

Suburbia Unlimited

Depending on your environmental viewpoint, suburbia is either salvation or damnation. It is the good life or the destroyer of cities. One thing is beyond argument: it has reshaped the face of America since World War II and profoundly affected the country's life and institutions.

Now suburbia is going under the microscope. Adelphi University's Institute of Suburban Studies claims to be the first research effort devoted solely to the consequences of this massive population shift. There are over 71 million residents in the suburbs now, more than in the cities and rural areas combined.

For a nation given to scientific and statistical soul-searching, the attention is overdue. There has been little analysis of the nature and extent of suburban expansion and its measurable results and portents for the future. From behavior to politics, ecology to economics, there is virtually nothing that this outward migration has not changed.

The national problems that suburbanization has brought in its wake are immense. Development has been unguided by ecological or environmental considerations. Resources, such as water tables, have been noticeably affected. Marshes are filled and wetland sanctuaries are lost. Pollution increases. The clearing of land, the building of roads and houses, have created or worsened flood areas, where construction and paving have lessened water absorption. Without plans or principles, sporadic battles have erupted over the more flagrant abuses. It is not just beauty; it is the balance of nature that has been endangered or lost.

* * *

The vitality that the suburbs have drawn from the cities is felt most crucially in terms of the relocation of the middle class and the removal from the central city of its supportive tax base. It is felt also in the decline of schools and of neighborhood quality. Business and industry have moved to outlying shopping centers and "campus" locations. The city suffers loss of revenue, jobs and services.

The dispersal brings a host of regional problems in transportation, resources and government itself. While conflicts increase in jurisdiction, hard local questions of social and racial integration are unresolved.

It has become increasingly apparent that suburbia is an energy-consuming world on wheels. And when studies and predictions are made, the prognosis is for more of the same, with suburbia moving to exurbia in essentially the same patterns. The destruction is simply to go on.

This country can and should do better. It is not the right to the pursuit of domestic happiness that is in question, but the planlessness and wastefulness of the process. There have been no land use policies; transportation linkage, when it happens at all, is after the fact; there are rarely standards of environmental design.

Except for some sociological studies, there is little except empirical observation of the chief American environmental phenomenon of the century. The time is tragically late for the issues to be defined and faced.