

This Old House

By DAVID BROOKS

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The 1980s and 1990s made up the era of the great dispersal. Forty-three million people moved every year, and basically they moved outward from inner-ring suburbs to far-flung exurbs on the metro fringe. For example, the population of metropolitan Pittsburgh declined by 8 percent in those years, but the developed land area of the Pittsburgh area sprawled outward by 43 percent.

If you asked people in that age of go-go suburbia what they wanted in their new housing developments, they often said they wanted a golf course. But the culture has changed. If you ask people today what they want, they're more likely to say coffee shops, hiking trails and community centers.

People overshot the mark. They moved to the exurbs because they wanted space and order. But once there, they found that they were missing community and social bonds. So in the past years there has been a new trend. Meeting places are popping up across the suburban landscape.

There are restaurant and entertainment zones, mixed-use streetscape malls, suburban theater districts, farmers' markets and concert halls. In addition, downtown areas in places like Charlotte and Dallas are reviving as many people move back into the city in search of human contact. Joel Kotkin, the author of "The New Geography," calls this clustering phenomenon the New Localism.

Barack Obama has said that he would start an infrastructure project that will dwarf Dwight Eisenhower's highway program. If, indeed, we are going to have a once-in-a-half-century infrastructure investment, it would be great if the program would build on today's emerging patterns. It would be great if Obama's spending, instead of just dissolving into the maw of construction, would actually encourage the clustering and leave a legacy that would be visible and beloved 50 years from now.

To take advantage of the growing desire for community, the Obama plan would have to do two things. First, it would have to create new transportation patterns. The old metro design was based on a hub-and-spoke system—a series of highways that converged on an urban core. But in an age of multiple downtown nodes and complicated travel routes, it's better to have a complex web of roads and rail systems.

Second, the Obama stimulus plan could help localities create suburban town squares. Many communities are trying to build focal points. The stimulus plan could build charter schools, pre-K centers, national service centers and other such programs around new civic hubs.

This kind of stimulus would be consistent with Obama's campaign, which was all about bringing Americans together in new ways. It would help maintain the social capital that's

about to be decimated by the economic downturn.

But alas, there's no evidence so far that the Obama infrastructure plan is attached to any larger social vision. In fact, there is a real danger that the plan will retard innovation and entrench the past.

In a stimulus plan, the first job is to get money out the door quickly. That means you avoid anything that might require planning and creativity. You avoid anything that might require careful implementation or novel approaches. The quickest thing to do is simply throw money at things that already exist.

Sure enough, the Obama stimulus plan, at least as it has been sketched out so far, is notable for its lack of creativity. Obama wants to put more computers in classrooms, an old idea with dubious educational merit. He also proposes a series of ideas that are good but not exactly transformational: refurbishing the existing power grid; fixing the oldest roads and bridges; repairing schools; and renovating existing government buildings to make them more energy efficient.

This is the federal version of "This Old House." And this is before the stimulus money gets diverted, as it inevitably will, to refurbish old companies. The auto bailout could eventually swallow \$125 billion. After that, it could be the airlines and so on.

It's also before the spending drought that is bound to follow the spending binge. Because we're going to be spending \$1 trillion now on existing structures and fading industries, there will be less or nothing in 2010 or 2011 for innovative transport systems, innovative social programs or anything else.

Before the recession hit, we were enjoying a period of urban and suburban innovation. We could have been on the verge of a transportation revolution. It looks as if the Obama infrastructure plan may freeze that change, not fuel it.

And not to get all Rod McKuen on you or anything, but the larger point is this: Social change has a natural rhythm. The season of prosperity gives way to the season of economic scarcity, and out of the winter of recession, new growth has room to emerge. A stimulus package may be necessary, but unless designed with care, its main effect will be to prop up the drying husks of the fall.

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