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POLICY

Make the Landscape Democratic Again

Income inequality has helped create a growing geographic divide between rich and poor. Aaron Betsky on why we need to mend that gap.

By [AARON BETSKY](#)

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San Francisco

America is heading back to the 'burbs. The [Brookings Institute](#), which has been steadily and consistently producing better analyses of urban trends than most urban design-focused institutions I know, notes the following in a recent [report](#) about the 2017-18 Census Bureau estimates:

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the latest data reveal that broad-based population 'concentration' toward large urban areas in the early 2010s was an aberration related to the post-recession economy and housing crunch."

Part of the issue no doubt is that the quality of life in many American cities is declining as infrastructure groans under decades of under-investment and privatization, and as a nest of regulations and economic forces help drive the less affluent into the fringes of downtown cores.



Elvert Barnes via flickr

A sewer project in Baltimore



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The problems aren't confined to first-tier cities. In another [report](#), Brookings [notes](#) that smaller cities are also becoming less affordable, making the dream of upward mobility increasingly difficult for those who have to spend at least half, if not more, of their income on housing costs. The suburbs, meanwhile, now offer more opportunities for advancement and access to schools and other amenities that can be prohibitively expensive in the core.

The suburbs have their own problems, of course. First and foremost there is sprawl itself, which not only is environmentally disastrous but also creates physical and social separations that we can only weave together largely through massively inefficient transportation systems.



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Housing in Seattle

I don't mean to suggest a false distinction between urban cores, the suburbs, and exurban communities. The real issue here—as Brookings [also argues](#)— is where we can find the qualities that we value, no matter if it's in a traditional city or what was once the countryside. If you look more closely at the growth within cities, the model is clearly becoming the one Lars Lerup [identified](#) decades ago in Houston: that of “stim and dross.” Within the miasma of urban, semi-urban, and rural landscapes, there are points where it all comes together into sites of intense use and human interaction.

If we are moving, both figuratively and literally, towards a landscape of stim and dross, what policies can make these urban moments truly sustainable, open to all, and beautiful?

In urban settings these are not only the traditional (semi-) public spaces of culture, learning, and government, but also the gentrified neighborhoods that fulfill Jane Jacobs's notion of what a city should be. We often forget that even in New York, the most dense and urbane of all of our cities, the distance between such nodes is often vast and filled with monotony and waste. The city is increasingly separated by income and, beyond the stoop or the café on the corner, quality of life for many residents has suffered because of the pressures created by this separation.

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Courtesy Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Rendering from Detroit's East Riverfront master plan

Meanwhile, a similar trend exists in suburbia. More and more suburbs are developing nodes where you will find civic complexes and shopping and eating opportunities that share common parking areas and facilities, and that are designed to seem more human in their scale and appearance. Again, many of these places are upscale (such as the fancy shopping malls that pretend to be village cores); as for civic amenities, they're often located in wealthier districts or developments.

Even rural areas are succumbing to this trend. Villages that are well-served by infrastructure, whether physical or virtual, have become havens for exurbanites who can live there in bucolic splendor, find a small community, and sip lattes in the former general store. In Spring Green, Wisc., where I spend half my year, rental prices have risen to the point that the village has become unaffordable for many children of longtime residents.



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Central Coffee Roasters in Sperryville, Va.

The potential of such stims is, of course, welcome. If urban qualities can be anchored at a small scale in communities around the country, whether they be urban, suburban, or exurban, they could help inspire a reinvigorated democracy, offering citizens all the opportunities that make this country great. What stands in the way of such a vision is the prevailing economic logic that only those who pay can enjoy the benefits of such urbanity. The emergence of Asian-style all-in-one communities at a vast scale, of which Hudson Yards in New York is the most prominent example, has taken this trend to new heights, both literally and in their degree of exclusivity.

At the other end of the scale, the high cost of housing in desirable locations and the fact that many municipalities can no longer afford to support their libraries and schools means that the divisions between stim-infused villages and hollowed-out market towns or [industrial hubs has become ever starker](#).



Kohn Pederson Fox Associates

Hudson Yards

It's not just an American problem. Rem Koolhaas has [described](#) the gentrification of the European countryside, and in Japan rural centers are [dissolving](#) at a catastrophic rate as the population ages and young people move to the city. The difference is that in the United States we have few, if any, mechanisms, to battle such trends or support the idea of a democratic landscape that is at the heart of our national self-image.

I am all for a national policy for infrastructural improvement, for a Green New Deal, and for many other proposals political candidates are releasing as the 2020 campaign gets underway. What I have not heard anybody argue for is a national plan to support gathering places like libraries or essential facilities like public schools, let alone incubators for small businesses that would support housing in the places where people want to live. If we are moving, both figuratively and literally, towards a landscape of stim and dross, what policies can

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Aaron Betsky is a regularly featured columnist whose views and conclusions are not necessarily those of ARCHITECT magazine nor of the [American Institute of Architects](#).

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