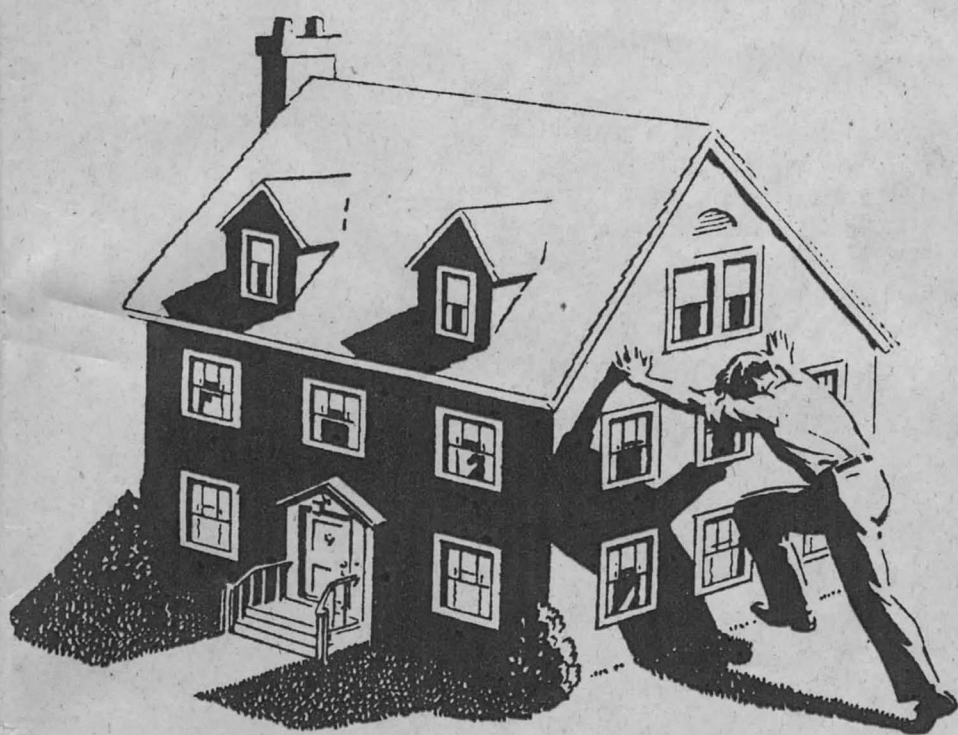


Glory days of suburbia are over



Two major problems of the suburbs that Kunstler makes in his well received, latest work, *The Geography of Nowhere*, are the extreme separation of land uses and the distances between them. Whether this separation is by housing pricing that does not allow for mixing different income levels, or by barring such commercial activities as corner grocery stores from residential areas, this separation means that auto transportation is too often necessary.

Does Mr. Wyatt remember the oil crisis of 1973? The long lines at the gas pumps, the concern about having to drive to work, school, play or whatever without available gasoline? This is what Kunstler speaks of when he talks about the future, for he is fully aware that more than half of our oil supply must now be imported.

The postwar period, in a sense, might be the compensation that a generation of Americans deserved because of the deprivation that came with a 10-year Depression and a four-year war. But times have changed.

Today's America means little job security, great difficulty in finding jobs, house prices so high that it is difficult for many to buy them, and women leaving their children at home while they must go out into the workplace to help support them. And worst of all, the formerly safe and serene suburbs must now deal with crime, drugs, overcrowded schools, increasing taxes and traffic congestion — problems that escapees from the city thought they left behind in the corrupt city.

Suburbia and its residents have had, perhaps, their day in the sun. Mr. Wyatt has had a good life and experienced many of the attributes that many Americans feel can be found only on the city's periphery. The real question, however, is whether these same opportunities will be there for his grandchildren.

Everyone marvels at the lovely countryside whenever they return from Britain. Do you think that it just happens? On the contrary: Some of the tightest controls on land use anywhere are to be found in that free nation — controls that would upset many Americans who take pride in their individual freedom, even if it often comes at the expense of the community.

Major cities in Britain are surrounded by greenbelts, in which new building is usually not allowed. This means city residents need only go a short distance to walk and enjoy nature. The greenbelt surrounding London covers as much area as the state of Rhode Island.

Closer to our own way of life are the planning controls used in Oregon. Recognizing that compact settlements are needed to preserve the countryside, Oregon officials have established Urban Growth Boundaries around their cities beyond which any major residential, commercial, or other developments are not allowed. Houses costing more than \$250,000 set on an eighth of an acre are not uncommon in these zones. But the countryside is preserved.

In Rhode Island, how can we preserve our rural lands? Fortunately, we are a slow-growing state and so are not subjected to the development pressures found in Florida, Arizona and a host of other states. And, yes, we have a policy of buying up development rights to preserve the land, but the costs are high and the program is limited. And when our own Department of Environmental Management determines that it is difficult to find one mile of roadway along our more than 6,000 miles of roads that is not developed or staked out for some construction, then we must be on our guard.

If we zone for one house per two acres, as is common in many of our communities, then much of the state will be covered with houses and our open land will disappear. Then we will have to visit Connecticut or Massachusetts to find the countryside. Does this sound absurd? Not if one projects development trends into the future. This is the concern of James Kunstler.

So, Mr. Wyatt, when you celebrate with your family those 40 years in your suburban house next year, take a look at your grandchildren and try to imagine where they will be living 40 years down the road. The halcyon days of filling in wetlands to build, not having to be concerned about zoning and subdivision regulations and getting cheap land on which to have large house lots are rapidly fading. Only time will tell what other constraints to suburbia lie ahead. But our grandchildren will have to live with them.

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with four houses and 19 children, I was a fortunate member of that postwar generation that could move on from there.

Warwick also well illustrates the postwar population change. In 1940, the city housed only 4 percent of the state's population; by 1980, more than 9 percent of all Rhode Islanders lived in Warwick. In that 40 years, the city's population tripled, from nearly 29,000 in 1940, to more than 87,000 in 1980. Typical of such exploding suburbs, no real center or downtown developed. Rather, such existing villages as Hoxie, Greenwood, Conimicut, etc., grew.

The malls followed the population. And then other businesses followed the malls. So now we read that Route 2, the 10-mile-long commercial strip through Warwick, is the retail heart of the state. God forbid that this is what our children have to look forward to.

The Rhode Islander Magazine article of Sept. 5 that described the state's new main street indicated that the strip was built for the automobile to the exclusion of the pedestrian. True enough. I was made painfully aware of this priority when of necessity I ran, not walked, across Route 2; when I tried to find a sidewalk at different places; and when drivers gave me strange looks that said: "What's that pedestrian doing on my turf?"

But from the pedestrian's view, what is there to see? Asphalt parking lots fronting buildings set back from the street, the constant humming of cars and trucks whizzing by, and squared-off cinder block buildings that any architect would be ashamed to call his own. Welcome to the new suburban downtown!

Now this is exactly what David Brussat of this paper and author James Kunstler decry in their pleadings to do a better job with future development. And abandoning the city because of past sins is not the path to follow.

MOST RHODE Islanders would undoubtedly agree with Donald Wyatt's sterling endorsement of suburbia (Commentary Page, Sept. 7) and many would envy the wonderful experience he says he has had living in Warwick these past 40 years. After all, the suburbs are the habitat of most Rhode Islanders as well as most other Americans and, it is presumed, these folks live there through choice.

It was not always so. The first U.S. census was in 1790, when it was determined that 95 percent of Americans lived in rural areas because farming was the order of the day. With the Industrial Revolution and the movement to jobs in the city, the census of 1920 recorded that, for the first time, most people lived in cities. Providence, for example, in 1910 housed 41 percent of the state population, compared with today's 16 percent.

The suburbs came into their own after World War II, with the profusion of automobiles, although that movement away from the crowded cities started with the railroads in the last century. Veterans of the war came back to crowded cities and an old housing stock and, over time, found themselves with growing families. The Baby Boom started in 1946, and over the next 19 years 75 million babies were born, the biggest increase of new births ever recorded in this country. And kids need space. That space, of course, was to be found on the periphery of the city.

Cheap mortgages (G.I. mortgages, with no money down), no-frills housing (a 600-square-foot house in Levittown, Long Island, sold for less than \$8,000) and, in time, a highway network to speed one into or around the city to jobs that were available almost for the asking, provided the best conditions for growth.

Having lived in Warwick in the early 50s, when I moved to Rhode Island, and buying a 672-square-foot first home for \$11,000 on a salary of \$3,000, with a G.I. mortgage, and sharing a common backyard