

## TRENDS

## Debate moving away from urban vs. suburban

Planning for future communities now centering around the idea of livable communities.

By DAN NAUMOVICH  
Correspondent

**H**igh-density housing vs. personal space and freedom. Diversity and culture vs. long, costly commutes. For years the debate between urban and suburban community models has been waged based on sharp distinctions, with the benefits and disadvantages of each poised in direct contrast. Community planners are finding that that is no longer a useful, or even a valid way to frame the discussion.

"We've moved a bit beyond that because the settlement patterns today are more diverse than they were 30 years ago. The city/suburban dichotomy is not really as valid as it used to be," says Jeff Soule, director of outreach and international programs for the American Planning Association in Washington, D.C.

"What we're seeing at the American Planning Association as an overall trend is what I characterize as place-making, which is looking more comprehensively than we used to. What people are looking for is a package of convenience, not just at housing, but the cost of the commute, proximity to jobs, transportation options, and overall urban amenities," he says.

He likens the trend today to the residential neighborhoods that arose in urban areas back in the beginning of the last century.

"If you go back to the streetcar subdivisions of the '20s, you'll find a lot of single-family housing, but it's arrayed in a way that is fairly high density and punctuated with commercial mixed-use nodes," Soule says.

He offers as an example Reston, Virginia. In the 1960s this planned community was intended to balance nature and lifestyle, but its vision has changed over the years.

The plan in Reston today is to maintain the walkable environment, while adding transportation and living choic-

es. Three new Metrorail stations will connect the community to surrounding areas and grade-separated bike paths will connect to a regional network of open space. A wide variety of new housing options include condos in a 30-story high-rise, along with quarter-acre, single-family residences.

"It's not that the suburbs are bad and the cities are good. There's a trend nationwide toward making all the different places along that urban/suburban spectrum into more complete places," Soule says. Soule cites the work of Dorell Myers, a professor from the University of Southern California's School of Policy, Planning, and Development, when he explains how shifting demographics are also playing a role in evolving community models.

"The isolated, single-use subdivision is already overbuilt in the United States. The combination of aging baby boomers and new immigrants coming from other cultures are demanding a more compact, integrated residential typology, rather than McMansions out in a cornfield," Soule says

**HIGH DENSITY LIVING.** Paul Campbell, principal at **KEPHART Community : Planning : Architecture** (Denver, CO), believes that the future of single-family residences is one of the most important questions that those involved with community planning need to ask themselves.

At KEPHART, Campbell is involved with production housing and so admits his views on the topic are myopic. A good deal of the firm's work is being completed in suburban infill areas with populations between 250,000 and 300,000. Approximately 85% are rentals.

"Is that a national trend? It is from our point of view," he says.

The developers who approach KEPHART for single-family residences are usually looking to fill out an existing development, rather than starting from

scratch. Campbell has also noticed a trend away from the McMansions and toward something that's livable, but on a much smaller and sustainable scale.

While Soule pointed to the baby boomers, Campbell sees Generation Y as leading the trend toward higher-density living. These tech-savvy individuals, born between the mid-1970s and early 2000s, are showing a preference for living closer to where they work and where they play, rather than returning home to a "pastoral community" each evening.

The housing crisis has also forced a segment of the population to rethink their housing options. While renting might not be their preferred choice, it could be the more sensible one.

"They're probably more inclined to accept that urban or infill location, rather than seek it out. It's more about price point," Campbell says.

Local governments are also driving change. Soule says that where once municipalities would cater to developers and absorb the costs for such things as extending road networks and utility infrastructure, they are less willing today to foot the bill without considering the alternatives. Fiduciary responsibility and return on investment are being weighed along with the increased property tax base.

"There's a more sophisticated set of questions being asked on who actually bears the cost of these different settlement patterns," he says.

All of this isn't to say that all Americans have been weaned from their desire for the privacy and wide-open spaces that are found in suburban locations. Single-driver cars will still be commuting along well-traveled roadways back home to single-family homes for some time to come. Sustainability and cost efficiency are becoming increasingly important, but people won't allow their freedom to choose where to live and how to live to be taken away. But these preferences could change. ▀▀

"It's not that the suburbs are bad and the cities are good. There's a trend nationwide toward making all the different places along that urban/suburban spectrum into more complete places."