

Toronto Star

Downtown density will prevail over slums of suburbia

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At the moment of its triumph, suburbia is starting to show signs of collapse.

Having remade the face of North America, the tide now seems to be turning against the 'burbs. The downfall won't be quick, but already the unthinkable is starting to happen.

As Christopher Leinberger argues in an article in the current *Atlantic*, "a structural change is underway in the housing market."

The author and urban planner insists that the troubles go well beyond the U.S. subprime crisis, that in fact they are evidence of a shift that will fundamentally alter the social and economic map of the continent.

In short, Leinberger charts the return to the city that began late in the last century and has been picking up speed ever since. Toronto is a good example; just look at the condo boom, now in its third decade, and the rising price of housing in neighbourhoods that until the 1970s, '80s and '90s, were assiduously avoided by the middle class, areas such as Cabbagetown, Riverdale and now Parkdale.

Canada has not experienced a subprime catastrophe, so perhaps we are an even better example of the city's new popularity. There are objective reasons – escalating cost of gasoline, heating oil and natural gas – but there's more.

As Leinberger writes, "Most Americans now live in single-family suburban houses that are segregated from work, shopping, and entertainment; but it is urban life, almost exclusively, that is culturally associated with excitement, freedom, and diverse daily life. And as in the 1940s, the real-estate market has begun to react."

The key phrase here is "culturally associated." Instead of *Leave it to Beaver*, the suburbs have now become the setting for *Desperate Housewives*.

Looking back at the postwar conditions that unleashed the explosion of suburbia, it's clear the growth was inspired as much as anything by a desire to escape from the city. Density, associated with danger, disease and decay, was the enemy.

Sixty years later, beset by gridlock, shoddy construction and environmental degradation that can no longer be ignored, density has started to look good again.

The response has been to make the suburban more urban. But as Leinberger notes, "Sprawling, large-lot suburbs become less attractive as they become more densely built, but urban areas – especially those well served by public transit – become more appealing as they are filled in and built up. Crowded sidewalks tend to be safe and lively, and bigger crowds can support more shops, restaurants, art galleries."

According to a study quoted by Leinberger, only a third of suburbanites "solidly preferred traditional suburban lifestyles." The rest claimed mixed feelings, or said they couldn't afford downtown prices.

And as Boomers grow older and couples put off having children, the appeal of the subdivision wanes even further. The result, Leinberger argues, is that the suburbs could well be on their way to becoming America's "next slum."

Research by David Hulchanski at the University of Toronto has already found that poverty here is being pushed out of its historic inner-city precincts and into "postwar inner suburbs" and "large postwar housing projects." Read Scarborough, Etobicoke, Jane-Finch, Rexdale and the like.

Toronto architect/planner Ken Greenberg rightly calls this the elephant in the room. His point is that the growing good health of downtown has blinded us to the looming crisis of the areas beyond.

In the years ahead, this process will become more pronounced. Just three weeks ago a Scarborough couple was fined \$10,000 for turning their home into a rooming house.

Clearly, we have much catching up to do; reality is well ahead of our ability to deal with it.

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