

Barricading our cities, and our minds

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Everyone bemoans the way street crime, visible poverty, deteriorating infrastructure, decaying homes and boarded-up businesses are becoming increasingly common features of city life, but we rarely ask ourselves how this deterioration in the world around us is affecting the way we look at the world.

In not asking that question, we underestimate the importance of urban decay as a problem in its own right, and the degree to which it promotes other social ills. Inner city decay is part of a dangerous and silent progression that is not being given the attention it deserves: the fragmentation of our society into potentially or actually hostile camps, barricaded off from each other. And it has the potential, in the end, to exercise an important influence on the course of national politics.

In order to see why, we have to start by looking at how decay happens. It begins with an anti-urban bias, a belief, deeply-rooted in Canada and the United States, that cities are, at best, a necessary evil, and the likely scene of violence, social disorder, dirt and tension. Rural and small-town life, by contrast, is associated with cleanliness, sturdy reliability and family values. The conclusion: We may need cities for our livelihoods, but they are not good places to live.

These conceptions have been promoted by a profusion of media images. Consider *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Anne of Green Gables*, or that odious Müslix commercial that romanticizes fruit-picking. More to the point, for the past half-century the notion that we can live better outside the inner city has been energetically and effectively advocated by a development industry that gained its foothold on wealth and power -- and continues to augment that wealth -- through suburban development.

New subdivisions are sold by purveying the image of a home in quasi-rural surroundings, but conveniently located near the city. The fact that these semi-rural paradises rapidly become urban areas distinguished from the city proper mainly by their monotony only serves as a basis for promoting a subsequent round of flight to the new urban fringe.

In short, we are a society in a perpetual state of flight from the city. In practice, most people who can afford to move out of the inner city do so. To be sure, there are middle-class and wealthy people residing in selected downtown areas -- gentrified older neighbourhoods or up-scale condominiums, especially in the most prosperous cities. But the vast majority of people with money to spend prefer to live outside the inner city.

In the neighbourhoods that are not gentrified, that leaves those who cannot afford to move out. Poverty is not necessarily accompanied by social problems, any more than wealth guarantees the absence of social problems. But when a metropolitan area is divided into neighbourhoods where poverty predominates and others where comfortable circumstances are the rule, it is inevitable that there will be a concentration of social problems in the poor areas. At the same time, the exodus from those areas makes it inevitable that, as the problems escalate, the resources for dealing with them will dwindle.

Where social problems predominate, lawlessness follows. Increasing crime and growing poverty lead to the decay of some downtown neighbourhoods. Houses are boarded up. Some neighbourhoods become so crime-ridden and decayed that they turn into no-go zones, and, hey presto, the bias against cities that started it all begins to look factual.

Confronted with growing evidence of the nastiness of city life, growing numbers of people take counter-measures. First they lock their car doors when they drive through what, in their minds at least, has become *The Ghetto*. But of course their neighbourhoods are not free of crime either, and when they are hit by crime they imagine that it has been committed by a refugee from the hideous streets of the inner city.

The solution, or so many of them begin to believe, is to fortify their homes against outsiders. It begins with high fences, heavy gates and barred windows, then proceeds to the hiring of private police to patrol the neighbourhood. When that still does not produce the yearned-for feeling of security, the next step is gated communities: whole subdivisions, entire condominium developments, or apartment complexes protected from the outside world by armed guards or electronic security. Such developments have already proliferated in the United States and are gaining a foothold in Canada.

A similar mentality is evident in retail trade. Shopping malls have always been highly controlled environments, carefully designed for the sole purpose of circulating potential customers as quickly as possible from one purchase to the next. From the outset, penniless lingerers were kept at bay. Security personnel forbade lengthy stays in the food court.

Benches in the mall corridor looked attractive, but had been designed, possibly by sadists, and apparently with the objective of encouraging short rest periods. In time, such measures have been augmented by electronic security and guards who double as bouncers instructed to deal summarily with anyone deemed an undesirable presence.

What is happening here is not only growing fear of the poor, but also the privatization of public space, which is given an added push by government cut-backs. Public streets are moved indoors into malls and become private preserves. Parks and streets in gated communities are barred to anyone who does not live there. User fees are charged for the use of other parks and public facilities so that, in practice, they become the property of those who can afford the fees.

The more privatization and security-consciousness grow, the more the fear spreads. What began as flight from the perceived ugliness of the city is in danger of ending with the fragmentation of society into mutually hostile camps, walled off against each other in an atmosphere of growing suspicion and fear. If we can believe Mike Davis, in his compelling *City of Quartz*, the future has already arrived in Los Angeles.

He describes a state of affairs that approaches class warfare, but is as much a putsch as a rebellion, with the well-to-do, in effect, engaging in offensive action against the poor. Los Angeles's rapidly-developing financial district is pictured as a series of super-blocks, so carefully circumscribed by security that together they constitute, in effect, a walled city.

Hispanic homeless people wash and swim in the sewage-laden Los Angeles River, with no warning signs posted in Spanish. Pedlars vending tropical fruit and household items are rounded up by police in sweeps aimed at narcotics dealers. Latino and African American neighbourhoods are declared "narcotics enforcement areas" and police barriers restrict entry.

All of this has rich implications for national politics. The more people are barricaded off from each other, and are suspicious and fearful of each other, the easier it becomes for governments to eliminate compassion from their calculations. A society that consists of a series of barricaded communities is likely to be an uncaring society, prone to cruelty and neglect.

In the United States, the national political implications of inner city decay have become more concrete than that. The 1992 election was a watershed: It was the first in which a majority of voters were expected to be suburbanites. As the election campaign heated up in the early summer, a race riot in Los Angeles was widely interpreted as a symptom of the crisis of American inner cities.

In response, a coalition of big city mayors got together, formulated a plan of aid to inner cities, and publicized it, thinking to take advantage of an election year by putting pressure on the candidates to address the crisis that was so evident to everyone.

The result? Neither Republican nor Democratic candidates responded to the initiative. That was hardly surprising as far as Republican candidates were concerned, since the Republican Party has long functioned as a defender of suburban interests. But the Democratic Party has, in the past, launched numerous programmes of support for inner cities. This time, however, Democrats understood that it was impossible to get elected without the support of suburban voters, and they took a pass on support for inner cities.

William Schneider, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, referred to the 1992 election as "the first election of the suburban century" and commented: "The prevailing imperative of suburban life is security -- both economic and physical." The suburban century continued in the most recent American elections with the passage of punishing welfare cuts to the accompaniment of rhetoric comparing poor people to wolves and alligators. No one would talk about their neighbours that way, even if they didn't like them. But in a society segregated along class lines it becomes much easier.

We have not reached that point in Canada, but the continuing abandonment of many inner-city neighbourhoods by middle-class residents, and the continuing decay and apparently worsening violence in those neighbourhoods suggests that we are on the same road. The election of a social-programme-slashing, user-fee-levying government in Ontario, with heavy support from exurban areas around Toronto -- the so-called 905 belt -- is suggestive of political drift toward Canada's own suburban century.

Clearly then, the decay of inner cities is far more than just a symptom of poverty and other social ills. It is a causal factor in its own right, deeply implicated in trends that are important in shaping national politics and the society as a whole. Finding ways to restore some of the civility, and the easy mixing of populations, that characterizes inner cities at their best, and to maintain it in those places where it still exists, ought to be a major national political objective.