

City Living

Our urban environment is ours, but you wouldn't know that at first glance. The way a city looks is decided by a cloud of government and big business. But citizens have more power to shape their world than they usually think. Read on for some pretty good ideas.

Photos by
Dereck Mangus



Urban Housing For All

The United States has five percent of the world's population but produces 20 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. The largest contributions come from utilities (electricity, heat, etc.) and transportation. How we produce so much more per person can be summed up in two words: suburban sprawl. Someone living in a big house out in the 'burbs, driving everywhere, uses far more energy than someone in a smaller place in the city who frequently walks or takes mass transit. And today, over half of all Americans live in suburbs. How best to address global warming? We need millions of Americans to move from suburbs to cities.

Today's suburbs are highly segregated by income, causing a huge income gap. For example, Weston's median household income is \$153,918; Chelsea's is \$30,161 [2000 data]. Apparently, John Edwards is right: there really are two Americas. In cities, however, rich and poor do live together. Walk two blocks down Pond Street in Jamaica Plain and you go from stately pondside mansions to little apartments on Centre Street. Here, everyone gains an appreciation of people not like themselves, even by simply passing a homeless person or a corporate suit on the street. And everyone shares the same schools and school expenses (private school notwithstanding). How best to address the opportunity gap between children, who happen to be born into wealthy or poor households, and to improve education for

all of us? We need millions of Americans to move from suburbs to cities.

by Seth Baum

Imposing some draconian law mandating this urbanization would be horrible. It reeks of China's notorious one child per family limit. Besides, it would never pass any legislative body. However, there is another way, a better way. What if millions of Americans actually want to move from suburbs to cities, thereby using less energy and sharing schools?

This can happen, and Boston is a shining example of how to do it. The city is beautiful, exciting, and very people-friendly. Mass transit is excellent (with plenty of room for improvement), and walking is even better. It's no wonder so many people have been moving here, or to other great cities like New York and San Francisco.

However, these are also the most expensive cities in the country, a fact that prevents more people from living there. This is both unfortunate and counter-intuitive, since such denser cities are so much more efficient: When everything's more spread out, we have to pay for more roads, more electric lines, and more gas and water pipes. We have to pay for school busses going further, and for our automobiles going further (and for having automobiles in the first place). Why is it that more efficient, higher density places are more expensive?

The main reason is that there aren't enough of these places. It's basic

economics: demand exceeds supply, causing high prices. Real estate developers cater to the highest bidders, so existing buildings often get renovated to sell for more than they used to, and any new buildings are usually high-end. (Perhaps you've noticed the many new luxury condo buildings around town.) Now it's harder to afford living in the city, and many long-time city residents are squeezed out, typically to less-desirable inner suburbs. This process of an area becoming popular, particularly among the affluent, and then becoming more expensive, often displacing the community that built it, is called gentrification.

The driving force behind the community displacement that comes with gentrification may have more to do with the large and growing income gap between the wealthiest and poorest in the country. We can't reasonably expect anyone making \$20,000 a year to be able to compete for the same housing with someone making \$200,000. Protecting communities in increasingly popular urban areas is yet another reason to raise the minimum wage, move towards universal health care, and make our tax structure more progressive.

The fact that high-quality, high-density cities are in such short supply around the country is a symptom of the much deeper, darker reality of urban planning in America in the last century. Since the early 1900s, and especially after World War II, conscious decisions were made by our leadership to develop sparse, automobile-centered suburbs. These decisions were heavily influenced by the automobile industry and others who stood to profit from it. General Motors bought streetcar systems and dismantled them to make room for their product.


Since then, the inefficiencies of suburbs have been heavily subsidized via municipal funding of roads, power lines, pipes, traffic cops, etc. (the "freeway" is not actually free), and even the homes themselves through mortgage deductions and other home ownership incentives, creating an illusion of suburbs being less expensive. A further push came from the racism which led to "white flight" from cities to suburbs and the decline of investment and subsequent decay of increasingly minority urban areas. The "inner city" became a place to avoid.

Boston was hit by this too, and still is. While the MBTA is forced to raise its prices for transit users, the Big Dig tunnels, one of the most expensive construction projects in history, are opening up free of charge to drivers. But Boston has managed to hold on to its dense urban core, which was largely built in the pre-automobile days. Today, more and more people are finding this type of place attractive, but since there are so few such places, those that do exist have become expensive.

Can we just build more dense urban housing to cool off prices? In fact, developers are putting up new housing all the time—but that kind of work takes time. Their work is often hindered by those currently living there, who often like their neighborhood just fine how it is, and fight hard to keep it that way. However, if the residents succeed, they could end up driving up their housing costs too much for them to stay there! And as long as the income gap remains so high, finding affordable housing for those on the low end of the gap will likely always be tough.

Developers, community members (new and old), architects, and city planners should work together both in Boston and across the country to build more attractive housing in dense urban areas, or in areas that would then become sufficiently dense to, say, support a good mass transit system. The community will know best how to build in ways that contribute positively to a neighborhood's character, and support people of varying incomes. Architects can turn this vision into blueprints. Planners can make it work with the rest of the region. And developers can make it all happen.

Open forums to bring these people together are called charettes

and take place all the time. In addition to providing valuable insights to developers, they're a fun chance to meet others in the community. Keep an eye open for them in your area—and make sure developers actually implement their recommendations and don't just use them as a PR stunt. Together, we can build more great urban spaces, slow down global warming, and build "one America." And we might as well have a good time doing it. 

While working on his many articles for this issue, Seth decided that the housing crisis is the fault of low wages. He's hard at work fixing that right now.

Recommended Reading & Viewing

Who Framed Roger Rabbit is based on the true story of the conspiracy by the automobile industry to purchase and destroy the Los Angeles streetcar system, which was once the world's best. It is the story of how the city came to be the sprawling, smog-drenched disaster it is today. Its mix of animation and live action reflects the blurred line between entertainment and reality that exists in LA today. And it's so cute!

Going Nowhere by James Howard Kunstler is a cynical yet thoroughly delightful rant on the failed state of city planning in America. Kunstler is not a planning professional but a perceptive citizen, and his objective is to dissect all that has gone wrong with land use in this country for the rest of us. To this end, he succeeds. This book is best read sitting on a plastic lawn chair in the middle of the South Bay Center parking lot.

The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit by Thomas J. Sugrue is a detailed study of the role race played in Detroit in the process of the inner city becoming the "inner city." It chronicles how the system was systematically and consciously rigged specifically against blacks, from underpaying them at work to overcharging them at home, making their concentration in decayed urban centers inevitable—and no fault of their own.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs is still the book on what does and doesn't make for a successful big city in this country, even though it was written 40 years ago. Though she uses some statistical evidence to back up her arguments, the heart of the book is her simple observations of the most ordinary happenings in urban spaces, like people walking to work or kids playing games. She takes us through neighborhoods good and bad across the country, including many here in Boston. (She repeatedly praises the North End for its vibrant, people-friendly streets and the close community it creates.)

Urban Housing For All by Seth Baum is an article in the September 2004 issue of *Whats Up Magazine* and is widely considered to be the most important piece of writing in the history of humanity. Baum, a prodigious visionary of epic proportions, solves all of Boston's problems, if not the world's, in 800 words or less. "A masterpiece for the ages." — Seth Baum

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