

Suburban Idyll

By JOEL KOTKIN

April 19, 2007; Page A17

No generation has lauded their revolutionary status more fervently than baby boomers. In documentaries, articles and books they are portrayed -- by themselves and others -- as agents of epochal change who, in the representative words of American University communications professor Leonard Steinhorn, have built "the inclusive, tolerant, free and equal America we have today."

Spoil sports may point out an older generation did the heavy lifting of surviving a depression, defeating the Nazis, overthrowing communism and launching the drive for civil rights. And some conservative boomers, outraged by the flood of self-congratulation, see their own breed as a scourge, undermining the nation's morality, culture and even their own children.

Yet on a closer look, the roughly 80-million strong generation born between 1946 and 1964 could turn out to be a lot more like their parents than anyone expected -- in no arena more so than in their choices of where, and how, they live. At the time when the generation came of age, there was a media hype about a "back to the city" coolness (read San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury or New York's East Village) or "back to nature" lifestyles (read Oregon or the Berkshires). In fact, relatively few boomers ultimately settled in edgy city neighborhoods or rural communes. Instead, they followed their parents into the suburbs -- often in bigger houses even further from the urban core.



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The good life.

The proclivity of boomers to buy and stay in single-family houses was one reason for the unexpected housing boom of the past decade. They not only moved to suburbia, but they hung out there much longer than anyone expected.

Now that the boomers are aging and their children vacating the premises there is enormous speculation about what their next moves might be. And once again, there has been widespread media and public relations hype about a pending mass migration of boomers back into the inner city. Outlets like CNN crow about the "reversal

of the post-war flight to the suburbs," with boomer retirees and empty-nesters leading the charge.

Such reports, almost always based on anecdotal accounts, present the image of a generation ready to flee the boring burbs they hated as adolescents for hipper and cooler urban cores. No one has embraced this notion more than the developers of urban luxury condos. It is all about the chance to once again reinvent yourself: "What Is Your Dream?"

"What Will You Create?" is the come-on used by one Boston condo developer targeting downshifting boomers.

Robert Toll, the man whose firm became famous for building suburban McMansions, has proudly announced that he is now targeting luxury downtown condos. He bases his move on the logic that downshifting boomers are heading downtown because they are "more hip hop and happening than our parents."

Yet with condo markets softening in many cities it appears that Mr. Toll's well-heeled, with-it Viagra generation may not be as large as some predicted. True, some highly visible wealthy individuals have opted for pied-à-terres in world cities like New York, where even a small apartment can easily run a \$1 million. And in almost any city, enterprising reporters and helpful developers can always produce individual boomers who fill the cherished back -to-the-city narrative.

The larger trends reveal the vast majority of boomers are actually going nowhere; according to the 2000 census, less than 2% cross state lines every year. Only a small number of those who move, according to a new study from the Research Institute for Housing America, choose to go back to the city. Many more, it appears, either head in to the suburbs, or move even further out.

A study for the Mortgage Bankers Association found that downshifting boomers were just about as suburb-oriented as their parents. Eighty percent of all moves by suburbanites over 50 were . . . well . . . to another suburban home, almost eight times the number that bought in the inner city. In contrast, more than half of city-dwellers who moved headed out to suburbia.

This reflects what may be seen as a basic lifestyle orientation. Asked for their preferences, many downshifting boomers express a predilection not for sex in the city, but for neighborhoods that are safe and close to outdoor recreation. Not surprisingly, according to one study of 2000 affluent boomer homeowners, two-thirds reported they wanted to stay in the suburbs; another 14% wanted to opt for a rural life.

"Everybody in this business wants to talk about the odd person who moves downtown, but it's basically a 'man bites dog' story," says Sandy Rosenbloom, professor of urban planning and gerontology at the University of Arizona. "Most people retire in place. When they move, they don't move downtown, they move to the fringes."

Ms. Rosenbloom's observations are born out in an analysis of migration patterns of people 55-64 by my colleagues at the Praxis Strategy Group. Among the relatively few who move, the trend among this cohort has been to move away from highly urban regions like the San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles and Boston areas. Gainers have included sprawling, less-expensive places like Las Vegas, Charlotte, Phoenix and Southern California's Riverside. Some of the biggest draws, on a per capita basis, are in rural locales such as Idaho and Montana.

Such tendencies can also be seen within almost all major metropolitan areas, where more boomers, on a per capita basis, left the core city than the suburb. The differential was particularly striking in Boston, Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, all with inner cities that are being hyped as magnets for "back to the city" boomers.

There are diverse reasons for these trends. One factor, notes Ms. Rosenbloom, may be that most boomers plan to work beyond the traditional retirement age, and some even into their 70s. Many will do so at least part-time at home. A one- or two-bedroom condo in the city may be splendid for a vacation, but less practical for a home office. Lifestyle also matters. Since so many in this age cohort have spent most of their lives in suburban settings, they are if anything less acculturated than their parents to the density, congestion and noise of inner-city life.

These trends have important long-term implications for the real estate markets of both cities and suburbs. Urban planners and developers counting on free-spending boomers to fill luxury condominiums -- particularly outside of Manhattan and immediate environs -- might be well advised to redirect their efforts towards less affluent but more city-friendly populations. These include students and young childless professionals, as well as that relatively small but still significant cadre of families who would like to make a go of it in the inner city.

But that last group in particular poses a problem for most municipal politicians. Middle-class families can thrive only if cities tackle fundamentals like business costs, job creation, reforming education and fixing basic infrastructure. One appeal of the affluent "empty nester" boomers lies in their perceived lack of need for such expensive, and often politically difficult, fixes.

In contrast, aging boomers may constitute a huge opportunity for suburban developers, particularly those creating new communities or refurbishing small town central cores. Over time, such places may provide an ideal market for smaller homes, condos and townhouses located in areas close to amenities and with access to open space.

"They don't want to move to Florida and they want to stay close to the kids," suggests Jeff Lee, a Washington, D.C., area developer. "What they are looking for is a funky suburban development -- funky but safe."

This can be seen in the unheralded, gradual graying of planned developments like the Woodlands outside Houston. Started in the 1970s largely for young families, the 85,000-resident community is increasingly home to three generations living in the same area. Almost one in four households is now headed by someone over 55, notes Roger Galatas, who for 13 years served as president of the development company which built and managed the Woodlands.

Mr. Galatas sees some hopeful social realities in such trends. Many aging boomers, he suggests, are more than suddenly "liberated" autonomous beings. They often consider themselves to be part of a web of relationships that spans generations. Having more time

for hobbies or sports ranks high in surveys of boomers, but so too does spending time with family, whether an aging parent, a child or grandchild. "People don't want to move away from their families, their churches, or their associations," he says.

There may even be an unexpected element of boomer social responsibility at work. In one survey of "empty nesters," as many as 40% said they expected one or more of their kids to come back and live with them at some point. According to a 2001 Zogby survey, most consider themselves as equally or more concerned than their parents with passing money on to their offspring. They also expect that their kids would welcome them into their homes if the need arose.

This picture may not fit the archetype of the hip, me-first, 50-something boomer as a superannuated rebellious adolescent so beloved by boomer memorializers, peddlers of Viagra and other sexual aids, as well as the ubiquitous luxury urban condo developers. Instead as family and community-centered seniors, they could provide a surprisingly stabilizing element for the generations coming to maturity behind them. That ultimately may prove their greatest legacy.

Mr. Kotkin, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and author of "The City: A Global History" (Modern Library, 2006), is writing a book about the American future.