



THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

We're a Suburban Nation. We Need to Get Used to It.

We can't move millions of people back to the center of cities. But we can make our suburbs friendlier to urban values.

OPINION | Dec. 22, 2021 • Aaron M. Renn



A suburban neighborhood in Las Vegas, Nev. (Shutterstock)

Some utopian activists believe that the United States needs a drastic urbanizing and an end to reliance on the automobile, for climate relief and other reasons. But this isn't going to happen. America is and will remain a suburban nation, with cars as the central feature of its surface transportation system. Our real challenge is to [move toward electric vehicles](#), and to build or retrofit suburbs to

better enable other forms of transportation for some of the trips we make.

The population of the U.S. is classified as about 80 percent urban, but this includes suburban areas as well as cities. If we tally up the number of places that are genuinely urban in form — moderate to high density, mixed use, built on a street grid, transit oriented or walkable — it doesn't add up to all that much.

The 2020 population of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle, Washington, Baltimore and Miami adds up to a bit over 20 million. That's only about 7 percent of the country's population, roughly equal to the population increase during the 2010s. In other words, even if we managed to double the populations of these cities, they would only be able to hold about one decade's worth of population growth.

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There are only a handful of cities with robust public transit systems that obviate the need for car ownership. Only New York, Chicago, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia and San Francisco have major rail systems that handle a significant amount of commuting.

Now, there are other urban places where a car is not necessary for a significant number of people. In my home city of Indianapolis, between 25,000 and 50,000 people live in a plausible urban environment. There are urban and transit-oriented suburbs around many large cities. And many college towns have this kind of environment. But all of this combined does not come near to large-scale urbanization.

Undoubtedly, we can and should expand our urban and transit footprint. But it will be very challenging to do. Our existing urban regions tend to be among the most restrictive in permitting new housing. Our rail transit construction costs are the most expensive in the world. And our planning and environmental processes result in major projects taking many years to even break ground. International



cities like Istanbul and Tokyo have been able to build significant amounts of housing and infrastructure rapidly, but we are far from being able to do that.

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Realistically, population growth in the U.S. is going to continue to be accommodated primarily by suburban expansion. Those regions that attempt to suppress this expansion through urban containment policies will continue to see ever higher housing prices and limited construction. There is a reason why places like [Texas](#) and Tennessee that encourage suburban housing construction are booming.

That does not mean we don't need change. We may well see a much greater adoption of electric vehicles. Elon Musk and Tesla have proven that it is possible to produce high quality electric vehicles at scale. Investment capital is pouring into other electric vehicle startups like Lucid and Rivian, and the legacy auto manufacturers are also spending big in this area.

The switch to electric cars will eliminate most climate and pollution concerns from the internal combustion engine. We're far away from an all-electric fleet, but we are moving faster in this direction than we are at urbanizing the country.

New suburban areas need to do a better job of incorporating non-auto transport modes. This means making sure there are sidewalks and bike paths along streets. In many cases it does not require costly storm sewers and curbing, just creating an asphalt path.

Suburbs also have to create more destinations to walk or bicycle to. This means allowing more neighborhood commercial development and mixed-use projects in suburban areas. Again, many suburbs are looking to build up their historic downtowns, or building urban-style town center developments in communities still largely composed of single-family home subdivisions. These moves would allow for incremental urbanization within the suburbs, enabling people to walk like to dinner, the store or a coffee shop, or to make other non-commuting

trips.

Climate change is not going to serve as an all-purpose cudgel to dramatically reorder American life. But new technologies like electric vehicles, and smarter design and retrofitting of suburbs, can deliver much of the carbon reduction we need in ways that are feasible and politically palatable. This, not a restructuring of American living patterns to massive city populations, is the best and mostly likely path forward.

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