

## **ULI on the Future, 2001**

### **An Urban Revival for a Suburban Culture**

By Alex Krieger

Though they have built them rapidly and at impressive scales, Americans have rarely cherished their cities, preferring more sylvan and uncrowned conditions away from the center. Successive rings of new settlement haven't always reinforced preceding ones, or benefited older central cores, suggesting for some that such constant privileging of the perimeter has created an urban civilization without cities. Nonetheless, America today is experiencing a city revival.

The centers of many American cities -- maligned or ignored and vacated by waves of suburbanization are exhibiting new vitality. There is demonstrable evidence of business and job growth; innovations in downtown and neighborhood retailing; expansion of cultural facilities and major investment in sports, convention and entertainment centers. Urban crime rates have fallen for nearly a decade, as have poverty rates, though less dramatically and insufficiently. There is a market for urban housing, modest by comparison to the ongoing growth of suburban areas, but a harbinger of a population inflow following decades of loss to the periphery.

While the health of the economy is important to this revival, there is a more fundamental change underway -- the tide of public opinion is shifting away from the dominant, dare one say sacred, position that the suburban lifestyle has held in the American imagination. With regularity, *good* stories about cities are appearing in the popular press. In publications such as Newsweek, The Atlantic Monthly, Governing Magazine, The Economist, the Wall Street Journal, as well as many city newspapers, the cachet of an urban zip code is discussed.

This is remarkable. A generation ago, indeed, for much of the twentieth century older cities were portrayed as chronically ill or frail; at best in need of life support, at worst beyond hope of recovery. Distress was felt more frequently than hope; about the demise of central cities, or the pathology and social dysfunction to be found within them. Public sentiments -- and national policy -- seemed to lie not in periodic efforts at renewal but in support of Henry Ford's memorable phrase: "We shall solve the problems of the city by leaving the city."

Some suggest that Mr. Ford and his instrument ultimately transferred the 'problems of the city' to the outskirts. Fewer today advocate leaving the city as the solution to improving it. Indeed, there are many cultural indices supporting a renewed appreciation for urban life -- beginning with the expanding critique of sprawl. Suburbia itself has been repositioned by the now grown children of the baby boomers (who grew up in the suburbs) as homogenous and uninteresting. There is saturation in some suburban retail markets coupled with the uncovering of untapped markets and disposable income among city dwellers, even in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Urban locations, or at least amenities, seem to attract a sizable portion of those engaged in the new economy; in the fields of high-technology, bio-medicine, financial and professional services, new media, international trade, hospitality and entertainment. The changing nature of household demographics and the acknowledgment of different family structures leads to a demand (not always being met) for diversification in dwelling types, as does the understanding that different settings for living become attractive at different stages of longer lives. A better-educated population becomes more demanding of cultural amenities and social stimulation. A search for "community" and "place" is underway; a reaction to both isolation caused by sprawl and the ubiquity of electronic communication. An environmental ethic is growing among the population at large. A social fatigue associated with the seemingly incessant

pace of change brings a greater resistance to further development, and a sentiment-laden attachment to life as it may have been in the places of memory.

Lastly a generational change in the acceptance of urbanism is underway. Urban pretensions, the Starbucks or Seinfeld phenomena are not to be underestimated while, the archetypal suburb, once the fashionable destination for the upwardly-mobile and for everyone else to aspire to, represents pure status quo. For the majority of Americans living out on the periphery the city lies outside of their daily experience and becomes interesting again.

The lures of the industrial city once filled the imaginations of rural populations, as still occurs in much of the developing world. Some sub-or-exurbanites now respond to the city in an analogous way -- it seems exotic to them. They may not need to migrate or starve as their rural predecessors had to do, but they look to the city for amusement, education, entertainment; to seek propinquity; to find novelty, encounter culture or reconnect with history; and, yes, to take advantage still of broader career or social networks. While low-dense development will remain the dominant land pattern in most parts of the country, it is under sharper scrutiny as the limitations of the suburban ideal, or the consequences of all achieving it, are becoming widely understood.

As America confronts the dual tasks of checking metropolitan sprawl and the need to revitalize older, half-emptied (consider Detroit) urban centers, other parts of the urbanizing world face quite separate dilemmas. In the still developing world, particularly throughout Southeast Asia and parts of Africa and South America, rapid urbanization creates the burdens of congestion, pollution, poverty, disease, social inequalities and similar miseries of high human concentrations, which the European city experienced during the blossoming of the Industrial Revolution. Suburbanization, at least in the American context, was part of the response. Even as the social and economic costs of sprawl become more apparent in North America, the allure of suburbanization and decentralization, made possible by increasing affluence and greater personal mobility, spreads to Europe and other parts of the developed world.

Rising standards of living in the urbanized West generate ever-higher expectations for additional services and space usage per capita. Yet higher expectations and a greater sense of entitlement produces lower tolerances for urban stresses, and thus the impulse either to escape to yet newer and more outlying suburbs, or to ardently oppose further development in one's proverbial back yard. In less affluent societies the enormous resources needed to improve basic living standards limits hope to modest improvements, even as cities remain the hope of many seeking to better themselves and their families.

Clearly, Las Vegas or Phoenix on one hand and Bombay or Karachi on the other cannot simply borrow from one another's current experiences in planning for their futures. The calls for managing growth, conserving open space, and the partial rediscovery of urban lifestyles, all receiving considerable attention in the American context, are not at the top of the agenda in, say, Calcutta. The imperative to improve primitive infrastructure, basic shelter and public health, while important anywhere, do not dominate American urban policy. Still, despite such diverse challenges, several overarching trends and renewed mandates will guide global urbanization in the coming decades of the new century.

### *Managing Urban Regions not Autonomous Cities*

At mid-20th century only London and New York boasted regional populations exceeding ten million. By 2010 the number of such city-regions is expected to reach twenty-seven. The term 'city' no longer adequately describes such territories as they extend over hundred-long miles of urbanization.. These are clusters of density, fragments of (often endangered) landscapes or agricultural lands, and overlapping webs of jurisdictional boundaries, infrastructure, ethnicity

and degrees of wealth. Frank Lloyd Wright's imagined *Broadacres* comes to mind except that his agrarian-inspired, evenly dispersed, low-density matrix has become the poly-nucleated, 'edge-city-iced,' regional checkerboard pattern of today.

Our experiences as urban dwellers -- living in close proximity with untold others across expansive geographies -- are in historical timeline quite new. Humans have a far longer track record of living directly off the land or in relatively compact civil aggregations where, for example, the concept of sustainability could not be conscious, merely what it took to subsist. Although periodically in history a city-state accumulating political or military prominence would grow rapidly in population -- Rome is estimated to have reached a million by the end of the first century AD before withering back to the size of a town by the Middle Ages -- large aggregations of people were exceedingly rare prior to the Industrial Revolution.

Our methods of servicing and governing urban regions remains untested. Greater Shanghai, for example, seems to be developing characteristics of Manhattan and Los Angeles at once; pockets of great densities yet widespread settlement stretching for nearly 300 kilometers to form the Shanghai/Nanjing/Hangzhou corridor. Its planners' current response, at least to traffic, is to build some 3,000 kilometers of elevated highways in and around Shanghai. North American planners, with experience that urban highways are traffic generators not traffic mitigators, may imagine impending highway gridlock and recommend investment in other forms of transportation. Yet, since urban infrastructure in China lags behind demand there is little time to debate alternatives before committing to a course of action.

The planning for Shanghai encompasses a regional, even national, perspective, consistent with Chinese tolerance for centralized political action. Back in the States, the tradition of home rule governance means that regional planning is rare, excepting transportation planning and environmental regulations, both dependent on state or federal funding. It is common for individual municipalities to act without any specific regional priorities in mind, competing for markets or public dollars with neighboring communities. To strategically plan for, much less govern, a metropolitan area encompassing dozens of autonomous municipalities (greater Chicago includes two hundred) is nearly impossible. With sprawl becoming a mainstream concern, the early decades of the 21st will witness experimentation with regional governance, or at the very least, requirements for pre-establishing regional goals or impacts of development as a condition for federal or state fiscal support. It is difficult to imagine effective growth management without some forms of regional cooperation.

### *Shifting Regions of Urbanization*

Led by London, seven European cities were among the fifteen largest metro areas in the world one hundred years ago. By 1940 only four European cities remained in the top fifteen while six -- New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston and Detroit -- were by then located in the United States. Three cities -- Tokyo, Shanghai and Osaka -- represented Asia. At the end of the 20th century only two American cities, New York and Los Angeles, remain in the top fifteen while Asia added three more; Beijing, Calcutta and Seoul. By 2020 the Asian continent will also include Bombay, Jakarta, Karachi, Dhaka, Delhi, Tianjin and Manila. Even with Seoul and Osaka (barely) dropping out of the top fifteen, Asia will account for eleven of the fifteen largest urban regions. Europe will have none, though the historical proximity of some cities is creating large contiguous urban corridors. It is even uncertain whether the paradigmatic large city of the 20th century, New York, will remain in the top fifteen.

The mobilization required to accommodate such growth, while minimizing environmental harm, is enormous. And those cities, which are no longer the very largest, are no less costly to sustain. The Regional Plan Authority of New York recently released a plan update which calls for 75 billion dollars of infrastructure over twenty-five years just to retain the

region's economic viability. Then think of Berlin. Few places on earth, even those much larger, experienced a higher level of public and private investment over the past decade. Berlin reminds us about the periodic imperative to rebuild, dare one say reinvent, existing cities.

Though North American cities are also experiencing substantial reinvestment, this has hardly slowed the continuing shift of American population (with all that implies for city-building) from the northeast and Midwest to the "sunbelt" areas in the south and west. Shifting geographies of urbanization are not just a phenomenon of the underdeveloped world.

### *Managing Sprawl Amidst Greater Mobility*

Dhaka in Bangladesh may today be among the fastest growing cities in terms of population, but Atlanta, Georgia has acquired the dubious distinction of being history's fastest expanding urban territory, having just about doubled in geographic size during the 1990's alone. Akron, Ohio managed to shed a third of its population during the 90's while increasing in land area by two-thirds! The suburbs of Chicago are expanding at a density that is less than one-fifth of that in comparable suburban districts of Paris. Among many such sobering land use statistics is the following: whereas less developed countries use approximately one acre of land per capita, North Americans seem to need (or simply make use of) the equivalent of 10-or-more acres of land per capita. Such voraciousness cannot be a model for future urbanization, and yet ....

There is a strong correlation between increased mobility (and economic well-being) and peripheral urban expansion. What will happen in China when car ownership increases from 10 to 30 or 50 percent of the population? On the other hand, something *needs* to happen in China; an increase in the average dwelling space, currently as little as six square meters per household, less than an one-eighth the current western standards. Though a certain level of density enables a city to provide the social, cultural and service infrastructure necessary for a vibrant life, too much density leads to a deterioration of urban experience and eventually requires substantial effort to reverse the trend. Likewise with sprawl; the many benefits to those moving out become at some point a burden for a region overall.

A recent Bank of America-sponsored policy report on American land use concluded that; "Ironically, unchecked sprawl has shifted from an engine of ... growth to a force that now threatens to inhibit growth and degrade the quality of our life." This is a daunting admission for a nation -- whose legendary growth and affluence has taken inexpensive land, personal mobility and nature's abundance for granted. Slowly, but now steadily, comes the realization that such assumptions cannot persist across another century.

Managing urban regions requires a constant calibration between the tendencies for concentration, observable primarily in rapidly developing societies, and for decentralization, in evidence among affluent nations internationally. During the Great Depression it was believed necessary for Americans to decentralize from congested industrial cities (on whom the depression, in part, was blamed). New Deal policies unabashedly favored decentralization, then termed "re-centralization," to less populated towns and regions. Seventy years of federal monetary support for sprawl, so pervasive that it is has not been acknowledged as such, leads now to calls for governmental action to minimize further sprawl.

### *Reaping the Advantages of Globalization*

Many observers predict that with increased globalization of markets and communication a homogenized world will emerge, shorn of regional values and local eccentricities; a world fashioned by the courser (even vulgar) tastes disseminated by mass media. Seeing McDonald's golden arches rise in view of Beijing's Temple of Heaven supports this possibility. But freer global exchange has a reciprocal consequence; the proliferation of ideas, choices and, thus, of

diversity. As the expansion of the Internet shows, yes pornography, but countless indigenous, intellectual, cultural, ideological and whimsical home sites also proliferate -- as they do in cities were the pre-electronic means of accessing choice.

The belief that access to knowledge, as promised by the Internet, is a democratizing force echoes the medieval German proverb, "city air makes one free." As knowledge-based industries become the largest economic sectors worldwide, and information, not goods, become the primary source of wealth generation, the 'capitals of information,' like the 'capitals of capitalism,' (to recall Kenneth Jackson's memorable term for New York) will be our most dynamic cities. The largest cities will remain the broadcast centers for the Information Age.

### *Urban Engagement by Choice not Simply Necessity*

For societies in which a base of economic stability has been achieved, John Maynard Keynes predicted a future where people pursue only what they find desirable. Freedom from the struggle over subsistence would, according to Keynes, enable people to "occupy the leisure which science and compound interest have won for [them], to live wisely and agreeably and well." He was advancing an Aristotelian idea, that people first gathered in cities for security, remained for economic opportunity, but ultimately stay for "the good life."

As the world's premier cities consolidate their position as centers of knowledge exchange and creativity, they become, ala Keynes and Aristotle, places less exclusively of labor and more dedicated to that good life. Remaining evocations of the Dickinsonian city of perpetual despair, especially in the developing world, makes this harder to grasp. Some even trivialize this notion of 'cities-for-fun'. Well, the escape to the suburbs was about leaving the sweat and coal dust of the city behind for a healthier and more relaxed atmosphere, to attend to family needs and enjoy the shade of trees. In the more advanced economies a reversal of sorts is taking place; the role of the city is shifting from a place where you must go, for a job, to a place where you may wish to spend time. At the moment the new attractions seem narrow -- too often themed commercial or sports venues -- but as cities become more desirable places to be; to interact with others; to visit and tour; to live in during stages across longer lives; as they attract us for such reasons and not only for economic activity, they reaffirm their essentially social purposes.

### *The City's Role in Accommodating Longer Lives*

Children born in the year 2,000 are expected to live into their nineties, and many may experience the dawn of the twenty-second century! It is unlikely that dwelling choices made over three-quarters-of-a-century will favor one predominant type of place or community. This is not often considered a problem of urbanization, though places like Phoenix and Orlando suggest otherwise, with their growth propelled by elderly populations.

The nearly 80 million American 'boomers' are gaining rapidly on their retirement years. They will increase the demand for retirement communities in the Sunbelt and elsewhere, and many will choose -- as the urban empty-nester phenomenon has shown -- retirement in established urban areas. Preparing for and retirement for the trend setting 'boomers', and for their even longer-lived children, will be a long and complex process. Factors such as high levels of disposable incomes, post-retirement 'second' careers, ability and opportunity to travel, desire for more diverse social setting and for continuing learning, entertainment and leisure options, prolonged participation in active recreation, and desire for proximity to first-rate health-care will favor vital urban environments.

In general, the child-rearing portion of people's lives, the cohort today most inclined to seek out suburban living, will represent a smaller percentage of an overall life span. Both during the prolonged years preceding family formation (as people wait to start families for career or educational reasons) and during the much lengthened post-child rearing years people will seek out diverse settings --including culturally-rich cities.

### *Conserving Urban Settings*

Because so much is new and still forming in a rapidly changing world, the parts, which precede the new, become both more cherished and more threatened. The threats are obsolescence, replacement, insufficient resources for preservation, and, indeed, demand for things new. The cherishing is for authenticity, continuity with prior epochs and values, and a longing for stability against incessant newness. As economists point out, scarce commodities usually become more valuable. The suburban landscape is no longer scarce, while traditional pockets of urbanism are becoming more so.

In many parts of the world the importance of preservation is yet to be established, but in America the period of federally sponsored urban renewal challenged cavalier attitudes towards history. Demolition is no longer seen as a precursor to improvement. The instinct to preserve evidence of the physical past -- to reaffirm the value for things which have persisted -- will only grow as the rates of change in business, commerce and technology accelerates the phenomenon of obsolescence, while falsely devaluing both place and artifice.

### *The Possibility of "Green Cities"*

If the second millennium seems to have been about *growth* in every conceivable dimension, many hope that the third will be about conservation. Is it possible to produce 'green cities' not because urbanization has sprawled into the woods, but because environmental logic determines the logical checkerboard accommodating urbanization and land conservation? The time-honored image, of course, is one of a tightly formed city or town surrounded by rings of agricultural land and then nature itself. Contemporary ecologists, if not tradition-minded planners, suggest an alternative in the form of *land mosaics*. Richard T. T. Forman, in a book of the same name, shows that virtually all landscapes and regions consist of "patches" of ecologically complimentary composition; boundaries and edge conditions between such patches; various "corridors" through which specific forms of life, including humans, migrate; and natural "flows" like weather and water currents.

This idea of a mosaic is a marvelous evocation for urbanizing regions stretching across hundreds, even thousands, of square miles. Envisioned as and mandated by tough land use legislation to be complex quilts of density, open landscape, conservation corridors, heritage districts and growth areas, rather than as generic fields of development, will enable opposite qualities -- including nature -- to persist. While there has generally been less resistance to growth in outlying areas, pending the extension of transportation and services, this is changing as a desire to preserve the not yet urbanized intensifies.

### *The Repository of Culture Still -- and Propinquity, Too*

With his usual humanity, John Kenneth Galbraith recently observed that William Shakespeare came from a country with a low gross national product. But he nurtured his craft in a city, London, whose cosmopolitanism fueled creative imaginations for centuries. It is tempting today to imagine a world in which location and desired activity are independent variables. Cities developed from an opposite impulse; to facilitate productivity through human interaction at

specific locations. This purpose has not been superseded by digital-flows. Even those most invested in e-commerce, chat-rooms or ‘surfing-the-net’ unconfidently predict the end of place-consciousness or dependence.

As the novelty of conducting business and social exchange electronically subsides a renewed appreciation for face-to-face contact returns. There is already evidence for this in the locational preferences of e-business start-ups. At any moment in history cities have served as magnets for the most talented, ambitious and creative people. There is little evidence that the innovators of the new information age will behave differently. Actually, because innovation is such a hallmark of the new information-based economies, concentrations of talent in cities will increase.

Here is the irony, and the key to understanding the virtue of cities in a digital age. When an industry becomes routinized, as in an assembly plant, it can locate relatively freely, assuming access to a labor supply and good transportation. But industries in early stages of formation (as so many technology, telecommunications, new media, and bio-medical fields are today) must rely on alliances, coalitions of entrepreneurs, complicated and changeable networking, interdisciplinary exchanges, short-term collaborations even felicitous connections. Such a dynamic layering of resources is the province of a great city, and the nature of current economic innovation. New York remains the unchallenged center for media conglomerates precisely because it can so quickly assemble talent from so many creative and entrepreneurial fields. If one accepts the forecasts that industries focusing on entertainment, travel and tourism, cultural exchange and education, idea generation, and unique product marketing will remain among the fastest growing, then the demand for cities as incubators and exporters of innovation will only grow.

### *The Imperative of Becoming a More Urbane Species*

As Americans struggle to rediscover the virtues of urbanism it is useful to recall Aristotle’s admonition; “...a man that is by nature, and not merely by fortune, cityless is either low in the scale of humanity or above it.” Fewer of us than in Aristotle’s time are today city-less, but it is raising the quality of life in cities, which must preoccupy contemporary Aristotlians.

During the 20th century dwellers of urban areas grew from around 200 million to nearly three billion. Some sixty million people annually, the equivalent of three Tokyos, are being added to the cities of the developing world alone, in places not readily able to accommodate them. Among the highest rates of urbanization occur in least prepared nations. Differential access to advances in medicine, much less economic opportunity, exacerbates divisions between the well to do and the poor. The substantial capital needed to participate in the new wealth-generating economies is a barrier for less affluent societies. Dependence on advanced and specialized education for better jobs disadvantages nations with more primitive educational infrastructure. Civil society in some places seems at risk, with crime rates increasing beyond those in New York or Detroit a decade ago. Even the effects of global warming seem to find the poor first, consider the exaggerated flooding in recent years in Bangladesh.

With half of humanity, and soon more, living in and around cities an urbane sensibility becomes essential worldwide: to have a sophisticated awareness of environment and one’s impact upon it; to be more civil and responsive towards others; to *act* on behalf of others not simply express concern for those less fortunate; to use technological advance for more equitable distribution of resources, not only to generate greater personal wealth and to respect natural processes tolerating less waste and redundancy. By 2050 another two billion urban dwellers are projected. Humanity’s response will reveal the living standards achievable in newly developing and maintainable in older metropolitan areas, and the ingenuity necessary to manage urban growth in a culturally and environmentally appropriate manner.

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