Sightline **Daily**

Term Limits

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Why the term 'suburb' needs a replacement.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal by Richard Florida about the changing demographics of cities has me thinking again about how to rid our language of the term 'suburb.' Florida's article points out that many of the cities we have typically called suburbs are transforming themselves from sprawling, car-centric and far-flung places into compact, transit-oriented, and walkable communities. These cities are also experiencing a shift in demographics that is challenging the safety net for social and health services. In other words, as demographics and the economy change, the suburbs are rapidly becoming more city-like. We need to re-think the distinctions we typically draw between city and suburb.

The stereotype of metropolitan areas in North America has usually been of a big city surrounded by smaller towns and cities. The big city is where people work and the suburbs is where people live. Cities are big, dirty, busy places full of crime while suburbs are banal, quiet, communities that are rather buttoned down and centered on single family houses. Cities have poor people jammed into apartment buildings while more affluent types spend their free time watering their lawns and driving to the mall.

The problem with the stereotype, Florida points out, is that the data doesn't support it anymore. In an article I wrote in *Forum*, American Institute of Architects Seattle Chapter's magazine, I compared Kirkland—a smaller city outside of Seattle—with two neighborhoods inside the city limits of Seattle. It turns out that Kirkland is far more compact and walkable than the Seattle neighborhood of Laurelhurst, which is a neighborhood with very low population density dominated by single family homes. In fact, Seattle has many neighborhoods that quantitatively and qualitatively function more like what we've called suburbs. Yet Kirkland's downtown and surrounding area is more densely populated and feels a lot more like Seattle's Capitol Hill.

And Florida's article points out:

As inner-city neighborhoods gentrify, blight and intransigent poverty are moving out to the suburbs. A Brookings Institution study released this week found that the number of poor people in the suburbs has grown by 37.4% since 2000, compared with 16.7% in cities.

So-called suburbs are now facing many of the same social and economic challenges once thought reserved for cities. The Cleaver family is no longer the sociodemographic norm in the smaller cities that surround larger ones. Safety net resources are a pressing need in places like Kirkland and Beaverton, Oregon just like they are in Seattle and Portland.

All of which brings me back to my reasons for wanting to lose the term 'suburb' in favor of something more accurate. The term suburb is:

- Divisive—"suburban" often derisively refers to lifestyles, rather than demographics or geography. That's just not helpful when trying to make public policy or land-use decisions;
- Inaccurate—Florida's research and my own have lead me to believe that the demographic and geographic distinction between cities is disappearing; and
- Counterproductive—believing that cities are automatically compact lets urban policymakers off the hook when it comes to encouraging growth, and it assumes that social and economic problems happen only in big cities.

Now, I don't have a good idea yet for a term to replace suburb. (If you have one, I'd like to see it in the comments.) It may be, as Florida points out, that leadership into the 21st century might come from those very cities that we have learned to cast as the epitome of unsustainable land use, the 'suburbs.' As those smaller cities diversify, reap the value of density—both economic and social—and grapple with a tough economy, they may be able to teach larger cities a lesson or two about how to accommodate growth sustainably.

Talking about 'density,' 'compact communities,' and 'choice' can keep discussions about linked to [sustainable solutions] rather than stereotypes conjured up by the term 'suburb.'