The American Metropolis at Century's End: Past and Future Influences

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Abstract

The American metropolis at century's end is vastly different than what many expected just 50 years ago. At mid-century, seers envisioned a clean, rationally planned city of the future, free of long-standing problems such as traffic and poverty. The reality is more complex. We built a new metropolis that addressed some major problems while simultaneously creating a host of new ones. The next 50 years will undoubtedly contain similar surprises.

In conjunction with the 1999 Annual Housing Conference, which looked at the legacy of the 1949 Housing Act, the Fannie Mae Foundation commissioned a survey that asked urban scholars to rank the key influences shaping the past and future American metropolis. The "top 10" lists that resulted are the focus of this article.

Keywords: Demographics; Development/revitalization; Policy

Methods

The top 10 lists are the result of a two-stage process. First, a group of urban specialists met to offer their ideas on what items should be included on preliminary unranked lists of influences. Next, these lists were mailed to members of the Society for American City and Regional Planning History (SACREPH), an interdisciplinary professional organization composed of urban historians, social scientists, planning faculty, and working planners and architects. SACREPH members were asked to select and rank the "top 10 influences on the American metropolis of the past 50 years," from a list of 25 choices. They were also asked to rank "the top 10 most likely influences on the American metropolis for the next 50 years," from a separate list of 19 choices. (Write-in votes were allowed, but none made the top 10.) Of the 280 surveys distributed, 149—53 percent—were completed and returned.

Survey participants were asked to pick 10 items on each list and assign them a score based on their importance, with 1 being the highest and 10 the lowest. (The same method is often used in coaches polls that rank the top college football and basketball teams.) To calculate the results, the items were weighted according to their rank. In other words, rank 1=10 points, rank 2=9, rank 3=8 points, and so

on down to 1 point. Points were multiplied by the number of times an item got a particular rating. For example, if an item ranked 1 on 7 surveys, the item's score at the rating level would be 70 (7 x 10 = 70). The sum of an item's score (adding up each rating level) equals the total score for that item. The final top 10 influences comprised those items with the top 10 overall scores, with number 1 having the highest scores, and 10 the lowest.

Rankings and scores

The top 10 influences on the American metropolis of the past 50 years are as follows:

1. The 1956 Interstate Highway Act and the dominance of the automobile (906 points)
2. Federal Housing Administration mortgage financing and subdivision regulation (653)
3. Deindustrialization of central cities (584)
4. Urban renewal: downtown redevelopment and public housing projects (1949 Housing Act) (441)
5. Levittown (the mass-produced suburban tract house) (439)
6. Racial segregation and job discrimination in cities and suburbs (436)
7. Enclosed shopping malls (261)
8. Sunbelt-style sprawl (242)
9. Air conditioning (234)
10. Urban riots of the 1960s (219)

The 10 most likely influences on the American metropolis for the next 50 years are as follows:

1. Growing disparities of wealth (567)
2. Suburban political majority (553)
3. Aging of the baby boomers (517)
4. Perpetual "underclass" in central cities and inner-ring suburbs (481)
5. "Smart growth": environmental and planning initiatives to limit sprawl (452)
6. The Internet (415)
7. Deterioration of the "first-ring" post-1945 suburbs (372)
8. Shrinking household size (353)
9. Expanded superhighway system of "outer beltways" to serve new edge cities (337)
10. Racial integration as part of the increasing diversity in cities and suburbs (195)

The top 10 lists explained

The top 10 influences on the American metropolis of the past 50 years

The single most important message of this list is the overwhelming impact of the federal government on the American metropolis, especially through policies that intentionally or unintentionally promoted suburbanization and sprawl. At the top of the list are the two judged most important: number 1, the massive interstate highway program, and number 2, the less obvious but highly influential policies of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Moreover, the opportunities created by these and other federal initiatives were eagerly seized by private enterprise (number 5 on the list, Levittown, and number 7, the enclosed shopping mall), leading to the proliferation of what number 8 on our list designates as Sunbelt-style sprawl.

The unfortunate consequences of these policies are seen in the items that identify the urban crisis that resulted when American cities lost population and jobs to the suburbs. The survey respondents emphasize the racial dimensions of this urban crisis (number 6, racial segregation and job discrimination in the cities and suburbs, and number 10, urban riots of the 1960s), for this was a period when more than 4 million African Americans left the rural South for cities that were already undergoing a deindustrialization that devastated their economies (number 3 on the list).

In this context, the 1949 Housing Act (number 4 on the list) has a strategic and perhaps tragic importance. Unlike the other federal initiatives in this list, the 1949 Housing Act sought mainly to benefit big cities through urban renewal: large-scale slum clearances, high-rise towers for new public housing, and downtown redevelopment. But this act not only failed to counterbalance the other, weightier prosuburban policies of the federal government, the failures of urban renewal itself as a design and social strategy worsened the plight of the cities and thus accelerated suburbanization and sprawl.

1. The 1956 Interstate Highway Act and the dominance of the automobile. Proclaimed the "largest public works program since the Pyramids," the 41,000-mile Interstate Highway System transformed the American metropolis in ways its planners never anticipated. The system was supposed to save the central cities by rescuing them from automobile congestion and also provide high-speed long-distance travel from city to city: "coast-to-coast without a traffic light." But the massive new urban highways, intended to move traffic rapidly in and out of downtown, quickly became snarled in ever-growing congestion, and their construction devastated many urban neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the new peripheral "beltways," originally designed to

enable long-distance travelers to bypass crowded central cities, turned into the Main Streets of postwar suburbia. Cheap rural land along the beltways became the favored sites for new suburban housing, shopping malls, industrial parks, and office parks that drew people and businesses out of the central cities. Finally, the interstate system was financed by a highway trust fund supported by the abundant revenue from federal gasoline taxes. Under the provisions of the 1956 act, these funds were available only for highways: The federal government paid 90 percent of the cost of the new highways, the localities only 10 percent. By contrast, localities paid a much higher percentage for investment in mass transit. This was a powerful incentive to neglect mass transit and focus a region's transportation investments only on roads. More than any other measure, the 1956 highway act created the decentralized, automobile-dependent metropolis we know today.

2. Federal Housing Administration mortgage financing and subdivision regulation. Compared with the impact of 41,000 miles of interstate highways, the mortgage policies of this relatively obscure federal agency might seem unimportant. But the experts recognize that post-1945 suburbia was built on the financial foundation of the FHA's low–down payment, long-term, fixed-rate mortgage. This crucial innovation was developed during the New Deal, when the federal government was forced to intervene in housing finance after the older mortgage system based on down payments as high as 50 percent and terms as short as five years had led to massive defaults. By the seemingly simple expedient of insuring against default the long-term, low–down payment, fixed-rate mortgages issued by federally chartered thrift institutions, the FHA created the financial instrument that would help raise American homeownership from 44 percent in 1940 to the record 66 percent it is today.

Moreover, the power to award or withhold mortgage insurance gave the FHA the hidden leverage to shape the postwar metropolis. The FHA developed standards for both home and subdivision design that quickly became the norm for the home-building industry. More important, FHA-insured mortgages in the two decades after World War II were limited to race-restricted housing on the suburban fringe; the FHA refused to insure mortgages on older houses in typical urban neighborhoods. This meant that a white home buyer who wished to stay in his old neighborhood had to seek old-style conventional mortgages with high rates and short terms. The same purchaser who opted for a new suburban house could get an FHA-insured mortgage with lower interest rates, longer terms, a lower down payment, and a lower monthly payment. By contrast, all African-American households were excluded from FHA-subsidized suburbs, which meant that they were denied the benefit of better schools, rapid appreciation in home prices, and access to the booming suburban economy. Although the FHA and other federal agencies have tried since the 1960s to

eliminate their anti–African-American bias, their policies during the period from 1945 to 1965 have had a lasting impact on the American metropolis.

3. Deindustrialization of central cities. In the years immediately following World War II, American industry was concentrated in northern and midwestern cities whose prosperous factory districts combined state-of-the-art production facilities, the best rail transportation links in the country, and the best access to the skilled urban labor force. But these seemingly permanent advantages were lost as employers were tempted by cheaper labor outside the older urban centers and by tax breaks and other subsidies offered by suburbs and rural areas. Moreover, the urban factory districts lost further advantage as industry shifted from rail to truck transportation and from multistory urban plants to more efficient single-story structures that required more space than most cities could provide. As national corporations shifted production out of the central cities to places where costs were lowest, manufacturing jobs moved first to industrial parks in the suburbs, then to the Sunbelt, and finally out of the country. The hardest-hit industrial cities such as Buffalo, Detroit, and Philadelphia lost nearly three-quarters of their manufacturing jobs. This radical deindustrialization of what had been America's industrial heartland devastated urban economies and municipal budgets. Deindustrialization also destabilized urban neighborhoods, which were based on a close relationship between work and residence. Perhaps most important, the deindustrialization of central cities meant that the millions of African Americans who migrated from the South did not find the abundance of entry-level manufacturing jobs that earlier immigrants from Europe had found. Instead, most African-American migrants were trapped in a declining urban industrial economy where good factory jobs were rapidly disappearing.

4. Urban renewal: downtown redevelopment and public housing projects (1949 Housing Act). The landmark 1949 Housing Act enshrined in its preamble the worthy goal of "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American" in federal legislation, but this goal was largely undermined by the urban renewal methods favored by the act. The legislation funded large-scale clearances of blighted urban areas, which were bought up by local redevelopment agencies and then leveled. These areas were then typically rebuilt according to the then-fashionable theories of modern architecture as high-rise towers set in massive superblocks, or, worse, remained vacant for decades. Urban renewal helped rid the cities of some of their worst slums, but the federal bulldozer also leveled many close-knit neighborhoods. The superblocks invariably lacked the vibrant street life of the older districts, and high-rise towers proved to be especially ill-suited to the needs of poor families living in public housing. Many local redevelopment agencies used "urban renewal" to mean "Negro removal," clear-

ing away African-American neighborhoods close to downtown and concentrating public housing in hypersegregated ghettos.

To upgrade decaying central business districts, the 1949 act and its successors also targeted downtown blight, which they sought to remedy with new middle-class high-rise apartments and automobile-friendly shopping areas. But the middle class still opted for suburban single-family houses, and the modernized downtowns were hard pressed to compete with suburban malls. All too often, planners targeted for destruction irreplaceable historic structures and the small businesses that tended to occupy them—the two factors that gave downtown its special character. Urban renewal combined with the impact of urban highways (see number 1) and competition from suburban malls (see number 7) left many downtowns a pedestrian-unfriendly patchwork of highway ramps, empty lots, parking structures, and isolated buildings.

5. Levittown (the mass-produced suburban tract house). The 17,000 houses that Levitt & Sons built on former potato fields east of New York City on Long Island from 1947 to 1951 have become the enduring symbols of the postwar suburbanization of the United States. These simple-looking structures in fact grew out of a highly sophisticated combination of advanced manufacturing and financial techniques that for the first time put the single-family detached suburban house within the budget of most middle-class and even working-class families. The Levitts (father Abraham and sons William and Alfred) pioneered the "industrialization" of suburban tract housing by using the techniques of mass production of standard models to speed production and cut costs. These techniques proved so effective that they were soon used not only by big builders like the Levitts, but by the medium and small builders who in fact constructed the bulk of postwar suburbia. Tied to innovations in home finance introduced by the FHA (see number 2), Levittown meant that buying a new suburban house was often cheaper than renting an apartment in the city. The Levittown mass-produced house became the defining "consumer good" in our consumer society—the mark of middle-class status in a middle-class society. Ironically, the original Levittown houses proved too small for an increasingly affluent society, but their simple flexible design made them easy to upgrade. As a result, very few unaltered Levittown houses remain in Levittown.

6. Racial segregation and job discrimination in cities and suburbs. The more than 4 million African Americans who migrated from the rural South to northern industrial cities from World War II through the 1960s encountered an urban world already defined by the "color line" and "the job ceiling." The color line forced them to live in ghettos whose strict boundaries in the 1940s had usually been drawn during the previous great African-American migration of World War I. In

ever more crowded ghettos, African Americans were forced to pay higher rents for inferior housing, and even middle-class blacks who ventured to live beyond the color line in surrounding white ethnic neighborhoods met with hostility and, often, violence. At the same time, the job ceiling limited African-American workers regardless of their skills or seniority to the lowest-paid, dead-end jobs. Although white European immigrant groups had earlier encountered prejudice and exclusion, African Americans suffered from unprecedented levels of segregation and job discrimination, which together put tremendous pressures on African-American families struggling to succeed in the supposed "promised land" of the North.

Although the civil rights acts of the 1960s outlawed both the color line and the job ceiling, both survived in altered forms. For example, the ghettos tended to expand not by integration at their edge but by "blockbusting," in which unscrupulous real estate agents used fear tactics to force white homeowners just outside the ghetto to sell at panic prices; they then resold the houses for a large profit to African-American residents who found themselves still within the now-enlarged color line. These and other forms of racism meant that a significant portion of the black migrants were unable to take the route of assimilation into the suburban middle class that earlier immigrants had followed. They were instead trapped in inner cities characterized by what social scientists call "hypersegregation": virtually total exclusion from white urban and suburban America, combined with a concentration of poverty, crime, and other indices of social disorganization.

7. Enclosed shopping malls. Suburbia found the definitive equivalent to downtown shopping when architect Victor Gruen synthesized the innovations of many previous developers into the first fully enclosed, climate-controlled shopping mall, which opened in 1956 in Edina, Minnesota. The enclosed shopping mall overwhelmed the old downtown shopping districts, offering the downtown's variety of department stores and specialty shops combined with the easy highway access, ample parking, and climate control that downtowns lacked. The massive scale of an enclosed regional mall meant that American retailing would now be dominated by large development that controlled this total shopping environment as no single landowner could dominate a downtown. This corporate concentration encouraged the growth of national franchise stores at the expense of local Mom-and-Pop retailing. Under the combined influence of the development corporations, the national franchisers, and their design consultants, the enclosed mall has evolved into an ever more elaborate, totalizing environment where shopping, eating, and entertainment are cunningly synthesized to maximize revenues. The mall design formula now virtually precludes the variety and diversity that once marked public spaces; political activities in malls have become an especially con-

tentious legal issue. Nevertheless, revenues from enclosed malls have stagnated in the 1990s as consumers sought to save time by shopping in more convenient strip malls or from catalogs or through the Internet. More than one-quarter of all existing malls are expected to fail in the next decade, and mall developers are frantically seeking newer, more enticing incarnations of the mall experience.

8. Sunbelt-style sprawl. "There is no there there," writer Gertrude Stein famously observed of an early example of Sunbelt-style sprawl in Oakland, California. Where northern and midwestern metropolitan areas had expanded outward from well-defined, long-established central cities, post-1945 development in the Sunbelt very quickly left downtown and all other traditional urban forms behind and sprawled out in all directions. As developers seized any opportunity to build quickly, these Sunbelt metropolitan regions grew into centerless, borderless agglomerations where massive housing developments, regional malls, industrial parks, office parks, and strip-development spread out in seemingly random order along the network of highways. Such areas are totally automobile dependent and as resistant to mass transit as they are to limits on growth. Although some observers claim to appreciate the surreal "pop art" juxtapositions of function and style that these areas inevitably provide, Sunbelt-style sprawl has generated an architectural and planning backlash in the New Urbanism, a movement that attempts even amid Sunbelt-style sprawl to bring back the traditional urban values of well-defined town centers and edges, and walkable neighborhoods.

9. Air conditioning. The rise of the Sunbelt and the enclosed shopping mall would have been impossible without this now-ubiquitous technology. Invented earlier in the century to improve photographic manufacturing, air conditioning became widespread in homes by the 1950s and 1960s. Air conditioning helped transform some of the most inhospitable sites for human habitation in the country into some of our fastest-growing metropolitan areas. The spread of air conditioning, moreover, has encouraged the cocooning of America, as people learn to move as seamlessly as possible from centrally air conditioned homes to air conditioned cars to air conditioned offices, schools, malls, and entertainment centers, thus minimizing any possible contact with the natural environment. Today, more than 80 percent of new homes are centrally air conditioned.

10. Urban riots of the 1960s. The full impact of the postwar urban racial crisis remained hidden from most of white America until the urban riots of the 1960s shocked the nation. Fueled by persistent unemployment, poor housing, and racial prejudice, the riots generally ignited at the flash point of conflict between a black ghetto population and a largely white police force. After the Watts district in south-central Los Angeles erupted in 1965, the long, hot summer of 1967

brought even more destructive rioting to Newark and Detroit; this in turn was followed by the riots that broke out after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. The 1968 presidential commission headed by then Illinois governor Otto Kerner laid the blame for the riots not on outside agitators, as many believed, but on the structural racism in American society. As the Kerner Commission report concluded, the riots showed that the United States was becoming two societies, "one black, one white—separate and unequal" (U.S. Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1). Although the report urged that the riots become the occasion for a concerted attack on racism and social divisions in American cities, the riots in actuality produced few positive responses and mainly accelerated white flight and urban disinvestment. In many cities, areas burnt out by the 1960s riots have remained devastated to this day. The riots thus mark the transition from the overcrowded ghettos of the immediate postwar period to the much larger inner cities marked by depopulation, deindustrialization, and abandoned housing.

The 10 most likely influences on the American metropolis for the next 50 years

Not surprisingly, the respondents disagreed more about the future than the past. Most of those polled foresaw the continuation and even intensification of the urban crisis that has characterized the past 50 years: growing disparities of wealth, a suburban political majority, a perpetual urban underclass, the deterioration of first-ring post-1945 suburbs, and continued automobile-based sprawl into new peripheral edge cities. A smaller group, however, predicted that smart growth policies would help preserve the environment and limit sprawl; this group also believed that cities would overcome racial and class divisions to become more diverse than they are now. Yet another group of respondents emphasized demographic factors: the aging of the baby boomers and shrinking household size. New technology in the form of the Internet made number 6 on the list and might well have ranked higher if the likely impact of this technology on the metropolis were clearer.

1. Growing disparities of wealth. The past 30 years have seen increasing concentrations of income and wealth at the top of the income scale, relative stagnation in the middle, and worsening poverty at the bottom. Our respondents expect this trend to continue in the next 50 years, with possibly dire consequences for American cities and regions, for growing disparities in income and wealth lead inevitably to an increasingly divided metropolis. If, as our respondents believe, these growing disparities of wealth will become the most important single influence on the American metropolis in the next 50 years, some of the negative consequences are detailed in the rest of the top

10 list: a perpetual underclass in central cities and inner-ring suburbs and the deterioration of the first-ring post-1945 suburbs, as the struggling portions of the middle and working classes find themselves trapped in deteriorating older suburbs. On the wealthier side of the great metropolitan divide, we are likely to see the winners in our winner-take-all society isolate themselves in gated communities or other exclusive preserves at the edge of the region. Other likely trends include a home-building industry increasingly focused on high-end trophy houses or tract mansions; a similar concentration in retailing on the upscale mall; office parks located near the enclaves where top executives live—locations that often leave the bulk of the employees with long, difficult commutes; and increasing disparities between the quality of the school systems and other services in elite suburbs versus less favored suburbs and inner cities. We are also likely to see new building focused not just on the outer edge of a region, but in certain quadrants favored by the affluent: for example, the northwest in Washington, DC, the southwest in Minneapolis–St. Paul, and the north in Atlanta and Chicago. For the affluent who choose to live in gentrified neighborhoods in central cities, the rule of isolation will also govern, as the wealthy use privatization techniques ranging from private schools to special tax-and-service districts to insulate themselves from the urban crisis around them.

2. Suburban political majority. The suburbs rule. The suburbs will continue to rule. The suburbs now enjoy an absolute political majority over both central cities and rural areas. In the 1996 presidential elections, for example, the suburbanites (residents of metropolitan areas outside of central cities, as the Census Bureau identifies them) comprised 50.5 percent of all Americans over age 18, and they cast 52.2 percent of the ballots because suburbanites register and vote in greater numbers than residents of central cities (who cast 27.8 percent of the ballots) or nonmetropolitan areas (who cast 20 percent of the ballots). Our respondents believe that this majority will grow and will increasingly determine policy in the next 50 years. If, as many argue, the most important future challenge for metropolitan areas will be to create some kind of effective regional governance for both central cities and their suburbs, this will happen only in ways the suburbs support. Nevertheless, the fact of the suburban political majority leaves many important questions unanswered. In the past 50 years, the suburbs have used their political clout to promote rapid growth for their own communities and isolate themselves and their tax bases from urban problems. Today, many suburban leaders have come to believe that the well-being of their own communities depends on regional cooperation to limit growth at the edge and reinvigorate their central cities. Moreover, if the predicted deterioration of older, first-ring suburbs takes place (see number 7), these less affluent suburbs might form coalitions with the central cities against their more affluent neighbors on the edge. Thus, the suburban political majority

could mean continued divisions between the suburbs and the central cities, or it could mean the opposite: regional coalitions and smart growth (see number 5).

3. Aging of the baby boomers. Because of the sheer size of the baby boom generation—the 80 million Americans born between 1945 and 1964 who now comprise 30 percent of our total population—their needs have determined the most important trends in metropolitan development. This has meant not only the explosion of Levittown-style tract houses bought by the parents of the baby boom generation, but also the growth of Sunbelt-style sprawl that has been the overwhelming choice of the baby boomers themselves. But this automobile-dependent suburban environment currently offers little provision for the aged.

The baby boomers are now at or near the peak of their earning capacity, but by 2030 the estimated 61 million surviving boomers ages 66 to 84 will constitute 18 percent of our population (compared with 11 percent for that age category today). Indeed, by 2030 a record 32 million Americans are predicted to be 75 years of age or older, double the number today. Beyond the physical difficulties of driving and home maintenance in the typical suburban environment, the suburban "communities of limited liability" have made few social investments in caring for the aged and dependent. But suburbia has already shown an unexpected capacity to adapt itself to new needs—for example, older people using empty mall corridors each morning as their walking tracks and social clubs. More important, developers are pioneering new forms of suburban assisted-care living that combine elements of condominium apartments and nursing homes. And new kinds of flexible transit that combine aspects of taxi and bus service might ease the mobility problem.

If crime rates continue to decline in large cities, empty nesters might increasingly sell their suburban tract homes to move to urban apartments, where a full range of services can be found within walking distance. But most aging baby boomers will probably be forced to struggle with a suburban environment that responds inadequately to their needs.

4. Perpetual "underclass" in central cities and inner-ring suburbs. This prediction represents perhaps the most disturbing implication of this survey's number 1 prediction of growing disparities in wealth. If the trends in our winner-take-all society have disproportionately benefited the top 5 percent who have isolated themselves in elite suburbs or gentrified urban cores, these same trends have left behind an underclass—disproportionately African American and Hispanic—stranded in our inner cities. Although recent government policy—most notably Empowerment Zones and the HOPE VI housing program—have

attempted to reverse past policy errors, there is little evidence that the relatively limited government role can deal with the scope of the problem. Moreover, the full effect of the 1996 welfare reforms that limit eligibility to five years have yet to be felt for the core welfare population. In the past, great cities have effectively combated poverty by providing richer opportunities for education (both formal and informal) than rural areas. But the crisis of the urban school systems has produced a profound mismatch between the skills required in the new urban service economy and the very limited skills most inner-city young people bring to the urban job market. This mismatch virtually guarantees the perpetuation of an urban underclass well into the 21st century.

5. "Smart growth": environmental and planning initiatives to limit sprawl. Smart growth means essentially planned growth, especially planning initiatives to limit sprawl at the edge of a region and preserve open space. But proponents of smart growth realize that for such measures to be effective at the edge, they require action throughout the region. In the Portland, OR, metropolitan region, the national showcase for smart growth, planning initiatives include (1) an urban growth boundary to stop sprawl, (2) efforts to focus growth around transit lines and their stops, (3) redevelopment of the downtown to give the region a coherent focus, (4) a new emphasis on "infilling" within already developed areas rather than "greenfield" development at the edge, (5) design guidelines developed by the New Urbanism that emphasize walking-scale communities instead of automobile-based sprawl, and (6) an elected regional government to administer these programs and maintain popular support and debate. As the Portland model shows, smart growth must be backed by a wide-ranging regional coalition that includes good working relationships between the central city and its suburbs, and between urban and rural interests. It also requires good working relationships among the different levels of government: municipal, county, state, and federal. These conditions have rarely been met in American cities and regions. Nevertheless, the grassroots desire to stop sprawl and the loss of open space—combined with the economic imperative that regions with a high quality of life succeed best in the global economy—have made smart growth a movement that politicians and developers must reckon with.

6. The Internet. As the English urbanist Sir Peter Hall has observed (1998), the difficulty in predicting the impact of the Internet on our metropolitan areas can be compared with the difficulty observers faced 80 years ago in predicting the impact of the automobile. Intelligent observers then could see that the automobile would change the structure of American cities, but they could not actually imagine Los Angeles or the other automobile cities that would eventually emerge. In the next 50 years, as the exchange of information increasingly

replaces the physical production and movement of goods as the primary function of cities, the Internet will inevitably change the structure of our built environment, but we cannot imagine today the new metropolitan areas that will emerge. Perhaps the most that can be said at present is that, compared with previous means of (physical) communication such as canals, railroads, or highways, the information superhighway is radically flexible. While railroads tended to favor the big cities and highways favored the suburbs, the Internet can potentially spur economic development on the most remote mountainside, in the densest downtown, and anywhere in between. Some observers assert that the Internet will doom cities to obsolescence as cyberspace communication replaces the face-to-face contacts that cities used to provide. Others see big cities reborn as hip environments where the art world and other urban-based centers of creativity meet the new technology of communications.

7. Deterioration of the "first-ring" post-1945 suburbs. When Levittown and similar suburbs were built soon after World War II, they seemed the incarnation of the American dream. But many of these suburbs have aged badly: Houses and lots are small compared with more recent designs, the residents themselves are aging, and even the plywood has started to come apart after 50 years. Where these areas had once defined the outer edge of the metropolis, they now comprise a first ring, too close to the central city and its problems, but now far from the affluent edge. Such first-ring suburbs often lack the tax base and local government agencies to deal with the social problems that have been unexpectedly thrust on them. Yet the well-being of the first-ring suburbs is of great concern not only to those who live there, but for the future of the whole region. If these suburbs deteriorate, this will mean an increasingly divided metropolis as the affluent flee ever farther to the edge, the poor are trapped in increasingly isolated inner cities and adjacent first-ring suburbs, and the middle class divides between those who are able to follow the affluent to the edge and those left behind in deteriorating areas. But if these suburbs are able to use both public and private resources to upgrade their housing stock and take advantage of their strategic location between the core and the edge, they could become new models for adaptive reuse, smart growth, and social diversity. If so, the first-ring suburbs could again incarnate a new version of the American dream.

8. Shrinking household size. The size of the average American household has shrunk by 26 percent during the past 50 years, and experts predict that it will decrease slightly in the next decade. Our respondents believe that this trend will continue for the next half century. Not only are traditional two-parent families having fewer children, but such families make up a shrinking percentage of total households. Over the past three decades, the proportion of households consisting of married couples with children declined from 40 to 25 per-

cent. The remaining three-quarters of American households typically consist of smaller, nontraditional single-parent families, couples living without children, and one-person households. As with the aging of the baby boomers, numbers alone cannot predict the role that shrinking household size will play in our cities and regions. Suburban developers have for some time provided nontraditional housing types for nontraditional households, including a wide range of condominiums and rental apartments. The continuing shrinkage will probably mean that the present identification of suburbia with the single-family detached house and the traditional family (already somewhat mythical) will soon seem as outmoded as *Leave It to Beaver* reruns. A more speculative possibility is that shrinking household size will encourage the revival of central cities, as nontraditional households seek the flexibility, convenience, and diversity that cities provide.

9. Expanded superhighway system of "outer beltways" to serve new edge cities. "TEA–21," the 1998 Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (the latest successor to the 1956 Highway Act), allows regions to "flex" some of the record $218 billion in federal funds to be spent by 2006 to mass transit and other nonhighway uses. But most of our respondents believe that the money will be used in the old-fashioned way: to lay more concrete for more highways. Almost every American region has plans for a massive and expensive outer beltway to relieve the congested inner beltways of the 1956 act. And like the earlier beltways, these will almost surely draw development to an even more remote edge of the region. The consequences of this expanded superhighway system would thus intensify the other predictions on the list: increasing distance between rich and poor, increasing stress not only on central cities but on the first-ring suburbs stuck on the declining inner beltway, loss of open space at the edge of the region, and (ironically) more traffic congestion as drivers are forced to travel longer distances commuting between widely scattered office parks on the expanded outer beltways.

10. Racial integration as part of the increasing diversity in cities and suburbs. This prediction goes against the trend indicated by most of the other items, but enough respondents chose it and the related number 5 (smart growth) to win them a place in the top 10. If the suburban political majority chooses to use its power to promote smart growth rather than sprawl, and if economic trends reverse themselves to promote economic and racial equality, then central cities and perhaps first-ring suburbs will be able to support genuinely diverse neighborhoods. Already a few areas—Adams-Morgan in Washington, DC; West Mount Airy in Philadelphia; Jackson Heights in Queens (New York City); and South Pasadena in Los Angeles—are home to an exciting if bewildering mix of races, languages, cuisines, and cultures. Such neighborhoods could be the proving grounds for a new and vibrant multicultural identity for the whole country; but, as the

rest of our list indicates, given other trends, the future of racial integration and cultural diversity remains endangered.

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