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## CITYSPACE

# The New Urbanism



**It's Mighty Mighty: Homes like this one in Mt. Airy bring people to Philly.**

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

## Why cities are better than suburbs.

*by Joseph Matje*

A new light is shining on America's cities after half a century of darkness. There is evidence of it in many places; cities are turning around flight trends of the past few decades and some are actually (gasp) growing, while new local building codes in effect for suburban areas are trying to stunt growth. I have heard the term "new urbanism" used to describe this hopeful re-emergence of urban America. What this term means to me is the shedding of the suburban flight trend where families moved out of major cities starting in the 1950s in search of a new American dream, which included picket fences around large lawns. What people are learning now is that this may not be the better alternative after all, and that large city living seems to make more and more sense.

For young individuals, the thought of living in the city should always be an appealing one. I can say this with confidence, having grown up in the suburbs and switched to city life. Those living in urban centers find themselves at the heart of American cultural centers, amidst large quantities of new thoughts and ideas along with the stimulating people producing them. The diversity of the city is also rewarding, allowing individuals to expand their knowledge of cultures simply by making friends with neighbors and co-workers. There is something to do around every turn, and a new experience occurs to most city dwellers on a daily basis, providing subjects for interesting discussions at later times. My neighborhood is very close-knit, as are most urban neighborhoods, and I know almost everyone on my block. My neighbors gather to talk on the sidewalks after work each day, and there is always someone ready to join my wife and me for a drink or a bite to eat.

For the middle-class family the city could be appealing as well, but generations of decline have unfortunately branded negative reputations on the minds of most soccer moms and dads. For the American city to truly be great again, the middle-class family must also come back home. Once mass-media outlets stop branding cities with reputations of despair and crime (which I think is to help suburban dwellers feel better about themselves and their drab lives), most people will see that the city is not a negative place, but in fact a positive and dominant one. The bland, repetitious life of the suburban family is starting to show side effects in people's actions. Boredom, which can only be combated by television in most suburban communities, has effects we are only beginning to understand.

Most people in America agree that more suburban sprawl is a bad thing, increased traffic being the No. 1 problem. But more negatives follow the spreading sprawl, and they deserve just as much attention since the problems are subtle with prolonged exposure and growing negative effects. The suburbs to me, of course with some small exceptions, are places devoid of culture. Most suburbs consist of only one ethnicity (whites), one economic class (middle) and few choices of local evening or weekend activities. The prolonged exposure to this environment breeds racism, and no understanding for the plights of others. Routine suburban sameness, coupled with the reliance on automobiles, could also be contributing to the obesity problem a whopping 65 percent of our population faces. In European countries, where the majority of people reside in cities, the obesity rate hovers around 5 percent. These percentages are steadily rising for suburban American, most notably in our youths.

Only good things will happen to America as the cities grow and the suburbs shrink. Environmentalists worry about the dwindling natural environment that is robbing native creatures of their habitats. The ironic part of this problem is that urban centers already exist; they simply are not reaching their full potential, which would likely cease the sprawl trend. Imagine the majority of commuters making trips to work that last 15 minutes or less. Pollution will drop and quality of life will increase. Perhaps half of commuters will not have to drive at all, spurring development of stronger public transportation and cutting the demand for oil and cars. When shipping or receiving goods, the travel distances from the



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...saving costs and cutting pollution. As more people move to the city, ...  
...but in places that have already been developed in the past. The new ...  
...have a negative impact on the quality of life of the people already ...  
...new residents moving in means an increase in the quality of life for ...  
...and rural areas most likely causes a negative effect on the residents

already living there. This is why so many suburban community residents are against increasing development and are passing local codes to block sprawl.

A concentrated microeconomic region is more beneficial to residents than a region that is spread out over far distances with thin populations. The city will collect tax money and use these funds to serve the residents of the city while keeping an eye open to the big picture. In other words, large-scale city developments such as a new subway line will be placed to best serve all residents of the city, most likely connecting places that many citizens want to go. There is no municipal body to oversee all development across all the suburbs in respect to the ways in which suburban developments work together for the region. This is why most suburban developments make no sense, such as the creation of the street that leads nowhere but in a circle around cookie-cutter houses, or the vast parking lots across the front of retail strip malls, making pedestrian access virtually impossible from store to store. Often one Philadelphia suburb will offer tax incentives to a business in another Philadelphia suburb, tempting them to move. This makes no sense for our region's micro-economy. Businesses should be tempted to move from other metro areas to Philadelphia.

The architecture of the suburban house is another cause for alarm. The McMansion-style home grows bigger while the size of the American family grows smaller. What is the cost, both economically and environmentally, just to maintain the heating and cooling of these homes? Most suburban homes are wood stick-style construction, and will not be here in 100 years. Then a new owner will have to build all over again, wasting more resources. On the other hand, a recent survey by the Center City District finds that most young people admit the architecture of Philadelphia is the most attractive quality. The masonry construction of the city's homes means they have stood for 100 or more years in most neighborhoods, and they will stand for 100 more. Each home is unique with respect to the neighborhood and its surroundings. You cannot get that type of quality by choosing your suburban cookie cutter out of a catalog.

In the city the local business owner has more chance to flourish. The large-scale chain store is not as popular in the city as it is in the suburbs. Since most city dwellers prefer to walk to different stores to do their shopping, they rarely do business in a large chain store where culture ceases to exist. The benefits of multiple small business owners over large-scale chain stores are overwhelming, economically and socially speaking. The money stays within the urban community, instead of flowing out of state to the chain-store headquarters. More small business owners means more development of properties in the urban center and not a concentration of all goods in one large warehouse, which does nothing to help the fabric of a community.

The one piece of the puzzle holding back an explosion of urban development is the problem with the public schools. The prospect of someone's child attending one of Philadelphia's pitiful, dangerous public high schools is the main reason the family is in the suburbs, dealing with the sprawl, the McMansions, the sameness, all of it. Philadelphia must fix the schools, and there will be no end to our potential. The choice of where to live is a no-brainer after that. In the words of Virginia Woolf, forced to live on the outskirts of London by her doctor, "the suburbs are neither strange nor marvelous."

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