

Connecting Suburbia: A conversation with Joel Kotkin and Jun...

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SPEAKERS

Joel Kotkin, June Williamson

J June Williamson 00:13

Hello, and welcome to threesixtyCITY. I'm today's host, June Williamson, Department Chair and Professor at the City College of New York's Spitzer School of Architecture. Today I'll be speaking with urban geographer Joel Kotkin, who is the Roger Hobbs Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University, and the Executive Director of the Urban Reform Institute. He joins me to discuss some of the challenges of the sprawling suburbs, and how the thoughtful design and retrofit of low density neighborhoods could lead to more connected, equitable and environmentally sustainable futures. Hello, Joel. So, let's start at the beginning. Could you share with listeners your take on the history of suburbs in Northern America, and how they came to be dominated by a pattern of low-density, car-centric development, where areas are often strictly separated by use? The residential areas are located away from commercial areas and there's even separation within commercial areas and so forth?

J Joel Kotkin 01:25

Well, basically what made this happen in large part is what the people want, and what could they afford? I mean, it's not that complicated. So what did people want, and particularly people with families, and people when they get older. I still think that for a certain portion of the under 30-35, the city is always attractive. I remember years ago, when I would visit New York, which is my hometown, but I've lived in California a long time now. And I would go there, and I could walk to family, friends, high school friends, college friends, all in Manhattan, and not one of them is there today. And they were gone by the time they were 35-40 at the oldest. That tells me that people end up making a decision, particularly if they have kids, that they want to go someplace where there's a backyard, and maybe it's a little bit safer. Now, I think the other part of your question, why did it take in some sense a not very attractive form architecturally. The reality is that suburbs were built very quickly, it's like a lot of things. You think about a Levittown, I mean, this was done by former Seabees who had served in the war, they had been making huge bases in islands in the Pacific, and they used some of that same technology to do it. We now can look back at it and say, it was too much carbon emissions, or it was too

separated by class and race. But for many people, and particularly for the American working class, initially the white working class, this was a liberation from the city. I'm old enough to have a mother who grew up in the slums in Brownsville, New York. And hopefully, this won't offend anybody, but she always used to say it was a shitty neighborhood then, and it's a shitty neighborhood now, my mother passed away last year. For her moving to the suburbs was a dream, to have a backyard, to have trees, to hear birds all the time, to know that my brother and I were going to a safe high school, it was an encouraging environment. So what's happening today is very interesting. On that ethnic basis, that's changed. 96% of all the growth in suburbia last decade was among non whites.

J June Williamson 04:02

So let me just jump in before we get into some of the demographic change. In terms of the history. I do think that in the 20th century, certainly, the history of suburbanization has much deeper roots than escaping the perceived and real ills of the built up center city area. So there were pull factors, as well as push factors, which you began to allude to, which then get into the complicated history of race in our country and other things. But I would say, having just raised a family myself in Manhattan, there is access to green space, and there are many, many families that are raising their children in the most dense parts of Manhattan and then other parts of the city. But I do think there were policies in place from the federal government on down that helped provide incentives for people to make those choices, especially in the 20th century, and it worked out very well for many of them financially and in outcomes for their families.

J Joel Kotkin 05:03

It's very important to realize that when you look at, like we've done the demographics even well before the pandemic, and we looked at the number of children in the core cities is about a third of what they are in the suburbs. But what's interesting that we found in Manhattan, I did this for the Center for Urban Future, which you probably know. What we found was under five, the Manhattan rate of fertility was about the same as the rest of the region. It was after the age of five it just dropped. Now, there are people that have good positions, or sometimes they have money, for a New Yorker, if you were able to buy in 20 years ago, you're sitting pretty, just like somebody who bought a home in Orange County 20 years ago is sitting pretty, even if the picture around them isn't so pretty.

J June Williamson 05:55

I'm still a renter. But let's get back to this question about the pattern of use separation. So, regardless of whether you have a family or not in older urbanized areas, you do have the option to walk to get around in various other ways besides using a car. So I do think that in addition to incentives, and as you said, the ease of development, doing it in a production line way in the postwar period, when there were a lot of people who needed to be housed quickly, there was also the widespread implementation of a certain idea about zoning. And, that it was more efficient and rational somehow to separate where people lived from where they worked. And the technologies of automobiles, of course, made that possible.

J Joel Kotkin 06:46

I would argue a couple of things. One is the libertarian and progressives both, I'm not favorable to either, are basically saying, we should get rid of single family zoning. Well people move into neighborhoods with the assumption that what they bought is what they were looking for. And now you're saying, well, the capital markets can come in, or the government can come in and let somebody build a four storey apartment right next door. That wasn't what you wanted in the first place. I think there are plenty of places where we can certainly densify but I do think the really important issue now is, once we recognize that the vast majority of the population is not going to be living in core cities, how do we make the suburbs better? And you can see the iteration, if you don't mind I'll talk a little about the history. You go to Levittown, I grew up first in Brooklyn and then Long Island. I know what Levittown looks like. It was crude in a certain way, like Lakewood here in Southern California, but it was good for a lot of people. Now, the new suburbs that are being developed, or at least the ones I've seen for example Irvine, Woodlands, a lot of the new communities that are being built particularly in Texas. They have town centers, some of them have walking trails, a lot of them have bike trails. I was just at a development here in California in Ontario, where they now have drones who will take your groceries. You would take the car mainly because you needed to carry them, now they have a drone that takes it. So there's that. There's tremendous liberation, that's represented by people working at home.

J June Williamson 08:40

Before we move on. I would also say that the history of suburbs obviously didn't start with Levittown. It goes back 100 or 250 years before that. But I think even in that period, and through zoning, there were always areas that had multi-unit housing, apartment buildings, and so forth in suburbs, but they were separated. So let's turn to the present day and continue to talk about that. So I recently co-authored a book called Case Studies in Retrofitting Suburbia, in which we describe six urgent suburban challenges. First is to disrupt automobile dependence, not to get rid of cars, but to disrupt the dependence. Second, to improve public health. Third, to support an aging population, and you already alluded to that, I think that's important. Fourth, leverage social capital for equity. Five, compete for jobs. And six, to provide water and energy resilience, so the sustainability aspects, to really make sure those are being realized in suburban landscapes and settings. So that's my take. But I want to ask you, what do you see as the current most urgent challenges to suburbs?

J Joel Kotkin 09:53

Well, the most urgent challenge to the society is preserving the middle class. I mean, you get rid of the middle class and you might as well just say, we're living in some sort of autocracy, which is what my book about feudalism talked about. People don't own houses, they have very little in the way of assets in many cases for themselves. One of the most discouraging things is to talk to young people here in California, and say, well, aren't you going to stay? And they say, no, I'm going someplace where I can buy a house. And that's really a shame, because we could do this, but we need to do it in a better way. Now, there are several things. One, on the energy front and the car front. First of all, obviously, long term the MIT vision of autonomous cars, where you get a car when you need it, and maybe some people will keep their cars but you don't use it. I've worked at home, my late friend Alvin Toffler once said, I invented the

electronic cottage before it existed. And one of the things that I have found, is that working at home worked out really very well for me. I've worked in an office three months in my entire life. And I'm almost 70. So that gives you an idea of how long I've been doing this. So what we're seeing is a) we can use technology so that people don't have to do the commute. Every morning, from Riverside, from what we call the inland empire into LA, are armies of cars, where people have to get up at 4:30 in the morning, and drive an hour and a half. And God knows, given California gas prices, I don't even know why they bother even showing up to work. But the reality is that we have to move away from that. Now, there are several ways we do that. One, is for certain sectors of the economy, for sure, work at home. If you have a hybrid form, that's going to reduce traffic considerably, people won't have to get in their cars nearly as much. Second thing that we can do is we can move towards autonomous vehicles so that when we do compute, we can still be relatively productive. And obviously, the kinds of cars we're going to be driving in 10-20 years are not going to be as damaging. One of the big issues, I think that's going to face us with the EVs in particular, is the fact that if the costs are so high, people won't be able to afford them. And so they're going to hold on to their gas powered cars. You know, there's one guy who said, in 10 years California will be like Cuba, filled with 30 year old cars that are being maintained. And that's not good for anybody. I also think in terms of the equity issue, what worries me is the fact that minorities and working class people, because I don't really care that much on the race, I look at class issues more, have no sense of upward mobility. What we do know is in places where housing prices are less expensive, let's say Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, even to some extent Phoenix, minority homeownership is much higher than it is in New York or Los Angeles. So I think that we can deal with these issues on several different levels. And I like the fact that you mentioned jobs, because the reality is the vast majority of all new jobs are created in the suburbs 80-90%. But they do have a problem, particularly what you might consider the less wealthy suburbs, let's say in parts of the Inland Empire, they have a hard time attracting high end jobs. One of the problems is, even if the housing is cheaper the salaries are lower. So if the suburbs can begin to attract more higher end businesses, and also begin to provide an education for the kids that go there, who then can get a decent job. I think we can deal with a lot of these issues. And then, of course, the big issue that you didn't mention, but I think is very important is the open space issue. Yes, New York City has opened space, but I'll tell you one thing, it's not like having a backyard. It's not like being in a neighborhood filled with trees. I live in a place that's essentially a bird sanctuary. I mean, it is just astounding.

J

June Williamson 14:13

I think one of the issues here, when we have these kinds of discussions about the city versus the suburb, and so on, is that often there are qualities on all fronts, and I think it's up to individuals to make choices about how they prioritize different things. I'm an architect and an urban designer, so I do think about design, that it's not just whether you can check things off, but the quality of how they're developed and used and the access that is provided to people are all important. So people weigh those things when they make decisions. So to not have parks, nor a backyard is a problem. But you know, finding the balance of how you prioritize having private open space versus having shared collective communal open space, the larger thing I think to agree that open space is healthy and desirable. So another thing that you've alluded to, of course, is the desirability of homeownership and how that builds wealth. And I think that's something that we have relied on in this country for a great period of time. But it's also possible to think about other vehicles, pun intended, by which people might be able to invest and create wealth, that there isn't just one path to do that. So again, I think we want to think about choice. And we don't want to mire people in communities, and you allude to

commutes and other kinds of things where they're locked in to a quality of life that also doesn't give them ways to build a future. So, circling back to the questions though, at the current time most suburban households have at least one car, especially those who live in single family or detached houses, and then the distances between those houses, their workplaces, the services they need to access regularly, and the ways we've invested in transportation infrastructure made personal cars the dominant form of transportation. And those are a depreciating asset in most cases, unlike often houses. But what are the ways, and I think you've begun to allude to them, that we can start to change these conditions to increase connectivity within burbs and throughout larger metropolitan areas? And, I would just put forth that, when we start to think about autonomous vehicles, we may be thinking about autonomous shuttles or shared vehicles, not just swapping out the private fuel-based vehicle for a private autonomous vehicle. You've already alluded that people may not have the incentives or the resources to do that. So I'm just curious on some of your thoughts about where innovations could happen and how that might change the suburban landscape?

J Joel Kotkin 16:50

I think innovations are happening. And of course, demographics are changing. People are moving to smaller cities. That started in about 2016, well before the pandemic. First, I really just wanted to echo what you said about choice. I think it is about choice. And I think ever since I started studying urban history, which I've been doing for a long, long time. There's always been, even in the post war era, a 10 to 15% of the population that chooses a dense, urban lifestyle. I mean, that really hasn't changed as much as we think it has. It's been sorta the same over time. And I think that choice should be there. The problem is I don't suburbanites saying to city people, you can't go to the city. It's the city people, particularly the planners, particularly the architects, no offense, and the academics who say, oh no, suburbs are bad, we've got to get rid of them.

J June Williamson 17:45

I'm not one of them. I think there are creative ways to think about the shopping malls, the office parks, the things that were built, and actually weren't built for a long time. A shopping mall has a 20 year lifespan. So there's an opportunity less than every generation to rethink how those places were built, the assumptions around which they were designed, the profits that had already been taken out of that land, and they're often in great locations. So could the folks who already live in suburbs who might want the denser lifestyle, not everyone, but if they can be accommodated, it actually frees up the pressure on others. That's the balance. That's the trick.

J Joel Kotkin 18:23

One of our biggest problems here in California, which is of course the poster child for dysfunction on housing, is that in California, what we tend to do is we tend to say, we're going to force you to build your housing in the already expensive, congested areas, where you can't possibly build anything cheap or even affordable, unless you subsidize it. Okay? Now, what you can do is you can say, look you can take these suburban areas, and you can, in a sense, urbanize parts of them. If you go to the downtown Woodlands, you're in a downtown. Or if you take a look at The Domain in Austin. I mean, if you talk to the people who developed them,

they said, there's a population one of empty nesters who would like to sell their homes and they don't want to live in the studio apartment, and they very often don't want to leave their community because that's where their church is, where their friends are, where their children sometimes are. I mean, in The Woodlands, you have three generations living there now.

J June Williamson 19:21

As people are living longer, they're far outliving their child rearing years. And so having those options and choices is really important. I do want to bring us back around to this mobility question. You talked a little bit earlier about drones making that last mile. I think those are the kinds of things that really could be game changers. Often we drive around because we might need to put a big bag in the car or we might need to give somebody a ride, and so we've got these oversized vehicles being used for all kinds of errands and trips where they may not be needed. And so we've already got people doing ride hailing so you just have to do the one way trip and drone deliveries so you can maybe walk to the store and you haven't brought the car just because you need to bring something back because you can have it drone delivered back. I'm really interested in all the ways that autonomous shuttles or other vehicles may be on fixed routes, along commuting paths, where we know the data shows that there's congestion, only at these peak times. And so if we could make more efficient travel for large numbers of people who need to get generally from one area to generally another, and not have to have all this excess infrastructure for all the times it's not needed. These are the things that I think are really, really exciting.

J Joel Kotkin 20:42

And a lot of the excess infrastructure is not just cars, but it's also what we now use as mass transit. For most of the country, mass transit doesn't work, it just doesn't work. In most cities, you can get to 50 to 100 times more jobs in 30 minutes than you can by transit.

J June Williamson 21:00

Fixed rail transit, you're saying. We have shuttle routes, other ways to actually move more people than a single individual in a private car.

J June Williamson 21:08

Or how we might live in the future if we had the choices. And so I do want to leave that on the table. I do think even people who choose to move to suburban communities these days for the schools, their children are growing older, they want a little bit more space. They still want to be able to walk to things and not be locking themselves into extreme commutes. And there's a whole land use piece of this that goes along with the the mobility transformations that are potentially exciting to think about on a number of fronts.

J Joel Kotkin 21:08

I think that the real future is going to be ride hailing. Some cities in Northern California, in the

I think that the real future is going to be ride sharing. Some cities in Northern California, in the suburbs, have gotten rid of their buses, but they subsidize Uber lift rides. I personally think maybe you could do, as you suggest, a shuttle service or a dial a ride. And if you're in a certain income category, or maybe seniors, you could even add them, you say, we'll subsidize it. I live in a place called Orange, California, which is a turn of the century agricultural town, it's a gorgeous city in terms of its downtown. I'm sitting drinking coffee, and at five o'clock I see a gigantic bus with almost nobody on it. I see a train, we have a train that goes right into the town, nobody's on it. Maybe we should think about how we can address the issues you're addressing, but in a way that is much more congruent with how we live.

J Joel Kotkin 22:39

Well, obviously the work at home is a huge part of this. But there are many things. What's interesting to me is if you look at, let's say Levittown Lakewood, because actually some of the earlier turn of the century ones were probably closer to what you're advocating. But then you start with Irvine, and you start to see a third of it is open space, bike trails, villages. Now, what they didn't do as well as they should have is the walking element to things. Now, if you go to some of the new developments that are being built in some other places, they are doing that. To me The Woodlands does a great job with this in the sense that you can even take a boat into the downtown because it's a gigantic swamp, but you can take advantage of it. Actually, they've done a very good job in some of the new developments that used to be rice plantations. And now they've made beautiful lakes that attract birds, because actually, the rice plantations were not as good for wildlife as what they have now.

J June Williamson 23:42

We've only got a few minutes left, and I want to get a couple of these other topics in if we can get to them. So I think that we can agree that there's a potential that rethinking mobility, as well as land use, could improve the kind of ecological outcome and performance of suburbs that otherwise can be seen as sprawling with a lot of parking lots and grey land. But how do these projects scale up? Can we ensure that not only the most privileged folks in our community can have access to these, because historically those folks have done the most to separate and distance themselves from others. So I'm curious on that, and I also just want some closing thoughts. The stereotype persists that kind of identifies the middle class with suburbs and suburbia, but also the dominant living condition for most North Americans now is suburbs. They have become very diverse within themselves as a category where there are folks of all incomes, backgrounds, lifestyles, household types, and ages living in the suburbs, rather than in center city or rural areas. But let me nevertheless, end by asking you what you think is the future of the the middle class? Will they continue to be identified primarily with the suburbs?

J Joel Kotkin 25:05

Certainly middle class families for absolutely certain. The fate of the cities lies with the cities, if they can deal with issues like crime and terrible schools, maybe there's a chance that a certain portion will be there. But the way that we provide more opportunities is by building in those places where we can build less expensively. To end with the point that you brought up earlier, we've got all these malls that are basically redundant. I mean, even the nice ones. Some of

them will do well, the higher end ones will do well, and the ethnic ones will do well. But fundamentally, we have and we're gonna have even bigger availability of opportunity in office space. These are two places where we can build the kind of housing we want. Now what I'd like to see, not just in suburbia, but all over is more two, three bedroom apartments so that people can work at home and have children. With the great problem we have now in California, and I'm sure it's true elsewhere, is if you live in an urban area where you want to live, you have to live in a studio, or you have to live in a one bedroom.

J June Williamson 26:16

I agree with you. And we could even have four and five bedroom apartments where nonrelated adults and families could perhaps even share.

J Joel Kotkin 26:23

I agree, I think we're going to have to realize how do we redeploy our assets, both in the urban area and in the suburban area. Technology gives us a lot of opportunities. The autonomous vehicle would be the cherry on top. Because the great negative of living in suburbia more than anything else is being tied to your car for things that you don't want to be tied to a car for. Now, I happen to live in California, so I bicycle most places I need to go, but the rest of the country doesn't quite have our weather.

J June Williamson 26:54

We want everybody to have those choices. That's the future vision. So that's all the time we have. And I want to thank you for a stimulating conversation, Joel Kotkin, it was a pleasure talking with you. Thank you, listeners, as always for joining us. We'll be back next week with another episode of threesixtyCITY.