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Aug. 30, 2005. 01:00 AM

People are moving in as jobs are moving out

Appeal of suburbs shifts downtown

CHRISTOPHER HUME

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There was a time when cities were said to be dead.

It wasn't so long ago — the 1960s and '70s — that experts decided the metropolis had reached the end of the line. It was a thing of the past, they declared; the future lay elsewhere.

Early in the 21st century, however, cities around the world are growing and expanding, doing well if not booming.

Even in North America, cities are resurgent. The appeal the suburbs once possessed has moved downtown. There's no better proof of this than the condo boom that's now in its second decade.

Suddenly, everyone wants to be in the city. The price they are willing to pay is life in a 500-square-foot unit on the 18th floor of some anonymous residential tower facing an architectural doppelganger across the road.


Though many aren't thrilled with the quality of these new buildings, few have questioned the value of the trend. After all, the more people downtown, the healthier the city.

That may be true, but some are starting to question the wisdom of turning the city into a work-free zone. This is where people come to live and have fun, but increasingly their jobs are farther afield.

The traditional equation that had much of the suburban population heading downtown to work is gradually changing. More and more, people are driving from suburb to suburb or even from downtown to suburb to get to their jobs. Rush hour now happens in both directions, inbound and out, morning and night.

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And because businesses in the city pay municipal property taxes at a rate 3.3 times that charged homeowners, the corporations are quietly abandoning the core for the hinterland.

At the same time, house prices in the city have reached unprecedented heights. Toronto's much-celebrated neighbourhoods are becoming too expensive for all but the wealthiest. Anyone who bought a house in the city 20 years ago wonders whether they could afford it now. Probably not.

Developers, of course, have embraced the condo with a passion verging on mania. The only office tower that has been constructed in downtown Toronto since the 1980s is the Maritime Life building at Queen and Yonge. Before that there was the Bay-Adelaide Centre, which was killed in 1993, leaving only a five-storey concrete hulk and an underground parking garage to show for its builder's lofty ambitions.

In the meantime, condos are going up all around, most notably on the southwest corner of King and Yonge, a location no one would have considered the least bit residential until recently. And now, the dreaded Donald Trump wants to add another condo to the core, a multi-storey extravaganza just down the street from the carcass of Bay-Adelaide.

For the moment, this massive influx of residents is seen as a good thing. Yet one wonders what becomes of a downtown where so few are actually employed. What happens to the tax base of a city that has been emptied of business?

One can't help but think of Venice, one of the most celebrated and beautiful cities on the planet, though less than 70,000 residents actually inhabit the place. The real population and business of Venice — business other than tourism — is in Mestre, a dreary community right beside Venice that visitors rarely see.

In the meantime, that other given of urban life — poverty — is also being exported to the suburbs. As the poor are pushed out of the areas they have traditionally inhabited, they have no option but to move farther out. And as awful as being poor in the inner city may be, suburban poverty will be worse. People can afford to be poor in the city, but in the suburbs ...

With amenities, such as they are, dispersed along six-lane highways that run between disconnected subdivisions, just getting from one place to another becomes an ordeal. With the absence of any meaningful public transit — *that's* all downtown — and the growing price of gas, the prospects look bleak for many.

Just a few years into the new millennium, it's clear that the old pattern of people and money flowing from the city to the hinterland has been reversed. It's the other way around now; people want to get back downtown.

That's why the next Detroit will be a suburb, not a city.

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