Let's make suburbs into cities: New urbanism, car culture and the future of community

Steven Conn
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By the last quarter of the twentieth century, Americans had succeeded in building an alternative to the dense central city, and the anti-government politics of the New Right had triumphed on the national stage. Roughly three out of every four of us live in large metropolitan regions, but the large cities that anchor those regions do not house a majority of those metropolitans. The greater Philadelphia region, on the East Coast, counts a population of just under 6 million, the city itself only 1.5 million; on the West Coast, the city of Los Angeles is home to nearly 4 million people, but the Los Angeles "metroplex" has grown to nearly 13 million. Hence the paradox: we are a nation clustered around our major cities, we rely on their infrastructure—transportation networks, education and research facilities, cultural institutions—and we remain deeply ambivalent about the city and city-ness itself.

At the same time, despite the flight from the city after the Second World War, despite the proliferation of physical environments shaped primarily by the automobile and private housing, Americans seemed no closer to solving the question of how to live the good life than they had been at the beginning of the century. Indeed, to judge by any number of sociological studies, public opinion surveys, and news reports, they were arguably further from finding that grail than ever before. A country of exiles, bowling alone, inhabiting a geography of nowhere. "At the conclusion of the 20th century," sociologist Robert Putnam concluded, "ordinary Americans shared [a] sense of civic malaise." The longing to belong that underscored the twentieth century had not been satisfied, the beloved community that Josiah Royce had anticipated had not yet come to pass.

Into that loneliness and alienation emerged two movements promising to heal what ailed us. One was made up of a loose assemblage of sociologists, philosophers, lawyers, and public policy types who called themselves "communitarians." They have attempted to formulate an ethos to navigate between an excessive individualism and an overbearing state. The other was a group of planners, designers, and architects who called themselves the "new urbanists." These new urbanists believe that America's sterile built environment has contributed mightily to that civic malaise, and that with better planning we can create meaningful communities.