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Plan Obsolescence

Urban planning skeptic Peter Gordon on the benefits of sprawl, the war against cars, and the future of American cities.

[Adrian Moore](#) and [Rick Henderson](#) | June 1998 [Print Edition](#)

Life in America's suburbs is under attack. In journals ranging from *The Nation*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Utne Reader* to *The American Enterprise* and *The Weekly Standard*, critics of suburbia argue that policies implemented since World War II--from the home-mortgage income tax deduction to subsidies for automobile operation to inflexible zoning laws--have lured Americans away from traditional downtowns and urban neighborhoods into soulless suburbs, where a landscape littered with strip malls and tract housing makes it nearly impossible for people to form genuine communal bonds with their neighbors. Contemporary suburbanites are condemned, in the words of the left-leaning *L.A. Weekly*, to "a future of endless sprawl and equally endless commutes."

To save suburban dwellers from this hellish existence, urban planners have devised massive subway construction projects, controls on the development of neighborhoods with single-family homes, "mixed-use" zoning districts that allow commercial operations to coexist with residences, and "urban growth boundaries" that have made it illegal to build homes or locate businesses on the outskirts of such cities as Portland, Oregon.

Enter Peter Gordon, a professor of planning and economics at the University of Southern California's School of Urban Planning and Development. For nearly three decades, Gordon, along with his USC colleague Harry Richardson, has challenged conventional views about gridlock and sprawl, finding that the data don't match the received wisdom: "Suburbanization" is not an artifact of late 20th-century America but a process that has unfolded as long as people have possessed the means to travel and relocate. Commute times are no longer than they were 15 years ago. Individuals are finding the types of living arrangements they prefer. And while Los Angeles-style sprawl is vilified in the traditional planning literature, as well as in most popular accounts of urban life, Los Angeles has the highest population density of any major metropolitan area in the country.

Gordon, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, has published dozens of articles in popular publications and peer-reviewed journals. He is co-editor of *Planning and*

Markets, a new online publication that focuses on land-use and transportation issues). While he may be considered a lightning rod in the planning community, in person he's gentle and patient, hardly the sort of firebrand his heretical views suggest.

REASON Managing Editor Rick Henderson and Adrian T. Moore, director of economic studies at the Reason Public Policy Institute, interviewed Gordon at his Brentwood home in March.

Reason: There is a pervasive argument among traditional planners that compact cities built around a traditional downtown are intrinsically good. While cities once developed around transit centers, raw materials sites, or natural harbors, contemporary cities seem to be more the artificial creations of planners. What has happened?

Gordon: Compact cities are archaic forms, and they are not coming back. When you study the economics of location, all the textbook models say a firm wants to locate near the urban core or other advantageous sites, and workers must make their living arrangements so that they are close to their jobs. That may be the way it was once upon a time.

But all these firms have become much more footloose. And they go where the workers want to live. The orientation has flip-flopped. Even manufacturing businesses are no longer locked into specific sites, so they have more locational choices. They want to go where the labor force wants to go. The workers and their families want to live where the land is cheap and the air is clean and the schools are good and there are high amenities and so forth. There's a lot more spatial flexibility than ever before, and the consequences are pretty benign.

People don't have to live near work. They can be near good schools if they want to be without paying the price in longer- duration commutes. If you make travel less expensive, there will be more travel.

Reason: You've shown that the average-duration commute has stayed the same over the past 15 years or so. Why does everyone believe that traffic congestion is getting worse?

Gordon: What's interesting is how little congestion there is. If you take a resident of any large foreign city like Tokyo and transplant him or her to Los Angeles, they think they've died and gone to heaven, because the commutes are less than half, on average, here than they are there. Something like 10 percent of the people nationwide commute more than 40 minutes one way. There is a lot of self-correction going on. For 1995, the average automobile commute in L.A. was 23.5 minutes one way.

People are part of a spontaneous order. I think it's not only pessimistic but even ignorant to believe that people are going to sit tight while their lives go to hell. That's never happened. Even where the commuting distances have increased, the trip durations have not, which means commuting speeds are up. It is the opposite of impending gridlock, and it means people can have their cake and eat it, too.

Reason: So why don't people in Tokyo correct in the same way Angelenos do?

Gordon: Many Japanese choose long train commutes because they have a much smaller scope of trade-offs available. Automobile travel is much more expensive [in Japan]. Land doesn't change hands as frequently. There are all kinds of things standing in the way of the fluidity that we're used to [here].

Reason: You're a critic of the New Urbanism, which is the hot thing in the planning profession. Here's how Alan Ehrenhalt describes the principles of New Urbanism in *Governing* magazine: "The automobile, and four decades of building homes, streets and suburbs for the automobile's convenience, were draining American places of the community and intimacy that human beings naturally desire." The New Urbanists claim that people want neighborhoods with tree-lined streets, and parks and shops all within walking distance of homes. What's wrong with that?

Gordon: I think the development of neighborhoods by private developers is driven by markets, not by public policy. People are getting the neighborhoods they want. And I trust that competing developers are reading the trade-offs that you and I are willing to make and that those trade-offs include our demand for community. Our demands for community are met in many ways. We can use the automobile [to meet those demands], or we can even use the Internet.

People are getting a sense of community in the neighborhoods we have. We know that 20 percent of all trips by automobile are for work, 20 percent are for shopping, and 60 percent are for things I would call social. The U.S. Department of Transportation uses categories like family/personal business, school, church, visits to relatives, and other social or recreational uses, but you could easily call all these social or "community" trips.

New Urbanism is heavy on intervention, and it's tied into the "civil society," or communitarian, discussion. It dances around defining whether there's a problem with the way we live and says, "There's a problem--automobile use--and we have a solution." I'm not sure we all agree there's a problem. And it's a long shot to say that there's a design fix and we know what that design fix is.

Reason: Conservatives such as Karl Zinsmeister at the American Enterprise Institute have become big boosters of New Urbanism. They argue that the fatal conceit of traditional planning and zoning has led to these soulless suburbs. But aren't the conservatives substituting their own fatal conceit, that everyone wants to live in Small Town, USA?

Gordon: That's the weak link in the New Urbanism. If there were a grain of truth in their view, we would soon see people demanding it, and developers would strive to provide it. Builders are not ideologues.

New Urbanists say there are land use configurations that will lead to lower trip frequency. And if we object to the use of the automobile, then we can develop a land use solution. They have advanced all kinds of street designs, and hypothesized how to lay out homes and neighborhoods more compactly, and say if people can walk to all the places they need to go, presto, there will be less automobile use. The smallest introspection will show that trip frequency isn't fixed.

The New Urbanists certainly haven't done their homework. They certainly don't look at the facts a lot, so I keep going back to the international comparison. We've all traveled, we've all seen

suburbanization in other parts in the world. There's clearly a universal demand for and use of automobiles that's reflected in the data.

International studies, like those from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, are always funny to read, because the authors prejudge everything. At the beginning you have all these conclusions articulated that the automobile is the problem, what are we going to do with the automobile, how can we keep people out of automobiles, and so on. But what's revealing is that the authors lament automobile use in all these places. You have a tough time blaming American policy for automobile use [in other countries], and when you get rid of that explanation, you have to end up saying the reason people drive is consumer preference. Preference is a pretty powerful explanation compared to the one suggested by the New Urbanism.

Not just that, but the New Urbanists claim suburban development, which they call "sprawl," is something that people are using against their better judgment. One of the favorite themes of planners is that people haven't got enough choices, and builders are restricted by zoning codes to give people stuff that they don't really want. That's of course inconsistent with the other story the New Urbanists tell: that planners are beholden to builders. Well, if that's true, and just one of these greedy builders would figure out that people wanted to live in neotraditional settlements, then that greedy builder would overcome political barriers and we'd have the neotraditional developments.

Reason: Aren't there private attempts to create the type of places the New Urbanists want?

Gordon: I don't know of a lot of success stories. A lot of these developments are too new to judge. A lot of attention has been paid to the Disney-built community in Florida [Celebration], but the reviews of it have been mixed. Even that refers more to opinions of reviewers and less to the judgment of the market.

Reason: *The New York Times Magazine* has suggested it's more like living in a Disney-built theme park than in a real community.

Gordon: But social arrangements that are provided in the marketplace are constantly evolving. We would expect that savvy builders are evolving and experimenting in providing new things. It's a wonderful process.

If the New Urbanists have something to contribute to that evolution, that's wonderful. But instead they want to make a clean break and say that society is marching one way and we know the way it ought to go instead.

Reason: What's good about suburban living?

Gordon: Those of us who believe in markets place a lot of value on living arrangements that are an expression of consumer preferences. People are voting for spacious living, so by all means let them have what they are voting for. They're voting for access to their schools, they are voting for clean air and those kinds of things. By any measure, suburban living has to be a success story.

Americans run to [visit] Europe because, hell, those are *cities*. Now, that doesn't mean we choose to live there; it's just a nice place to visit. Traditional cities are fun for tourists. [That has] nothing to do with whether you want to live there.

There is the presumption that suburbanites are living these lives of quiet desperation and isolation, and they really hate being there. You see trotted out ideas about community being missed. And to have community, you've got to be in Manhattan. There are a lot of ex-Manhattanites that would challenge that theory very seriously.

Reason: A lot of people seem to think that auto travel is heavily subsidized but mass transit isn't.

Gordon: Federal transit subsidies go back to the 1960s, and for the first 10 years they were capital subsidies only. You had all this overbuilding of rail transit and a lot of people wrote articles that said overbuilding occurred because the feds subsidize only one part of the activity, and that's building. In 1974 the feds began subsidizing operation as well as building of transit systems. The whole idea of a federal transit policy may be silly, but as long as all this money is funneled through Washington, locals want to get in line to get theirs.

Whether you [do] it per mile or per trip, transit subsidies are hugely greater than any subsidies to the automobile. Per passenger mile, transit subsidies are 50 times what auto subsidies are. And the L.A. experience suggests that we spend a lot of money and get less transit use. We're spending more to get rid of riders. Back-of-the-envelope calculations show that about \$7 billion has been spent on rail so far, and we know that they've lost an aggregate of about 1 billion riders over a 10-year span. So they've spent \$7.00 for every transit rider eliminated.

Reason: How does that loss of ridership compare to the national average?

Gordon: There have been market-share losses in all of the new rail cities. The other thing you want to control for is background growth. So this is over a period where L.A. County added 12 percent to the population, and a lot of those were lower-skilled immigrants, who are sort of a natural constituency for mass transit. So to spend that much money and lose that many riders, that's not simple. You've really got to work at it.

Reason: Is any public transportation economically viable?

Gordon: At best, a *maybe* if you legalized vans. There's a big fight in New York City over them right now. Los Angeles legalized airport vans, and now Super Shuttle wants to get in the way of new entrants. But whatever [form of public transit] you come up with would be running neck and neck with large numbers of used cars. The transportation mode of choice of low-income people is used cars.

Reason: The communities that are held out as almost utopian by the New Urbanists--Portland, Oregon, or the Kentlands in suburban D.C.--have intensely politicized almost every private land use decision. Is putting every decision about painting your roof before a plebiscite the way people really want to live?

Gordon: That scares off a lot of people because they fear that their own property rights are up for grabs. If their own property rights are subject to being put in a common pool, a lot of people will say, "No, thank you."

On the other side, we have the growth of community associations, or what some people are calling entrepreneurial communities. When everything is contractual, then you're not going to have these surprises. So people are making ever more such choices, and it puts them in the category of getting out of harm's way and providing insurance for my property rights, because my property rights are ever more up for grabs, [depending upon what] judges are doing or not doing, or what the zoning board is doing in response to organized groups, and all that. The entrepreneurial communities--or whatever you want to call them, community associations--are a mechanism that fits very well.

Reason: But can't community associations become political organizations that have as much power as zoning boards?

Gordon: If everything is covered by contract, there are no misunderstandings and no surprises. We either bargain for the contract that we want or we go look for another one somewhere else.

Reason: But contracts can't anticipate everything. An entrepreneurial community established 20 years ago could have never anticipated the development of 18-inch satellite dishes, which might well be banned in such a place.

Gordon: More adaptive forms will have to come on the market. My friend Spencer MacCallum, an anthropologist who writes on these issues, says that we may see the development of leasehold arrangements rather than traditional contract arrangements. The model he uses is that of hotels and shopping malls, where entrepreneurs provide services that people want. Leaseholds may provide much more flexible property arrangements than we typically imagine.

Reason: You mean the neighborhood association may renegotiate parts of its contract every year? We won't let you build a deck on the back of your house this year, but next year we'll think about it? Or people could decide to live in rigidly defined communities with extremely inflexible contracts if there's a demand for them?

Gordon: Right. All in the direction of increasing competition. People are more mobile than ever, and they have an easier time moving from one place to another as their requirements change.

The downside of these entrepreneurial communities, of course, is that as more affluent people withdraw from cities the interest groups that are left behind become ever more powerful. The people who are victims are the people who are least likely to move. We condemn the poorest to the worst public schools and the worst public services.

Reason: So are decaying urban cores part of an evolutionary process that no planning can overcome?

Gordon: The best thing that's happening to old urban cores is the immigrants, and immigrants have almost nothing to do with the planners except for the fact that planners often give them a hard time when they want to get occupational licenses. The infusion of capital and entrepreneurial skills in the core areas is coming entirely from the immigrants. If we make it our business to chase them out, then we may be hastening the decay of those urban cores.

Reason: You don't fit the profile of the typical urban planner, advocating top-down remedies. How did you arrive where you are? Are you indeed atypical?

Gordon: Planning is so eclectic it draws people from everywhere: architecture, the social sciences, the natural sciences. You really get an odd stew. I have a very Hayekian view of the world, and given the way that I view the evolution of the built environment, the Hayekian view has a lot to say. I teach about markets, so I'm less suspicious of market mechanisms than most of my planning colleagues.

And even when I speak with like-minded colleagues, I have to ask if market-friendly planning is realistic or plausible. Is there any mileage in doing market-friendly planning, or are spontaneous orders or spontaneous adjustments going to outdistance what planners try to do all the time? And that's why it's interesting to look at the migrations that are going on into the exurbs and into private communities, because those are going on in spite of any planning or any policy.

If we have local policy interests, and we have an understanding of the role of markets, then I think you reach the conclusion that a lot of the conventional, command-and-control stuff is disastrous. Spending \$7.00 per rider to lose a billion transit riders is disastrous. So I think we have a huge case study which does not offer us any cause for optimism for traditional planning.

What can we, as researchers, really do? We can quit, or we can keep believing--let's unearth some of these facts and ideas, present them as best we can, and maybe somebody will learn something.

Reason: How are you perceived in the planning community? Are you on the fringe?

Gordon: I'm at the edge of the fringe.

Reason: So when you go to the American Planning Association's convention, do you drink alone?

Gordon: Well, I don't go very often. When I'm invited to speak at certain places, I think it's as a curiosity. There's the usual handful of people who thank you. God knows if they thank you because they've been informed or entertained or whatever.

But the intent is to uncover some facts, support them as best you can, put them in context, because there are all sorts of unfounded assertions out there.

Reason: Even so, the traditional planning community doesn't seem to shun you completely. In the Winter 1997 issue of the *American Planning Association Journal*, you and your USC

colleague Harry Richardson engaged in a fascinating debate with Florida International University planning professor Reid Ewing. Your article, "Are Compact Cities a Desirable Goal?," was a straightforward exposition of the case against traditional planning and for consumer preferences. Ewing's "Is Los Angeles-Style Sprawl Desirable?" directly challenged your arguments. How did that come about?

Gordon: We sent them our article, and they wrote back and said, "We can run this if we run it with a counterpoint." There wasn't even the suggestion that they would run ours alone. I'm happy they did run both, because I want that discussion to be out there. Nevertheless, the editors of the journal of the APA felt they needed the safety of a counterpoint before even letting us present our side. But Harry and I were pleased to find out that the editors awarded us honorable mention for feature article of the year.

I was asked to address the L.A. City Planning Commission two years ago because there was a draft of their plan which favored transit-oriented development. And I said, "Here are the various reasons why it will not work." The response I got was a big yawn. There was zero interest in that, either [from] the commissioners who for some reason invited me, or [from] a lot of the staff people who were there. I just said their document was full of holes, but there was no interest as to asking why, or can you tell us what's wrong, or anything like that.

Reason: Is traditional planning becoming inconsequential? Are today's academic planners comparable to the slide-rule designers of 20 years ago, preparing to offer a product which has no market?

Gordon: We are trending away from planners in the traditional form, who primarily serve the interests of municipalities. But property arrangements are coming on line which require the developer to wear the planner's hat or the planner to wear the developer's hat. You could call this role "planning," but it's not traditional or public-sector planning.

People who are savvy enough to see the opportunities may be called planners, but they are less likely to operate in city hall and are more likely to operate in a development group, to arrange the types of developments that are successful. They will need a more sophisticated range of skills.

Maybe the world is changing so fast that what's coming out of the academy will lag behind [what the real world demands]. Maybe students will come out of the academy being trained in one way and find, once they leave, they need skills that direct them in another.

But that may be true of any number of other disciplines. It may be a problem professional schools in general face. We know universities are having a hard time keeping up. That's why we have think tanks [laughs].