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A Region with Access for All: Overcoming the Social Engineering of Suburbia

~ john a powell

Editor's Note

This essay is from a talk given at CALA in May 1998 by John A. Powell, professor at the University of Minnesota Law School and executive director of the University's Institute of Race and Poverty. He appeared with William Morris, director of the Design Center for American Urban Landscape, John Adams, University of Minnesota professor of geography, Minnesota State Representative Myron Orfield, and Curt Johnson, chair of the Metropolitan Council.

I'm going to start with a historical perspective on how social policy has shaped metropolitan regions, then talk about some of the dynamics happening today, project it into the future, and then finally talk about solutions.

In terms of sprawl and issues of concentrated poverty, I think in order to really understand it we have to go back at least to World War II. Curt [Curt Johnson, chair of the Metropolitan Council] just talked about subdivisions where we now have large numbers of people living in subdivisions, where not only do all people look alike but all the houses look alike as well.

That was not true before World War II. Subdivisions are a relatively new phenomenon, and I don't think that was simply a function of people's deciding that they wanted to live in suburbs. In fact we know it wasn't.

When the United States adopted the Federal Housing Association (FHA) to help people buy homes, it was revolutionary. Before that time you had to put 50 percent down to buy a home. Most Americans couldn't afford to do that, and, in fact, much of the legislation came into effect during the 1930s at the height of the Depression. And the federal government stepped in and said we need to do something to make homes available to Americans and at that time most urban Americans lived in central cities. In creating a push for home ownership, the federal government also stated a clear preference for new construction outside established urban areas.

The FHA also wrote in the underwriting manuals that in order to receive FHA housing loans that would allow the buyer to put down only 5 percent (and if you were a veteran, only 3 percent) you had to live in a racially homogeneous neighborhood.

Some time later, in 1965, the Interstate Defense Highway Act created immense freeway linkages not only between cities, but also into cities, thereby separating established neighborhoods and fueling suburban growth. Thus in effect, the federal government funded and made it rational, desirable, and reasonable to move out of the central city into these large subdivisions. And it did this in



From the Minnesota Historical Society

such a way that it largely benefitted whites and prohibited blacks from living in those subdivisions.

In fact, the federal government said if you have a diverse population, you are not eligible for this program. That is not simply people exercising choice. That's the federal government, and one of the things that I still get frustrated with today. Some scholars have said that this subsidy probably cost the federal government about \$1 trillion dollars. And yet today when we look at the problem we are asked to turn to volunteerism. Let people and the markets do what they will yet we run the risks of "social engineering."

The huge irony here is that the postwar suburbs are the largest social engineering project this country has ever undertaken. And yet when we want to challenge it, we say we can't do anything. We have to basically rely on the goodwill of people, nonprofit agencies, and charities.

Zoning authorities

One of the important facts most people don't realize: Cities or municipalities have no zoning authority. Now in my saying this, you probably wonder what law school do I teach at. All zoning authority comes directly from the state, and the state delegates that authority to municipalities, but the ultimate authority rests with the state.

Thus the state government has absolute control, if it decides to exercise it, about what goes on in terms of zoning. It doesn't have to go with "hat in hand" to the suburbs and say "would you please think about zoning and affordable housing differently," That would be good for our communities. It has the authority to say "No, you can't do that. I'm delegating to you, but I am delegating with these restraints." Now politically we may not be willing to do that, but it is not a question of power or authority.

Regional sprawl and segregation

After World War II, two of the largest migrations inside the United States occurred simultaneously: blacks migrating from the South to the North and whites migrating from the city to the suburb. The latter migration was tremendously funded and supported by the federal government.

(over)

The more sprawl in a region and the more fragmented a region is, the more racially segregated and the more economically segregated the region. Unless you address sprawl and fragmentation, you cannot address problems of racial and economic segregation.

If you address sprawl and fragmentation, the separation of new jobs on the fringe and those who need them, there is a possibility that you then can break down the barriers of racial and economic segregation. And I agree with Curt Johnson's [chair of the Metropolitan Council, who also spoke at the forum] statement that one of the substantial forms of segregation that we have not paid attention to recently is economic segregation.

Concentrated versus individualized poverty

Segregation of any kind is not a function of choice. I think we have pernicious policies that support a fragmented region, and we have to think about adopting new policies. Now in terms of thinking about racial and economic segregation, concentrated poverty is where they come together. You have low-income black people and increasing numbers of Latinos living in high-poverty neighborhoods, and high poverty neighborhoods function differently than individualized poverty.

Individualized poverty is more likely a poor white's experience. Concentrated poverty, where neighborhoods and — in some places like Detroit and Cleveland — entire cities are poor — is something that blacks and Latinos experience much more of. And I want to suggest to you that they are not there because they want to be around each other. They are there because of our social policy.

In 1968 the Kerner Commission used the term "ghetto" to describe areas of concentrated poverty. Their findings also stated, and I paraphrase here, that the Negro can never forget what whites fail to understand...that whites are implicated in every aspect of building the ghetto, in its formation, in its maintenance, and in its evolution over time.

Even though you don't see white people very often in the ghetto, it is policies adopted by powerful whites that actually create ghettos. And when blacks moved from the South to the North they weren't looking to live with other blacks in the ghetto. They were moving for jobs. The economy was humming and blacks left by the millions to the North for jobs.

Today, many of those jobs have left the central cities. And blacks and Latinos increasingly can't get to those jobs. In this region that might sound like it is an important issue, but it is marginal here because the minority population is still relatively small.

The risks of a polarized future in the Twin Cities region

Our perception of "minorities" is going to change. As of the year 2000 less than half of the working force in Minnesota will be white males. After the year 2015, all growth in terms of the labor force of this state will be in the minority community. If you look at the

growth of the labor force in the state for the next 30 years, it is projected that there will be 11 percent growth in the white population and 247 percent growth in the minority population. The minority population is not expanding; it is exploding.

And there are some other things that are happening that should cause us to pause. The white population is aging. The minority population is very young; in 20 or 30 years the average African American will be 26 years old. The average white will be 42 years old. Whites will not have children. Their children will be grown. They will not have children in school. You will have a labor force that is increasingly black and Latino and Asian with a lot of children in school and you will have a tremendous urge to polarize.

There will be an equally tremendous urge on the part of whites not to participate in the schooling of these children. On the other hand, the care that whites will need and the support for social security will be dependent upon workers who are increasingly black, brown, and yellow. So what I want to suggest is that unless we start addressing these issues in a way that really rethinks the sprawl and fragmentation, we are headed for a serious problem in this state and in this country.

Housing where the opportunities are

There are many problems and many ways of dealing with the fragmentation and regional sprawl. One, of course, is transportation. Another is schooling. Another, of course, is employment. Ultimately we have to look at all of them, but I want to suggest that the key is *housing itself*.

When we look at housing needs, we see that already we are tremendously undersubscribed in the number of units of low- and moderate-income housing. And while this data is accurate, it is also misleading because it doesn't talk about the spatial distribution of housing and the spatial distribution of jobs. The reality is that by and large, we do not need any more low-income housing in the central city unless we also build light rail to the central city.

We need housing where the jobs will be, and in the future the job growth in this state and in this region will not be in the central city, it will be in the suburbs. What we need is an aggressive, fair-share housing policy that results in housing being distributed throughout the region and especially where job growth is occurring.

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