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# My Early Notes On The Book “Vanishing New York”

Michael Lewyn |

I am just starting to read *Vanishing New York*, one of the more highly publicized books written from the “left-wing NIMBY” point of view. One of the chapters complains about the explosion of chain stores in the East Village. So the last time I was in that neighborhood, I decided to count the number of storefronts occupied by chain stores on major avenues like First and Second. Much to my surprise, only about 5-10 percent of storefronts were occupied by national chains. So why do some people perceive that chains are on their march in New York City?

It seems to me that there’s a cognitive bias going on, roughly similar to that which spurs “white flight” in some neighborhoods. I suspect that if you grow up in a lily-white area, are not exposed to much racial diversity, and do not see such diversity as desirable, you might expect to see zero blacks or Hispanics in your neighborhood. So if you see a few blacks in the area, you might start to think of the neighborhood as an integrated one, even though the neighborhood is still only 5 or 10 percent non-white. (I suspect that this mentality increased President Trump’s support in rural counties with lots of Hispanic migration).

Similarly, if you expect to see zero chain stores, one such store a block seems like a massive change.

# Charter Schools Not A Panacea, But Better In Some Contexts

Michael Lewyn | [City Notes](#) |

I recently went to a conference sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia on urban issues. The most interesting presentation was on urban schools. The speaker, Will Dobbie, pointed out that the average charter school was no better than the average public school, but that the very best charter schools in high-poverty areas massively improved test scores for low-income children. What's the difference between the best schools and the rest?

Dobbie found that the most successful charter schools devoted more days and hours on instruction, spent more hours tutoring weak students, and provided more feedback on test results to parents and teachers. By contrast, other common charter school strategies, such as smaller classes, higher overall spending, and more highly-credentialed teachers, were not associated with high test scores. (Dobbie's paper can be found [here](#).)

In other words, money matters – but only if it is spent on the right policies.

# Residential Hotels Were Far More Affordable Than Today's Housing

Michael Lewyn | [City Notes](#) |

Some progressives blame high housing costs on inequality. But in the 1920s, inequality was as significant as it is today, if not more so. However, there was apparently much more low-end housing, according to a book I just read, *[Living Downtown: The History Of Residential Hotels In The United States](#)*, by Paul Groth (which I recommend to everyone interested in these kind of issues). Groth focuses on residential hotels; until the growth of zoning, hotels and apartments were interchangeable.

The difference between the 1920s and today is the following: today, the only multifamily housing options available to most people are

1. a government-approved, zoning-friendly apartment or condo (which is usually not that cheap because multifamily housing is a zoning pariah and is excluded from 99 percent or so of a region's blocks) which complies with 80 zillion building code provisions designed to insure it is "decent". This category includes market-rate housing and subsidized housing- even the latter has to comply with the regulations, so it doesn't end up that cheap.
2. a homeless shelter built or subsidized by government or
3. the street

By contrast, in the 1920s, there was a wide range of housing between #1 and #2, and even options between #2 and #3 as well. For example, today an apartment typically has a private kitchen/bath/etc. In 1920, that was an option for the middle and upper classes. For the working classes, you could share a house with a family, or live in a residential hotel with shared baths, some with a kitchen, some without (the latter presumably cheaper). If you were poorer, you could live in a cheaper hotel with cubicles. If you were poorer still you could sleep on a floor, and at the very bottom of the market, you could sleep in a movie theater at night.

How cheap were these low-end alternatives? Groth calculates that in San Francisco, the lower-middle classes could live in a rooming house with a bath down the hall for \$4-10 per week (\$50-140 today, or \$200-600 per month). A cheaper, nastier version of the same was \$3-5 per week (\$40-60, or \$160-240 per month).

A cubicle was a quarter a night (\$3 or 4 today), or \$1-3 per week (\$60-160 per month). At the very bottom was a true flophouse: 5 or 10 cents a night (a dollar or so today) for a dry space on an open floor, still better than sleeping on the street.

Now of course, all this affordability had a cost: much of it was not “decent” by today’s middle class standards. It seems to me that you can have regulation-induced decency, affordability, or a low cost to the public fisc. But you can’t have all three.

# Notes From Houston

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

In July, long before the recent flooding, I visited Houston. Houston has a reputation as a poorly planned city- and in some respects, it is.

But Houston’s transportation planning is superior to that of my native Atlanta, in at least two ways. First, Houston has a grid of commercial streets; one can travel through Houston fairly easily without being forced onto an interstate highway. By contrast, Atlanta’s roadway system is dominated by north-south interstate highways; in some parts of Atlanta and its suburbs, east-west arterials are few and far between. Second, sidewalks seem to be the norm rather than the exception in what passes for urban Houston; by contrast, in the homeowner blocks of Atlanta, sidewalks die out about four or five miles from downtown, long before the city limits.

What about land use? Houston’s lack of zoning does not seem to make a huge difference in spatial order; by and large, I saw no large-scale land uses (such as, say, factories or department stores) in the middle of homeowner blocks. However, the absence of formal zoning does allow for slightly more mixed use

than in a typical city; although I saw very few blocks that combined housing with even small-scale commercial activity, I saw more blocks that contained both single-family and multifamily houses. Although Houston is basically a low-density city, it is somewhat less so than other Sun Belt cities. Inside Houston's I-610 "Loop" (which includes around 100 square miles of land) the population density is a little over 4,500 people per square mile. By contrast, the density of the city of Atlanta (which includes about 130 square miles) is about 3,500 people per square mile.

# Traffic Won't Disappear Just By Forcing It To The 'Burbs

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

One common [anti-housing argument](#) runs something like this: "Doesn't new housing increase traffic? The roads/sidewalks/subways are jammed. Therefore, my neighborhood can't accommodate more residents."

This argument fails for two reasons. First, it is a "beggar thy neighbor" argument: it could justify excluding anyone anywhere. If new people will crowd Los Angeles' roads, they'll also crowd those of suburbs or smaller cities. In fact, suburban infrastructure may actually be more burdened by new housing than city infrastructure, because several hundred new residents effect Manhattan far less than Manhasset. And new suburban housing might increase traffic even more than urban infill, because when suburbanites commute to cities they are burdening the roads (or rails) of both the suburb they live in AND the city they work in.

Second, exclusionary zoning fails on its own terms, in that it's only partially successful in keeping people out. Some people who can't afford high rent move to suburbs or other cities; however, others live with roommates or in homeless shelters or on the streets. This is why high-priced cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco keep growing anyway.

# With Housing Prices Already High, Why Mandate Better “Quality”?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

New Urbanists argue that NIMBY activists will, in fact, accept new housing—it just needs to be high quality. As Vancouver planner Brent Toderian told *Vox*: “I’ll often point to existing buildings and say, ‘If I thought that’s what I was going to get as a community, I’d be against it too.’ The city has to be able to virtually guarantee the quality of the outcome from the urban design, livability, multimodal perspective...So when NIMBYs express a fear of change over density, they’re often right.” Instead, dense housing must have “high design quality” and amenities like parks.

But “quality” is just one of many concerns. As Benjamin Ross wrote in the book *Dead End*, there’s a near-infinite variety of anti-development arguments: “There’s either too much parking or too little. If houses are proposed, offices are what the neighborhood needs; if offices, houses would be better. Property values will go down; we will be priced out of our homes.”

Meanwhile, housing enhancements cost money, thus raising prices—which then reinforces NIMBY arguments that new housing is too expensive and spurs gentrification. So by requiring “quality”, a city raises housing costs, further feeding the NIMBY beast.

## By ‘Dubaiization’, Do You Mean Lower Densities?

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

I recently got an email from the group [HumanScaleNYC](#), which apparently exists to oppose new buildings, or tall buildings, or something. It read: “City Planners think there is no upper limit to density.” Right away, my b.s. radar sounded, since current zoning codes substantially limit density, and planners greatly influence them.

The email continues by asking “when is there too much density? When is there too little? Is there a range of ‘just right’ or Goldilocks densities for a livable city that can still support public transport? We need this debate as a city, otherwise, we will end up as Dubai.”

But Dubai is in fact far less dense than NYC. Had they bothered to check Wikipedia, they’d note that its 2.8 million residents live within 497 square miles—or 5600/sq mile, less dense than Staten Island. So if they want density reductions, the Dubaization of NYC should be their goal.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave...when we don’t do our homework.

# Localism: The Junk Food Of Urban Planning

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

I recently read a book (Zoned Out, by Tom Angotti) stating that New York City needed “community-based planning.” By this the author apparently meant that each neighborhood regulated its land use. This is already the case to some extent; if a neighborhood doesn’t want new buildings, its residents complain to their city councilor, who’s likely to heed their voices if s/he wants to be reelected. In fact, New York has already institutionalized the voice of neighborhood activists, through community boards that make recommendations about rezonings.

Such localism is the junk food of urban planning: it sounds sweet but can be dangerous in large quantities. Why? Because what’s good for a neighborhood’s existing residents is not always good for the entire city. Existing residents, if they are homeowners, want to keep prices high so they can sell their homes at profits. But the city is more attractive—and better functioning overall—if new residents can actually afford to live there.

## A Zero-sum Mentality: “Not Enough Urbanism To Go Around”

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

Right now I'm reading *Breakthrough*, by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger. The authors argue that the environmental movement is too focused on austerity and not enough on cleaner energy. The authors write that some environmentalists "insist that humanity's future is a zero-sum proposition—that there is only so much prosperity, material comfort, and modernity to go around."

It seems to me that there is a lot of "zero-sum thinking" within arguments about urban issues as well. For example, leftist fear of gentrification is based on the idea that there is simply not enough urbanism to go around—either the poor can have it, or everyone else can have it, but not both.

On the other hand, fear of school integration (which tends to be more prevalent among conservatives) is also based on zero-sum thinking: if poor people go to my children's school, my children will suffer.

Is zero-sum thinking always wrong? That discussion I'll leave for another day.

# Suburbs Aren't Growing That Much Faster Than Cities

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

A few weeks ago, Richard Florida wrote\* in the New York Times that the "urban tide has crested." But it seems to me that he over-interpreted the data in two ways. First, even the Brookings Institution data he relies on shows that cities have grown almost as rapidly as suburbs: major cities grew by 0.82 percent in 2015-16, while their suburbs grew by 0.89 percent.\*\* The same data shows that among the 53 metro areas with over 1 million people, city populations grew in 40. In the 20 largest metro areas, central cities declined in only three – Chicago, plus the always-declining St. Louis and Detroit.

Second, the Brookings data relies on yearly Census population estimates. But these estimates have not always been very reliable. For example, the 2010 Census showed a 120,000-person gap between the prior year's estimate of Atlanta's population and the actual Census count.\*\*\* Thus, there is no reason to believe that this year's Census estimates are accurate enough to show whether any city's population increased or decreased over the last year.



\*[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/cities-suburbs-housing-crime.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/cities-suburbs-housing-crime.html?_r=0)

\*\*<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/05/30/city-growth-dips-below-suburban-growth-census-shows/>

\*\*\*<http://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/ShowDocument?id=9225>

# America's Housing Picture: More Renters, More Multi-family, More Demand

Michael Lewyn | [City Notes](#) |

The Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University recently issued their annual report on American housing. A few of the more interesting facts:

\*Rental demand has been surging. The number of renter households increased by 600,000 in the last year alone, and has increased by about 10 million since 2000. NIMBYs like to argue that rental demand is driven by rich foreign investors—but in fact, renter growth is pretty broad-based. For example, the share of children living in rental housing increased from 29 percent in 2005 to 36 percent in 2016 (Ch. 5)

\* Although multifamily starts have increased dramatically since the recession, it's still not up to 20th-century levels. In 1985 there were 669,000 multifamily starts; the number decreased over time, bottoming out at 109,000 in 2009. The current level of 393,000 is only slightly above the peaks of recent booms (353,000 in 2005, 346,000 in 1998) (Appendix, Table A-1). The current vacancy rate (6.9 percent) is the lowest since 1985.

Bottom line: demand is high, supply less so.

# The Cross-examination Of Mr. Nimby

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

After reading yet another article about upzoning and property values, I had a fantasy: what if arguments about zoning took place in a trial? I imagine the following colloquy:

Counsel: Mr. NIMBY, isn't it true that ever since zoning was invented in the 1920s, you have been arguing that zoning increases property values?

NIMBY: yes, your honor.

Counsel: so by that logic, eliminating zoning or making it less restrictive would lower property values?

NIMBY: yes.

Counsel: by contrast, today you are arguing that upzoning increases property values and causes gentrification?

NIMBY: yes, I am.

Counsel: but doesn't upzoning make zoning less restrictive?

NIMBY: yes, that's actually why I am against it.

Counsel: So to summarize, in the 20th century you were for zoning because it prevented property prices from falling, and now you are for it because you think it prevents prices from rising. I have just one question: were you lying then or are you lying now?

## St. Louis Could Use Some Gentrification. Rail Won't Do It Anyway.

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

A recent [Strong Towns](#) post suggests that some progressives are opposing a new light rail line in St. Louis because it could cause gentrification. There might be valid arguments for opposing new light rail—but gentrification isn’t one of them, for two reasons. First, St. Louis is a low-income city that has lost higher shares of its population than any other major American city (by 2010, St. Louis had lost 62.7% of its 1950 population; even Detroit had lost only 61.4%). If any city could use a little gentrification—or economic development in general—it’s St. Louis. Second, the likelihood of new rail causing gentrification is slim. The Metrolink system already runs through some pretty poor areas. For example, one stop is in Wellston, an inner suburb where the poverty rate exceeds 50%. Improved transit might help a neighborhood that is borderline, but it won’t make a region’s poorest areas gentrify.

# The Negligible Impact of Uber-Rich Buyers

Michael Lewyn | [City Notes](#) |

A common claim is that if housing isn’t reserved for the poor, it’ll all be bought up by foreign zillionaires. For example, the Canadian website [BetterDwelling.com](#) posted the following headline in June: “This Is Where The Uber Rich Are Buying (And Selling) Second Homes.”

But if you read the story carefully, it doesn’t really support second-home hysteria. The article states that New York City’s uber-rich (which the story defines as persons worth over \$10 million) had 18,400 second homes—which is only about 0.6% of the city’s total stock of 3.3 million units. Other notoriously expensive cities, such as San Francisco and Vancouver, aren’t even on the story’s list of multimillionaire-infested cities—a fact that suggests wealthy foreign buyers aren’t a factor in those markets. In cities with massive housing stocks, it seems that this group will be but a fraction of any consumer market. (In fairness, the story doesn’t discuss renters, or not-so-rich people with second homes).

## “Goldilocks Density” Doesn’t Mean What

# Housing Obstructionists Think It Does

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

One phrase that is becoming more common is “Goldilocks density,” to imply an urban form that is presumably “just right.” I think the originator of this phrase may have been Lloyd Alter, who wrote: “It is more likely that we, in fact, want to make everything like Greenwich Village or Paris, with moderate height buildings that are more resilient when the power goes out.” But why should we make everything like anyplace? Some people like Greenwich Village, some people like skyscrapers, some people like sprawl. Even if you find Greenwich Village’s density ideal, it is nonsensical to stick the “Goldilocks” moniker to it, to use as an argument against new housing. Why? Because almost all of North America is much less dense than Greenwich Village, which has 79,000 people/square mile. If all of NYC was built at Greenwich Village density, it would have about 23 million people, almost triple its current population. If Vancouver was built at Greenwich Village density, it would have 3.4 million people, over five times its current population. So if THAT was what you meant by “Goldilocks density” I would say: go ahead, make my day.

# Apartment Dwellers Less Likely To Feel The Burn

[Michael Lewyn](#) | [City Notes](#) |

After a recent fire disaster in a London high-rise, I read a lot of blather about how skyscrapers are more dangerous than other buildings. But in fact, fire deaths are likelier to happen in ordinary apartments than in high-rises—and more likely to happen in single-family homes than in either. According to the National Fire Protection Association, about 8 fire-related deaths a year (40 between 2009 and 2013) occur in high-rises. By contrast, about 400 deaths a year occur in apartment fires generally (incidentally, less than half the 1980 number), and single-family home fires cause six times that number of deaths (just over 2600). So even if every high-rise fire death was in a residential building, about 1/3 of 1%

of all home fire deaths were in high-rises, and less than 20% of all residential fire deaths were in apartments generally (stats available [here](#) and [here](#)).

One might ask: what percent of housing structures are high-rises and/or apartments? I haven't found data on high-rises specifically. But according to Census figures, 21.8% of housing units have three or more apartments- a good surrogate for the "apartment buildings" category. So it appears apartments are underrepresented among fire deaths.

# My Review Of Jane Jacobs' "Vital Little Plans"

Michael Lewyn | [City Notes](#) |

I just finished reading *Vital Little Plans*, a book mostly consisting of small essays by Jane Jacobs. Where she was off-base was often as interesting as where she was right.

Jacobs was writing at a time when land and housing were both cheap by 21st-century standards. In 1957, she pointed out that downtowns were full of underutilized land. As evidence, she wrote that "land costs are now running less than 17 percent of total cost for building on the most coveted sites in midtown New York." Now, of course, land is much more expensive in almost any urban center. Today, land prices in metropolitan New York are 47 percent of overall housing prices- and I suspect the number is even higher in Manhattan. For example, a 1/4-acre vacant lot in Washington Heights, one of Manhattan's poorer areas, cost \$899,000- more than a comparably-sized lot in Atlanta's richest areas.

She writes that old buildings are more congenial for small shops, because they are less likely to yield high profits. Again, this makes sense in low-cost places- but when land prices rise, even old buildings are expensive. (Conversely, in newer, cheaper areas, even fairly new buildings can host lower-cost enterprises).

Jacobs favored decentralized decision-making but was no libertarian. She favored zoning based on performance-related standards, such as noise and pollution. In 1970, she wrote that to limit traffic generation, "standards could designate the number of parking places permitted." Apparently, she thought that neighborhood activists would want to limit parking. But this does not seem to reflect reality today; in fact, car-owners often wish to maximize parking in their neighborhood, while non-car-owners often tend to be unaware or apathetic of the impact of parking.

She also favored generous protection for historic value, suggesting that such protection could include "whatever the neighborhood considers valuable: say trees over a certain girth, for instance." She proposed limiting out-of-scale buildings, suggesting that "the relevant standard would be the length of street frontage allowed a building; a small-scale frontage automatically takes care of height in most cases." All of these policies make sense in a city where there is no need for new housing- for example, in 1960s New York, when even well-off neighborhoods were besieged by the risk of abandonment rather than the risk of high housing costs.

