The END of the Suburbs

Author Leigh Gallagher is Assistant Managing Editor of Fortune, so not directly involved in urban design and planning ... instead is a consumer of it.

Three caveats at this point:

1. She writes about the history of the suburbs, the ‘why’. Discusses the current trend that sees some relocation from the suburbs to urban centres – suburb dwellers moving ‘downtown’, younger generations, especially millennials, establishing their initial home in an urban setting, I think many readers, as I did, will find much of the analysis and rationale a bit oversimplified and suspect. This is a very complex issue with all kinds of variables coming into play.

2. Further, the thrust of the analysis is based on US experience. Gallagher notes, for example, that federal housing policy played a major role in the drive [↩] to suburbia – mortgage interest deductibility is a great example. AND, of course, at the time of writing and even now, the US is still recovering from the Great Recession and the huge impact that had on the housing realities in the US – much more severe than in Canada.

3. If you’re looking for clarity in her crystal ball for the future, you won’t find it. Again, it’s a very complex issue, lots of variables, including very personal ones – we are talking, after all, about people’s homes. Their own version of ‘the American Dream’.

She talks about New Urbanism at length, including a trend among large US developers that have traditionally built seas of ‘tract housing’ to now include some of the principles of New Urbanism – smaller scale, narrower streets, front porches, back lanes, localized green space, ‘nodes’ of mixed use, transit – without labelling their communities as New Urbanism.

One interesting concept she talks about is ‘urbanizing the suburbs’. The introduction of an ‘urban core’ into the suburbs. Mixed use. Retail, commercial, institutional, various forms of residential.

And an emphasis on walkability. All, or at least much of these features and amenities, within walking distance of your home. She references the Walk Score, and notes that among other health benefits, walking provides time for thinking! The Walk Score is heavily used by realtors in the US to promote sales and help clients find locations that are optimally walkable.)

The City of Markham, Ontario is doing exactly that with its award-winning new ‘Downtown Markham’. Here is a municipality that, one could argue, was the very definition of ‘suburbia’. Yet, over the past 20 years, Markham has created a vision to ‘urbanize suburbia’ – and is now building it. And it is incredibly successful!

So, the future.

Gallagher talked to lots of experts on both sides of the urban v. suburban argument, and here are a few thoughts:

- There is a near consensus that things are changing, and will continue to change. The ‘divide’ between urban and suburban won’t look the same as it did 20 years ago, or as it does today.
• Many who live in the suburbs will continue to want to live there, for many reasons, usually very personal. Especially those who live in the ‘first ring’ of suburbs around a city. *(Anders Duany, one of the founders of New Urbanism, “… freely admits he sees the objective benefits of suburban living.”)*

• There will be growing momentum to ‘urbanize the suburbs’.

• As existing suburbs continue to evolve, and as new ones are developed, there will be much more choice in residential forms than has been the case in the past. A mix of forms rather than a sea of very similar ‘tract houses’.

• Many who are choosing now to establish their first residence in an urban setting will stay there, even while raising a family. Others, though, will want to move into lower density, with different kinds of amenities.

• While cities will continue to evolve, to varying degrees, the biggest changes will happen in the suburbs themselves. “Urbanizing the suburbs”.

• The ‘exurbs’ – the rings of the suburbs that are furthest from urban centres – will be most ‘at risk’. Experts suggest (at least in the US) that some will fail. Others will be completely redeveloped, for example, by recycling those ‘tract houses’ into affordable housing, student housing or other residential forms OR converting the stock to other uses like retail, commercial, office.

• Some see an emphasis on smaller cities – 10,000 to 300,000 population. While others envision a reconstruction in the opposite direction – megacities that stretch across entire regions, and which MAY look like a lot of large ‘nodes’ connected by transit (first choice) and roadways (the fallback).

In the end, Gallagher and her experts predict that consumers will have a lot more options to select their own preferred version of ‘the American Dream’.