

## **Panel – The Suburban Downtown**

**Moderator:**

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Thanks for having me here. It's always good to get away from the east at this time of the year, I tell you. You know, when I'm packing for places, one of the things you think about is how much outerwear you need to bring. And I brought like, you know, fleece. That's a good sign when you can just do that.

So right away, I think Riverside has all kinds of advantages over my home in North Virginia, in Alexandria, Virginia. Also, I think the summer where I'm living is like another form of winter, only with bugs and humidity.

So for three months of the year, it's nice where I am. Let me tell you. I can't say too bad a thing or it will get back to some of these local elected officials. "What's wrong with our weather? Better than up north."

I want to just start out by giving you a little bit of background on what I'm going to be taking this material from. In other words, where is my idea coming out of? And that is that I just finished a book. It's in its final edit. It's called "Boomburbs: The Rise of America's Accidental Cities." And some of the boomburbs aren't so happy about that label, "accidental," by the way. It gives a sort of sense of not being planned. It's in its final edit.

I am not going to put a PowerPoint up today. Some of these photos are the kind -- it's like this is a strip shopping area. I think you get it. I don't have any maps that I want to show. I do something that's geographically based. I use PowerPoint to try to avoid it when it's talking about something as ubiquitous as the boomburbs, but I will sort of paint a picture of these places for you in terms of their diversity, because they are quite diverse.

I looked at about 140 cities. And they ranged from 50,000 to 500,000 people. And although there's only 140 of these places, they are about half of all the growth occurring in cities in that size range. In other words, they're where the action is. They're a small fraction. They are about 20 percent of cities that meet that size range, but they are most of the new development and the infill development. So just capturing these places is capturing really a significant share of the phenomena of cities below, let's say, Washington and Boston and San Francisco and above a kind of small town. And most of the boomburbs, as I described them, are west, by the way, not east, having to do with the fact that westerners do districting for municipalities different than the east. I live, for example, in a county of 1,000,000 people, Fairfax County, Virginia. It's unincorporated, and it would probably have several cities that would be in that 50 thousand to 500 thousand range that had also met the other criteria for being a boomburb, which is to say you grew fast since 1970. And some of these places, by the way, have had double-digit or many times double-digit growth since the 1940s. Some of them are based on war industries originally and then were swept up in

general urbanization of big region.

And, incidentally, you are in one of these cities, because Riverside met the criteria. It's big enough and it's grown fast enough. It has older sections, but through annexation, as probably many of you know, it's adding new land all the time and picking up and grabbing what would have been the exurban population growth at the edge. Other examples around the Inland Empire include places like Fontana, Rancho Cucamonga. And as far as around the country, Mesa, Arizona, east of Phoenix; Plano, Texas; North Las Vegas, Nevada; Coral Springs, Florida, where my brother lives. So I have a brother in a boomburb. Naperville, Illinois.

And as far as the case analysis that I've done for this book, I have spent about a year in the boomburbs, because I lived in Tempe, Arizona, for six months. There's one. I spent a good deal of time in Riverside, California. And it all adds up to quite a bit of my personal life, you know, working and living in these places. I wanted to get a very vivid sense of them. I interviewed a diverse range of people too. And by the way, I was talking with the press PR person the other day and she raised with me, you know, "How many of these have you been to?" And it's only a few that I have not been to. And I have been to them in ways that -- you know, people use these cities as -- it's got an airport, hotels, and, you know, sometimes you don't know you're in them, they're so obscure. Originally, I have been getting involved in this project, which was part of a bunch of research off the 2000 census that I did with the Brookings Institution, was that most of the fast-growing cities in the United States are relatively obscure places.

The fastest growing city since 1990 is Gilbert, Arizona. And Gilbert, Arizona insists that it is a town. It insists it so much that it's officially a town. And if you ask, for example, grad students to go out and find data on a place, they come back and there will be literally the label, "Gilbert Town." And I had to say to my grad students, "Gilbert Town? Gilbert Town has got 200,000 people. What's going on here?" I went and talked to that mayor. One of the persons I interviewed. And he said, "No. No. We are a town on purpose. We could have been a city once we reached 5,000 people under Arizona law. We are going to get to over 300,000 people, but we are still going to be a town in the mind, where it matters, you know. Because we are never going to let, you know, New York City happen on our doorstep."

And that's an extreme case, but I think you get a flavor for what these places may be like. So I've talked with developers and I've talked with planners, business improvement districts that are focused on this specific subsection, downtowns. By the way, the book is not just about their downtowns. And downtown is interesting, because boomburbs aren't really about, at least in the past, their downtowns. That might have been where they got some growth. You know, a lot of these places began early 20th century as tiny little specks, as villages, and the downtown may reflect the older building environment within them, but it's not where the city has its economy, its population, you know. That's instead out there on the freeway. They are more like an exit ramp economy.

And most of them, by the way, do not have edge cities. An edge city is a technically defined area of

5,000,000 square feet or more of office space coalesced into a reasonably consistent continuous chunk of space, mixed use with 600,000 square feet of retail. There's only about three edge cities in all of them. What they have instead is a separate book I wrote for boomburbs called "Edgeless Cities." That is that at every off-ramp there's a little bit of economy, maybe a half million square feet and so on. And that's the heart of those places.

And that's what's interesting about their downtowns. They have downtowns, but these downtowns are tiny, you know, places relative to the size of the city. In an extreme case, let me just mention Mesa, Arizona from the start. Mesa is a city east of Phoenix at the center of, I guess, the East Valley, the sub region of Phoenix that Mesa anchors. And by the way, that sub region is like the Inland Empire to the rest of Phoenix. Mesa is in a region of 1,000,000 people, but everything in Phoenix is sort of L.A. 1950, you know. And it's booming. It will go to 2 million, 2 1/2 million maybe by 2030, 2040. So Mesa right now has almost a half million people. It's like 490,000 people. So that makes it bigger than Minneapolis, Miami, St. Louis, Atlanta. But if you go to Mesa seeking some kind of skyline, you know, if you look at the soaring art of Mesa, you will find a town that looks -- I don't know -- like it's attached to 25,000 people perhaps. It's got a couple of little buildings in it. Actually, it's got a nice new art center, and it will eventually have light rail. And there are big plans in Mesa. And Mesa 2030 might be a very different place. But if I had a bet where Mesa's economy in 2030 would be, the heart of it, it would be in a new town out by Williams Gateway Airport, which is going to become the Ontario Airport of Phoenix.

Phoenix will diversify its airports. Sky Harbor will specialize in international travel. And a place like Williams Gateway, which has three 10,000-foot runways, was annexed by Mesa -- by the way, Gilbert is not too happy with that -- annexed by Mesa, and plans are for a kind of, you know, industrial park, office space boom, the 202 loop which loops through the whole East Valley as a brand-new, high-capacity, 8-, 10-lane in some places, elevated interstate, you know, rubberized asphalt to reduce noise, high-tech road, runs right by it. That's where Mesa's big plans for significant employment concentration are. However, it will make its downtown into something better than it is today.

It will move beyond this kind of boutique look and try to go high-rise, try to do some of these things. And I will talk about that in relation to other places.

The biggest downtowns right now in the boomburbs are places like Irvine, California, which is a greenfield downtown, or Irving, Texas. Substantial high-rise construction, mixed uses, set in a, you know, quasi-urban setting, you know, a kind of an office park, but office park on steroids. And, you know, that's still where the biggest downtowns are.

What I want to do is, as I go through this, I want to divide this into six types. And I will give you an example out of each one, and I will talk about the opportunities and challenges you find in each one of these six types. But to start with, about four of these types are infill. In other words, they are remaking the space that was originally designated as downtown. And there are examples big and small without rail, and there are examples big and small with rail. And usually with rail the opportunities

are more exciting. And a lot of the places without rail are going to get rail. If not in this round, soon.

The other side of this is that there are also suburban downtowns or boomburb downtowns that are greenfield, and some of them are as small as a lifestyle center and others are as big as Irvine or Irving or some of these other places out by Williams Airport that will soon be constructed at a scale now similar to the older 1970s/'80s new towns.

So I want to go through some cases, give you my thoughts, give you my impressions. Let's talk about the boutique downtown, the places that are the smaller infill space, meaning they are remaking the downtown. Chandler, Arizona, a neighbor of Mesa and Gilbert and Tempe, is in the East Valley, has a tiny little downtown. It's literally a few blocks. Again, a city, you know, almost 200,000 people with a few blocks in their downtown. And it's split by a terrible road. I mean, talk about pedestrian unfriendly. And it's famous because it's in some of the testing ground where that regulatory takings/ eminent domain heat of the last year has occurred. And Arizona now has passed legislation, Prop 207, that prevents regulatory takings and is packaged with an eminent domain law and has sort of hamstrung some of these cities and their actions, but there's still, you know, high hopes for Chandler.

The reason Chandler is so invested in the downtown is interesting and very telling of the boomburbs. Chandler's mayor, when I said to him, "What do you care? It's two blocks." He goes, "Oh, no. No. These are more than two blocks. This is

where this town began and where this town used to have an identity and a brand in the region. And then what happened is all this postwar suburban development came, and we literally just ran into other towns. And now I'm the mayor. I take a drive. I'm not even sure where my town ends. I think I know, but I'm not really sure because I think we've gotten into this annexation war with Chandler and there's like pockets of Chandler inside -- you know, and all this sort of stuff. We went over our boundary line. So what we are really looking for is a sort of signature space, a signature public space, something that distinguishes us. And even if it's a tiny fraction of employment, a small fraction of retail sales, as long as it's got people living there, as long as we could have a Christmas parade, as long as it's a real public space, we think that will distinguish us. Because right now when people think of Chandler, their image is of shopping malls. And luckily the shopping malls of this day are mostly upscale, but there will be a time when Chandler shopping malls will go as all retail must, on that slide into oblivion. And I would rather have some enduring thing, something real, something we can nail down in this otherwise topsy-turvy world of suburbia.

So it's a boutique downtown specifically to rebrand the city and with an intended purpose of giving people the impression that Chandler is a place, an actual real, you know, city, not just a series of subdivisions.

The larger scale away from rail redevelopment, a very good example is actually Scottsdale, a neighbor of all these cities I've referred to so far, but north of them, you know, north

and east in the favorite corridor of Phoenix, the most affluent part of Phoenix is what I call the Upper East Valley, kind of like the Upper East Side, which is Paradise Valley, Scottsdale, Fountain Hills, if you are familiar with the area. Pima Freeway going right up.

Now, Scottsdale has got this goofy downtown. I don't know what they were thinking. They got cowboys all over it. "We are going to cowboy downtown." This place has Frank Lloyd Wright. This place is one of the most affluent parts of the intermountain west. In other words, the real estate in this region is expensive and sort of shocking.

Well, if you went to Scottsdale, you'd be, "Oh. Well, no. This costs like our stuff does." It doesn't cost like the west side of L.A. per square foot, but it costs like better towns in the Inland Empire, actually.

So Scottsdale took this direction, and also pushed away light rail. "No, we don't need that. We are a cowboy downtown." And meanwhile developers have found them and are developing high-rise, beautiful, expensive, hundreds and hundreds of dollars per square foot space. And, you know, there's pedestrian possibly in Scottsdale's downtown. It's an overt space. It's a nice space. But they made that terrible misjudgment. And it's my suspicion -- I've talked to people, including, by the way -- somebody that pointed this out to me was somebody who's working in a real estate firm. And I gave a talk. And this guy was like 29. He was past the internship point out of business school. And he lived there. And he was as frustrated as you could be. So, you know, somebody

who's in their twenties and thirties has no image of Scottsdale as a cow town. They think of it as a sophisticated place. It's branded through its expensive resorts and luxury shopping and high-cost housing. And it made a blunder. And it pushed away the rail. And he said to me, "The leadership emerging in this city, that next round that we get regional rail, light rail in the Phoenix system, we are going to get that." It's going to go right down Scottsdale Boulevard, and every little cowboy sign is going to get torn off, and all the imagery is going to be Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin and desert urbanity, mid-century modern, desert urbanity, a whole different step.

So my guess is -- and based on real estate investment trends and based on development pressures, the east side of Phoenix is built out in that area. It's Indian reservations and McDowell Mountain Regional Park. East Valley can run forever. The West Valley can run to Los Angeles, basically. But that part of Phoenix is going to have to get serious about redevelopment.

Now, transit-oriented development that's at a small scale, that's, you know, sort of in an old downtown, in an infill sitting. An example of that, a village-type transit-oriented development, would be Plano, Texas. Now, Plano, Texas has a lovely little downtown right on its light rail stop. It's Dallas Area Rapid Transit. It's well used. That north line that runs into Plano is a place where people park and ride from the rail head. They come in from exurbs. They are actually people who are free riders. The towns are not participating in the penny sales tax increment that has been thrown into the system like Plano did, doing the right thing with rail, doing the

right thing with transit. But the downtown is well sort of lived in. It has a lot of multi-family housing. It has attached ownership. It's kind of like an infill lifestyle with retail. The interesting thing is that there's almost no big business presence there. There's no skyline. There's nothing like that. It's a pleasant little transit village. It almost looks circa 1910. It would be like an L.A. transit village before structural steel visited the Southland and before earthquake roofing visited the Southland. And it's a tiny speck, again, relative to what's in Plano. Plano is a huge town, and it has eight Fortune 1000 businesses in it, so the J. C. Penney's and all these other firms that are nationally known, nationally recognized in the city. Places like Legacy, places like Ross Perot helped to build. And what they are doing in those places is remaking them as auto dependent, not to receive light rail any time soon at least. Auto dependent, though pedestrian-oriented, big-scale, lifestyle mixed with corporate offices. And it's interesting, because Plano is on two tracks, and it's got a leadership role on two tracks. On one hand, it's going ahead, doing the right thing. And on the other hand, it's going and building a set of new towns on a different model and on a model that probably doesn't reduce auto dependence, although when you get there at least you could walk to something. I mean, that's almost what they're going for. You know, if you have been in office parks where nothing is proximate to anything else, there's a noon traffic jam of lunch-goers. If you can fix the noon traffic jam, not turn a car on and waste gas for lunch, that in America counts as progress.

And then there is transit-oriented

development of a high-rise nature. And the most serious case I can think of -- has anyone been to Tempe, Arizona recently? Oh, my God. There are high-rises going into Tempe that are so up there, so many feet into the sky, that Phoenix is complaining that it's getting in the way of the landing patterns of Sky Harbor Airport.

And I tell you what. Residents there I don't even think know what these things are. They are in the ground and they are getting worked on, and they show the tower, and it's 28 floors, 30 floors. I don't think they've got a concept of what this skyline is going to look like. I'm like, "You know what a 30-story building is like; right?" "Yeah. Yeah. Got the little illustration over here." "Okay. Let's see when that thing goes up."

But they're doing it. And they have rail and they have corporate headquarters. They have U.S. Airways down there. They have serious stuff. Big-time shopping. It's probably the most urban space in all of Arizona at this point. It's really ahead of downtown -- anyone who's been to downtown Phoenix, that's a sad, sleepy place, although it's getting light rail. It is going to transform itself as well. But Tempe seems a bit ahead of it.

This model of the transit-oriented development high-rise traces its origins to Arlington, Virginia. Anyone familiar with Arlington, Virginia, it was a declining suburban of the 1970s when the Washington Metro System was getting built. And what Arlington did is it was confronted with the Washington Metro. And originally, as engineers think, they're like, "Well, we can run it down existing rights-of-way

and it will cost less." And Arlington said, "No. We are going to pay extra, reach into our municipal budget and pay for you to drop the line underground through the heart of our declining sort of old linear office/commercial district along Wilson Boulevard. And we are going to have a series of station stops along that route, and we are going to develop at these station stops."

And really the interesting thing about that program was always that it wasn't about the high-rise, and it wasn't about the mixed uses and all the good things, all the smart growth dimension that would follow. It was instead a protection of existing single-family detached dwelling neighborhoods that felt threatened by the more random densification of Arlington, because Arlington is so proximate to Washington, D.C. It has so much land value because of access to the District. The District is growth-constrained in peculiar ways including height limitations on buildings. So Arlington was a space that could be swept into and immediately effaced. And a lot of the pressures will be on these kind of small single-family homes on relatively modest 10,000, 8,000, 6,000-square-foot lots in older neighborhoods, and it was about that preservation, but at the same time there was the sense that, "If we are going to get dense, we are going to get dense along this corridor."

And that's very much the discussion that used to be in the boomburbs that are getting light rail, so much so that people from Denver, Colorado, for example, are interested in being the Arlington of the Denver region as they get the Fast Track system, they get several station stops. They look at those stops the same way, that they are a relatively upscale, though, you know,

a limited space to be built out in a place like Lakewood that they risk, you know, competition from places that are far more distant exurbs that are offering new greenfield opportunities. "Come here. Move some dirt. We will lure you in. We will do what we have to." And, you know, they are not either a city, like a downtown, they are not lower downtown in Denver, which is tremendously successful, nor are they, you know, Castlerock or someplace way to the south of Denver. Instead, they are caught in between.

And the idea is that one of the solutions to that status, that status between fish and fowl, between city and exurb, is that you urbanize in an appropriate way. You urbanize at the right scale. You urbanize in a way that instead of offering sort of nothing, all the diseconomies of traffic and congestion with no urban setting, that you instead create a sort of hybrid space, a hybrid city. And you are seeing this everywhere. And the leaders in this include Tempe. And I believe in the future of Lakewood. Leaders of this generation, the granddaddy of this are places like Bethesda, Maryland, along the Red Line outside of Washington and, as I mentioned, Arlington, Virginia. And I think it's actually a good workable model and it's something that I find one of the more encouraging dimensions of the boomburbs.

Now what I would like to do is just wrap up on the final comments of one of the examples of a greenfield, new town development, including one that's nearby, which is lifestyle center driven, towns that really don't have downtowns, almost don't have a Chandler downtown, or if they do they're not thinking of it the way Chandler is, as a branding or an image. A place like Rancho Cucamonga doing Victoria Gardens.

Victoria Gardens will become that city's town. That is Rancho Cucamonga's public space. It already is succeeding. I have been there several times in the sequence of development of that project. You know, it's where the kiddies go at Christmastime and ride the little kiddie train and things like that. You know, I see, by the way, you know, Breston, Virginia, by me as an example of a kind of new town successful public space like that. We don't need many of these, but some of the examples are pretty well executed. And Victoria Gardens also has housing going in next to it. So it has mixed use. It doesn't have mixed everything. There's no transit to it. There's no large-scale office/commercial development with it, but it has housing proximate to it and the space itself has been redone as pedestrian oriented. You know, you get out. No one is doing enclosed malls anymore, obviously. That era has passed except in Minnesota where it counts. But why would anybody do an enclosed mall in Southern California? Riddle me that question. Of all the spaces you want to be outside, this has to be one of them.

So that sort of fashion has moved on. And in its place is something that, you know, critics love to -- it's easily picked apart. "This is faux." "This is la, la, la." Compared to what? Compared to what they were building?

I have found, by the way, even -- this is interesting -- even little strip shopping is better than it used to be. And I credit that in part to Starbucks. Starbucks has people that work in this part of the economy where they walk around with laptops and they are on phones all day, "La, la, la." I don't know what they're doing. And they go to

Starbucks and they hang out. And Starbucks in a lot of the sunbelt especially has insisted on outdoor space. And outdoor space in old-style shopping malls was a tiny little sidewalk where you walked alone like this and maybe a car didn't run into you. And it has widened out. It's still a parking lot. You still drive to it, but when you get there, you can actually walk through courtyards in this space. It is a whole different design. So it's not just even at the top end, at the large-scale, at the lifestyle center, but even the mini versions of that seem to have a sort of civilizing element and an assumption of public space.

And I have been in these. There is a whole world of these. There are people hanging out in Starbucks all day. All that discussion about the alienation of the suburb is empirically untested, and I suspect somewhat false as it applies to this kind of space. "Now, can you can get there using energy consumptive" -- blah, blah, blah. "Yeah. Yeah." I can't solve that. But there is civilization of a type, and there's community of a type in these places, and I wouldn't belittle that. And, again, it's easy to -- I will look at this as just a dressed-up version and everything else.

The other larger-scale mid-rise/high-rise new town -- I've mentioned some examples, but if you go to Irving, Texas, Las Colinas, this, you know, huge complex with, again, faux urban elements including these horses running through water, something like that, you know, that sort of statuary that I can't quite figure out, old Texas imagery, not particularly my aesthetic, but, you know, there it is. And there's a public realm and a large scale to it. And I think that generation of new town is improving as I see

examples going around the country.

And what would be good in the future is some of this, I suspect, will attract rail. In other words, rail makes space, but sometimes space is made and rail comes as well and then changes the dynamic. Even in my region, a place like Tyson Corner is going to get rail. The issue is do they drop it like Arlington or do they go on an elevated track? And it's penny wise and pound foolish to put it on a track. You drop it and Tyson's Corner, Virginia, will be an urban space. You elevate it and it will be all park-and-ride commuter track. Everyone does this. And I am in a very cheap state, Virginia, and they don't like a tax, and I'm praying they do the right thing. Any time I get a chance to proselytize locally, "Put this thing in the ground. Look what Arlington did. How many examples do you need? You can walk to the example at work."

So let me wrap this up. What does this all mean? Well, it means a diversity of type. In other words, all these boomburbs, different scales, different settings, different roles they play in the region have different things happening in their downtown. The bottom line, as Ed noted, this is a country that will add more people by mid-century on projection than China will. We'll pick up 100,000,000 people by 2043, depending on some estimates, 2040, 2039, in that area, picking up 30,000,000-plus a decade. And in that process, we are remaking space.

We have an opportunity to substantially remake space because we are adding such a large share of the built environment, especially retail. And so much of this will be built in boomburbs. So much of

this will be built in boomburbs that have finished building that postwar generation of development and are now seeking a recycling of the parking lots in Plano have value. You know, places that are grayfields that aren't dirty because they never had any industrial history but are already built up to some extent have value.

And what I suspect, that by 2020, 2025, 2030 you'll see is a kind of regions where there's a complex polycentrism, not equally-sized edge cities surrounding an old core downtown, but, instead, as is mentioned previously in other research in the early 1990s even a kind of net of mixed use, of spaces that are diverse in scale and in type, but a kind of urban archipelago, where older subdivisions exist on the '60s and '70s model, and then a lot of the newer stuff on the fringe is still under construction, and then a lot of infill that improves the quality of the built environment substantially over where it was.

And just a final note on Southern California. There are regions like Southern California and South Florida where there are no greenfield opportunities in large scale as there were in the past. I guess you can go to Palmdale if you really like that I-15 pass up there. Good luck with all that. Because it's probably snowing up in Edwards today or something.

So the Southland, as it is modestly defined, let's say, has limitations on growth. So it is going to be the lab. And I think Bill Fulton, who's in the room, calls it the world's largest infill project.

South Florida is in that condition. Some regions will voluntarily constrain themselves, are not

resource driven or environmentally driven. And then there'll be the southeastern U.S., Atlanta, Nashville. They will give you that final exurb you wanted. If you're dying, they will be the exurb to the whole nation because they will still provide that model of growth well into the future and they have a kind of built form and a resource capability and land availability and cost structure that would favor that. But regions along the Pacific Coast and, I even argue, much of the southern intermountain west, including Las Vegas and Phoenix, will mimic this sort of more urban model that I think is pioneered in much of Los Angeles. And what I see a Tempe as is Orange County 1980 waiting for its turn to get that sort of high-rise skyline. By 2020, all of this will become painfully obvious and millions and billions will have been made off of the investment of this.

Thank you very much.  
(Applause.)