
The inner city

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For much of the twentieth century, America's inner cities have suffered from the unanticipated consequences of government policy and urban planning. The availability of the massive interstate system for daily commuting made it easy to abandon the city for houses on the periphery. The widespread construction of parking lots downtown further eased the automotive commute while turning the city into a paved no-man's-land. Racism, redlining, and the concentration of subsidized housing projects destabilized and isolated the poor, while federal home-loan programs, targeting new construction exclusively, encouraged the deterioration and abandonment of urban housing. Worse yet, the application in the city of suburban zoning standards, with their deeper setbacks and higher parking requirements, prevented the renovation of existing buildings, which became illegal under the new code.

Thinking of the city in terms of its suburban competition

The fact that policy and planning can be blamed for our cities' problems is actually encouraging—it implies that better policy and better planning can produce better cities. But that is not enough. To be effective today, urban leaders must stop thinking of their cities strictly from the inside out, only from the point of view of their own citizens. That approach may seem virtuous, but it ignores the reality of regional competition in an open market. Urban leaders must borrow a page from the suburban developers' handbook and look at their communities from the outside in, through the eyes of a customer who is comparison-shopping. A family or company moving

to a metropolitan area has a choice between the city and the suburb, both of which are competing for its business. Will it be a house on Maple Street, or one in a gated subdivision? Will it be an office suite downtown, or a glass box in the business park? Often the greatest disadvantage of the city is not its own problems per se but the extreme competence and ingenuity of the suburban developers, who are constantly raising the expectations of consumers.

Suburban development is a well-honed science. New subdivisions outperform the city in category after category—in their amenity package, civic decorum, physical health; in their retail management, marketing techniques, investment security, their permitting process, and so on. Exploring each of these categories in turn helps show how the city can once again become competitive. Of course, the following discussion of what cities can learn from the suburbs should not overshadow the important physical distinctions between suburban and urban places, differences that are to be celebrated and reinforced. The greatest mistake the planners of the sixties and seventies made was to try to save the city by turning it into the suburb. Their approach could not have been worse. The future of the city lies in becoming more citylike, more pedestrian-friendly, more intense, more urban, more urbane.

The amenity package

The new suburbs are known for their private yards, their tennis clubs, their golf courses, and their guardhouses. The city does not offer these amenities in abundance, nor should it attempt to. Perhaps the best-known urban amenities are cultural and sports