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In defense of the lowly city: urban exodus

By Chester Smolski

For much of American history, cities have been depicted as centers of sin and corruption. As a result, they have been neglected, ignored, castigated, criticized, shunned and despised by citizens and government alike. Americans just don't like cities.

From Thomas Jefferson, who claimed that cities are "a sore on the body politic," to Frank Lloyd Wright, who felt that cities were nothing more than "centers of banking and prostitution and little else," there have been far more critics of the city than there have been supporters of these major population centers.

Urban Deeds

Even today, most of us choose to live in suburbs and in rural areas. Currently, just more than 30 percent of the American population live in central cities, and many who live in the city wish that they were not there. A recent poll of New Yorkers by the New York Times indicated that 59 percent of the respondents planned on moving outside of the city in the next five years.

Preliminary counts from the 1990 census in Rhode Island revealed that six of the seven communities that lost population from 1980 to 1990 were cities, continuing a trend that has gone on since the end of World War Two.

Are cities all that bad? From this writer's point of view, the answer is an emphatic "no." This point of view comes on the heels of living in the cities of Providence; Worcester; Syracuse; New York; London; Madison, Wisc. and Columbia, S.C., as well as visiting and studying cities such as Jerusalem, Rio de Janeiro, Barcelona and many other cities of Europe and the world. As an urbanist, teacher and devotee of cities, it is my joy and obligation to know and understand cities.

Throughout history, in our study of civilizations, we look to the city as the apex of a culture and of a country. For it is in cities that man has attained and manifested his greatest achievements, museums, cathedrals and other facets of man's higher works. The city also harbors man's technological works, be these factories or research centers, and the best that society has achieved, whether this be its hospitals, restaurants or accounting firms.

As tourists, we travel the world, and where do we go to see a country? Why, the city, of course. To see England, we visit London, to see Turkey is to visit Istanbul, and to know Greece is to see Athens. And when foreign tourists come here, they visit New York, San Francisco and Providence. They certainly don't want to see Burrillville or Tiverton.

The city represents the crowning achievement of man, but in America, with its wide-open spaces to which people still move, the city is a great place to visit, but not one in which to live. And it doesn't seem likely that this attitude will change over the next decade.

The cities will be, as they have been in the past, havens for the poor, the new arrivals, minorities and the disadvantaged, while at the same time they will continue to shelter the privileged rich. Middle America will find its nirvana in the suburbs, shunning the problems of the city by leaving it.

Residency requirements are an attempt

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to keep the working middle class in the city, but in the recent Providence election, that provision of the 1980 Home Rule Charter was overwhelmingly defeated.

It seems that suburban living has worked in the past. The single-family detached house—surrounded by acres of grass that requires self-propelled lawn mowers and

sweepers that cost hundreds of dollars—has become the symbol of success for the former city-dweller. And in this bucolic setting, crime does not occur, folks are pleasant to each other and kids enjoy the best of public schools. At least that is the way it used to be; if not in fact, at least in the perception of those folks aspiring to locate in this setting.

We all know how the suburbs have grown, changed and have become cities in their own rights. The schools have drug problems, violent crime is not unknown, vandals destroy property and the traffic on the main roads and freeways has become as bad as any bottleneck in the city.

The American city in this next decade will likely continue its outward reach from the city centers, just so long as the automobile and cheap gasoline hold sway. Satellite cities, called urban villages or outer cities, will grow larger, more will develop and they will continue to sap the strength of our cities.

Continuing gentrification, limited governmental efforts for improvement and some private ventures will continue to hold and attract some middle-income dwellers. But it is largely the old stock of inexpensive housing, available public transport, nearby hospitals and services as well as office and limited factory concentrations that will provide jobs for the less skilled if the city. And this is why new people will come to the city; for its jobs and services.

As cities have changed in their forms and functions over history, so too will America's cities continue, in the short term, their pattern of development and outward spread that has become do evident since the end of World War Two. Only time will tell, in the long term, what the role of the city, as we know it will be.

Chester E. Smolski is the director of urban studies at Rhode Island College.