

Preface

When a strong trend is in its early stage, it does not look strong. Is that where city revival is now? I think so. The trend line is similar for several indicators—including income, housing value, race, and recently population—and in the direction of city revival for each one. When suburbanization was well under way after World War II, the 1950 census did not contain clear evidence proclaiming what would happen during the next half century. But an incipient trend became a wave, and the decline of cities coincided with the rise of suburbs.

Since then, suburban prosperity—and spatial sprawl on the edges of suburbs—has seemed to be the unvarying companion of city decline. Yet recently, that relationship has lost its certainty, dramatically so.

The answer to two questions contains the seeds of a revolution in perceptions and reality. The first question is: Which metropolitan area had the fastest central-city revival after 1990? The second question is: Which metropolitan area had the fastest suburban population sprawl, adding the most counties to its metropolitan area since 2000?

The answer to each question is Atlanta. Thus, rapid suburban sprawl does not inevitably cause central-city decline. Sprawl may even nurture rapid city revival in some instances—an unthinkable thought until now.

Which conditions have brought about this change in metropolitan areas? How widespread are these changing conditions? Have they been perpetuated by foreclosures during the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009? Perhaps locations of foreclosures are the final piece of evidence signaling transformation of post-World War II patterns of the well-off living in suburbs and the poor living in cities.

This year, 2010, has 65 years of suburban sprawl to live with or unravel. Higher gasoline prices indicate traveling shorter distances each day is wise, so unraveling sprawl is the better option. Signs of global warming tell us that time is short for altering our way of life. These conditions make compact redevelopment necessary. As the suburban dream is foreclosed, the time for a different dream has arrived.