



the Urban Weaver

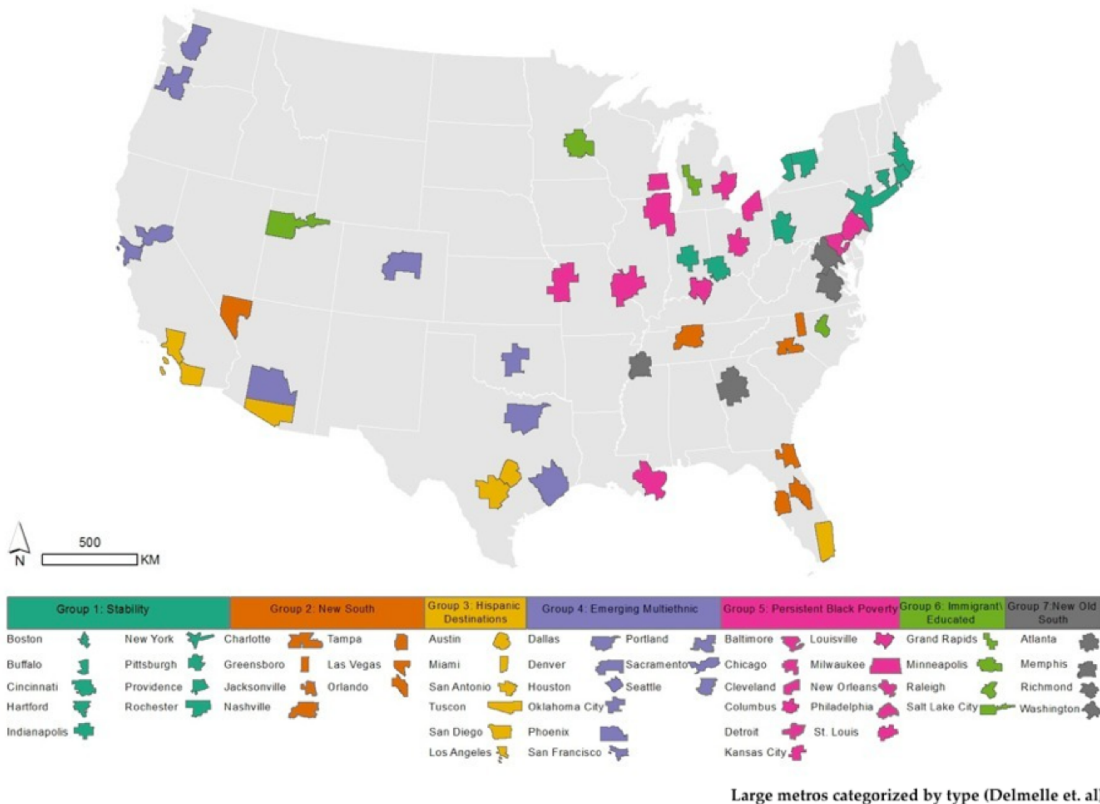


issue no. 1: october 1, 2017

What's in a Name?

Everywhere we look today we seem to see cranes and construction fencing and other evidence of evolution and change in the built environment. It's been called an 'urban renaissance' by myriad analysts and pundits. But its implications run far deeper than simple growth. For the more wonkish, it may now be time to consider [whether we should think of neighborhoods in new ways](#).

Elizabeth Delmelle, a geographer at UNC Charlotte, published an interesting study looking at how neighborhoods have changed in the last several decades. As Richard Florida summarizes, the study "identifies the basic types of American neighborhoods, the main contours of their change, and the kinds of metros where difference types of neighborhoods predominate." There's lots of data to consume and consider.



What struck us is the new typology she used to define similar neighborhoods: Stability; New South; Hispanic Destinations; Emerging Multiethnic; Persistent Black Poverty; Immigrant and

Educated; and, New Old South. The names are descriptive, and we realized we could name a bunch of the cities just by their typology.

If you're from Milwaukee, you can probably guess we're labeled as Persistent Black Poverty. The study says "these cities were all destinations of the great migration and the patterns of racial segregation that were carved out during that period have proved durable through time." Clearly.

Coupled with the discovery that the most common neighborhood type at the census tract level is one having experienced limited change, it seems clear that the problems we face here in Milwaukee are deeply entrenched. But that's not new news.

What may make this research interesting is that it gives us a new language with which we can discuss our issues. It also gives us a new metric with which we can compare our city against its peers, and against those cities toward which we might aspire. And, perhaps most importantly, it gives us a context in which we can consider how we approach growth going forward.

Goldilocks and the Urban Planners

Lloyd Alter, an architect and managing editor of [TreeHugger](#), asserts that communities should be built at what he calls the [Goldilocks density](#): not too high, not too low, but just right. He's peeved that in 'so-called hot cities such (sic) London, Toronto and New York, the planners and politicians are letting a thousand towers bloom.' And, he asserts this is happening based on what he identifies as the flawed argument that density is good and these towers mean density.

He says that the magic density is 'dense enough to support vibrant main streets with retail and services for local needs, but not too high that people can't take the stairs in a pinch. Dense enough to support bike and transit infrastructure, but not so dense to need subways and huge underground parking garages. Dense enough to build a sense of community, but not so dense as to have everyone slip into anonymity.'

Sounds like magic indeed.

If we want great cities and communities, there's no doubt that we should engage in aspirational design and planning. But flattening our cities to a sea of mid-rise buildings isn't the answer. Community doesn't happen because of density. Don't take us the wrong way: density can absolutely be a big contributor to community. After all, it encourages [productive collisions](#). But density isn't the secret sauce.

We believe great communities happen because their members engage. And the built environment gives them the tools to do that. Alter isn't entirely wrong. But his focus on towers as disruptive fails to consider the role those towers can play in establishing iconic visual identity. [We know city skylines when we see them](#) because the towers have distinct identity. We think that matters.

A community's identity is best described holistically – necessarily including all the elements its members consider fundamental. Good walkable streets with dynamic pedestrian environments

and effective storefronts are undeniably powerful. But that's only one kind of, or element of, a community. I suspect Alter doesn't think communities should be homogenous. He likely believes there can be remarkable communal strength in diversity. Unlike Alter, however, we believe the built environment, and the communities it shelters, derive meaningful benefit from diverse forms.

They're Baaaaaack

To be fair, they never really left. **But the suburbs are in for a major resurgence.** And it's because of [Millennials](#). The Demand Institute completed a fascinating forward-looking [survey of 1,000 Millennial households](#) ("DI"). And, the National Association of Homebuilders continuously looks at homebuilding and buying trends (like their [2013 American Housing Survey](#) ("AHS")) looking at the purchase decisions of buyer in the immediately previous two years. Taken together, they present evidence of actual Millennial purchase preferences (AHS) and projections for preference influenced decision in the future (DI). The results don't seem to jibe with what has become the party line regarding those folks.

Here's a snapshot of key findings:

- In the next 5 years:
 - 8.3 million new Millennial households will form
 - They will spend \$1.6 trillion on home purchases, and \$600 billion on rent
 - 74% plan on moving
 - 71% for a better place
 - 59% for privacy or space
 - 48% to own, not rent
 - 64% expect to be married vs. 30% today
 - 55% expect to have children vs. 36% today
- 75% believe home ownership is important
 - Only 16% say they won't buy a home
- 61% want more space, not less, when they move next
 - Only 15% want less space
- 48% of Millennials will move to **suburban** locations, with only 38% making their next move to an urban location
 - Only 28% expect groceries and restaurants to be within walking distance, and only 19% expect retail to be within a walk
- 88% of Millennial households own a car
- Millennials have been buying smaller houses than previous generations, and make their decisions based more on financial considerations than size considerations
- 1 out 3 Millennials who purchased did so to establish their own household
- The most influential characteristics in the actual purchase decision were the house itself (81%), safety (66%), and looks/design (59%).
 - Schools were 42% (and we KNOW that's going to change)

- Public transportation was at the bottom of the list (15%).

We bet that data doesn't exactly fit with many of your pre-conceived notions about Millennials. The bottom line is that the suburbs absolutely aren't dead yet and, to the contrary, they're about to thrive. Consider that home ownership rates [dropped all the way to 62.9% in the Q2 '16 and have now risen to 63.6%](#). That's not an enormous move, but it's the tip of the iceberg.

Consider that for the past 4 years, the National Association of Realtors [Home Buyers and Sellers Generational Trends Report](#) has identified that the Millennials are the largest home buying cohort nationally, and [half of all home buyers in the US are under 36](#). And, 47% of today's Millennial homeowners already live in the suburbs. Consider also that nearly 90% of all new mothers are Millennials and there are well over 16 million Millennial moms. Those kids need schools, and the suburbs kick ass and take names when it comes to providing education.

The real question isn't whether the Millennials are moving to the suburbs: it's which suburbs are they moving to? And, to get to that answer we'll need to dig in on what drives the decision process: why do people move and how do they pick where they go? Look for more in upcoming issues of The Urban Weaver.

Contemplating the Nature of Cities by Listening

To be sure, you can learn about your built environment by listening to sirens, the flows of traffic, voices on the sidewalk and seagulls squawking, but you can have way more fun by tuning in to [99% Invisible](#). This terrific podcast (and blog) started out as a project of KALW public radio and the American Institute of Architects in San Francisco. Today – it's a fascinating and totally compelling source of impeccably produced podcasts catalogued in categories like Architecture, Objects, Sounds, History and Technology.

We loved learning about the [strangely intimate relationship](#) between James Bond's nemesis Goldfinger and brutalist architecture. [Master planning in Salt Lake City](#) and how great (divine?) plans on paper for pedestrian experiences can be so deeply subverted in practice. All about how those pervasive [inflatable, floppy men](#) came to be at car lots and grand openings.

This site is terrific. Roman Mars is a revelation as the host. Together with his staff, they have created an auditory delight – both hearty meal and dessert. Like Peter Minshall planning the Los Angeles Olympics and working on the first notions of inflatable men, [jump into this water like an eager little duckling](#) (@4:31). It's that good.