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What Lies Ahead for the American Metropolis in the Age of Inversion?

A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for an Urban America

by Vishaan Chakrabarti

Metropolitan Books, 2013

The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City

by Alan Ehrenhalt

Vintage Books, 2012

The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving

by Leigh Gallagher

Penguin, 2013

Reviewed by Jake Wegmann

The Great Inversion by Alan Ehrenhalt is, at this point, a couple of years old. The book's outstanding virtue is that it has clearly named and defined what the author maintains is the most important high-level process restructuring metropolitan space across the United States: *inversion*. As he conceptualizes it, inversion is the reoccupation of metropolitan cores and favorably located inner suburbs by the wealthy, a dramatic reversal from their penchant for decamping to the metropolitan fringe for the better part of a century. Helpfully, inversion, which might be called a process of gentrification at the metropolitan, rather than neighborhood, scale, and one that unfolds in lockstep with a simultaneous devalorization of the exurban fringe, is described in terms of the *type* rather than the simply the *number* of people who have swapped their relative locations. This helps us distinguish Boston and Paris, both of which have lost population but gained economic vitality and housing units in the last 100 years, from Detroit and Cleveland, which have lost all three in recent decades.

Ehrenhalt's notion of inversion is a helpful lens through which to view two recent books, one of which, *The End of the Suburbs* by Leigh Gallagher, is a work of journalism that seeks to further document it. By contrast, the other, *A Country of Cities* by Columbia University scholar and practicing architect Vishaan Chakrabarti, is an unabashed manifesto that aims to radically alter the trajectory of inversion. The books by Gallagher and Chakrabarti both make contributions, but each also suffers from major omissions and flaws.

The End of the Suburbs, despite its overwrought title, is a nuanced work that foretells the end, or at least the peak, of car-dependent outward suburbanization catering to the desires of nuclear families to live in large houses rather than the actual end of suburbs. The author wisely, and early on, follows Ehrenhalt's lead in declaring a neutral normative stance regarding her own feelings toward suburbia, largely based on her recollections of a happy childhood in the Philadelphia suburb of Media, Pennsylvania. However, one suspects that Media—blessed with a bounty bequeathed by history of charming tree-lined residential streets, a thriving commercial core, and even a well-used legacy trolley line—is exactly the sort of place that will thrive in an inverted metropolitan America.

A Country of Cities is different in every way. Packed with figures and graphics, it argues that the construction that will inevitably take place near city centers as part of the Great Inversion should take the form of *hyperdensity*, or new urban fabric that is dense enough (30 units per acre for housing) to support rail transit. This, the author maintains, is needed to solve pressing environmental crises, such as climate change, as well as to revive the nation's moribund economy and spark the rebirth of the middle class.

Perhaps more so than *The End of the Suburbs*, *A Country of Cities* suffers from the limitations of Chakrabarti's singular perspective. It is deeply informed by Manhattan, where he both lives and works. The foreword by the architect Norman Foster makes this clear when he recounts the occasion on which he and Chakrabarti, living a few subway stops apart, made a spontaneous decision to meet and agree to collaborate on the book; he goes on to note that such a meeting could not have happened in Los Angeles. This, Foster argues, demonstrates the wonders of urbanity. Of course, such spontaneity would have been considerably more difficult had the two men lived, say, in downtown Brooklyn and Stamford rather than in midtown and lower Manhattan. For that matter, it would have been simple had they lived in the Los Feliz and downtown sections of Los Angeles.

The foregoing, of course, is a minor flaw, but it bespeaks a bigger issue with the book's narrowness of perspective. This is apparent when the author belittles the marked uptick in dense construction in Bethesda as the urbanistic "worst of both worlds": Bethesda continues to be riddled with traffic, it has only "token" transit, and its main street is lined with chain retail. Never mind that the world's densest, most vibrant cities tend to be choked with traffic; that the Washington Metro that serves Bethesda ranks second in ridership among the nation's subway systems; and that chain stores can as easily serve pedestrians and transit users as local retail. If one of the nation's few examples of transit-oriented development that comes close to meeting the author's criteria for hyperdensity fails to meet with his approval, then it is difficult to imagine where else his massive

proposal should unfold, aside from the addition of yet more skyscrapers to New York City, Chicago, Honolulu, and a very few other locations. While he usefully compiles a list of governmental actions, such as eliminating the mortgage interest tax deduction and shifting funding from freeways to transit, that would amount to a progressive 21st century incarnation of what in an earlier time was known as “urban policy,” Chakrabarti fails to grapple with the dynamics that explain the land markets in such places, and why they form such a short list. How exactly hyperdensity can be induced to arise in downtown Phoenix or San Antonio, let alone in Milwaukee or Buffalo, is left unsaid.

At the same time, Chakrabarti is silent about what will happen to countless exurban communities, not to mention the people who live in them, if his vision is realized. Although he acknowledges the enormous costs of building skyscrapers and their failure, when built new, to house the poor or even the middle class, his only real solution is prefabricated construction. Unfortunately, prefab is to housing what nuclear fusion is to energy production: the ultimate solution that is imminent, and has been so for almost three-quarters of a century.

While Gallagher does not entirely ignore the people who are on the losing end of the reshuffling of spatial privilege amidst the Great Inversion, her narrative does not touch on actual exurban places. Ehrenhalt, by contrast, and to his great credit, included in his book an illuminating chapter describing the recent history of Gwinnett County, Georgia, a former quintessential “white flight” destination northeast of Atlanta. Gwinnett has become one of the most ethnically diverse jurisdictions in the entire nation, with all of the opportunities and the dislocations that that entails. Prognostications on the fate of Gwinnett County and many other places like it will be as essential to making sense of the society-reshaping effects of inversion as the descriptions of gentrifying sections of New York City and other urbane places that occupy much of Gallagher’s book.

Gallagher and Chakrabarti, it should be said, make a contribution. In the former, we have a well-written, engaging primer on reurbanization that would be helpful to a reader new to the subject. Chakrabarti’s book puts forth a forceful and conceptually clear vision for a new city-building paradigm of hyperdensity. While its reductiveness and omissions can and should be criticized, it does the useful work of providing a new template against which future interventions in metropolitan areas can be evaluated. The trio of books discussed here helps us, in different ways, grapple with the vast implications of the Great Inversion. But there is a great deal of work still to be done.

Jake Wegmann recently began as an Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin.