

What Millennials Want—And Why Cities Are Right to Pay Them So Much Attention

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As a



baby boomer myself, I'll confess to feeling a bit like, enough with all this talk about the Millennials already. But the reality is, those born roughly between 1982 and 2001 form a demographic cohort of some 80 million Americans. So it's not surprising that U.S. cities are paying a lot of attention to what they want—now and in the future—in terms of the places they live.

For cities, the resurgent interest in downtown living has long been attributed to aging boomers—those born roughly between 1945 and 1964, an estimated 80 million as well, many of whom have already become empty-nesters and sold the house in the suburbs and “right-sized” to a condo near the symphony and fabulous bistros. Another significant segment of growing urban populations, of course, are the young professionals and what Richard Florida calls the “creative class.”

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Millennials are something else again. Characterized, fairly or not, as competitive and driven, entitled and narcissistic, thoroughly technology-savvy, and more practical than ideological, they are finding their way in the world, and making the time-honored calibration of professional career and preferred place of residence.

Two public opinion polls came out in the last month suggesting the kinds of places Millennials like. Spoiler alert: it's Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, as well as communities such as—I'm inclined to say once again, of course—Boulder and Austin. The key characteristics seem to be walkability, good schools and parks, and the availability of multiple transportation options.

They found that 54 percent of Millennials surveyed would consider moving to another city if it had more or better options for getting around, and 66 percent said access to high quality transportation is one of the top three criteria they would weigh when deciding where to live. Nearly half of those who owned a car said they would consider giving it up if they could count on public transportation options. Up to 86 percent said it was important for their city to offer opportunities to live and work without relying on a car.

The poll, conducted by Global Strategy Group, was done in 10 major U.S. cities across three 'tiers' of transportation systems – "mature" (Chicago, New York City, San Francisco), "growing" (Charlotte, North Carolina; Denver; Los Angeles; Minneapolis-St. Paul) and "aspiring" (Indianapolis; Nashville; Tampa-St. Petersburg).

"This survey reinforces that cities that don't invest in effective transportation options stand to lose out in the long-run," says Michael Myers, a managing director at The Rockefeller Foundation. "As we move from a car-centric model of mobility to a nation that embraces more equitable and sustainable transportation options, Millennials are leading the way."

The second survey was released last week by the American Planning Association, on the last day of the organization's [National Planning Conference](#) in Atlanta, a gathering of some five thousand planners, elected officials and others. The report on the national poll, titled [Investing in Place](#), compiled results of surveys of 1,040 Americans, roughly half Millennials, the other half baby boomers. Part of the message was that the two groups want many of the same things: better transportation options, walkable communities, technology-enabled cities, and housing that would allow "aging in place."

That poll, conducted by Harris, found that 68 percent of respondents believe the U.S. economy is fundamentally flawed, and that the path to prosperity lies in building up local communities—not through recruiting companies but by concentrating on these same basic elements of desirable places to live.

Whether the community is a small town, suburban or urban location, 49 percent of respondents said they someday want to live in a walkable community, while only seven percent want to live where they have to drive to most places. Over three-quarters noted the importance of affordable and convenient transportation options other than cars in deciding where to live and work; nearly two-thirds said the so-called "shared" economy, meaning companies like Car2Go or Airbnb, was at least somewhat important to them.

Forty-four percent of respondents said they were somewhat or extremely likely to move in the next five years. Fifteen of more than 300 U.S. metro areas named as top potential destinations were: San Diego, New York, Boston, Denver / Boulder, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, Portland Ore., Washington, D.C., Austin, Phoenix, Charlotte, Atlanta, and Miami.

Skeptics might wonder about the framing of questions in polls like this. The APA survey points out the low percentage of respondents who said they would prefer "living in a suburb requiring driving to most places," rather than a place with "walkable amenities." What if they substituted "the freedom to drive to most places?" Nonetheless, there do seem to be some genuine common themes here. And certainly the scale of the demographics warrants this kind of market research: combining Millennials

and boomers translates to roughly 160 million Americans, who are essentially the present and future customers of metropolitan regions. “As planners, it's vital that we look ahead 15 or 20 years,” to guide growth, says APA President William Anderson.

The APA says its national poll was commissioned to “objectively analyze community preferences related to key demographic groups for economic development purposes.” In the end, though, it's all about me. I'm what the APA would consider an “active boomer,” and I do like being in an urban environment. My oldest son, born in 1996, is a Millennial; he's graduating from high school next month and off to college—Washington University in St. Louis—in August. He might surprise me, when he starts his life as an adult, but I can't picture him in a suburb, either. It all feels sensible and frankly a little bit obvious. City leaders and transportation policymakers are right to take note.

Anthony Flint is a fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, a think tank in Cambridge, Mass., and author of *Wrestling With Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City* and *This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America*. His next book, *Modern Man: The Life of Le Corbusier, Architect of Tomorrow* will be published in the fall of 2014 by Amazon Publishing. [All posts »](#)



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