

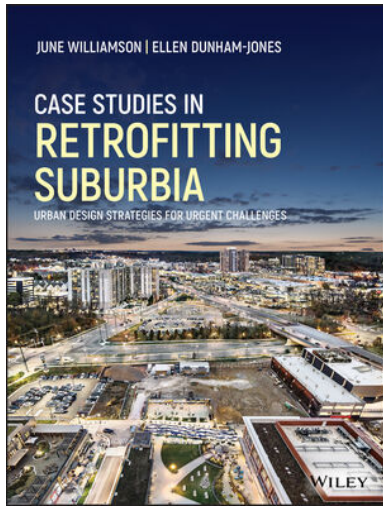
**Extra Documentation
EDRA 2021 Book Award Submission**

***Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia:
Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges***

by June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones

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Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges

June Williamson, Ellen Dunham-Jones

E-Book	978-1-119-14919-4	January 2021	\$52.00
Hardcover	978-1-119-14917-0	January 2021	\$65.00

DESCRIPTION

A brand-new collection of 32 case studies that further demonstrate the retrofitting of suburbia

This amply-illustrated book, second in a series, documents how defunct shopping malls, parking lots, and the past century’s other obsolete suburban development patterns are being retrofitted to address current urgent challenges they weren’t designed for: improving public health, increasing resilience in the face of climate change, leveraging social capital for equity, supporting an aging society, competing for jobs, and disrupting automobile dependence.

Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges provides summaries, data, and references on how these challenges manifest in suburbia and discussion of successful urban design strategies to address them in Part I. Part II documents how innovative design strategies are implemented in a range of northern American contexts and market conditions. From modest interventions with big ripple effects to ambitious do-overs, examples of redevelopment, reinhabitation, and regreening of changing suburban places from coast to coast are described in depth in 32 brand new case studies.

- Written by the authors of the highly influential *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*
- Demonstrates changes that can and already have been realized in suburbia by focusing on case studies of retrofitted suburban places
- Illustrated in full-color with photos, maps, plans, and diagrams

Full of replicable lessons and creative responses to ongoing problems and potentials with conventional suburban form, *Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges* is an important book for students and professionals involved in urban design, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, development, civil engineering, public health, public policy, and governance. Most of all, it is intended as a useful guide for anyone who seeks to inspire revitalization, justice, and shared prosperity in places they know and care about.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About the authors:

JUNE WILLIAMSON is associate professor and department chair at the City College of New York's Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture. She is the acclaimed author of *Designing Suburban Futures: New Models from Build a Better Burb* (Island Press, 2013).

ELLEN DUNHAM-JONES is professor of architecture and directs the urban design degree at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She was voted one of the world's 100 most influential urbanists by *Planetizen* and hosts the *Redesigning Cities* podcast.

The authors' first book, *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs* (Wiley), was deemed "the Bible of the retrofitting movement" in the *Chicago Tribune*. It was featured in *The New York Times*, CBS Evening News, *Urban Land*, *Architectural Record*, and received the 2009 PROSE award for architecture and urban planning.

To purchase this product, please visit <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/9781119149170>

NEW BOOK:

Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges by June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones

The next book in the groundbreaking Retrofitting Suburbia series presents 32 brand new case studies documenting successful retrofits of underperforming suburban property types into more just, healthy, and prosperous places.

New York, NY (February 3, 2021) – June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones, authors of the best-selling Retrofitting Suburbia series, today announced the publication of [Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges](#). The first in the series (2009) sparked a national dialogue on transforming and revitalizing our nation's communities, including what to do with the plethora of America's dying malls. The book was met with critical acclaim and was featured in The New York Times, CBS, NPR, TED, Time, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today. The Chicago Tribune called it "the Bible of the retrofitting movement."

"Our ambition [in writing this book] was to engage with a larger, continuing set of challenges, given that suburbia is the United States," said author June Williamson in a recent article in *The New York Times*. "Suburbs are us. They're where the majority of people work, where they live."

The new volume presents detailed case studies that address six crucial challenges facing communities today: 1) improving public health, 2) increasing resilience in the face of climate change, 3) leveraging social capital for equity, 4) supporting an aging society, 5) competing for jobs, and 6) disrupting automobile dependence.

"There's surprisingly little written that's useful to aging suburban communities coping with how to evolve. And, the literature is often removed from what the suburbs actually are," says Dunham-Jones. "It's stuck in this old trope of suburbs versus city, when really it's not a question of whether suburbs will stay the same or will be turned into something else. Change is occurring anyway."

From modest interventions with big ripple effects to ambitious do-overs, examples of redevelopment, re-inhabitation, and re-greening of changing suburban places from coast to coast are described in depth in 32 brand new case studies. ***Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges*** is an indispensable book for professionals and students involved in urban design, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, development, civil engineering, public health, public policy, governance and for anyone who seeks to inspire revitalization, justice, and shared prosperity in places they know and care about.

For more information visit www.retrofittingsuburbia.com.

ABOUT JUNE WILLIAMSON: June Williamson is associate professor and department chair at the City College of New York's Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture. She is

the acclaimed author of *Designing Urban Futures: New Models from Build a Better Burb* (Island Press, 2013).

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Pedestrian-oriented streetscapes and hip destinations in The Domain, Austin, Texas. Photo at lower left courtesy of The Dogwood restaurant. Other photos by Phillip Jones, 2019

RETROFIT

The state of the art of suburban retrofit

Two retrofit experts have a new book that is an essential reference for transforming suburban landscapes.

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE JAN. 21, 2021



Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges, the latest book in a series by June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones, is about creating real value from underutilized places. The volume focuses on automobile-oriented, conventional suburbs, which comprise about 90 percent of US metropolitan areas.

More than a half century of literature describes the flaws of conventional suburbs. Yet imagining them as something different is hard. The roads, parking lots, buildings, landscaping, and infrastructure are built, representing trillions of dollars in sunk costs. Williamson and Dunham-Jones have helped to change our thinking about what is possible in the American built environment.

Beginning with their 2009 book, *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*, the authors have highlighted the opportunities of suburbs to transform into better places. This new book reports on projects built over the last decade that have capitalized on that potential.

What is a suburb? Williamson and Dunham-Jones avoid complicated formulas by focusing on built form. The name suburb—combining the roots for “beneath” or “less important” and “city”—essentially means less than urban. It’s not about distance from the downtown core of a major city. Many cities have suburban areas within them—and many suburbs have sections that are essentially urban. Here's part of the authors’ explanation:

A property with a building surrounded by surfaces that are lawn or paved for parking we define as suburban form. If the building fronts a sidewalk and places the parking either under or behind it, that’s urban form. If the road infrastructure is dendritic—branching out like a tree—that’s suburban form. If the streets are networked—interconnected and walkable, with frequent intersections—that’s urban form.

With that form-based definition in mind, the authors explore *how* suburbs can be retrofitted. One of the goals of suburban retrofit is to bring some much-needed walkable urbanism to the suburbs. *Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia* offers examples of how to upgrade suburban areas to real urbanism. And yet the book is not dogmatic on this point, because that upgrade may not be the best solution in any given location. Suburbs can also be retrofitted through reinhabitation of vacant buildings—or regreening to restore ecological systems that improve stormwater management. The authors are guided less by theory than on-the-ground research:

Our database of retrofitting examples has exploded over the past decade from 80 to over 2,000 entries. Slightly more than half we classify as redevelopments, only 2 percent as regreenings, and the rest comprise incomplete tallies of the vast number of reinhabitations and adopted corridor retrofit plans.



The Historic Fourth Ward Park, a regreening in Atlanta, Georgia. Photo by Phillip Jones, 2018

Why should suburbs be retrofitted at all? Many suburbs are so badly put together that some urbanists [argue](#) that resources would be better spent focusing on older cities and towns. Historic communities tend to have good “bones”—well-connected streets and infrastructure with interesting buildings made by hand. But with 90 percent of our metro areas built as conventional suburbs, and most people living in such places, the problems can’t be ignored.

Reading this book strengthens my view that suburbs should be transformed for yet another reason. The very flaws of the suburbs create the potential for improvement. For those who do the hard work of transforming suburbs, the gain is all that much greater. And as the authors make clear, the work can be completed incrementally, one step at a time. Still, retrofitting suburbia is hard, and definitely not for everyone.

Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia is divided into two sections. The first section lays out “urban suburban challenges” posed by automobile-oriented communities. The authors explain how these problems can be addressed through retrofit. The challenges are:

- Disrupt automobile dependence
- Improve public health
- Support an aging population
- Leverage social capital for equity

- Compete for jobs
- Add water and energy resilience

Section one is an overture for the case studies, which form the heart of the book, as the title suggests. The case studies are aided by the authors' own drawings, original photographs, and illustrations from other sources.

Transforming an industrial campus

Discussion of suburban transformation usually revolves shopping malls. But suburbs include many kinds of underutilized sites, such as a 300-acre former IBM research and manufacturing campus in Austin, Texas. This site is not a typical “brownfield” site. Selectric typewriters, powered by early computer technology, were developed and built on this site from the 1960s through the 1980s.



Figure—ground diagrams of the IBM site from 1986 (at left), The Domain in 2013, and the plan for eventual buildout. Source: Authors.

This site is being redeveloped as Austin’s second downtown, nine miles from the city’s historic core, called The Domain. The developer-led project “has inserted chunks of walkable urbanism into a sprawling office park,” the authors report. “The bits are anchored by familiar department stores but centered on well-designed pedestrian-oriented streets lined by loads of brand-name shops topped by loads more apartments. Bars and restaurants spill out into many of the popular public spaces.

“While detractors deride The Domain as ‘living in a mall,’ the strategy has been very successful at attracting the next generation of knowledge workers to approximately 10 million new square feet, twelve miles north of downtown Austin, Texas.” The development has successfully boosted jobs, tax revenues, and property values, the authors report.



Aerial view of The Domain. Photo by Phillip Jones, 2019.

From office park to downtown

Ten miles west of Miami, Florida, an 80 percent Hispanic community is building a downtown on the site of a 120-acre, 1970s office park. Rather than focusing on housing for mostly single millennials, Downtown Doral is offering civic assets and attracting families. The development includes a city hall, two charter schools, a library, a public art pavilion, and a three-acre city park.

Downtown Doral, which took shape after the 2008 recession, is using the principles of “[Lean Urbanism](#).” A more connected street system is being built with sidewalks and a mix of uses, yet Downtown Doral also retains existing roads and some of the original office buildings that have provided a steady revenue stream for the developer. Practicality guides the approach to mixed-use.

“In Doral, continuous fine-grained retail and restaurant frontage on Main Street encourages walking, although housed in cheaper to-build one-story liner buildings,” the authors report. “Not tucking them into the ground floors of high-rise residential buildings limits risk to investors should either use fail. Similarly, the high-rises are independent structures from their parking decks.”

Downtown Doral is becoming an urban core for a suburban city while avoiding a blank slate approach. The resulting development is more sustainable, and also contributes to a unique place.



The Pike & Rose development on the site of a former strip mall in the White Flint area of Montgomery County, Maryland. Photo on left courtesy of Federal Realty Investment Trust. On right courtesy of Clinton & Associates, PC.

Corridor retrofit

The transformation of a central corridor in Lancaster, California, which had just gotten underway as Williamson and Dunham-Jones finished their first book, is among the most inspiring stories. The city shrank a five-lane arterial down to two lanes, removed seven traffic lights, cut the speed limit down to 15 mph, and rebranded the area as The BLVD. The BLVD quickly became the social heart of the city, generating \$273 million in economic activity with 37 new businesses and more than 800 housing units, the author’s report.

“Despite all of the new activity on The BLVD—or because of it—public safety has dramatically improved. Total motor vehicle collisions are down 38 percent and pedestrian-involved collisions have plummeted by 78 percent.”

The success of this project has set a new planning and development course for Lancaster, a suburban city in eastern Los Angeles County that grew up since the middle of the 20th Century.

“Based on the behavioral changes he saw after the road diet, (City Planning Director Brian) Ludicke introduced a Complete Streets Master Plan for the entire city in 2016. The Antelope Valley Healthcare District also took notice and in collaboration with the city are planning to redevelop automobile-oriented properties surrounding the to-be-rebuilt hospital into a walkable, mixed-use, medical, commercial, residential district called Medical Main Street.”

Reimagining a health district

The 1,000-acre Baton Rouge Health District epitomizes suburban medical facilities with more than 17,000

The 1900s Baton Rouge Health District epitomizes suburban medical facilities with more than 4,700 parking spaces and 12 million square feet of disconnected development. A 2015 report examines the district like a patient, pointing out symptoms like traffic congestion, automobile dependence, and few opportunities for active transportation contributing to environmental health factors like lack of exercise and obesity. Sponsored by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, the report envisions this site converted into a walkable urban district with a mix of uses and civic sites. “Treatments include infilling the street network and adding a 7.4-mile walking and biking trail to improve efficiency and choice in the transportation network. The follow-up tests include metrics on travel speed, bicycle and pedestrian counts, and surveys of employee travel behavior.”



Vision for the Baton Rouge Health District, currently an auto-oriented corridor. Source: Perkins & Will.

This visioning exercise was surprisingly influential. “Implementation began right away, with formation of the Baton Rouge Health District as a coordinated nonprofit entity, appointment of an executive director, fast-tracking by local authorities of a complete streets project for the district’s most congested and pedestrian-unfriendly arterial corridors, and construction of new segments on the ‘Health Loop Trail.’ Four miles of additional sidewalks and trails will be added in the next years.”

Whether the full vision will be implemented remains to be seen. However, the initiative is part of a nationwide trend of hospitals recognizing that place-based solutions are critical to community health. “As of late 2019, 46 health systems (many of which are the largest private sector employers in their states and represent about 20 percent of the nation’s hospitals) have joined the Healthcare Anchor Network’s commitment to leverage hiring, purchasing, and place-based investments to build more inclusive and sustainable local economies.”

Health districts, corridors, office parks, industrial campuses—these are just some of the suburban places that are ripe for retrofit. Such transformations will help to define land-use planning and development in the 2020s. *Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia* is now the essential reference on the topic.



Robert Steuteville is editor of *Public Square: A CNU Journal* and senior communications adviser for the Congress for the New Urbanism.

Q. AND A.

Like It or Not, the Suburbs Are Changing

You may think you know what suburban design looks like, but the authors of a new book are here to set you straight.



Mueller, a neighborhood in East Austin, Texas, created on the site of a decommissioned airport, is among the 32 projects featured in “Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia,” by June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones. Phillip Jones

By Julie Lasky

Oct. 16, 2020



Leaving the city for the [suburbs](#) is on the minds of many New Yorkers this year, as remote work has made it possible for some to live just about anywhere. But the bidding wars and spiking home prices that have resulted from the migration aren't the only ways the suburbs are changing. According to June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones, architects and co-authors of a new book due out in December, a growing number of design and planning schemes are helping to make suburbs more walkable, sociable, healthy and equitable.

“Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Strategies for Urgent Challenges” (Wiley) features 32 projects through the lens of ambition, or rather six ambitions: reducing car dependency, boosting health, supporting seniors, promoting diversity and justice, creating job opportunities and protecting the environment. The book is a sequel to the authors’ 2008 “Retrofitting Suburbia” (and its 2011 update), which made their reputations as hopeful chroniclers of big boxes, dead malls and sunset strips.

The authors discussed this latest chapter in their collaboration in a recent interview. The conversation has been edited and condensed.



June Williamson, left, and Ellen Dunham-Jones wrote "Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia."
June Williamson

What prompted you to write a sequel to "Retrofitting Suburbia"?

Ms. Williamson: Our ambition was to engage with a larger, continuing set of challenges, given that suburbia is the United States. Suburbs are us. They're where the majority of people work, where they live.

Ms. Dunham-Jones: There's really remarkably little written about the suburbs, and the literature seems removed from what the suburbs actually are: They're engaging in this old trope of suburbs versus city, when really it's not a question of whether suburbs will stay the same or will be turned into something else. Change is occurring anyway.

Ms. Williamson: Whether you want the old mall back or not, it's gone. Or if you prefer the way the office park was structured and the property tax revenue that came from it, well, that company is gone, or broken up. So rethinking these properties has to happen.

One commonality that seems to emerge is a desire for walkability and a mixed-use public space.

You talk about three kinds of retrofits: redevelopments (demolishing and reconstructing underperforming shopping malls to make them mixed-use town centers, with retail, offices and housing); repurposing existing spaces; and greening.

Ms. Dunham-Jones: What's really interesting about greening is that even though it is usually done for ecological reasons or flood control, it can create lakefront property, or park-front property that then induces some redevelopment around the edges.

Ms. Williamson: Two of our case studies illustrate that: One is Meriden Green, in central Connecticut. The Meriden Hub mall was an urban renewal, um, bad idea built over a brook that was culverted. The area was then devastated by floods. Subsequently, the mall was demolished and the land regraded to make a storm-water park that is designed like a bathtub so it's now capable of absorbing the storm water for most of the town. There are a mile and a half of walking paths along the brook, as well as pedestrian bridges and an amphitheater. The entire area was rezoned as a transit-oriented district, and new housing has sprung up. In a small city that has a fair number of lower-income folks, the enhanced, lower-priced rail service has provided access to jobs.



BEFORE: The creek running through Meriden Green, on the site of a failing and flooding shopping mall in central Connecticut. Courtesy of Milone & Macbroom Inc.



AFTER: The land was regraded to make a storm-water park with walking paths and pedestrian bridges. Courtesy of Milone & Macbroom Inc.

A similar story is in Wyandanch, a hamlet in the Suffolk County town of Babylon. In the post-World War II period, when Levittown was being built, Wyandanch was one of the places where developers built similar houses for Black Americans. Black G.I.s were able to buy houses there, but the property didn't appreciate over time. And other kinds of investments weren't made in the community for decades. Over 20 years, with the support of the town and, now, county, and with Long Island Rail Road rebuilding a station and putting in a parking structure, the area is rebounding. Water and sewer infrastructure, which had never made it to this community since the 1940s, was extended, and mixed-use buildings were built on the many surface parking lots. They also added a lovely little plaza and park in the center that has a seasonal ice-skating rink.



Wyandanch Rising, a suburban Long Island renewal project in Babylon, N.Y., reversed decades of neglect with new transportation, housing and greenery. Phillip Jones

Ms. Dunham-Jones: In the suburbs, many people have access to leafy lawns, but what they don't have access to are really community-oriented spaces — the little town green programmed with activities. Regreening has a lot of different benefits that are too often overlooked.

Ms. Williamson: That's a good segue to one of our main challenges: retrofitting to improve public health. And that's something we learned more about since the first book — all of the interesting research that links the built environment to North Americans' chronic levels of obesity and diabetes, and their lack of physical activity. Those are some of the complicating conditions that make this pandemic so much more risky and deadly.

Through rethinking the built environment and retrofitting, we can have significant public health outcomes that could save a ton of money. Just motivating people to go outside and take short walks could have significant health benefits.

Ms. Dunham-Jones: On the matter of walkability, one of our case studies is Mueller, a former airport in east Austin, Texas, that's been significantly redeveloped on 700 acres. The community has been designed to accommodate 13,000 residents and 13,000 workers. It's not 100 percent complete, but studies already show that, yes, residents are walking and biking more, encouraged by the small block sizes, the narrow streets that reduce car speeds and the green infrastructure.



An ice-skating rink in a plaza is a centerpiece of the Wyandanch redevelopment. Phillip Jones

That raises the question of supporting older suburban residents, the population you describe as “perennials.”

Ms. Williamson: By 2050, 20 percent of the U.S. population will be over 65. This group is not old; they're just older. But they do have particular needs. There is thinking about designing communities that provide lifelong support in suburbs, where these folks perhaps already live and have raised families and want to remain. There are ideas about cohousing, about allowing accessory dwelling units, or infilling with cottage courts or small apartment buildings that would complement the predominance of detached single-family housing. Some of the empty malls can be turned into wellness and fitness centers and health clinics.

Cottages on Greene, in East Greenwich, R.I., is an example of a housing type that allows older people to downsize within their community. The development was built on the site of a car-repair business that had a mini-strip center on one side and detached houses on the other. The lot is only about an acre, but it has 15 small units artfully arranged around a green space. When you're driving along the main street, it just looks like two houses. But then you take a left and there are more units behind, and the shared green manages the storm water. Four are subsidized housing.

Ms. Dunham-Jones: Cottages on Greene is a great example of how design helps overcome Nimby resistance to affordable housing. And it meets the market for much smaller homes. The suburbs were built on this assumption that the first buyers of new homes are going to be a young family with kids. We're seeing a resurgence of that in many places, but two-thirds of suburban households do not have kids in them.

Ms. Williamson: A lot of our examples speak to the high percentage of suburban rental houses and apartments. I think people have this preconceived idea that suburbia is all detached houses and owner-occupied. A lot of the housing is in garden apartment complexes, as well as new rental units added in retrofits. And, of course, there's the lingering effects of the recession a decade ago that has turned a lot of detached houses that might have once been owner-occupied into rentals.

Ms. Dunham-Jones: Since 2005, more Americans in poverty have lived in the suburbs than have lived in cities. So there's a great need to improve opportunities for the very poor and disadvantaged. A lot of rentals are aging garden apartment complexes that are housing of last resort. And they're often getting torn down and replaced with brand-new complexes at higher density and triple the rent. There's no way that the same population can afford them. We really encourage more communities to insist on replacement units.



Studies of the Mueller neighborhood's residents confirm an increase in physical activity fostered by small blocks, narrowed streets and green spaces. Phillip Jones

Which retrofitting interventions provide the greatest benefits at the least cost?

Ms. Dunham-Jones: Right now, 46 percent of trips from predominantly single-family-home suburban neighborhoods are three miles or less. Which would be perfectly fine for a bike ride, a scooter ride, or a walk in many of those trips, if there was adequate infrastructure to make that a safe choice. That would have enormous impact.

Ms. Williamson: Something that can be done very simply, at almost no cost, is changing zoning. Several jurisdictions have gotten rid of the RI zoning and allowed accessory dwelling units in neighborhoods. It doesn't change everything overnight, but you can see the effects over time.

Investing in planning, design and community processes early on costs little and can have really significant benefits further down the line. Returning to the example of Wyandanch on Long Island, from 2000 to 2016 they calculated a 75-to-1 return-on-investment ratio from the public-sector investment to the new investment that came to that location. That's pretty significant.

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Five myths about the suburbs

By **June Williamson**

June Williamson is coauthor of the "Retrofitting Suburbia" series, whose second book will be published later this year. She is Chair and Associate Professor of Architecture at the City College of New York.

Oct. 2, 2020 at 9:33 a.m. EDT



Suburbs are as varied and plural as the United States. Yet our mythology casts “the suburbs” as somehow separate, frozen in amber (not to mention in need of “saving”). They became a flash point in the first presidential debate, with President Trump claiming that “our suburbs would be gone” under a Democratic administration, and former vice president Joe Biden retorting that Trump “wouldn’t know a suburb unless he took a wrong turn.” Our suburbs do face urgent challenges, including automobile dependence, an aging population and environmental risks. To address them, we’ll have to dispel some long-held misconceptions.

Myth No. 1

Suburbs are less dense than cities.

When Americans imagine suburbs, they often picture detached houses, open space and multicar garages. Since the onset of the pandemic, a steady drumbeat of articles have proclaimed the new desirability of suburban living: These tend to pit suburbs against cities in stark opposition, as if residents face a choice between, say, downtown traffic or backyard chickens.

But most of the built area of the United States is suburban, and the typical reality is not so bucolic. Suburbs can be congested, with a lot of car traffic and commercial and industrial development. They can also be just as dense as center cities. The 2010 Census showed 7,600 people living per square mile in the iconic suburb of Levittown, N.Y. — the same residential density as many tracts in downtown Phoenix and much of Cleveland. The inner Boston suburb of Somerville, Mass., meanwhile, is nearly three times as dense as Levittown (and still mostly low rise).

In suburban places that have been retrofitted into mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods, the density can be even higher: The Belmar area of Lakewood, Colo., has 15,000 residents per square mile, similar to

downtown Denver.

Myth No. 2

All suburbanites own detached houses.

It's often assumed that suburban residents own dream homes: "little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same," as the Malvina Reynolds song has it. The New York Times recently described single-family zoning as "practically gospel" to suburbanites, especially in the wealthiest towns.

But fewer than half the housing units in the 11 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, owned or rented, are detached houses. And since, according to a government survey, 52 percent of Americans report that they live in suburbs, it stands to reason that their suburbs include a lot of rental units and other types of housing. Westchester County, N.Y., home of the elite suburbs at the center of battles over provisions of the Fair Housing Act, fits the pattern: Only 44 percent of its housing stock is detached single-family houses, and only 61 percent of households own the homes they live in. Even in tony Montgomery County, Md., just 65 percent of housing is owner-occupied.

Demand for different types of housing, at all price points, has increased. For instance, baby boomers are living long lives in the same suburbs where they once raised families, and many would prefer to downsize if their area offered apartments or townhouses. Another strong market for suburban growth is retrofitting obsolete properties with other housing types, such as infill townhouses, cottage courts (a compact cul-de-sac), triple deckers (three apartments stacked vertically) and fourplexes.

Myth No. 3

Suburban workers typically commute to downtown jobs.

An outdated image persists of "bedroom" or "dormitory" suburbs where breadwinners commute daily to center-city jobs. "Millennials want a single-family house, even if it means a long commute," the real estate website HousingWire claimed in a post promoting suburban life. HGTV Canada built an entire reality series, "Urban Suburban," around families deciding between these two types of neighborhoods, debating the trade-offs of living farther away from their city jobs.

But this is not the norm. Though the pandemic has many people commuting from bedroom to den, work commutes were typically already suburb-to-suburb. In 2013, the Brookings Institution estimated that only

23 percent of jobs in the 100 largest U.S. metro areas were within three miles of a central business district. Much job growth — especially in personal care and home health aides, nursing, food prep, management and software — is happening in suburban centers. Areas such as Tysons, Va., and the Domain development in Austin are retrofitting corporate office parks and campuses to add housing and bring more residents into these job centers, helping to ease commute time.

Myth No. 4

Today's suburbs are racially integrated.

In response to recent dog-whistle rhetoric suggesting that the suburbs are lily-White bastions of segregation, commentary insisting on their diversity seems to have created a new myth — of the suburbs as havens of racial harmony. “Could Diverse Suburbs Be Our Bubbles of Belonging?” asked a writer in the *Bold Italic*.

But research shows that, even as suburbs grew and more non-White people moved in, residential segregation *between* suburbs increased significantly, by policy and by design. Until the 1930s, the same suburban town often included a mix of White and Black neighborhoods, but the ensuing decades saw the construction of vast suburban areas that were more likely to be internally homogenous by measures of income, race and ethnicity. Integration, when achieved, can be fragile.

Levittown was federally subsidized, Federal Housing Administration-insured and deed-restricted when it was built in the 1940s and '50s. It is still almost entirely White. Nearly identical housing was built in nearby Wyandanch, N.Y., in a less advantageous location, but open to purchase by Blacks. That town remains largely Black. The trajectories of the two communities diverged significantly: The modest Levittown properties, originally purchased with almost no money down, appreciated considerably, while the Wyandanch houses did not. In a recent *Brookings* post, Elizabeth Kneebone put it succinctly: “Yes, most people in the nation’s major metro areas — whether white, Black, Asian American, or Latino or Hispanic — live in the suburbs. But they don’t live in the *same* suburbs.”

Myth No. 5

E-commerce killed suburban malls.

Online shopping has driven the so-called retail apocalypse, many proclaim — including publications such as *Forbes* and *Mic*. In its lament for the suburban mall, *Time* attributed its decline to digital lives that are “frictionless and ruthlessly efficient, with retail and romance available at a click.”

Undoubtedly, the retail sector is suffering, but the closure of some venerable mall anchors, like [Sears](#), has more to do with hedge fund mismanagement than shoppers' online habits. And the trend of dead and dying suburban malls has much deeper roots, reaching back to a development model that encouraged an unsustainable boom in their construction, especially in the 1970s and '80s. Cheap land and increased auto access from new roads, among other factors, all led to overbuilding of suburban retail: By 2000, the United States had much more retail square footage per capita than any other country — twice as much as Australia and 10 times as much as Germany. The tax code allowed mall owners to write off the value of buildings in as little as seven years, encouraging poor construction and discouraging maintenance; as historian Dolores Hayden writes: “After time, the result was abandonment.”

Though this phenomenon is distressing, not least because of lost jobs, it's also an opportunity. When landlords empty out and sell off underperforming shopping malls and strip centers, the properties become available for wholesale reinvention. For example, as early as the 1990s, the mixed-use Mizner Park development replaced the failed Boca Raton Mall in Florida — years before the founding of Amazon, eBay and Etsy. (Amazon chief executive and founder Jeff Bezos owns The Post.) Many other places have followed suit, either reusing former mall buildings and regreening their parking lots or redeveloping them into higher-density, mixed-use town centers.

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