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What Transit Will Actually Look Like in the New Suburbia

Or, why we should fall in love with ride-share, buses, and walking.

LEIGH GALLAGHER | @leighgallagher | Jun 12, 2014 | Comments

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A rendering of Bridge Park, a mixed-use development in suburban Dublin, Ohio. ([Dublin, Ohio / Crawford Hoying](#))

As the Manhattanization of America rolls on — the urbanization of not just our cities [but our suburbs](#) — many of these efforts are taking place in the depths of car-dependent suburbia. So while developers tout walkability, sense of community, and access to an "exciting Main Street environment," a car may still be necessary to commute to work, or for any kind of substantial errand. The historian Kenneth T. Jackson, author of the masterful *Crabgrass Frontier: The*

Suburbanization of the United States, once pointed out to me that in many of these new developments, you can buy milk, an ice cream cone, and a great cup of coffee, but you can't buy a mattress. The point is, most households in these communities will still need a car, sometimes two.

This enrages some transit purists. No matter how vibrant a newly developed downtown, if you're not removing the need for a car, you're not *really* [urbanizing the suburbs](#) and making them more livable. Right?

I say no — the mere ability to live closer to your neighbors, to sit on a porch within earshot of the people walking down the street, to walk to a café (whether it's in a shiny new town center or an authentically urban neighborhood) is transformative for cul-de-sac transplants. These urban developments still represent an important step, even if the transit issue isn't 100 percent solved.



I'm bracing myself for angry emails from that statement. But the fact is, most of our country's recent suburban development is in communities where there is little access to public transit — especially rail transit. The dense, transit-friendly suburbs of the Northeast are a fluke; most of America's suburbs were built in the last 50 years, and most commuters who live in them [drive themselves to work](#). That's where the problem is, so that's where the patches are being applied.

The fact is that building rail transit in car-dependent suburbs is difficult for many reasons — density, geography, and cost among them. "The residential and commercial densities required for higher-capacity transit are usually far in excess of even the most dense 'town center' developments," says Shyam Kannan, managing director of planning at the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. Unlike our older suburbs, New Suburbia developments are not often "strung together like beads on a string," says Kannan, capable of being efficiently linked by rail routes. Far from it. The [economics for a light rail line](#), then, become very challenging without huge subsidies.

But while the debate about the car's role in New Suburbia rages on, a few

emerging approaches to the transit problem are worth noting.

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Many new experiments are in the works involving ride-sharing, and while none are likely to scale anytime soon, it's a fix that draws heavily from the influence of Silicon Valley. As my colleague Michal Lev-Ram reports in the lead story in *Fortune's* [New Metropolis issue](#) about the [end of driving](#), Google is partnering with GM on a pilot car-sharing service at its Mountain View headquarters that gives employees access to a fleet of 50 all-electric Chevrolet Spark EVs that are linked up to a mobile app that matches drivers and cars for morning and evening commutes. (This isn't too dissimilar from Streetsblogger Mark Gorton's idea for what he calls [Smart Para-Transit](#), based on a fleet of vehicles with a central dispatch that matches riders and destinations.) In Palo Alto, Mercedes-Benz is testing a "Boost by Benz" program that shuttles kids around to piano lessons and soccer practice in brightly colored vans. Lev-Ram also notes that GM and Toyota recently said they would start giving discounts on new car purchases to Uber drivers.

In Dublin, Ohio, a suburb 17 miles northwest of Columbus, the town has rezoned 1,100 acres to create the Bridge Street District, a cutting-edge plan for a dense, mixed-use urban environment, including a \$14 million pedestrian bridge designed to help "create a rich and robust non-motorized environment." Local developer Crawford Hoying is developing a \$300 million mixed-use project on the one side of the river, and on the other, it's developing 42 high-end condos — 24 of which are already reserved, mostly by empty-nesters living in big homes in nearby car-dependent suburbs or golf communities. "Walkability is the number one reason for every person," says principal Brent Crawford. Dublin has no access to rail transit. But the Central Ohio Transit Authority recently announced a plan to redraw its bus network to offer more high-frequency service to denser areas, including new lines to Bridge Park. Crawford says this means his residents could have access to everything they need without a car.

Kannan of Washington Metro believes cities need to seriously rethink buses, which are much cheaper than rail, carry lots of people, and can go anywhere. "Today's buses aren't your father's buses," he says: they're high tech, clean, energy efficient, sleek, and in some cases, [highly amenitized](#). (As a longtime customer of New York's Hampton Jitney, I can vouch for the quality of an "amenitized" bus ride.) There's still a [stigma against buses](#) in this country, but it's conceivable that this mindset could change. Consider the huge popularity of the controversial commuting buses in San Francisco operated not just by Google but by Facebook, eBay, Genentech, and others. And witness the rise of intercity carriers Bolt Bus and Megabus in recent years — especially among those transit-happy, texting Millennials as a dirt-cheap alternative to Amtrak travel up and down the Northeast seaboard (I'm no Jitney snob; I've taken these a lot, too). Something bigger may be going on.



The Skokie Swift service celebrated its 50th anniversary in April 2014. ([Flickr user Zolk](#))

There's another solution here, too — the idea that the best way to build New Suburbia is off the back of Old Suburbia. Many developers are seizing opportunity to build updated, urbanized housing stock where transit already exists. In Libertyville, Illinois, a prewar suburb 35 miles north of Chicago, John McLinden has developed [School Street](#), a row of 26 porch-adorned single-family homes with barely a few feet between them on narrow, Chicago-sized lots. The

development runs right into Libertyville's 178-year-old main street, [Milwaukee Avenue](#), a vision in tightly packed boutiques, mom and pop retailers, restaurants and "2 a.m. bars," as McLinden touts. Right behind it is where residents catch the North Line into Chicago. McLinden is now taking his model to nearby Skokie with a new development called [Floral Avenue](#). Skokie sits on the Chicago Transit Authority's yellow line, also known as the "Skokie Swift" — so named in 1964 as a two-year experimental service funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, CTA, and the Village of Skokie to show that mass transit could be adapted to service the new suburban market.

To paraphrase Robert A.M. Stern, [suburbs are like cholesterol](#); there are good ones and bad ones. We doubled down on the bad ones, but the good ones have a lot to offer—including good old urban DNA and lots of public transit. Will Silverman, a senior managing director at Savills Studley in Manhattan and one of my most plugged-in sources, swears that inner-ring, transit-oriented suburbs are going to be [the next big thing](#) just for this reason, and insists that they have already started to rise as a separate entity from car-oriented suburbs. "It's happening," he emails, pointing out that in the New York market, that means places like Forest Hills, Riverdale, and Douglaston, Queens in New York City and inner suburbs like Pelham, Hastings-on-Hudson and Bronxville, "are going to do REALLY well."

As I ponder this, he emails again: "Please let me buy a house in Larchmont before you write about this."

Sorry, Will.

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