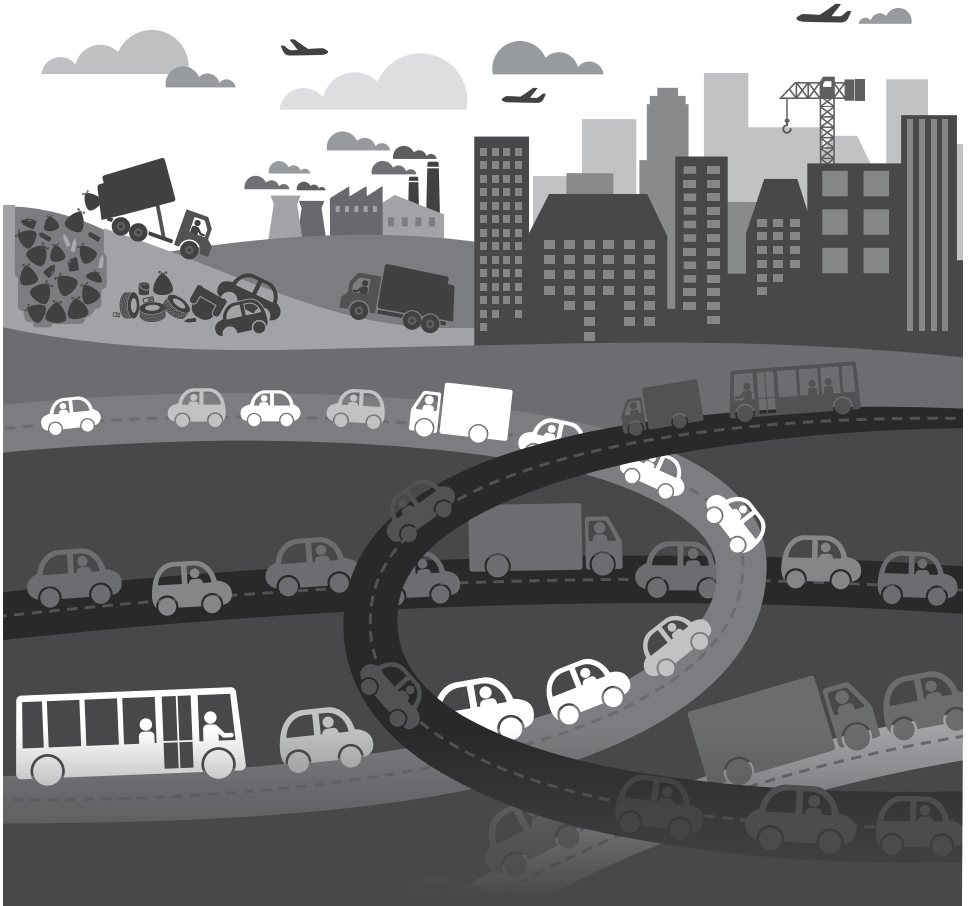
SUBURBAN ORIGINS, SUBURBAN LEGACIES



WE CANNOT AFFORD THE INFRASTRUCTURE AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS WE HAVE BUILT TO CENTRE OUR LIVES AROUND THE AUTOMOBILE.

BY PHILIP BESS

In the short run, suburbia's future, like that of much of the real estate market, depends on the economy.
—Joel Kotkin

[America] invested most of [its] late twentieth-century wealth in a living arrangement with no future. American suburbia represents the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world . . . Compounding the disaster is the unfortunate fact [that suburban development] (a.k.a. the "housing bubble") has insidiously replaced manufacturing as the basis of our economy.
—James Howard Kunstler

Our economy is stalled and cannot be restarted [because] our places do not create wealth, they destroy wealth. Our development pattern . . . is simply not productive enough to sustain itself. It creates modest short-term benefits and massive long-term costs. We're now sixty years into this experiment, basically through two complete life cycles. We've reached the "long-term," and . . . can clearly see we've run out of options for keeping [our suburban] Ponzi scheme going.
—Charles Marohn

Life in society must be considered first and foremost as a spiritual reality.
—Pope Benedict XVI

Like debate about almost everything else these days, debate about land-use and human settlement patterns—which may be characterized roughly as the debate between advocates of suburbia and advocates of traditional towns and cities—has become intractable. *Intractability* here refers not to the ordinary disagreements that occur within any community about how best to pursue the ends that the community holds in common. Such disagreements are inherent (and perennial) in the life of any healthy community. Intractability is not about means, but rather about shared ends—or rather about the *absence* of shared ends. It describes debates in which no rational resolution of disagreements is possible because the disagreeing parties argue from completely different premises. Such is the debate between today's urbanists and suburbanists, a debate likely to continue until reality proves one of them wrong. That may happen soon; it may be happening now.

The history of suburbs is part of the history of cities, and the history of the post-1945 suburb is unintelligible apart from the rise of the modern industrial city. Among the effects of the industrial revolution was a transformation of the Western cultural ideal of The City as the primary locus of human flourishing, an ideal with roots both biblical and Greek. With the rise of the industrial city, urban social life as both reality and ideal became problematic. As recently as the 18th century, Samuel Johnson could write of London: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." But even as he wrote, forces were at work that would lead cities to be thought of not as the loci of human flourishing but as sites of pollution, disease, squalor, crime, and ugliness. Soon William Blake would write of England's "dark satanic mills," and Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* would describe the fictional

but prototypical industrial city of Coketown in terms more hellish than heavenly. In turn, as cities came to be regarded as debasing and corrupt, *nature* came to be regarded as restorative and pure, a popular sentiment that persists to this day.

The harshness of the Industrial Revolution has fostered a series of urban reform movements that continue. Some were arguably successful, from 19th century hygiene acts, to the Urban Parks Movement for which Frederick Law Olmsted was a central figure, to the early 20th century City Beautiful Movement. Other reforms, including 20th century use-based zoning laws, architectural and urban modernism, and mid-20th century "urban renewal," were arguably less successful. The post-1945 automobile suburb must be understood in historical context as another of these reform movements, the initial and continuing popularity of which is uncontroversial, but the success or failure (and future prospects) of which is precisely the issue at hand.

Contemporary apologists for suburbia—Robert Bruegmann from academia; Joel Kotkin, Wendell Cox, and Randall O'Toole from the world of professional consultants; journalist Steven Greenhut—defend suburbia essentially on the following grounds: 1) that suburbs are a natural human desire and have always existed; 2) that people shouldn't be "forced" to live in a high-density-population urban environment ("high-rise condominium" is the bugbear); 3) that unlike many cities, suburbs are affordable for middle-class families with children; 4) that suburbs are safer for children; 5) that suburbs have better schools; and 6) that people simply like suburbia, and suburbia is a "natural" expression of the modern free market.

In defense of traditional towns and cities, urbanists have sound rejoinders to each of these contentions, and a holistic approach to thinking about human settlement and its relationship to nature. These include:

- Suburbs have indeed been around for a long time, but to neither the extent nor the form nor at the expense of suburbs that have come to exist since the end of World War II.
- No traditional urbanists (including New Urbanists) are suggesting that traditional urbanism is defined by high-rises or that anyone should be forced to live in high-rises—quite the reverse: urbanists note correctly that current law, public policy and culture overwhelmingly mandate *sprawl* and prohibit making traditional urbanism.
- The "affordability" of suburbia is in fact an illusion because suburbia's hidden costs and externalities are typically uncounted; and, historically, that traditional towns and cities have been the places where people of all different classes congregate and live together.
- When automobile-related deaths and injuries are counted, traditional towns and cities are statistically safer environments for children than are suburbs.
- "School quality" is a function of many factors—including funding mechanisms, family structure, parental involvement, and school choice—more significant than urban or suburban address.
- Far from being the consequence of the free market, suburbia depends absolutely upon government intervention and direction, specifically infrastructure subsidies and federal housing policies; and suburbia may be like many things in life that people might want but that individually and collectively we literally cannot—in multiple senses of the word—afford.

If the debate between committed urbanists and suburbanists is intractable, for anyone thinking about these issues dispassionately or

for the first time, understanding the exact nature of the debate depends much upon how both *city / urban* and *suburb / suburban* are being defined. For advocates of the modern suburb, there is little if any differentiation either made or to be made between the traditional (pre-1945) city and the modern city on the one hand, and the pre-1930 suburb and the post-1945 suburb on the other. But urbanists argue that the failure to distinguish these differences obscures rather than accurately describes both the physical and the cultural reality of each.

Urbanists and suburbanists agree that modern urbanism is often problematic in many respects—the related trifecta of crime-drugs-bad schools, as well as traffic congestion, high taxes, governmental mismanagement, and so on. Suburbanists characterize these problems both as *reasons* for the attractiveness of suburbia and as *justification* for suburbia itself. In turn, urbanists 1) point out that suburbs are not immune to the aforementioned problems plaguing cities; 2) argue that suburbia—by virtue of the way America finances both public education and infrastructure construction to the benefit of suburbs—actually *exacerbates* the problems of the modern city; and 3) promote traditional urbanism as the *cure* for both modern urbanism and the post-1945 suburb—which apologists for suburbia (though, in the aftermath of the sub-prime mortgage crisis, not all of them) do not regard to be in any need of healing.

Definitions of *city* and *suburb* require some historical context. Urbanists and suburbanists pretty much agree that the essential appeal of suburbia is its ideal of living in a detached house in or near some natural or agricultural landscape (what James Howard Kunstler has termed "the Little-Cabin-in-the-Woods"). In pre-modern western culture this "suburban" ideal—*pastoral* is in fact the more apt adjective—found expression in aristocratic life in the country house, villa, chateau, or plantation, with or without formal gardens, in the midst of agricultural lands or hunting forests (such as the Villa Adriana, or the Villa d'Este, or Versailles, or Stourhead, or Monticello). From the mid-19th century until about 1930, the suburban ideal came to mean captains of industry and upper management living in suburban railroad towns (like Forest Hills, or Oak Park, or Lake Forest—note the names) located outside the limits of rapidly expanding industrial cities (in the examples just cited, outside New York and Chicago, respectively). The pre-modern pastoral ideal was a life almost always linked to the city as a temporary respite from the city, and presumed both wealth and the existence of a servant class to tend to the requirements of life in the country. The 19th century suburb was also invariably linked to a city, albeit in a different way as a permanent place of residence; and was in many ways similar to the formal order of a small town—an important point to which I will return shortly—but connected by rail to the larger modern industrial city on which it depended for its existence.

Let's shift our attention for a moment from the *suburbs* to the *urbs*. Pre-1945 cities also had some uniformly distinctive physical features. Arguably the most important of these was that cities were networks of streets and squares and buildings and blocks that, regardless of the modes of pre-mechanized (and later mechanized) transportation found within them, contained *a mix of uses within pedestrian proximity* of each other, usually not further than a five- to ten-minute walk. Such cities, if they were large, were made up of neighbourhoods or "quarters" bearing these mixed-use and walkable characteristics—and, in this respect, pre-1945 *urban neighbourhoods* possessed the *same* formal characteristics as pre-1945 *towns* and *villages* (as which in fact almost all pre-1945 cities began). Moreover, these same streets-squares-buildings-blocks

formal characteristics exist even today in pre-1945 American towns and city neighbourhoods in a variety of population densities, from house and bungalow neighbourhoods in Chicago, Santa Monica, and Cooperstown, to low-rise multi-family building neighbourhoods in Boston and Santa Barbara, to row-house and high-rise apartment neighbourhoods in Manhattan and Philadelphia.

This historic urban formal character, this mix of uses within pedestrian-proximity *in a variety of densities*, is what today's traditional urbanists *mean* by "urban"; but it is a point consistently—perhaps willfully—ignored and unacknowledged by today's suburban apologists, except perhaps to be acknowledged as a kind of human settlement that "progress" has rendered obsolete. The fact that historic cities characterized by this traditional formal order have endured for many centuries or millennia, and retain their economic value into the present, ironically earns them neither love nor respect from suburbia's contemporary apologists.

Yet another critical point that goes unacknowledged by at least some suburbanists is a radical difference between the pre-1945 suburbs I have described above and the post-1945 automobile suburb. The pre-modern country villa was pastoral, a house in the landscape. The 19th century suburb was in certain critical respects *traditionally urban*, essentially a small town connected by rail to a larger city that in its walkable or mixed-use and self-governing character was very like any other traditional town or urban neighbourhood. In contrast, the formal order of the post-1945 suburb is something the world had never before seen: a physical environment that by law separates uses from each other, designed in a manner that requires an automobile to get to virtually every activity of daily life—work, shopping, school, church, recreation. *This* is *the* characteristic physical feature of the post-1945 suburb, and its consequences could not be more far-reaching. The failure of suburban apologists to acknowledge this singularity is as striking, and as misleading, as their (mis) characterization of urbanism as a collection of high-rise condominiums.

A recurring contention of the suburbanists is that urbanists generally (and the Congress for the New Urbanism in particular) want to prohibit the automobile suburb and force everyone back into centre cities of high-rise condominiums and no private yards. I suspect the desire for this among traditional urbanists is only slightly less likely than its prospect (which is to say, not very), but it does allude to an emerging (or re-emerging) reality of contemporary human settlement patterns: that the idea of a "downtown/commercial centre city" with bedroom suburbs is itself an historical anomaly peculiar to the 19th and 20th centuries, whereas the reality of both pre-19th and emerging 21st century urbanism is more multi-centred.

Thus, although contemporary urbanists themselves argue that 21st century human settlement already is tending and is almost certain to be a more poly-centric *urbanism*, Joel Kotkin taunts New Urbanists, writing that

> if the new urbanists want to do something useful, they might apply themselves by helping these peripheral places of aspiration [i.e., currently struggling sprawl suburbs] evolve successfully. That's far more constructive than endlessly insisting on—or trying to legislate—their inevitable demise.

Here Kotkin imagines that he is defending suburbia, and proposes that it's *his very own idea* that this "successful evolution" will entail sprawl suburbs becoming

> more diverse with many [residents] working at home or taking shorter trips to their

> place of work [Such suburbs] will become less bedrooms of the core city but more self-contained and "village like," with shopping streets and cultural amenities near what will still be a landscape dominated primarily by single-family houses.

This is, of course, simply to predict that *sprawl suburbs will become more traditionally urban!*

About this "successful evolution" of suburbia as an objective, traditional urbanists and Kotkin (apparently unwittingly) can surely agree. But the question remains about how and to what degree this is possible, given the constraints that the current physical form of suburbia afford us. For there are now some good reasons to think that the current form of suburbia is unsustainable, and that the suburban bill (literally) has come due.

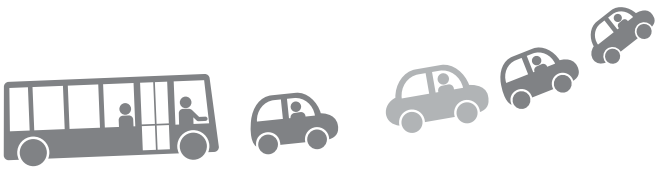
First, however, an (apparent) digression. Urbanists possess many arguments for why traditional urbanism should be preferred to the post-1945 automobile suburb. One argument is civic and aesthetic: there is simply nothing in suburbia that corresponds to the beautiful civic squares and walkable streets of traditional small towns and city neighbourhoods, and there can be no *beautiful* civic spaces in post-1945 automobile suburbs because there *are* no civic spaces in post-1945 automobile suburbs. A second argument for why the automobile suburb is problematic is from justice—that the social and financial benefits of suburbia have significant systemic costs borne disproportionately by others (including both non-suburbanites and the descendants of suburbanites).

However, although such arguments may be persuasive to some, they do not count for much to many in an individualist culture where beauty is in the eye of the beholder and consumer desires will always trump "community standards," a culture where law is popularly understood less as ordinances of reason for the common good than as statutes enacted on behalf of interest groups. Thus it is necessary in our pragmatic and fact-oriented culture for urbanists to resort to pragmatic arguments and facts. For better *and* for worse—for worse because the statistical arguments for urbanism are not necessarily the most important arguments for urbanism—there is no shortage of pragmatic arguments.

One of the more common of these pragmatic arguments is *environmental*. For many years, urban apologists have emphasized the alleged environmental unsustainability of sprawl, suburbia's consumption of the natural and agricultural landscape, and its dependence upon finite fossil fuels. A primary anti-sprawl argument has focused on the automobile-centred suburb's adverse contributions to climate change, and its inability to survive the escalating price of gas that will follow from impending Peak Oil. These claims may or may not be true, and may or may not be urgent—I myself am more confident of their truth than their immediate urgency—but *politically* I think they will prove less consequential than arguments now developing that focus upon the *economic* unsustainability of the automobile suburb.

Civil engineer and planner Charles Marohn, executive director of Strong Towns (strongtowns.org), writes pointedly and persuasively of the economically unsustainable future of the post-1945 automobile suburb, noting that since the end of World War II our human settlement patterns—overwhelmingly suburban—have grown using three primary mechanisms:

- *Transfer payments between governments*, where the federal or state government makes a direct investment (typically in infrastructure: roads, sewers, and so on) in growth at the local level.
- *Transportation spending*, where transportation infrastructure is employed to improve



automobile access to a site that can then be developed.

- *Public and private-sector debt*, where local municipalities, developers, and individuals take on debt as part of the development process, whether during construction or through the assumption of a mortgage.

Marohn notes that in employing each of these mechanisms,

> the local unit of government benefits from the enhanced revenues associated with new growth. But it also typically assumes the long-term liability for maintaining the new infrastructure.

Marohn points out that this kind of exchange—a near-term cash advantage for a long-term financial obligation—is one of two primary reasons why America's sixty-five year experiment of building automobile suburbs is most accurately understood as a Ponzi scheme. The other reason, he writes, is that

> the revenue collected [by suburban municipalities] does not come near to covering the costs of maintaining the [suburban] infrastructure. In America, we have a ticking time bomb of unfunded liability for infrastructure maintenance. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) estimates the cost at $5 trillion—but that's just for major infrastructure, not the minor streets, curbs, walks, and pipes that serve our homes. The reason we have this gap is because the public yield from the suburban development pattern—the amount of tax revenue obtained per increment of liability assumed—is ridiculously low. Over a life cycle, a city [sic] frequently receives just a dime or two of revenue for each dollar of liability. The engineering profession will argue, as ASCE does, that we're simply not making the investments necessary to maintain this infrastructure. This is nonsense. We've simply built in a way that is not financially productive. We've done this because, as with any Ponzi scheme, new growth provides the illusion of prosperity. In the near term, revenue grows, while the corresponding maintenance obligations—which are not counted on the public balance sheet—are a generation away.

Marohn provides several mundane case studies to demonstrate his point about the inability of suburban developments to generate the tax revenues necessary to maintain their infrastructure—case studies alarming in their very ordinariness. He describes how suburban infrastructure creation and maintenance has gone through two thirty-year cycles, and explains why it has crashed at the beginning of the third:

> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, we completed one life cycle of the suburban experiment, and at the same time, growth in America slowed. There were many reasons involved, but one significant factor was that our suburban cities [sic] were now starting to experience cash outflows for infrastructure maintenance. We'd reached the "long term," and the end of easy money. It took us a while to work through what to do, but we ultimately decided to go "all in" using leverage. In the second life cycle of the suburban experiment, we financed new growth by borrowing staggering sums of money, both in the public and private sectors. By the time we crossed into the third life cycle and flamed out in the foreclosure crisis, our financing mechanisms had, out of necessity, become exotic, even predatory.

Our national problem, he concludes,

> was not, and is not, a lack of growth. Our problem is 60 years of unproductive

> growth—growth that has buried us in financial liabilities. The American pattern of [suburban] development does not create real wealth. It creates the illusion of wealth. Today we are in the process of seeing that illusion destroyed, and with it the prosperity we have come to take for granted. . . . We need to end our investments in the suburban pattern of development, along with the multitude of direct and indirect subsidies that make it all possible. Further, we need to intentionally return to our traditional pattern of development, one based on creating neighborhoods of value, scaled to actual people. When we do this, we will inevitably rediscover our traditional values of prudence and thrift as well as the value of community and place.

In the meantime, in the aftermath of the subprime mortgage crisis, what is actually happening in the outer-ring suburbs, the "drive-till-you-qualify" residential sub-divisions and their ancillary shopping malls? Chris Leinberger, in a late November op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, observes:

> Many drivable-fringe house prices are now below replacement value, meaning the land under the house has no value and the sticks and bricks are worth less than they would cost to replace. This means there is no financial incentive to maintain the house; the next dollar invested will not be recouped upon resale. Many of these houses will be converted to rentals, which are rarely as well maintained as owner-occupied housing. Add the fact that the houses were built with cheap materials and methods to begin with, and you see why many fringe suburbs are turning into slums, with abandoned housing and rising crime. . . . Those retail centers and subdivisions will never be worth what they cost to build. We have to stop throwing good money after bad. It is time to instead build what the market wants: mixed-income, walkable cities and suburbs that will support the knowledge economy, promote environmental sustainability and create jobs.

Set aside for now the question of the long-term sufficiency of "the knowledge economy." Joel Kotkin protests (with *data*) that urbanism, as he defines it, in fact is *not* "what the market wants," that what the market—or at least a substantial portion of it—still wants is the post-1945 automobile suburb. He concedes, however, that the outer-ring suburbs are currently struggling, and concludes that "suburbia's future, like that of much of the real estate market, depends on the economy." However, if Charles Marohn is correct about the bills coming due for suburban infrastructure; and if James Howard Kunstler is correct that the recent boom economy— "the housing bubble"—now gone bust was largely *based* upon suburban development and government attempts to promote it, then the future of the post-war suburb doesn't have anything to do with what consumers *want*, because the economic un-sustainability of the post-war suburb has in fact revealed itself—in which case, the now intractable suburbanist / urbanist argument has been (or soon will be) settled in favour of the urbanists, and the post-1945 suburb recognized as a ruinously expensive failed experiment.

What then the legacy of the post-1945 suburbs? I mention here only to acknowledge and set aside certain cultural achievements of suburbia and the serious fiction, cinema, and music it has inspired. (In all seriousness: I love the high quality of suburban high school football, and hope it can be sustained in other settings if necessary; am of an age to have admired the writings of John Updike; and confess writing these thoughts immediately subsequent to an extended if belated introduction to Arcade Fire.) The achievements of suburban culture both are worthy of respect and

to be expected from a historically distinctive kind of environment that two to three generations of Americans have known as home. Despite what I think are suburbia's serious cultural and existential shortcomings—systemic shortcomings, albeit perhaps properly regarded as consequences more of errors than of sins (though not entirely)—it is not difficult to imagine a near future in which our lost suburban culture is romanticized by some as a kind of never-to-be-recovered golden age of freedom and luxury. But this I think would be an illusion, based—as suburbia itself has been—upon a mistaken understanding of human freedom and its purposes.

However, what of suburbia's physical legacy? This question raises again but in a different way the issue of *intractability*, because a primary problem with the post-1945 suburb has to do with the *un*-fixability of its physical infrastructure, and particularly its residential subdivision infrastructure. This is an infrastructure of self-contained pod-developments consisting of many relatively small properties owned by many private parties on which sit poorly built buildings fronting self-contained internal street systems altogether governed by single-use zoning constraints that make residential subdivisions difficult if not impossible to connect to other ordinary quotidian activities—work, shopping, school, church, recreation—in any way other than by automobile and the extensive (and unaffordable) infrastructure that automobiles require. It is therefore difficult to think anything other than that the future of the outer-most fringe post-1945 suburban single-use-zoned residential subdivision is bleak; and if my analysis of this situation is correct, our current economic crisis is supporting evidence.

More hopeful is the future of existing and former suburban commercial properties (and I suspect there are few readers who cannot think immediately of some dead shopping malls not far from them). There is hope because suburban shopping malls and their parking lots are comparatively large parcels of land, occupied by not-very-durable buildings, and controlled by relatively few owners. Compared to residential subdivisions, these retail and commercial parcels are low-hanging fruit for future development in today's struggling suburbs, and have the potential to become, as Kotkin notes,

> more self-contained and "village like," with shopping streets and cultural amenities near what will still be a landscape dominated primarily by single-family houses.

In other words, they would become more *urban* in ways that even some current apologists for sprawl are coming to recognize as desirable—and, I would add, perhaps also more attentive to durable construction. The difference… will be that these new "self-contained and village-like" centres are going to have a less far-flung periphery of single-family houses than currently exists in post-1945 automobile suburbs, and that more daily business will be done on foot or by bicycle or with short drives than has been characteristic of the past sixty years of suburban life. Moreover, to the extent that this re-mix of uses and re-concentration of population will be true of post-1945 automobile suburbs, I suspect it will be true of historic railroad suburbs as well. We need not imagine the end of the internal-combustion-engine automobile to imagine a built environment where cars are used less than they are now simply because we collectively cannot afford the infrastructure and living arrangements we have built to centre our lives around the automobile.

Some of the legal mechanisms that would make this new traditional urban development possible are already being developed, most notably mixed-use/form-based zoning codes to supplement and/or replace the standard

single-use-based zoning codes that have governed virtually all post-1945 suburban development everywhere. A change in federal lending standards allowing more flexibility in the construction of mixed-use buildings and multi-family residences in these new traditional urban centres would also have a salutary effect on more walkable mixed-use development (though federally insured loans may have less of a role to play in future construction and development than in recent history). Likewise, taxes that take into account the full costs of road creation and maintenance and the full value of parking would make a virtue of economic necessity by promoting denser and more walkable mixed-use settlements that reduce the need for daily driving.

Legal mechanisms and intelligent tax policies are necessary for good traditional urbanism, but not sufficient. They must be accompanied by a retrieval of both the theory and the details of how to think about and how to build beautiful and durable and convenient urban environments, which organizations like the CNU and at least a few schools of architecture and urban design are pursuing. Moreover, if this transition back to traditional forms of urbanism is to succeed, it will surely require the cooperation if not renewal of the kinds of free associations, religious and secular, that Tocqueville early on recognized as essential to a just and democratic civil society. And this brings us to a point repeated tirelessly by Pope Benedict and his immediate predecessors: human society is "first and foremost [a] spiritual reality."

For many people, the involuntary *economically driven* transition from a suburban culture back to a more urban culture is going to be difficult. Nevertheless, I think there is a silver lining for those who continue to desire the impossible suburb: that our new economically constrained urbanism will yield goods—some new, some old but forgotten—that will pleasantly surprise many of us (not least a long term revival of genuine economic prosperity). Just as beloved traditional neighbourhood baseball parks that derive their distinctive characters in part from the street and block networks that physically constrain them, so too do human beings develop admirable character traits in confrontation with life's inherent and inevitable constraints.

The mistake of modernity is to think that our freedom and our happiness mean the absence of limits. But our freedom and our happiness lie not in laissez-faire economics nor in laissez-faire sex nor in laissez-faire suburban and technological self-isolation. Our freedom and our happiness lie rather in responding intelligently, justly, and generously to the challenges that life presents us as members of communities. This point—and its relationship to *place* and to the built environment—is an old and venerable point. If as a culture we have forgotten it, let us all pray it is only for a season, for its timeliness appears now to be upon us.

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