

Wall Street Journal

The Dying Suburbs? A Look at the Growing Debate

Posted By [Emily Friedlander](#) On July 8, 2008 @ 12:05 pm In [California](#), [Local News](#) | [50 Comments](#)

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[1] Are the suburbs dying? The housing slowdown and rising fuel prices have revitalized the conversation about the way Americans choose to live.

In March's [2] [Atlantic Monthly](#), Christopher B. Leinberger, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor of urban planning, got the ball rolling by predicting that a combination of factors — rising gas and fuel prices, the subprime situation, demographic changes — will lead to a suburban exodus, particularly in exurbs far from city

cores.

Mr. Leinberger paints a bleak future for the suburbs: He says that suburban decay will be even worse than the decline of the inner cities that began in the 1960s. Those neighborhoods, he writes “consisted of sturdily built, turn-of-the-century row houses, tough enough to withstand being broken up into apartments, and requiring relatively little upkeep. By comparison, modern suburban houses are cheaply built ... Hollow doors and wallboard are less durable than solid-oak doors and lath-and-plaster walls. The plywood floors that lurk under wood veneers or carpeting tend to break up and warp...asphalt-shingle roofs typically need replacing after 10 years. Many recently built houses take what structural integrity they have from drywall — their thin wooden frames are too flimsy to hold the houses up.”

In an Op-Ed in the [3] [L.A. Times](#) yesterday Joel Kotkin writes that this view is largely exaggerated: “The ‘out of the suburbs, back to the city’ narrative rests more on anecdote than demographic or economic fact. Yes, high gas prices and rising subprime mortgage defaults are hurting some suburban communities, particularly newly built ones on the periphery. But the suburbs remain home to a majority of Americans and a larger proportion of U.S. families — and people aren’t leaving those communities in droves to live in cities.”

But Mr. Leinberger doesn’t postulate that all suburbanites are packing up their bags and heading for Metropolis. He also looks to the development of walkable urban neighborhoods. He points to Belmar, the new “downtown” in Lakewood, Colorado, a middle-income inner suburb of Denver, and to the Reston Town Center, located between Virginia’s Dulles International Airport and Washington, D.C.

In the Journal yesterday, [4] [Ana Campoy](#) wrote about Sacramento’s attempts at “smart growth” — new housing development that clusters the places where people live more closely with the businesses where the work and shop. Rising fuel prices are giving many long-time proponents of smart growth new hope, she reports.

As Mr. Leinberger writes, “the shift to walkable urban environments will give more people what they seem to want.” Although he says “many people will still prefer the bigger houses and car-based lifestyles of conventional suburbs. But there will almost certainly be more of a balance between walkable and drivable communities — allowing people in most areas a wider variety of choices.”

Readers, join the debate: Will the current suburban model fade in favor of more walkable environments? Is the suburb the new inner city? If you currently live in a suburban area, would you be willing to give up your car-based lifestyle? – *Emily Friedlander*