


Are Cities Obsolete?

BY STEVE AUSTIN

A man in a dark suit and tie stands with his arms crossed in front of a tall, modern skyscraper. The building's facade is a grid of windows, and the sky is a pale, hazy blue. The man is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression.

Cities are the great places of human history. They have provided us with the drama and diversity that have become part of us. They have always been our centers of learning, trade and fun. They have been our economic engines. And now they are obsolete.

Many people hold this view, but is it really the case? Considering only the immediate present, it may appear to be so. Cities, once vitally important to individual lives, now seem to have no connection to ours. Today, astonishingly, there may be as many as two or three generations of families who have never set foot in the dense, old parts of their communities — the parts that constitute the city. It was not always this way.

Consider what cities used to be to people. One hundred years ago, cities were where you shopped, traded, worshiped, socialized, learned and practiced democracy. You went to the city to mail a letter or receive a telegram. You couldn't see the world without passing through the city. You may have stuffed some money into your mattress, but most of it went with you to the bank in the city. You heard the news of the world in the city. If you were sick or had legal issues, you went to the city. Personal milestones were marked in some way through a connection with a city. Everything revolved around your connections to the city. The city was

where, in 21st century terms, you plugged in.

But do you really need a city to plug in today? A car can take you any distance to see a doctor or a friend. News comes to you instantaneously from myriad sources. You can find a lawyer on TV, research pharmaceutical information on the Web, and e-mail your friends 24 hours a day. You can join any number of interest groups and never have to go to a meeting. You can do your banking from your dining room table. You can get almost everything you need at a supercenter that is open day and night. And what you can't get there, you can have shipped to your front door with one telephone call.

This freedom to plug in wherever you want has led some to believe that

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cities are no longer necessary. Since we can care for ourselves wherever we choose to live, this thinking goes, why would we choose a city? Many people believe the best choice is to live anywhere but the city. These thoughts are rooted in the feeling that cities are somehow alien to our nature. This represents quite a change in only 100 years.

We are seeing the results of this thinking in our landscape. Houses, shops and offices are springing up rapidly in areas outside cities. Churches line once rural roads in what has become a spiritual representation of our flight away from cities. We are remaking our landscapes and our lives based on the belief that cities are bad.

Why should anybody care? Isn't this belief so widespread that many have stopped questioning it? Shouldn't we just accept that what we are creating must be for the best?

No, we must not accept this. Cities are, quite simply, our future. The view



that cities are obsolete is nothing more than a passing fashion. Cities — our cultural foundation, our societal base, our connection to the past — will never be obsolete. They are the most practical, efficient and time-tested forms of living ever devised. They remain our nation's economic engines. And, given the new patterns of global business and our own changing demographics, cities in the 21st century will be more important than ever to our society and our economy. Our challenge is to grow our cities despite the attitudes of those who would abandon them.

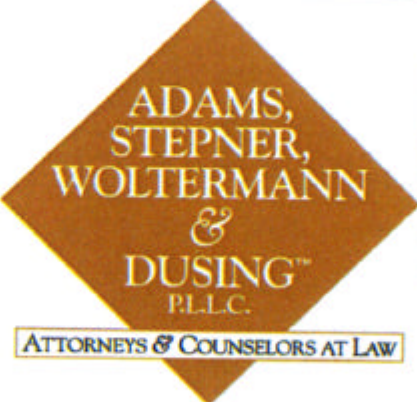

Cities represent our shared history; their buildings represent gifts from the past that previous generations intended to last. These generations believed in the future enough to spend their limited funds proving it — an attitude we don't find anywhere outside of cities today. Non-city

buildings are designed for a maximum life of 30 years, if that. What does that say about our generation?

Our artistic and cultural lives are rooted in cities, the only source of the gravity necessary to create a home for priceless artifacts and important discussions. We know, for example, that cities are where museums belong if for no other reason than that they would look lost next to a strip mall.

Cities house valuable infrastructure such as water and sewer lines, streets and telecommunications facilities. These are valuable resources because we do not have to create them anew at great expense, a lesson being learned in many areas. The years ahead could find these areas facing tough choices between higher taxes or antiquated infrastructures. And the result could be

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a stagnating economy as quality businesses look elsewhere to locate. Cities will be far ahead in this game and much better prepared to respond to new growth that will reap economic rewards.

Transportation choices abound in a city. Interconnected streets and short blocks make cities easy to navigate. And a car isn't always necessary — one can walk, take mass transit or even rollerblade. The ease of transport is in

striking contrast to life in the outer fringes, where planning has ensured that no one can walk anywhere.

Housing choices increase in a city — from townhouses to loft apartments to single family detached houses. Each type of housing appeals to people with different incomes and backgrounds, helping create a diverse population — an ideal of democracy. In contrast, residents of many newly developing areas are highly segregated by housing costs.

Cities also offer the perfect antidote to the growing sense of isolation many people feel in their lives. The design of cities creates a naturally occurring

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network of social contacts. Walking along a city sidewalk can bring you into contact with any number of people. Consider, by way of comparison, the scheduling required for social interaction in nearly all other settings. A city-based social network also fills the role of an extended family of people who take an interest in your life.

Cities are safer than ever before. The FBI Uniform Crime Report shows that the crime index for most cities decreased by anywhere from seven-tenths of a percent to 1.9 percent in 2002, a trend

that has been steady for the last decade. Meanwhile, the crime index in suburban areas jumped by 1.8 percent in 2002, and even rural areas saw an increase in the crime index of four-tenths of a percent.

Since we live in an entertainment age, cities are becoming the hottest places to spend leisure time. Culinary and artistic adventures beckon. Cultural and sporting events draw more people than ever. Downtown movie theater and playhouse audiences are growing. People are rediscovering the pleasure of simply watching other people. Cities are also vital to the tourism industry, which is simply another form of entertainment. Over time, fewer and fewer people will want to visit sprawling strips of similar stores. Instead, more tourists will want the action, excitement and beauty of a city.

Changing demographics will supply the residents for resurgent cities. The long-held notion that the American Dream takes shape as a single-family house inhabited by a dad and mom and kids is fading fast. That dream now represents less than 25 percent of all American households. Meanwhile, several large and formerly unnoticed demographic groups are emerging.

There are more single people and active older people than ever. Single people, who can live anywhere, are increasingly seeking the social connections and action of city life. More folks over 50, whose children are grown, are searching for sophisticated urban living areas. They want to be close to museums, cafes and music venues. And in the next 10

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years, the so-called echo generation, children of baby-boomer parents, will reach adulthood. This is one of the largest generations yet seen in this country, and its members will grow up desiring cities. Through movies, television and advertising, all of which are incorporating more "cool" urban images than ever, these young people will see the best side of cities.



Even middle-age parents are choosing the city. They want to trade a monotonous life elsewhere for the

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pleasures of the city, and they don't see the city as unsafe or unhealthy for their children. Rather, they view the city as an exciting playground in which the children can gain a greater awareness of the world. As one father says, "I want my daughter to understand how I related to the city and have her relate to the city. The whole city becomes a back yard."


These people will gravitate to cities because they are tired of the traffic, visual blight, loss of green space and lack of social value elsewhere. They will search for cities that are vibrant, diverse and satisfying. Cities will provide them with a quality of life higher than has ever been achieved. And because of this, the wealth of our cities, and their inhabitants, will continually rise.

City leaders must take steps now to ensure that their cities are not left out of this boom. They must

address basic quality of life issues, from crime to litter, immediately. They must ensure that their city infrastructure is in good shape. City leaders must create a welcoming atmosphere for all kinds of people.

Beyond meeting these needs, leaders also must plan for and implement those things that will be indispensable to a 21st century city. They must update their zoning ordinances to meet the varied demands of city development that focuses on mixed uses and higher densities. Cities must vigorously pursue historic preservation by adopting building codes that will

allow developers flexibility in renovating older buildings. City and business leaders must work to gain broadband Internet access as soon as possible. And entertainment attractions such as sidewalk cafes and outdoor festivals must be encouraged.

City leaders must do these things and many more. Most important, they must continually guard against the mindset that cities are obsolete. This is a destructive force. Simply put: Cities are not obsolete, and they never will be. Indeed, cities offer us the brightest future. 




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