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Cities and Suburbs Are Becoming Pretty Similar

Something is lost as big-box stores move into urban areas and cultural centers are squeezed out.

by Tyler Cowen

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Converging. Photographer: Tim Boyle/Getty Images

A few decades ago the choice for most people was pretty simple: either the city or the suburbs. The city was exciting but a little dangerous. The suburbs were comfortable but bland. These days our suburbs and cities are converging, which is narrowing our lifestyle choices.

Consider the Washington area. The Rosslyn, Clarendon and Ballston parts of Arlington, Virginia -- which are right next to the District of Columbia -- used to be considered suburban, and are still formally classified as such. Yet they are increasingly similar to the Northwest quadrant of Washington. They attract the same young, highly educated demographic; they are crowded; parking is hard to come by. Much of this territory offers easier access to the jobs and amenities of Northwest D.C. than you might have from the lower-income sections of Washington, such as Anacostia. There is also work in progress to turn Tysons Corner -- once the epitome of “edge

city” suburban existence -- into a walkable town center, connected to the broader area by the recently inaugurated Metro Silver Line.

Washington in turn is more like a suburb than in times past. Twenty years ago, D.C. residents would drive to the suburbs for retail shopping. The chaining of urban America, plus the ascent of Amazon, has made this largely unnecessary. On the other hand, rising rents have pushed a lot of music and theater venues outside the city’s borders, so the older notion of the city as a center of culture is growing obsolete. The suburbs have more entertainment than before, and are less defined by retail malls and big-box shopping.

This blurring of cities and suburbs represents a more general trend. Poverty, which used to be a problem of cities and rural areas, is an increasingly [suburban](#) phenomenon, with municipalities and counties unprepared for their new burdens. Cities are no longer automatically [so dangerous](#). And due to NIMBYism, which limits construction and raises rents, many American cities aren’t growing much in population, pushing density into the suburbs.

The internet has been another equalizer. You can enjoy texting and social media from just about anywhere, and our near obsession with these activities is equalizing urban and suburban experiences, possibly for [the worse](#).

Arguably, sex and alcohol were once more prominent in some American cities than in American suburbs. But the new generation of American youth seems [less interested](#) in these activities anyway.

As American travel infrastructure decays, and traffic congestion worsens, what we used to call cities and suburbs won’t be able to rely on each other so much, as trips become too exhausting and time-consuming. That too will encourage cities and suburbs each have their own mix of jobs, retail and cultural opportunities.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle between a yet stronger equalization of cities and suburbs is the subpar public schools in many American cities. Yet with ongoing urban gentrification and innovation in charter schools, this too may change. And the spread of poverty to the suburbs may weaken school quality there.

One way to study the future is to see how new cities and suburbs are being built, mostly looking toward Asia. Rapidly growing areas have lots of well-distributed skyscrapers, but without a clearly defined urban center as you might find in European (or some American) cities with 18th century or medieval roots. Singapore is sometimes called a “city-state,” but outside of its small central core, it often feels more like a “suburb-state,” albeit with high population density.

Commentators may be missing the new reality of convergence because so many of the intellectual elite live in a few highly distinctive major cities -- New York, London or San Francisco -- or in “urban adjuncts,” such as Berkeley, California, or Cambridge, Massachusetts. I see those areas as isolated outposts, not the future for most of the West. Think instead of how the urban and suburban areas of Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Orlando really don’t differ that much.

People have been debating whether the new Amazon.com Inc. headquarters should go in an urban or suburban area. There's probably not enough room for it in a city such as crowded downtown Boston, so the very placement of the Amazon office buildings will bring along lots of housing and retail development along these new, blurry urban and suburban lines.

If you like crowded areas, and living on the internet, it will be great. And the shopping is better than ever before. But using your residential location to drive your lifestyle and mindset may be a thing of the past, and so yet another freedom of choice is slowly ebbing away.

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To contact the author of this story:

Tyler Cowen at tcowen2@bloomberg.net