

## As a Child of the Suburbs: – a response to Michael Thompson’s “How Suburbs Destroy Democracy” *by Alex Schafran*

As a child of the suburbs, I empathize with Michael J. Thompson’s anti-suburbia diatribe in the previous issue of MONU. Whereas the suburb I grew up in does not fit into Thompson’s neat little box of undemocratic suburbia, it is not difficult to see the negative side effects of American postwar housing policies, both socially and environmentally, that decades of scholarship have brought to light. But a significant danger lies in painting with such large brushstrokes. Thompson’s piece makes it seem as if everything outside of cities was some massive, low-density homogenous Levittown, while cities are a paradise of density and democracy. So how does he account for a place like Passaic or Essex County, New Jersey, where he teaches, which is far more diverse and in some instances at least as dense as many American cities, yet is formally a suburb of New York City? What about Riverdale in the Bronx, or Forest Hills in Queens, low-density “suburban-feeling” pockets of the largest city in the United States. Drive through Minneapolis or Seattle and tell me where the city ends and suburbia begins; on the other hand, places like Ontario and Irvine will likely have densities on par with Central Los Angeles within a few decades.

Similarly, Thompson’s suburbanites come across as mindless zombies, cut-off from cultural institutions and social capital and living dull and simplistic lives. Although many post-war ‘burbs do seem to suffer from such a serious malaise, others are remarkably diverse, with vibrant town centers, especially in those like mine which were small towns that became suburbia, as opposed to purely greenfield suburbs. Downtown Bethesda, Maryland or Rockville Center on Long Island are not the East Village, but they are not nearly the horrific nightmare that Mumford feared. Visit a church group, a PTA meeting, or a planning and zoning board meeting and you will see that both social interaction and local democracy do exist in the suburbs. Is it on par with the city? Perhaps, perhaps not, but it is certainly not this uniformly dreary, undemocratic place.

One key reason as I see it for Thompson’s mischaracterization of suburbia is his overly romanticized vision of the revolutionary history of urban environments. Democratic life has not always emanated from urban environments – in fact, the democracy that is home to this suburban hell was forged as much at the farmhouse table as it was in any urban salon. Our Jeffersonian democracy was built on small towns, open spaces and farming, and that rural character is undoubtedly

ingrained in our national character. Our first immigrants came seeking land of their own and adventure on the frontier. Subsequent generations of immigrants were forced to live in cities by an industrialized economy, but at the earliest opportunity, they and their descendents fled. In fact, studies by William Frey and the Brookings Institution show that immigrants are now going directly to the suburbs in large numbers.(1) South Asians now go directly to Edison, New Jersey without stopping in Jackson Heights; Salvadorans have long gone directly to Hempstead, Long Island without ever living in “the city” at all. This is a country that has always loved its space, and that has somehow built its democracy despite the physical distance between neighbors. No anti-suburban argument, no matter how eloquent, is going to convince the masses of Americans that they should not pursue the dream of the quieter life. Just ask Joel Kotkin – although you can argue with his defense of suburbia, you can not argue with some of the numbers that show that Americans are still overwhelmingly choosing to leave the formal city.(2)

As planners, policy makers and urbanists, the real challenge lies in understanding this American desire for space, and coming up with novel ways to redesign and rework the American suburb so that it is less hostile to human life, less destructive to our natural environment, less of a barrier to spatial equity and more integrated into the metropolitan ecosystem. The Brookings Institution (among others) has done an excellent job at pointing out that the next great American urban challenge – perhaps on par with the attempt to revitalize inner cities and reverse the anti-urban policies of the 50’s and 60’s – is a suburban one. (3) How do we revitalize aging inner-ring suburbs? How do we overcome nimbysism, isolationism and political boundaries to force the suburbs to accommodate their fair share of metropolitan density? How do we continue the urban renaissance – despite Kotkin, I do believe that American cities are experiencing a true rebirth – in the face of astronomical housing prices, a fact that threatens to make cities as segregated and unequal as suburbs? How do we achieve, as Susan Fainstein puts it, a “just city?”

Fundamentally, answers to these questions will require a more nuanced definition of human settlements than the terms city and suburb currently offer. By framing our debate in these terms, we accede to these artificial boundaries an importance that they do not deserve. As Myron Orfield(4) and other metropolitanists have shown, one of the great crimes of “suburbia” is the fact that they are separate from “cities” in a formal, political sense, despite the fact that they share industrial bases, cultural assets and a single ecosystem. They simply don’t share tax bases, and this exacerbates inequality and prevents cooperation on critical issues like transportation and land use regulation.

It is ironic that one of the most eloquent understandings of the importance of regional thinking comes from the New Urbanists. The "Region" section of Congress for the New Urbanism Charter (5) specifically recognizes that the metropolitan region is the fundamental economic unit of the contemporary world, that the true divisions within this unit are ecological and geographic, and that there are nuanced differences between neighborhoods and places. Sadly, this subtlety seems to have been lost on the New Urbanist practitioners who have been working in the Gulf Region, as their emphasis on form and their utter ignorance of people and process has prevented some of their good ideas – not just about regionalism but about walkability – from taking hold.

As a New Yorker, I must recognize that I live in a single human ecosystem, consisting of 20 million people spread over 31 counties in three states. Some of these people live in high density communities, others in low density ones, with an awful lot of grey area in between. A small percentage still live on farms. Some people are actively engaged in their democracy; others are completely disengaged. Some people have access to a vibrant communal life; others live in isolation. And these characteristics are not necessarily decided by municipal boundaries. Kotkin points to the gradual loss of jobs from the city as proof that cities are still in decline. It is as if a city's only purpose is to provide jobs, and that the old city, which emptied out in the evening, would in some way be more desirable than a city with a smaller job base but a more vibrant, 24/7 community and active street life. I see it as a fantastic development that suburbs are finally beginning to take on their share of economic activities and jobs. People are going to live there no matter what, and if we are ever to overcome the job/housing mismatch – which Robert Cervero has demonstrated as a major cause of traffic and transportation headaches (6) – then people must be able to work where they live. The reverse commuting patterns you are seeing out of San Francisco – which to Kotkin show that San Francisco is failing in some way – to me are a sign of the new metropolis, one with many centers and a regional balance of jobs and housing.

Perhaps Kotkin is just as attached to a false mythology as is Thompson. Married couples with children now account for only 23.5% of American household's – less than the number of people living alone.(7) He talks often of a "middle-class lifestyle", yet one gets the sense that in order to be middle class, or at least to live the "lifestyle," one has to be married to a member of the opposite sex and live with your children in a single family home. He regularly discounts young people, gays and other members of Richard Florida's "creative class", as if their contributions to the city are lessened by the fact that they don't have children. But only a third of American households have children – what are the rest of us to do?

That is not to say that Kotkin's warnings to cities about becoming

playgrounds of the rich and the young should not be heeded. Children in the city are critical, as is diversity, and both are in danger in places like San Francisco, as a recent San Francisco Chronicle (8) series shows. Much more needs to be done on issues life affordable housing and education to ensure that cities remain diverse, both ethnically and agewise.

Similarly, Thompson's concerns about the quality of democratic life in what is now by far the largest segment of the American populus – suburban counties – have significant merit. Some of the horrors that he cites are realities outside of cities, and the decline of America's first suburbs is a critical urban issue for the current century. But when Thompson paints in such broad brushstrokes, or when both he and Kotkin remain attached to a particular myth – Thompson's revolutionary city and Kotkin's suburban family paradise – it only reinforces the artificial divide between places within the metropolis. And it is our attachment to these outmoded political boundaries, and the outdated myths which accompany them, which will in the end only hinder us from addressing the true needs of the changing metropolis in the years to come.

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(1) Frey, William H. (2006), "Diversity Spreads Out: Metropolitan Shifts in Hispanic, Asian, and Black Populations Since 2000", Brookings Institution Report: March 2006

(2) Kotkin, Joel (2006) "The Ersatz Urban Renaissance," The Wall Street Journal, May 15, 2006; Page A14

(3) Puentes, Robert and David Warren (2006), "One-Fifth of the Nation: America's First Suburbs", Brookings Institution Press: February 2006

(4) Orfield, Myron (2002) American Metropolitcs: The New Suburban Reality, Brookings Institution Press

(5) <http://www.cnu.org/aboutcnu/index.cfm?formAction=charter>

(6) Cervero, Robert (2001) "California's Transportation Problems as Land-Use and Housing Problems: Towards a Sustainable Future," California's Future in the Balance: Transportation, Housing/Land Use, Public Higher Education, and Water Four Decades Beyond the Pat Brown Era, A. Modarres and J. Lubenow, eds., The Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs, California State University, Los Angeles, pp. 16-49

(7) Source: 2000 US Census

(8) Lelchuck, Ilene (2006) "Lots Of Toddlers, Fewer School-Age Kids In S.F.," San Francisco Chronicle, Tuesday, May 30, 2006