

Opinion

The Suburbs Are Coming to a City Near You

Is a city still a city if urban living is a luxury good?

By Candace Jackson

Ms. Jackson writes frequently about real estate.

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SAN FRANCISCO — The roof deck of this new apartment complex is over half of an acre, and currently a concrete construction zone. But soon it will have a grass lawn, benches, hammocks and 20 planter boxes that residents can use to grow vegetables.

It's the size of a larger-than-average backyard in a subdivision of a nice suburb with a name like Pleasanton or Pleasantville that's a 30- or 45-minute drive from the city.

But this airborne backyard is at the Landing, a building in Dogpatch, a still-industrial part of San Francisco near the waterfront and known for its warehouses and dive bars. It's pretty far from anyone's vision of classic tree-lined cul-de-sac suburbia.

"The suburban life in the city is what we're going for," Roman Speron, a member of the building's development team, told me on a recent tour of this oasis in progress. The 263-apartment development has been arranged with multiple elevator banks and outdoor space in the middle to create small clusters of residences. Marketing materials describe the setup as a "suburban village within the city of San Francisco."

Your own slice of suburbia within city limits is a concept that developers and retailers across the country have been pitching a lot recently, subtly or not. The pendulum swings of socio-economic and demographic changes over the past two decades in some thriving cities are partly behind this shift.

A generation or two ago, the well-to-do tended to flee to the suburbs when they married or had kids. Today, they're the ones who often opt to stay put, even with large families. And some baby boomers who left to raise kids have returned. So developers are offering them big-box stores, food courts, easy parking and house-like apartments, all without having to leave the city.

Even if the target renters for those Dogpatch apartments decamp for the suburbs eventually, their preferences, predilections and disposable income will have reshaped what a city is — and who can afford to live there.

For the first time since the invention of the car, many cities saw their populations grow faster than their suburbs between 2010 and 2015, said William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution. The densest urban neighborhoods once tended to be a mix of lower-income residents and the wealthy, but that balance has shifted. In 2000, the people most likely to live in the highest density neighborhoods were low income, said Jed Kolko, the chief economist of the website Indeed. By 2014, the wealthiest 10 percent of households were just as likely as the poorest 10 percent to live in high- density neighborhoods.

The dividing line between urban and suburban limits has always been a little murky in most cities, many of which have their own vast stretches of single-family homes with attached garages. But the general idea was that the suburbs offered comfort and personal space, private backyards and a bedroom for each kid. City living was more exciting and offered culture and a more diverse mix of everything, but required some sacrifice. Apartments were smaller, parking a headache and a backyard unimaginable.

Today, the cost of city living in many areas is higher but the trade-offs for those who can afford it are fewer.

The result is that the idea of a city itself is changing. In some ways, living in a dense urban area has become much more pleasant for certain types of people — namely the affluent and those who prize proximity to the action above all else. You can now live within easy walking distance of your favorite restaurants, go see a play and shop at Target nearby. But what does it mean when urban living becomes a luxury good and a lifestyle brand?

In many American cities and downtown areas, new residential development is now heavily skewed toward more expensive, larger apartments and condos. Twenty years ago, just over 5 percent of new condos that sold in Manhattan had three or four bedrooms. In the first quarter of this year, nearly 19 percent of them did, according to the appraisal firm Miller Samuel. As land costs rise, developers can make more money building at the top end of the market and ignoring the middle.

At the Dahlia, a 38-unit building under construction on Manhattan's Upper West Side, developers say the idea is to set up condos large enough that they could reasonably replicate the feeling of a house in suburbia. The building has no studios or one-bedrooms. The largest units, with four bedrooms, are around 2,100 square feet with prices starting just over \$4 million.

One of the Dahlia's biggest selling points? It has its own parking garage. "You can pull in with your S.U.V., unload and take your things in a private manner," said Shlomi Reuveni, the president of the company that is handling sales for the building. "That's very appealing." And very suburban.

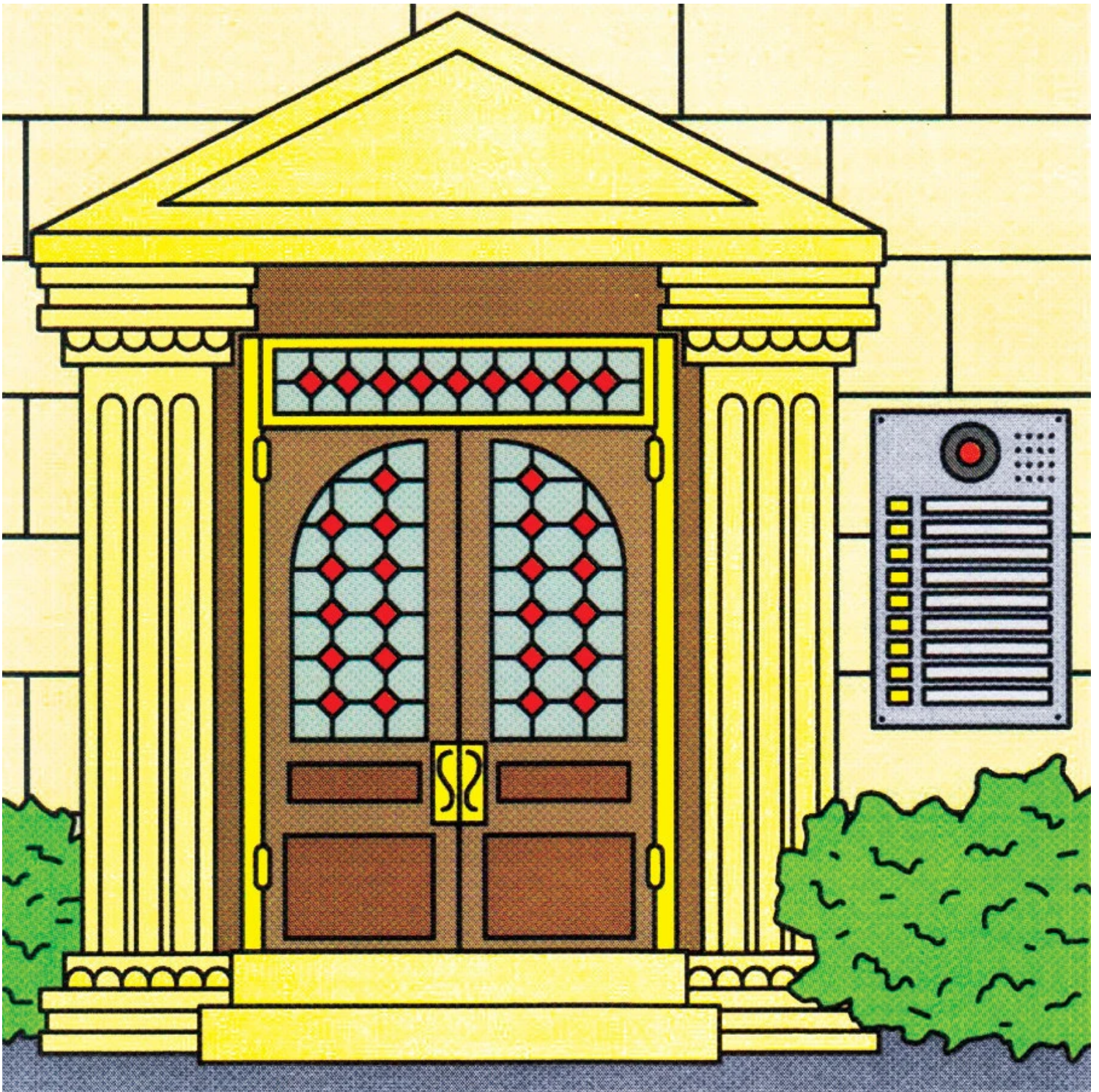
In some high-end buildings, architects are giving apartments the feel of single-family homes by replicating the layouts of suburban houses. At the Quay Tower, which overlooks Brooklyn Bridge Park, there are just five condos on each floor, two of which have private elevator access. Inside, the larger units have something you see a lot of on HGTV suburban house renovation shows: large mudrooms off the back door with locker-like cubbies and sturdy ceramic-tile floors.

In Seattle, there's a new luxury apartment building with a rooftop lounge with hammocks and a chicken coop you might see in a more permissive (or at least chicken-friendly) suburb. In New York, the developer Extell is wrapping up construction on the Kent, a building on the Upper East Side that has, in addition to a stroller valet and a swimming pool where kids can take lessons, an area called "Camp Kent." It's a play space that looks like a woodsy country scene with a treehouse and a carpeted "river" leading to a private outdoor playground.

Of course, these new buildings are designed for a very narrow slice of the population — those who can afford to spend multiple millions of dollars on a home — but it's a slice of the population whose purchasing decisions affect all city dwellers.

Amit Bhandari, a 40-year-old who works at a financial institution, recently purchased a condo at the Dahlia, the Upper West Side building. He and his wife, a public-school teacher, have a 10-month-old baby and are planning to expand their family. He says they went to open houses in suburban New Jersey, near where he grew up, but decided to buy three blocks from where they live now once they realized that the new building would make their lifestyle almost just as easy as living in the suburbs — minus the hourlong commute.

"You can spend more time with your kids," said Mr. Bhandari. "And this type of building eliminates the traditional pain points of apartment living." That means, he said, that he and his family didn't really have to make the usual city-versus-suburb trade-offs.



George Wylesol

Big-box retailers, those shopping hallmarks of suburbia, are also moving into cities. Neil Saunders, the managing director of GlobalData's retail division, says many suburbs are already saturated with big-box stores and not seeing the same growth they used to, making expansion into cities a more attractive option for chains.

Target, with its huge selection of everything from groceries to furniture, is a prime example of this trend. In the 1990s, it went big on Target Greatland and SuperTarget stores in the suburbs and exurbs.

In 2006, Target stopped building Greatlands (though continued to build other Target stores). Then in 2012, the company went in the opposite direction, introducing urban Targets that measure around 100,000 square feet, compared with 130,000 square feet for an average Target in the 'burbs.

By 2017, Target had opened 30 smaller-format stores in dense areas, including near college campuses and in big cities, some as small as 12,000 square feet. This year, it will open 30 more, compared with just two new suburban stores.

The urban Targets are a way for the company to get stores close to where people are moving, said Jacqueline DeBuse, a Target spokeswoman. The company is still researching and adapting to what sells best at the small stores. One thing it has learned: City dwellers tend to walk or take public transit to stores and don't buy much in bulk, so you won't find things like 24-pack paper towels in urban Targets.

City shopping increasingly includes of the ultimate symbols of suburbia: malls. At the Hudson Yards development in Manhattan, a seven-story indoor mall is anchored by the city's first Neiman Marcus department store.

"I kind of see it like a suburban town center right at your door step — and then some," said Sherry Tobak, a senior vice president with Related, the developer of Hudson Yards.

And if you miss suburban mall food courts, you've now got upscale, artisanal versions of them cropping up in cities, rebranded as food halls. Denver has at least half a dozen of these within city limits, including Broadway Market, where local vendors sell empanadas, sushi and Roman pizza. In San Francisco, the Market, underneath Twitter's headquarters in the still-gritty Mid-Market neighborhood, opened in 2015 and is reportedly planning an expansion that will increase its size by 50 percent.

Some cities and neighborhoods are getting more of another thing often associated with suburbia: white people. White population growth in the United States is declining and cities aren't, on the whole, getting whiter — but some neighborhoods are. In 2000, the nearby Brooklyn neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights and Fort Greene, for example, had a combined black population of about 45,000 and a white population of about 37,000. By 2015, there were 32,000 black residents and 62,000 whites, according to data from the New York City comptroller compiled by CityLab and Esri Media.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, 58 percent of the population in 2015 was made up of people of color, up from 34 percent from 1980, according to a study by PolicyLink and the program for environmental and regional equity at the University of Southern California. The share of

minorities in the population is expected to grow during the next few decades everywhere in the region — except for in the city of San Francisco.

The return of affluent whites to cities has made for a something of a reversal of the white-flight phenomenon of the early and mid-20th century, when middle class and wealthy whites left cities en masse for the homogeneous suburbs. Blacks and other minorities were effectively barred from doing the same because of redlining and other racist tactics. Recently, though, suburban areas have experienced growth in their black populations. “We saw a real black flight between 2000 and 2010 to the suburbs,” said Mr. Frey.

Although most suburbs remain largely white, in general suburbia is becoming far more racially mixed. Today, 36 of the country’s 100 largest metropolitan suburbs have populations that are at least 35 percent minority.

Suburbs are starting to look more like cities in other ways, too. Many commuter towns and exurbs have urbanized in their own ways. Shopping malls have been transformed into downtown-like retail corridors. In a shift from the single-family home sprawl that dominated in a previous generation’s version of suburban life, condo and apartment development is booming in many suburbs.

Of course, many people who live in cities will still end up moving to the ’burbs at some point, and there are signs that the urban migration trend is slowing: From 2015 to 2017, population growth in cities overall slowed somewhat, while suburban areas gained, said Mr. Frey.

In expensive cities like New York and San Francisco, the people who do head for greener, suburban pastures tend to be middle-class millennials in search of affordable housing (no wonder — very little new urban housing today is designed for them) or better public schools for their children. But these days, the search for a house with a garage and a backyard tends to happen later in life. In New York, the average age for a first-time mother is now 31; in San Francisco it’s 32.

“Young people have always gone to cities, and then when they have kids moved to the suburbs,” said Mr. Frey. Millennials have followed that same mold, he explained. They just get started later. And even when they leave the city to raise their kids, they’ve spent years reshaping it before they leave.

Mr. Bhandari, the recent Upper West Side condo buyer, says some of his friends who have started families have decamped for the suburbs in recent years. But, he says, most don’t really want to. “The way they usually describe it is, they had to move out there,” he said.

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Candace Jackson, a freelance journalist, covered real estate for The Wall Street Journal for seven years.

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Correction: May 18, 2019

A previous version of this article misstated the role of Shlomi Reuveni's company, which is handling sales for the Dahlia, not developing it.

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