that "the street is for autos."

Norton also talked about the genesis of the gas tax: like anti-jaywalking laws, it spread like wildfire throughout the states in the 1920s, at the behest of the car lobby. Why would car lobbyists support the gas tax? Because if taxes were paid by motorists, then the street would be defined by bureaucrats as something designed to serve motorists.

Finally, Norton talked about the idea that the "American love affair for the car"; he said that it was first raised in a 1961 TV show, "Merrily we Roll Along", which was sponsored by Dupont (which then owned 1/3 of GM) and used the term repeatedly. In other words, this term (often used by environmentalists as well as supporters of auto-dependent development) is nothing but a industry propaganda talking point.

Tumlin on Parking

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/10/2012 - 2:53pm

This afternoon, Jeffrey Tumlin spoke on how to reform parking to reduce the negative results of minimum parking requirements. (If you're not familiar with them, google "Donald Shoup"). Some of his solutions were stuff I've heard before: abolish parking requirements, create residential permit systems to reduce the threat of spillover parking, and set market prices for parking to discourage driving. But I heard a few neat ideas I hadn't heard before.

Such as:

1. If a city does have a parking permit system (i.e. allowing only residents of neighborhood with parking stickers to park on its streets), prevent new developments from participating in it (thus reducing NIMBY opposition to infill, since NIMBYs no longer need fear that residents of the new development will clog the neighborhood with their cars).
2. Smart meters that accept credit cards, to make on-street parking easier and thus reduce demand for off-street parking.
3. Allow people to renew their on-street parking by cellphone, so that people can park for more time than expected, thus making downtown parking less obnoxious.
4. Flex parking- allow merchants to commandeer parking space for outdoor restaurant space, to increase restaurant revenue.
5. Undo the parking/rent bundle- require landlords to give commercial/residential renters the option of "cashing out" parking by going without parking spaces.

6. In places using parking permits, subsidize people who surrender their permits (e.g. with transit passes, money for carsharing)- the idea being that the cost of the subsidies is outweighed by reduced need for parking.

Duany Speech At Thurs. Morning CNU Plenary: Why Code?

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 05/10/2012 - 12:47pm

For me, the highlight of CNU 20 so far was Andres Duany's speech at this morning's plenary session. Most of his speech was about the SmartCode, responding to libertarian objections. He said, in so many words: if we don't code, and if we don't consider aesthetics when we do, someone else will (usually a local aesthetic review committee or zoning board). He added that given the United States' century-long history of bureaucratic control over land use, the most likely alternative to coding is not the free market, but decisionmaking by bureaucratic discretion. By contrast, a clear code gives landowners the right to say to government, "You can't tell me what to do if I follow the law."

Duany also spoke about the usefulness of calibrating the Code to meet local concerns, suggesting that without such variation we will still get a "reasonably good place" but that flexibility is necessary to get a really great place. But how much flexibility is too much?

Then he spoke about the necessity of "code-free zones" that accommodate the preference of much of the public for sprawl. But how do we prevent the exceptions to a code from swallowing up the code itself?

Driving and the Young

Submitted by MLewyn on Wed, 05/09/2012 - 1:06am

I just saw the recent study, ["Transportation and the New Generation"](#) put out by NJ PIRG, which seeks to explain why the young are driving less.

Figure 7 contains the results of a poll asking respondents to choose between "smart growth" and "sprawl" environments. 62 percent of 18-29 year olds chose smart growth, as opposed to 54 percent of thirty-somethings and 58 percent of sixty-somethings.

Similarly, Figure 8 shows that 27 percent of 18-29 year olds think it is "very important" to have social amenities within walking distance, as opposed to 21 percent of thirtysomethings and a similar percent of sixty-somethings.

And Figure 13 shows that 46 percent of 18-34 year olds reduce their driving to protect the environment, as opposed to 42 percent of sixty-somethings - again, not a huge gap.

The authors of the survey seem to think these results are a big deal. I don't, given that 18-29 year olds are less likely to have children and thus to need more space. Actually, I would have expected a bigger age difference. (Of course, this may be actually a **positive** from an urbanist point of view- even if it doesn't show rousing youth support for urbanism, it also shows lots of non-youth support!)

Synagogue Options for Jewish CNU-Goers

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 05/08/2012 - 5:52pm

If you would like to spend Friday evening or Saturday morning in a synagogue, there are plenty of options- nothing within a few blocks of the Congress, but several within a 30-45 minute walk. They include:

Chabad (palmbeachjewish.com)- meets at hotels on Palm Beach side. Call 561-420-5000 for info. Services include meals.

New Synagogue (Modern Orthodox, 235 Sunrise Avenue)- info at newsynagogue.org.

Emanu-El (Conservative, 190 North County Road, Palm Beach)- info at www.tepb.org

Temple Israel (Reform, 1901 North Flagler, West Palm Beach)- info at www.temple-israel.com (note that despite WPB location its not any closer to convention hall than the Palm Beach shuls).

My New Book

Submitted by MLewyn on Tue, 05/08/2012 - 9:19am

My book, "A Libertarian Smart Growth Agenda" is available at amazon.com . If you don't want to pay for the book, you can read the article that it was based on [here](#).

Three-Cornered Politics

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 05/06/2012 - 1:47pm

In metro Atlanta, the Sierra Club is allying with Tea Party activists to [fight a one-cent sales tax increase](#) designed to raise additional funds for both roads and transit, primarily because of concerns about increased funding for sprawl-creating expressways.

This illustrates a broader point: transportation politics are no longer a struggle between roads advocates and transit advocates, but a three-cornered fight between the road lobby, transit supporters (including new urbanists and environmentalists) and fiscal conservatives. Although transit supporters have almost never had a consistent majority in either federal or state legislatures, they can form a winning coalition with either of these two stronger groups.

The sales tax referendum pits the road lobby against conservatives; transit supporters have to decide whether to ally with the road lobby to get a few crumbs from the table, or to fight the road lobby on the theory that more roads means more sprawl means less effective transit.

Similarly, at the federal level, some conservatives (such as the WSJ editorial board) want to form an alliance with the road lobby, in the hope that the road lobby will settle for a huge slice of a shrinking transportation pie. On the other hand, President Obama, like the pro-tax coalition in Atlanta, seeks to bring road and transit supporters together for a pro-spending alliance.

‘Suburbs’ Don't Have to Equal ‘Sprawl’

Submitted by MLewyn on Mon, 04/30/2012 - 10:28am

Great post at <http://capntransit.blogspot.com/2012/04/why-we-need-walkable-transit-oriented.html> .

Minimum Parking Requirements Upheld- Or, When Will They Ever Learn?

Submitted by MLewyn on Sun, 04/29/2012 - 10:09am

Last month, a New York appellate court upheld minimum parking requirements in Syracuse, on the ground that such rules are reasonably related to the city's goal of "enhanc[ing] traffic safety by removing cars from the [City's] streets"(1)

New Urbanists have written extensively about why parking requirements are in fact fertility drugs for cars.(2) By artificially increasing the supply (and thus lowering the price) of parking, these regulations actually subsidize driving, thus multiplying cars. And by causing cities to be infested with parking lots, off-street parking rules make the pedestrian environment more difficult and unpleasant.

Clearly, we have a long way to go before these propositions become common knowledge.

(1) <http://www.nycourts.gov/courts/ad4/clerk/decisions/2012/03-23-12/PDF/0211.pdf>

(2) <http://works.bepress.com/lewyn/70/>

Zoning Budgets- One Way to Keep Nimbyism Under Control

Submitted by MLewyn on Fri, 04/27/2012 - 9:50am

Roderick Hills and David Schleicher, two law professors, have proposed one way to limit NIMBY-inspired downzonings: a "zoning budget." Specifically, they propose that cities require every downzoning to be matched by an upzoning somewhere else, so that the city's "budget" was always balanced. (See http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1816368 for the article, or <http://www.cato.org/pubs/regulation/regv34n3/regv34n3-6.pdf> for a shorter version).

Housing Costs and Centralization

Submitted by MLewyn on Thu, 04/26/2012 - 10:43am

In my limited experience, commentators who oppose regional land use regulations like urban growth boundaries (or at least worry about the impact of such regulations on housing costs) tend to favor keeping cities constrained within their 1950 boundaries, while people who favor such regulations tend to favor city-county mergers, revenue sharing, and other ways to essentially merge city and suburb.

So you might think that the cities with the highest housing costs would be "hyper-elastic" cities that have gobbled up their suburbs, while metro areas with hundreds of little suburbs have lower costs.

But this is not necessarily the case- especially at the high end of the cost spectrum. The most expensive regions* are a mixed bag- New York, San Francisco, and Honolulu (which arguably is an outlier because it is an island). New York and San Francisco are classic "inelastic" cities; they are trapped in their 1950s boundaries and surrounded by dozens, if not hundreds, of little suburban municipalities with their own zoning regulations. Cities with centralized environmental regulation (such as Seattle and Portland) tend to be somewhere in the upper middle- not among the least expensive, but far less so than New York and San Francisco.

Does this mean that centralized regulation might reduce housing costs by reducing the power of neighborhood NIMBY groups? Or does it mean that annexation and centralization just don't matter very much?

*For statistics, see http://www.nahb.org/reference_list.aspx?sectionID=135

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