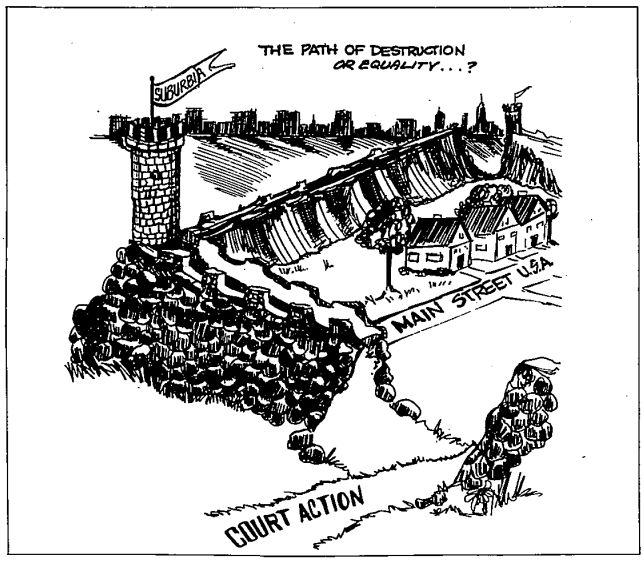
The Coming Apart Of Fortress Suburbia



(EDITOR'S NOTE: It is the policy of Observer Newspapers to bring to its readers not only the best of the home town news but also information and points of view dealing with the phenomenon of the suburbs. The following article, while it does not necessarily reflect our point of view, is so timely and so relevant to what's going on today in the suburbs that we are devoting today's editorial page to it. The author is a Washington-based political writer. Copyright (c) 1972 by the NYM Corp., and reprinted with the permission of New York Magazine.)

By JOSEPH KRAFT

Bert Lahr used to do an act with an 11-foot pole. It was called "The Things You Wouldn't Touch With a 10-Foot Pole," and it conveyed very nicely the attitude of the suburbs towards New York City.

For most suburbanites, the city means crime, filth, racial tension, social disorder and traffic congestion. It embodies all the troubles they wish would stay away from their doors. So, to keep the city at a distance, suburbanites have built thick walls in the form of exclusionary taxes and zoning laws enforced by an incredibly complex series of interlocking townships, municipalities, school districts and other authorities.

Now these walls are beginning to crack. The crumbling process, which is going on all across the country, is perhaps the dominant feature of American political life today. And powerful outside agents speed the coming apart.

For one thing, courts all over the country are upholding civil rights groups which challenge zoning and tax privileges.

For another thing, federal agencies, notably the Department of Housing and Urban Development, are pushing the suburbs to take on some of the burden of urban problems.

But these visible efforts are making headway only because they harmonize with a hidden force inside the suburbs. Rapid, headlong growth – that quintessential suburban quality – has created a subversive influence, a kind of time bomb within the suburban fortress...

Who's Left Out?

Bus drivers, repairmen, janitors and electricians – the blue-collar workers who man the industries and facilities the suburbs now need to be self-sustaining – cannot afford to live in the suburban areas where they work. The same applies to operatives in the factories that are increasingly locating in the suburbs – often for tax reasons.

A second group of suburban malcontents is older people – many of them first generation residents of the suburbs. Their children have grown up, and they no longer want their large homes on big lots. Still less do they want to move back to the center cities. They would like relatively cheap homes or apartments in the suburbs. But these are not to be had.

As William Cahill, governor of the essentically suburban State of New Jersey, put it in a recent housing message to the legislature: "Our senior citizens living on fixed incomes cannot continue to pay spiraling property taxes on their homes, nor the high rental cost of an apartment, if any at all are available."

The younger suburbanites are in the same fix as their parents. They have spent much of their lives in suburbia, and they want to work and raise their families there. But they don't have the money for larger homes. The kind of apartments they need are in especially short supply, since 80 per cent of the zoning laws in the New York suburbs, devised with the idea of cutting down education costs by limiting accaccommodations for children, forbid apartments of more than a single bedroom.

However, the post-war baby boom means that young people in the family -forming age bracket are the fastest-growing segment of the population.

One suburban sociologist, Professor Herbert Gans of Columbia, believes that the pressure of the young couples is itself powerful enough to crack existing restrictions. "So many young families are already starting to form," he says, "that change has to come."

Realtors React

The cumulative effect of all this push for change inside the suburbs finds its most sensitive register in the marketplace.

Those prime movers and shakers of American society, the real estate developers, sense the shift of demand, and they are rapidly lining up to capitalize on it. Perhaps the most striking feature of the New York Times' survey of the New York suburbs was the near unanimity of the comments by builders and developers.

Here is David Bogdanoff, one of the biggest developers in Westchester (N.Y.) speaking: "Setting yourself up as a prestige town with large-lot zoning won't work anymore. There just aren't that many people who can afford upper-middle-class housing to fill all those towns."

This is Peter Taylor, of Levitt & Sons: "We're a mass builder. But our market is rapidly decreasing. We've tried to drive the costs down, but we still can't sell a guy who makes under 17 grand a year."

In the townships and counties, zoning and tax decisions regularly go against projects for more apartments and small homes. So intense is the feeling that the chairman of New York State's Urban Development Corporation, Edward Logue, has preferred to negotiate with suburban officials for new housing rather than to invoke his power to override zoning laws...

Riding to the rescue of the forces for change is a potent new ally – the Department of Housing and Urban Development and its chief officer, Secretary George Romney.

For most of its life, and in most of its activities HUD has been a brick-and-mortar outfit. Its primary function has been to subsidize building, either indirectly through guaranteed mortgages on private homes or directly by doling out funds to local public housing authorities.

During the Johnson Administration, the amount of funding rose sharply, and it was directed very largely at housing in the center cities. The result has been a fiasco...

In city after city, and especially in the older downtown sections of the oldest cities, new projects have foundered fast. Maintenance and upkeep were inadequate. Mortgage and rental payments fell behind. Many units were abandoned after only a few years of use.

HUD A Slumlord

Now, as the cycle of failure and foreclosure runs its course...Secretary Romney is becoming the biggest slumlord in history.

Not surprisingly, this experience has had an impact on the outlook at HUD. Romney gathered in his years as governor of Michigan a keen awareness of the social factors in housing. But the Nixon Administration has not exactly had as its chief objective the notion of mixing whites with blacks – least of all in the suburbs.

So. Gov. Romney and his men were obliged to fall in with the brick-and-mortar emphasis at HUD. At the start, anyhow, their big program was Operation Breakthrough, a scheme for bringing assembly-line efficiency to bear on the production of housing. But with more and more new housing going bad, Romney and the department were virtually shoved off the production kick. As burgeoning slumlords, they suddenly had their noses rubbed in the social side of the housing problems.

As the Nixon Administration entered its fourth year, Romney was as a man converted. He had become a leading apostle of the view that pouring new housing into the ghetto was a self-defeating game.

"It's impossible," he said in a press conference early this month, "to solve the problems of the central cities in the central cities alone." Having laid down that truth, he was cautiously prepared to take the consequences.

For one thing, he established a basic guideline, effective Feb. 7, which bars the concentration of more public housing in the inner city.

For a second, he has begun promoting the idea of housing allowances paid to ghetto families. That proposal, originally pushed in the Nixon Administration by Pat Moynihan, would give at least some city residents the opportunity to look for apartments or homes in the suburbs.

Thirdly, the secretary has been lavish in his support of the regional arrangements now in effect in Dayton, O., and Washington, D.C. whereby public housing is distributed on a quota basis by agreement between the central city and the surrounding counties.

GEORGE . ROMNEY has found himself the biggest slumlord in the country, whether he likes it or not.

Finally, Romney has been talking up Operation TACLE – Total American Community Living Environment. This project was pushed on Secretary Romney and other HUD officials by James W. Rouse, developer of the new, racially-integrated town of Columbia, Maryland, who is now working on a multi-million-dollar project for reviving downtown Hartford.

What Romney now has in mind, essentially, and what TACLE seems to point toward, is the development of new towns within towns.

That is, a concerted effort by the federal government, local business, and suburban authorities for joint ventures to rebuild the central cities in a way that will connect them with the outer cities.

To be sure, George Romney is not all that powerful – even within the Nixon Administration. It is known that he was once lectured long and hard by (then) Atty. Gen. John Mitchell on the need to stay loyal to the president or to resign. It remains a question whether he is on Mr. Nixon's first team or even on his taxi squad.

The Courts Rule

There is yet another force pushing the elbow of Romney and all other federal officials: state and federal courts, in a wide-ranging series of decisions, many of them arising from civil rights actions, have been obliging officials to batter down the walls between the inner city and the suburbs.

Four key decisions have been handed down in the housing field.

The first (in the so-called Lackawanna Case) questioned zoning by the city of Lackawanna, N.Y. A federal district court threw out that town's zoning provisions on the ground they were merely a subterfuge to protect white neighborhoods against public housing apt to be occupied by blacks. The Lackawanna decision was upheld by the Supreme Court last April.

The second ruling (in the Gautreaux Case) questioned the location of housing subsidized by HUD and the Chicago Housing Authority. A federal district court first ordered an end to concentrating public housing in all-black neighborhoods. It has now ordered that public housing be scattered in white neighborhoods throughout metropolitan Chicago.

The third ruling (in the Shannon Case) questioned the siting of public housing in fringe ghetto areas. A federal district court ruled that HUD could not locate projects in mixed black-and-white areas, if the result would be to tip the district into an all-black neighborhood.

Finally, in the case of Crow vs. Fulton County Commissioners, there is an absolute breach of the suburban barrier. A federal district court in Georgia has ordered Atlanta and suburban Fulton County to develop a housing plan for the whole metropolitan area. This ruling will, in effect, foster the scattering of public housing projects in the white suburbs.

School, Tax Cases

On top of those cases, there are related rulings in the education and housing fields. In education, the new landmark is the Richmond decision handed down by Federal District Judge Robert Merhige, Jr. on Jan. 11, which is now up for appeal.

It holds that, to achieve school desegregation, the predominantly black inner city school district must be merged with two almost entirely white suburban school districts. It strongly implies that such merger procedures should apply to northern cities and the suburbs, not merely to the South, which has been the explicit target for civil rights legislation.

As to taxes, the landmark cases are the Serrano decision of the Supreme Court of California and the Rodriguez decision of the Federal District Court in San Antonio, Texas. In both cases, a decent education has been accepted as a constitutional right.

In both there is a finding that the practice of financing education through property taxes yields grossly unfair results. Specifically, there is evidence that the relatively heavy taxes paid by parents in the inner cities produce schools of poorer quality than those generated by the relatively low property taxes of the more affluent suburbs.

In both cases, therefore, the whole basis of financing education through property taxes is called into question. The issue has escalated above the level of suburban government, where restrictions are entrenched, up to the state and national level.

Partly as a result, California is already moving toward a uniform state-wide property tax. The Nixon Administration is preparing a scheme (known as VAT 73) which would, by next year, introduce a value added tax, or national sales levy, in place of the property tax as the chief producer of school funds. These two possible changes are surely portents of further change.

Financing education through property taxes has been such a dominant feature of the city and suburban landscape that nobody knows what consequences will result from its obliteration.

Cracks In The Wall

Which is precisely the point. The present relationship between inner city and outer city, between decaying black downtown and thriving suburbia, is not stable. Ongoing social, political and legal forces keep the suburbs in tremendous flux. Nobody seems to see, even through a glass darkly, where the next 10 years will lead, to say nothing of the longer perspective.

Certainly no one should imagine that there will soon emerge that dream of the planners -- large scale metropolitan government embracing in unified jurisdiction both the inner and the outer city. But neither is the future likely to be characterized by the present split between city and suburbs.

The only sure things are the cracks in the suburban wall. They augur yet more of the eternal pulling down and rebuilding that has been the recurrent feature of American life.

Editorial & Opinion

OBSERVER NEWSPAPERS, INC.

Philip H. Power, Publisher

The Livonia Observer • The Redford Observer
The Westland Observer • The Garden City Observer
The Plymouth Mail & Observer • The Southfield News & Observer
The Farmington Enterprise & Observer

Member SUBURBAN NEWSPAPERS OF AMERICA

Published by Observer Newspapers, Inc.
36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, Mich. 48150

Serving the communities of:
Livonia, Plymouth, Plymouth Township, Canton Township, Farmington
Farmington Township, Redford Township, Garden City, Westland,
Southfield, Lathrup Village, Bingham Farms.