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# The Changing Face of Migration: Opportunities for Urban Planners in the American Suburb

By Julie Behrens and Kaja Kühl

## Abstract

Over the past twenty years, the United States has experienced a wave of immigration unparalleled since the turn of the last century. Increasingly, new arrivals are finding jobs and moving directly to the suburbs, reflecting larger employment trends and signaling a shift from past patterns of immigrant settlement in the U.S. Local authorities, native-born residents and immigrants alike often struggle to adapt to the rapidly changing identities of their communities, even calling into question the notion of the suburban lifestyle as a representation of the “American Dream.” Using the suburb of Brentwood, New York as a case study, this paper illustrates the challenges and opportunities for suburban communities in adapting to these changing demographics and offers suggestions about how urban planning can promote integration while planning for a sustainable future of diverse suburban communities in the United States.

**Keywords:** Suburbs, immigration, Brentwood, NY, ethnic urbanism

There are now an estimated 35.7 million immigrants in the United States, with more arriving in the 1990s than in any other decade on record (Singer 2008). These new arrivals are transforming communities across the country, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in the American suburb. Whereas a century ago immigrants established ethnic enclaves in cities and moved out to the suburbs only after a significant period of integration into American life, today existing social networks and employment opportunities are likely to lead new arrivals directly to the suburbs, often skipping over the city altogether. This shift represents a break from previously understood patterns of immigrant settlement in the United States and is a reflection of nationwide economic restructuring and urban growth trends. Since the 1990s, the booming economies of growing metropolitan areas like Washington, D.C. and Phoenix have generated strong demand for immigrant labor in all sectors (Kallick 2009). These cities are more sprawling and suburban by design than traditional immigrant gateways such as New York or Boston, which experienced decentralization during the same period. The broad diversity in the type of migrants living in the suburbs reflects the range of

job opportunities, from high-tech and finance to low-skilled service sector jobs, now located in suburban environments.

Meanwhile, the very notion of “suburbia” as currently experienced is being challenged by urban planners and urban designers mindful of its impact on environmental and social sustainability. Housing, transportation, public space, and schools are four areas of planning where efforts for immigrant integration align themselves with efforts to plan for long-term sustainability. As land use planning and urban design are being reconsidered in suburbs, immigrants can be a powerful force in shaping development. Here, we take a closer look at the suburban town of Brentwood, New York, discussing four specific areas of urban planning and governance where opportunities exist for integration as a tool for positive transformation in suburban communities.

## Background

Over the span of two decades, Brentwood, New York, a community of about 60,000 located in Suffolk County, Long Island, has become the center of the Salvadoran diaspora in the New York City metropolitan region. The Salvadoran influence is evident in the more than forty shops and restaurants specializing in Central American foods and other specialties that line Suffolk Avenue as well as the presence of the Salvadoran Consulate, Long Island’s only diplomatic mission, which has operated out of a former drive-through bank branch building since 1995. Each year, Brentwood celebrates El Salvadoran Independence Day, drawing an estimated 60,000 spectators to what is perhaps Long Island’s biggest annual parade (Berger 2004).

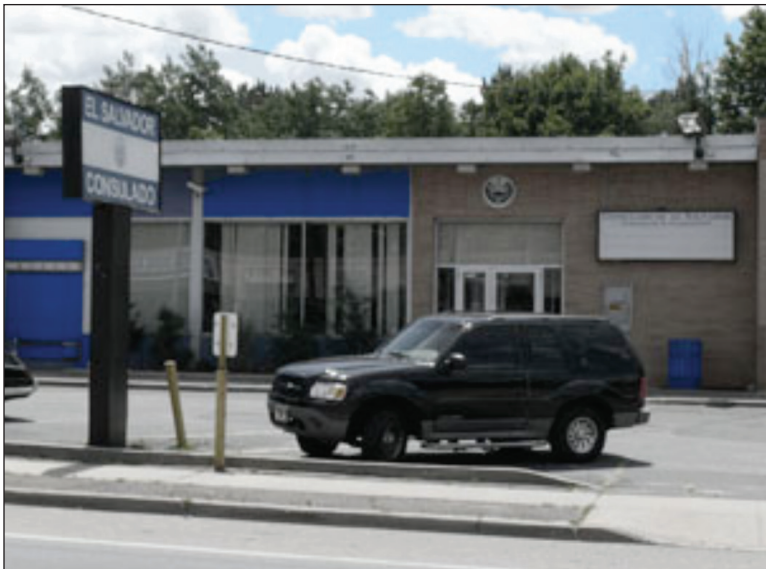


Figure 1: Salvadoran Consulate, Brentwood, New York (image by the authors)

Salvadorans arrived in response to the strong demand for low-skilled labor and concentrated in Brentwood, one of the few communities where they could access affordable housing on Long Island, an area with the unfortunate distinction of being the third most racially segregated suburban area in the country (E.R.A.S.E. Racism 2009).

The original Salvadoran immigrants were escaping rural villages on the front lines of a fifteen-year civil war. More recently they are fleeing extreme poverty and high unemployment, and are seeking to reunite with family members already settled in the United States. Sixty-eight percent of Brentwood residents are Hispanic and 40 percent are foreign born, with 63 percent speaking a language other than English at home.<sup>1</sup> Though many arrived in the U.S. under Temporary Protected Status—a temporary visa extended to non-refugees fleeing disaster—Salvadorans have now gained foothold on Long Island with a new generation of American-born children contributing to the transformation of this community into a suburban ethnic enclave.

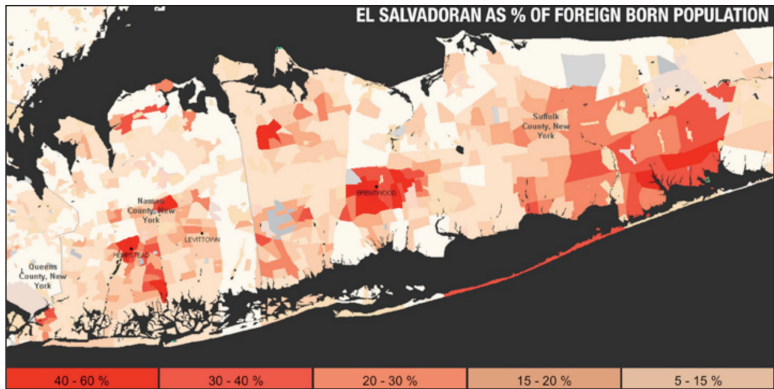


Figure 2: Salvadoran Population Density on Long Island, 2000 (graphic by the authors)



Figure 3: One of many new Salvadoran-owned businesses in Brentwood (image by the authors)

Salvadorans in Brentwood have helped to revive a decaying community by transforming once-vacant storefronts and housing stock into viable businesses and neighborhoods. However, the rapid influx of people has also put a strain on an already struggling suburb dealing with out-migration of wealthier residents to surrounding suburbs. With the national debate focused primarily on inclusion versus exclusion and the legal status of the individual migrant, tensions can run high between long-time residents and immigrants who can be perceived as a threat to security and suburban life.<sup>2</sup> Issues like diversity, poverty, and failing schools—long associated with urban areas—make many long-time suburbanites uneasy. The response to common complaints such as residential overcrowding and loitering has had the effect of limiting access to housing, services, employment, and public space for immigrants, creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity among many (Drum Major Institute, 2010). Rather than questioning the legitimacy of these new residents by designing policies of control and exclusion, communities should seek the opportunities that newcomers present and develop inclusive spaces for integration. Many strategies for sustainable growth, though not immigration specific, have the overall effect of promoting integration.

## Housing

Brentwood, not far from the original Levittown, serves as an example of a typical post World War II suburb. Most of the housing stock has come of age and is small compared to newer suburban developments. At eighty-five percent, the overwhelming majority of housing units in Brentwood are single-family structures, higher than the average of sixty-seven percent in suburbs nationwide.

With few options for affordable housing, many new immigrants are forced to live in overcrowded conditions in single-family homes, raising concerns about tenant safety, surrounding property values, and neighborhood security. Local officials have responded by passing exclusionary housing ordinances and conducting zoning raids that have left tenants homeless. To be effective, overcrowding ordinances imposed in Brentwood and other places need to be paired with planning for alternative housing options. Developing a diverse housing stock in suburbs, in terms both of size and affordability, is an opportunity not just for new immigrants but for all types of non-nuclear family households including single people, young couples, the elderly, and single-parent families.

## Public Transportation

Although Brentwood was founded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in part because it was located along a railway line to New York City, it resembles many

suburban communities across the country in that public transportation is lacking and even daily errands are burdensome without a car. This lack of public infrastructure creates huge challenges for newcomers as well as long-time residents who might not own a car or know how to drive, such as the elderly or children, who are thereby excluded from access to the local transportation system. In contrast, the New York City subway is an example of a transportation system marked by inclusion and integration, where everyone has equal access for the same price.

Low-income immigrants in Brentwood commonly use carpools and bicycles as modes of transportation. Traffic accidents, sometimes fatal, are not uncommon, as bicyclists must pedal along busy roads and highways that offer no protection to cyclists. Innovative solutions for public transportation as well as a network of bicycle paths could transform a necessity into a sustainable solution for Brentwood and its residents.

## **Public Space**

Streets, parks, and plazas are spaces for interaction among strangers, offering everything from mere visibility of the “other” to a place for meaningful exchange of goods and ideas. Strangers share space for cultural events, markets, or public demonstration. Equal access to such space in cities has long contributed to integration by allowing newcomers to find work and information, to engage in commerce, and to enjoy leisure activities. In the suburbs, these kinds of interactions are often limited to parking lots, mall interiors, or more recently, Internet communities.

In Brentwood, day laborers often stand in public spaces like sidewalks and parking lots waiting for work, an arrangement that frequently contributes to negative public sentiment about immigrants. Instead of creating ordinances prohibiting this use of public space, which has been the primary strategy employed so far in Suffolk County, local governments may consider creating worker centers or designated meeting points. Not only would such an approach improve the condition of public space, it would provide a much needed service for workers, employers, and the greater community.

## **Schools**

Schools often drive the locational choices of those seeking to live in the suburbs. One-third of Brentwood’s population is school-aged children. Nearly 68 percent of the children in Brentwood’s school district (the largest on Long Island) are Hispanic, and over 2200 new immigrant children registered in between 2005 and 2008 (Berger 2008).

For many new immigrant families, schools are the first point of contact with institutions in the United States as well as with native-born Americans. Because women are often the primary caregivers within immigrant communities, schools also become a place of integration for women to whom other spaces of employment or public life may not be accessible. Utilizing schools as community-based service and learning centers is a smart strategy for integration. Resources for English language learning, civic participation, after-school programs, adult education, and even delivery of health services can ensure that schools will be pillars of local integration efforts in most any community.

## Summary

Housing, transportation, public space, and schools are four areas where strategies for integration and long-term sustainability in suburbs overlap to benefit all residents. Zoning that allows for greater density and multi-family residential buildings in proximity to services and public transportation can reduce dependency on the automobile as the only mode of transportation and increase access for all residents. Providing a dense network of public transportation, bicycle lanes, and pedestrian-friendly streets will become critical for suburban communities to stay healthy while facilitating immigrant integration. Creating pedestrian-friendly environments and civic centers that allow for daily encounters as well as cultural exchange can shape public opinion and ease an integration process based on mutual acceptance and respect for both the immigrant and the recipient community.

New immigrants will likely continue to settle into suburbs, providing an opportunity for communities to harness the energy of these newcomers in their efforts to plan for a sustainable future.

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## Endnotes

1. Demographic data used in this article was collected from 2010 U.S. Census and American Community Survey Data. [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)
2. In a statement that embodies much of the fear and misunderstanding about immigrants on Long Island, Steve Levy, Suffolk County Executive and the highest ranking official in the county, was quoted in a 2007 interview with the New York Times saying, "People who play by the rules work hard to achieve the suburban dream of the white picket fence. Whether you are black or white or Hispanic, if you live in the suburbs, you do not want to live across the street from a house where sixty men live. You do not want trucks driving up and down the street at 5 a.m., picking up workers" (Vitello 2007).

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