

Guest Editor's Introduction: Suburban Planning—The Future Becomes the Past

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The articles in this special Opolis issue of *Housing Policy Debate* address an issue that suburbs never anticipated: growing old. Each article addresses this theme in a different context, but taken as a whole, they provide remarkable intersections on the past as prologue for the nation's suburbs. Most of the articles are about the central Midwest, except for one that discusses Australia and one that focuses on Baltimore. These are not just analytical articles, but context for policy.

What do the articles in this issue say?

Bernadette Hanlon offers an excellent overview of the transformation of American suburbs. Her extensive analysis of more than 3,000 suburbs across the nation demonstrates their continuing diversification. In fact, suburbs with different origins—old towns near cities versus developer-built new communities—have very different trajectories, no matter where they are. The past is prologue. Older suburbs that were founded in the 1930s to be exclusive enclaves near big cities such as New York remain very well-off. Such places continue to be exclusive and are not subject to the economic shocks that new commuter suburbs experience when the middle-class base is affected by job changes or loss. Moreover, inner-ring suburbs that formed the basis for “white flight” are now in the path of “black middle-class flight” and are witnessing the formation of new Mexican and other new immigrant communities. The inner-ring suburbs in the Midwest and South are experiencing steep declines. The new suburbs in the West and Southwest are booming and influenced by rising wealth. During the past 50 years, suburbs, depending on their demographics, have moved up, moved down, or remained stable. Hanlon's work presents the best overview of the articles that follow, because she provides the broad context into which they fit.

W. Dennis Keating and Thomas Bier look at suburbs nationally as a system of places and find much variation with respect to decline and progress. Their work offers a wider template for understanding suburban growth and decline, and reinforces the notion that inner-ring suburbs with changing demographics are experiencing the deepest crisis. Race and income make a difference in suburban distress just as they do in cities, but so does location (in the Northeast, South, or West). One of the reasons for this relates to the role the suburb has played historically. In the Northeast, suburbs were small, single-industry towns before becoming bedroom communities; in the South, established patterns of social and economic segregation have reproduced themselves in the suburbs. Meanwhile, the western suburbs are as new as the West itself and do not reflect the same social history with respect to suburbanization. This means different remedies for different declining places: One approach does not fit all, and this is a difficult notion to get across in Washington, DC.

Thomas J. Vicino examines the Baltimore suburbs and finds them to be very similar to other suburbs in decline. He shows that suburbs attracted economic and social classes differentially. That is, some suburbs were professional in character from their inception and have remained so. Others attracted lower-income residents and minorities, and they have continued to reflect this feature of immigration. To some extent, the way a suburb starts out determines its destiny. In essence, the seeds of success or decay were planted early in the suburban transformation. Professional suburbs confer address prestige, while blue-collar and more heterogeneous suburbs are less likely to make the transition as they age. Even as gasoline prices rise, professional suburbs can attract new jobs and new retailing based on income and general attractiveness, but older, more heterogeneous suburbs struggle as they age.

Katrin B. Anacker and Hazel A. Morrow-Jones examine Cleveland's very interesting metropolitan approach to suburbanization. They show that inner-ring suburbs put all of their eggs in one housing basket. As some of these suburbs have aged, home values have divided. As one would anticipate, the inner-ring suburbs that look too much like the city demographically have fared worse than those that have fewer minority residents. As suburbs pass 60, it takes more to maintain them because they are not as attractive as they once were. Older homes need new roofs, new appliances, and so on, and these same communities have tired 1960s shopping centers that are no longer attractive. As inner-ring suburbs age, some with better access to highways maintain their value, but the key to housing prices is more the location of the community than the home itself, because far too many suburban homes have

lots and planning systems that do not lend themselves to much flexibility. Like an aging beauty, older inner-ring suburbs try to maintain their appeal, but they do not look as good in the same old hairdo and bell-bottoms. This analysis suggests to planners that a more aggressive approach to expanding lots and altering suburban settlement patterns will have to occur for these old places to be young again.

Cristina Martinez-Fernandez and Tavis Potts discuss the notion of suburban centers as innovation hubs in Sydney, Australia. In essence, they are trying to find an economic reason for suburbs. Most Australian suburbs served both a bedroom and an industrial function, so analyzing them is important for understanding older suburbs in this country because many U.S. suburbs were originally industrial nodes as well. As suburbs age, Martinez-Fernandez and Potts find that the essential ingredient, knowledge capital, diminishes and that suburbs have few institutions or networks to maintain that knowledge base. In this sense, the work of Martinez-Fernandez and Potts is very similar to studies of older U.S. industrial suburbs that are aging in place. Older suburbs that were home to industrial firms are dying intellectually and physically. Martinez-Fernandez and Potts point out the obvious: that such places need more than sprucing up with coffee shops, they need an infusion of new human capital-forming institutions if they are to have any hope of making it to the next century.

Finally, T. Paul Hutchinson explores Robert E. Lang's concept of a dual housing market: one for conventional low-density suburbs, and one for cities and denser suburbs. Lang suggests that the housing market might be a U-shaped curve, with high demand for low-density homes in a suburban environment and high demand for high-density, urban places, but with low demand for intermediate places. Hutchinson refines this theory and suggests that what might be at play is a consumer preference for city-like house features in a city environment and suburban-like house features in a suburban environment. Hutchinson proposes that what is really important in determining house price is the difference between the number of city-like features of a house and the number of city-like features of its location. He asserts that the price is high when there are few differences, but goes down when there are many differences.

What does it all mean?

Suburbs are like cities—they are aging and declining. However, unlike cities, they were never designed to age. As a result, we face a new national crisis. The place settlement pattern of less than 50 years and the residential

location of nearly 70 percent of the nation is not a suitable or sustainable model for the future. The articles in this issue show that suburbs have little capacity to adapt as they age. This is an important challenge for the planning profession because the future will not be in new building, but rather in rebuilding. Older suburbs are a challenge in that they lack the core on which to build and are deeply spatially separated and segregated. Reusing a suburb or even infrastructure such as old malls and blighted suburban real estate is not in the lexicon of planning yet. But these articles show that the future will lie in reshaping suburbs that were never intended to grow old.

Author

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