

# New sprawl has plan for suburbia

We are in the middle of a \$25 trillion building boom that is changing the face of the country, carved from desert and barren tracts, notes **DAVID BROOKS**.

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BUCKEYE, Ariz. —

HEAD WEST from downtown Phoenix past acres of postwar sprawl, go up over the White Tank Mountains, and there spread out before you is the future.

There before you is a barren desert floor. Right now it's nothing but scrub, tire tracks and desert washes, but this land has been bought by developers, and groundbreaking is just around the corner. By 2025, a million people will be living in this now-empty space.

When you are out here, you can feel America's growth. Between now and 2025, the population of the United States will increase by 70 million. That's the populations of California, New York and Florida put together.

To accommodate these people, 100 billion square feet of new residential space will have to be constructed. According to a Brookings Institution study by Arthur C. Nelson, half of the buildings in which Americans will live, play and work in the year 2030 don't even exist yet. We are in the middle of a \$25 trillion building boom that is changing the face of the country, and most of it is happening in desert places like this one.

It's true that cities have experienced a resurgence in the past 10 years, but the real action is still out here on the fringe. All the population growth of all the major U.S. cities in this decade still doesn't equal the growth of just two suburban California counties: San Bernardino and Riverside. The flow of people moving into cities is but a trickle compared with the torrent moving out to exurbia.

When you study this torrent, you realize it is actually several torrents running in the

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same direction. It's active seniors looking for communities tailored to their needs. It's young singles looking for town houses (there are more single-person households in suburbia now than two-parent families). It's rich people looking for country clubs and poor people looking for affordable housing. Most of all, it's immigrants who are skipping gateway cities and buying homes twice as quickly as earlier immigrant groups.

Up until now, explosive growth and increasing market segmentation have led to sprawling decentralization. In pursuit of their own private havens, people have been spreading out and unwittingly creating the centerless landscapes of strip malls and tract homes that have been the subject of a million anti-sprawl lamentations.

But that's not what is being built and planned here outside Phoenix, and that's not the emerging pattern nationwide. The story of American development is the story of a contest between privacy and community, and the tide is turning. Communal impulses are rising up to counter privatizing, decentralizing trends.

Suburbia's critics tend to treat home buyers as bovine pawns of evil developers. But home buyers led this change. In the 1980s, exurbanites wanted golf courses in

prestigious new communities. But by the mid-1990s, they wanted Starbucks, Kinko's and walking trails — community spaces to combat isolation.

The first wave of far-flung exurbanites overshot the mark, and found they were missing civic bonds. So creative builders are responding to the new market pressures.

When you look at the new influential master-planned communities — Verrado here in Arizona, or Stapleton near Denver or Ladera Ranch in California — you see that the old tract homes and enclosed-mall version of suburbia are gone. These new developments combine New Urbanist ideas — like mixed-use downtown neighborhoods with lofts over shops — with the traditional car- and backyard-friendly neighborhoods that people move to the suburbs to get.

These communities, and the ones planned here west of Phoenix, tend to offer traditional cul-de-sac residential areas around amenity-rich villages — pedestrian-friendly streetscapes with shops, restaurants, schools, community centers, theaters and town squares.

These communities play with diversity. Some mix day care centers and senior centers. Stapleton has \$120,000 homes on the same block as \$1 million homes. Market Common in Virginia has an urban grid with a suburban sense of safety and enclosure.

This is what Joel Kotkin calls the New Suburbanism. These new suburban villages, he says, will combine with revived older suburban villages, like Naperville, Ill., and Fullerton, Calif., to create an "archipelago of villages" — a new sort of landscape that is neither city nor sprawl.

It's all kind of amazing: market-tested cohesive institutions to counteract the segmenting and niche-ifying forces of the age. It's not anti-suburbia; it's go-go suburbia growing up.