

The Cities We Need



BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD In the first half of the 20th century, the students at Boston's best public high school, Boston Latin, included a brash kid named Leonard Bernstein, who would one day compose "West Side Story"; another boy named Thomas L. Phillips, who would build the Massachusetts manufacturer Raytheon into a bulwark of

American defense; and Paul Zoll, who would pioneer the use of electricity to treat cardiac arrest while working as a doctor at a Boston hospital. ¶ Most any American city of that period could produce a similar honor roll of kids raised on its streets and educated in its public classrooms who went on to leave a mark on the world. Back then, cities supplied the keys for unlocking human potential: an infrastructure of public schools and colleges, public libraries and parks, public transit systems and clean, safe drinking water. The very density and diversity of urban life fostered the accumulation of knowledge, the exchange of ideas, the creation of new products. ¶ American cities were the hammering engines of the nation's economic progress, the showcases of its wealth and culture, the objects of global fascination, admiration and aspiration. They were also deformed by racism, bled by the profiteering of elites and fouled by pollution and disease. But in their best moments, they offered the chance to slip the bonds of prejudices, second-guessing and limited horizons. They offered opportunity. ¶ Then, cities worked. Now, they don't. ¶ Well before the coronavirus pandemic posed its own threats to the life of American cities, they were struggling. Over the last half century, their infrastructure of opportunity has badly decayed. Their public schools no longer prepare students to succeed. Their subways are reliably unreliable. Their water runs with lead.

The photographer Alex Sisti visited two neighborhoods in Chicago where the difference in average life expectancy is as much as 30 years. His images throughout this section of affluent Streeterville and the poorer neighborhood of Englewood show how — just eight miles from each other — they represent separate worlds, with different horizons of opportunity.

Our urban areas are laced with invisible but increasingly impermeable boundaries separating enclaves of wealth and privilege from the ghettoed blocks of aging buildings and vacant lots where jobs are scarce and where life is hard and, all too often, short. Cities continue to create vast amounts of wealth, but the distribution of those gains resembles the New York skyline: A handful of super-tall buildings, and everyone else in the shade.

The pandemic has prompted some affluent Americans to wonder whether cities are broken for them, too. It has suspended the charms of urban life while accentuating the risks, reviving a heavy American tradition of regarding cities with fear and loathing — as cesspools of disease, an image that all too easily aligns with prejudices about poverty and race and crime. Even New York's governor, Andrew Cuomo, has described New York City's density as responsible for its suffering.

Some have left for second homes, and the crisis has prompted a flurry of fantasies about abandoning cities altogether, rooted in the idea that we'll all be better off at least a little farther apart — social distancing as the salvation of society.

This is dangerously misguided.

Our cities are broken because affluent Americans have been segregating themselves from the poor, and our best hope for building a fairer, stronger nation is to break down those barriers.

But to realize the potential of cities, we need to change the harsh reality that the neighborhoods into which Americans are born delimit their prospects in life, their chance of graduating from high school, of earning a decent living, of surviving into old age. In Chicago, the difference in average life expectancy for people born at the same time in different neighborhoods is as much as 30 years. Please pause to consider that number. Babies do not choose where they are born. In Streeterville, a neighborhood of white, affluent, college-educated families living comfortably in townhomes and high-rise condominiums along the shore of Lake Michigan, a baby born in 2015 could expect to live to 90. Eight miles south, in Englewood, a poor, black neighborhood of low-rise apartments in the shadow of Interstate 94, a baby born in 2015 could not expect to reach 60.

We need to rewrite the rules that have made it virtually impossible to build affordable housing in wealthy neighborhoods. In the 1930s, when the Federal Housing Administration, created to encourage homeownership by subsidizing mortgage lending, refused to support loans in black neighborhoods, which were delineated with red lines on the agency's maps. In Detroit, a developer persuaded the government to back a new, white subdivision in 1941 by building a half-mile wall, six feet tall, along its boundary with an adjacent black neighborhood. An agency manual also recommended highways as barriers to maintain racial segregation.

Between 1954 and 1962, they got 98 percent of the government-backed loans. Congress outlawed such explicit racism in the Fair Housing Act of 1968, but the checkerboard created during the building boom of the postwar years endures. The wealth gap between blacks and whites allowed suburban communities to limit integration through zoning laws restricting the construction of denser, more affordable housing. The nation's old industrial centers — not just places like Peoria, Ill. and Syracuse, N.Y., but also New Orleans and Boston — remain some of the most racially segregated cities in America.

In recent decades, racial segregation has modestly declined, as many cities as richer black and Hispanic families have moved to more affluent neighborhoods. But economic segregation has increased sharply. As knowledge workers, bankers and software engineers flock to cities like Raleigh, N.C., Austin, Texas, and Seattle, the concentration of well-educated workers and well-paid jobs has left much of the country behind.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the poor residents of the boomtowns have also been left behind. In 1970, 65 percent of the residents of large metropolitan areas lived in neighborhoods with median incomes close to the median for the entire area, according to an analysis by the sociologist Kendra Bischoff and Sean P. Reardon. Most neighborhoods, in other words, approximated the economic diversity of the broader community. But by 2009, only 42 percent lived in such neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the share residing in either very affluent or very poor neighborhoods more than doubled from 15 percent to 33 percent.

This trend has reshaped central cities, filling downtowns with buildings invariably described as "luxury" condominiums and apartments. In Chicago, for example, a recent analysis found the share of census tracts with concentrations of either wealth

or poverty increased from 28 percent in 1980 to 47 percent in 2010.

But most wealthy families continue to reside in the suburbs that provide the bulk of housing in every metropolitan area except New York. These suburbs, created to maintain economic exclusivity, have become increasingly exclusive. Residents live in what are effectively private clubs and send their children to what are effectively private schools. Cars have obliterated the need for servants to live close by or to be tolerated as participants in the same polity. The people who serve the affluent must find housing elsewhere.

Life in America resembles an airline passenger cabin: separate entrances, separate seating areas, separate bathrooms. The Village of Indian Hill, a wealthy suburb of Cincinnati, claims its rural atmosphere, its "firm administration of zoning ordinances" and its "proximity to the cultural life of a large city." It is, in short, a paradise, taking what it values from Cincinnati while contributing as little to it as possible. In this, it is hardly unique. Hundreds of similar suburbs encrust cities across the United States.

Even in cities where the rich and poor continue to live under the same local government, economic segregation saps political support for common, egalitarian infrastructure. Rich New Yorkers donate generously to beautify Central Park while resisting the taxation necessary to maintain parks in neighborhoods they never visit. In Washington, D.C., parents in wealthier neighborhoods contribute lavishly to par-

ty schools. Most cities are beginning at an early age. In 1965, the federal government started a program for lower-income children called Head Start. Darren Walker, who rose from poverty in Louisiana to head the Ford Foundation, has credited his escape to "the young woman with the clipboard who knocked on our door," to sign him up for the program's first cohort. A growing body of research backs him up. Yet federal investment remains paltry. Head Start is available to only 11 percent of eligible kids below the age of 5, and 36 percent of those ages 3 to 5.

The United States is virtually alone among developed nations in devoting more public resources to educating affluent children than poor children. Breaking the link between property taxation and school funding is an important first step. But equity requires a reversal of the current situation. It costs more to provide an equal education to lower-income students. The Netherlands, for example, funds schools at a standard level per student, plus a 25 percent bonus for each student whose parents did not graduate from college.

A vocal group of critics has long questioned whether more public spending would improve education. Such arguments are exercises in obfuscation. What those critics really believe is on display in their own communities, which generally provide lavish funding for well-tended schools stocked with the latest technology and staffed by experienced teachers.

Cities also need to try harder to equalize opportunity within

the school districts. Most cities are slight variations on neighborhood school systems, in which the district's racial and economic composition determines the quality of the education. A 2019 analysis by the economist Thomas L. Kane found that the average school district reduced segregation by less than 1 percent compared with a simple policy of assigning every student to the closest school.

The racial and economic integration of public education increases the test scores of minorities and lower-income students, and improves their fortunes in later life. Perhaps the most important it inculcates empathy and a sense of community in students from every walk of life.

Shared experience is the foundation of a successful polity, and it is not a stretch to think that simply educating children in integrated schools would begin to close the divides that have paralyzed our politics and made it impossible to address the problems that are crippling the country.

America's cities are being profoundly tested by a pandemic that has caused the deaths of tens of thousands of people and forced the suspension of urban life. Even in cities so far spared the worst of the health crisis, the collapse of tax revenue is forcing elected officials to consider draconian cuts in public services. In such moments, it is hard to dream about what might be.

Yet crises can be clarifying, enforcing a focus on what is necessary and what is important. Inequality is an inescapable fact of urban life. The Greek philosopher Plato, prefiguring Dr. King by a few thousand years, wrote in "The Republic" that "any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich." But the crisis is a reminder that segregation is a relic of the past. The rich need labor; the poor need capital. And the city needs both. Reducing segregation requires affluent Americans to share, but not necessarily to sacrifice. Building more diverse neighborhoods and disinvesting public institutions from private wealth, will ultimately enrich the lives of all Americans — and make the cities in which they live and work a model again for the world.



FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF OUR CITIES

BY JAMES BENNETT

It turns out that New York does sleep, or, at least, that it can be induced to. Through the collective efforts of its people, its racing pulse has been slowed to a deep, muffled beat, one they strain to hear as they walk by padlocked playgrounds, down emptied streets. ¶ With other diversions closed off to them, rich and poor pass in Central Park, masked and more strange to one another than ever, yet also with more in common, given the tough new adversary they share. Along the southern edge of the park — Billionaires' Row, it's called — the unfinished luxury towers jabbing at the sky seem less like middle fingers raised to those who can't ever hope to live in them than like decaying monuments of another age. ¶ That's silly, of course. The buildings will be finished — construction has already started up again across the city. Wealthy people will move in. The masks will also come off one day. And then maybe New Yorkers will recognize, in one another, something new. ¶ It's a dark hour for American cities, but the only road to a more just and successful society runs through them, and crises like this have transformed them for the better before. Central Park itself sprang from an effort to combat disease, out of a 19th-century belief that fresh air would prevent malaria. Now, in the depths of this pandemic, the public square in many cities is expanding, as streets close to cars and open to walkers. ¶ American cities may have been prospering before the pandemic hit, but they were failing, too, as the lead editorial in this second chapter of our *The American* will need series explains (the whole series can be found at nytimes.com/americasawakened). For all the bigotry and other cruelties they indulged, these cities also fostered invention and progress — in literature, music, art, food, science, business — by stirring together vast numbers of people from different cultures and classes. But over the decades, affluent residents have clustered within their own neighborhoods, with their own schools and services, leaving poor neighborhoods to wither. ¶ A baby born in one neighborhood in Chicago is now expected to die 30 years sooner than a baby born in a wealthier neighborhood just eight miles to the north. A child's ZIP code has become a kind of prophecy. ¶ "My students do not normally advance beyond where they were born," Amir Tehari, a high school teacher in Sacramento, said in response to questions that Times Opinion asked teachers across the country. "The story of ZIP codes is a story of dreams stolen away from children." ¶ Throughout this issue of the Sunday Review you'll find a number of big ideas to fulfill the promise of American cities. There are two recurring themes I'd like to emphasize. One is the crying need for affordable housing, salted throughout cities rather than concentrated in a few areas. (It may seem costly, but have we really considered our existing priorities? As Binyamin Appelbaum writes, we could house all the nation's homeless for the cost of an aircraft carrier.) The second theme is the foundational importance of public education. We could make such strides if we'd confront bad choices we've made, about financing and segregation, that are wasting untold human potential. ¶ As our contributing writer Annalee Newitz writes, as far back as the Bronze Age, radical inequality evidently brought once-powerful cities to their knees. But there's good news, too: Humans have learned a few things across the millennia. It's within our power to save the American city so that it works for all its residents and, in doing so, advances civilization itself.

James Bennett is the editorial page editor.

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The logic of school segregation is straightforward. Said the mayor of Gardendale, Ala., which waged an extended campaign to extricate its schools from the district less than a decade ago, "It's keeping our tax dollars here with our kids, rather than sharing them with kids all over Jefferson County."

The success of affluent Americans in asserting the privilege to sequester themselves, to retain the benefits of their wealth within the boundaries of their communities, to ignore the welfare of those on the other side of invisible lines, is shortsighted. This nation is ailing because so many of its citizens have no chance to chart their own destinies. A return to health requires a renewed commitment to provide every American with the freedom that comes from stability and opportunity — the freedom to make something of one's life.

There can be no equality of opportunity in the United States so long as poor children are segregated in poor neighborhoods. And there is only one viable solution: building affordable housing in affluent neighborhoods.

The federal government can help. In 2015, it provided \$139.8 billion in payments, tax credits and other forms of housing subsidies — and 60 percent of that money went to households earning at least \$100,000, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Imagine what could be accomplished if the government used that money instead to build housing that poorer families could afford to rent.

The government also should require communities that want federal funding for roads and other infrastructure to allow the development of denser, more affordable housing.

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What opportunity looks like in our cities.



A DECLINE OF HOPE BY DAVID LEONHARDT AND YARYNA SERKEZ

THE life expectancy in most American metro areas is around 80 years. But it varies enormously depending on your neighborhood. High-income people can often expect to live 10 to 20 years longer than lower-income people. Nationwide, the largest gaps are in Washington, D.C. (27 years), Columbus, Ohio (26 years), and Kansas City, Mo. (23). In New

York, the gap is 21 years. In Chicago, it's 14 years. In Los Angeles, it's 11 years. These gaps highlight a broader problem: The country's cities — where many of the nation's poorest and most vulnerable people live — often exacerbate inequalities today. Over the past 50 years, the average income in nearly every metro area has soared. But the averages don't tell the full story. They have risen in part because incomes for the affluent have soared.

And the income numbers are snapshots, which don't follow the

same people over the course of their lives. Studies that do track the course of people's lives show an even more alarming pattern: Many people who grow up in low- and middle-income families are struggling to climb the income ladder.

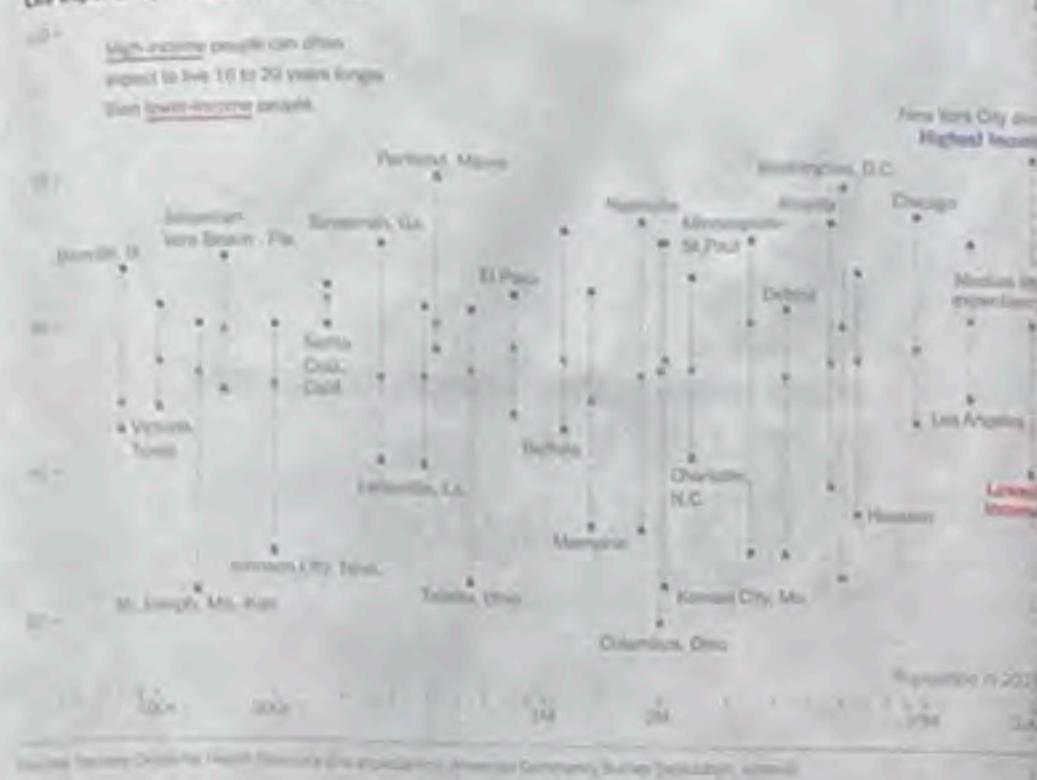
In some cities that have been celebrated for rapid economic growth — like Atlanta and Charlotte, N.C. — upward mobility is particularly rare. These cities have attracted new upper-income workers from other metro areas, but opportunity remains mostly closed to huge swaths of the population.

One of the forces holding down economic mobility is physical mobility. People living in higher-income neighborhoods typically live near good schools and good jobs. In lower-income areas, many people must spend long stretches of time getting to and from work, taking them away from their families.

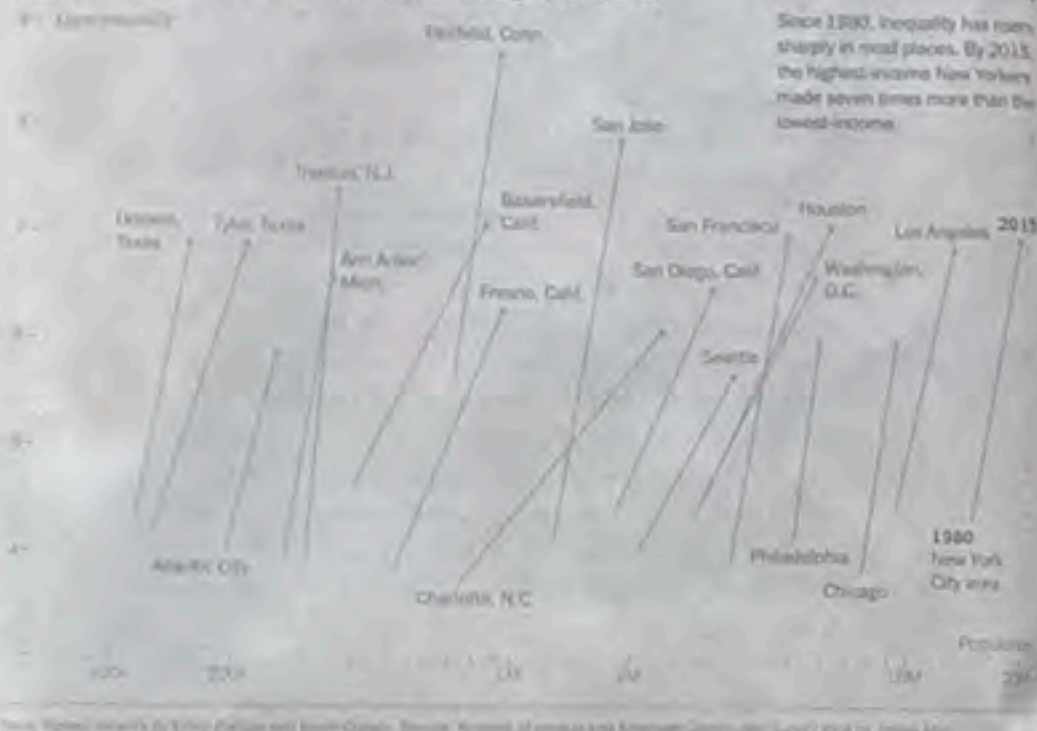
In addition to the growth in its inequality within metro areas, inequality across metro areas has also surged. A small number of areas account for a large and growing share of jobs, income, wealth, venture-capital funding and more.

Cities are still the country's most economically dynamic places. But they are also a microcosm of the extreme inequality that shapes so much of American life in the early 21st century.

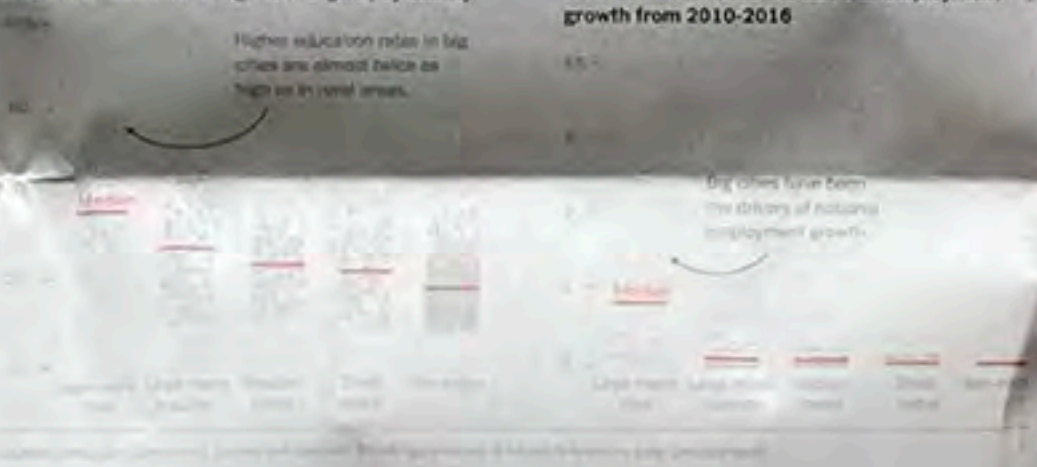
Life expectancy at birth, by metro area



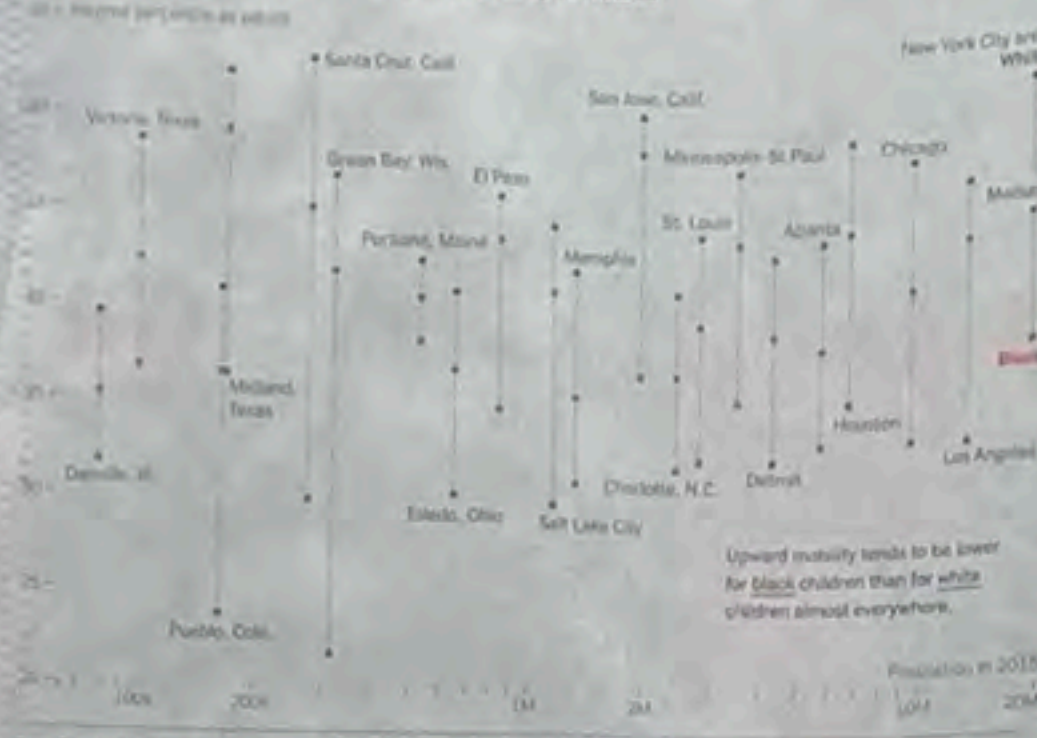
Ratio of 90th-percentile wages to 10th-percentile wages, 1980-2015



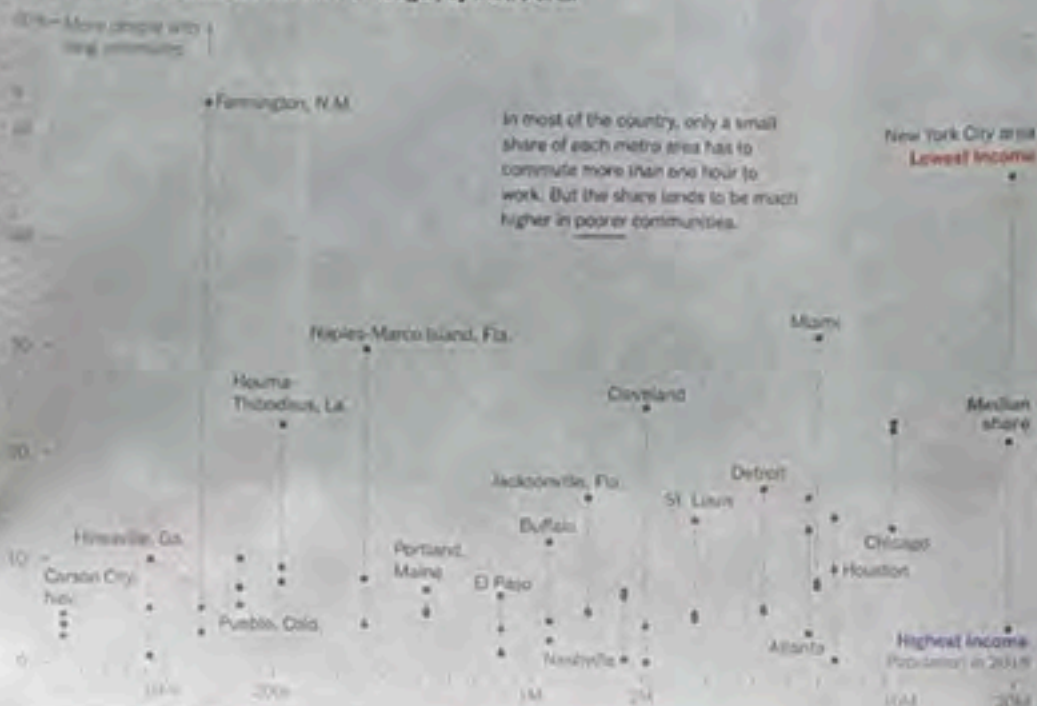
Share with bachelor's degree or higher, by county



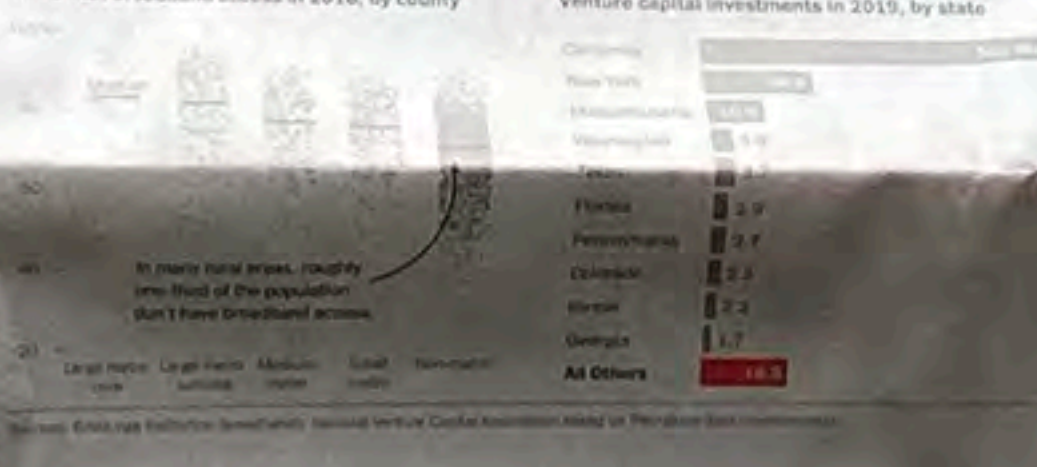
Median income mobility for people who grew up poor, by metro area



Portion of work commutes one hour or longer, by metro area



Share with broadband access in 2018, by county



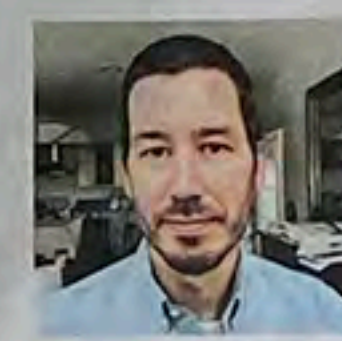
'ZIP CODE HAS A GRAVITY' BY LORA KELLEY

AMERICAN teachers are on the front lines of connecting young people to opportunity in the form of learning, employment and emotional and physical health. But teachers too often are working within structural inequalities that impede many students from achieving their potential. These issues begin with pollution and the stresses of poverty and extend to economic segregation and inadequate school funding. We asked teachers in cities across the country to share the experience of how the neighborhood that children are born into affects their futures. Over 500 teachers wrote in.

All of the teachers we heard from went out of their way to praise the hard work and talents of their students. But each also discussed the challenges that students in low-income schools face that students in wealthy ZIP codes do not.

In their own words, here are seven public-school teachers on the question of how where students are born shapes their lives. All photos were taken by the subjects or people close to them. These accounts, drawn from interviews and submissions, have been edited and condensed.

Lora Kelley is an editorial assistant in the Times Opinion section.



Jay Wamsted
High school math,
Atlanta



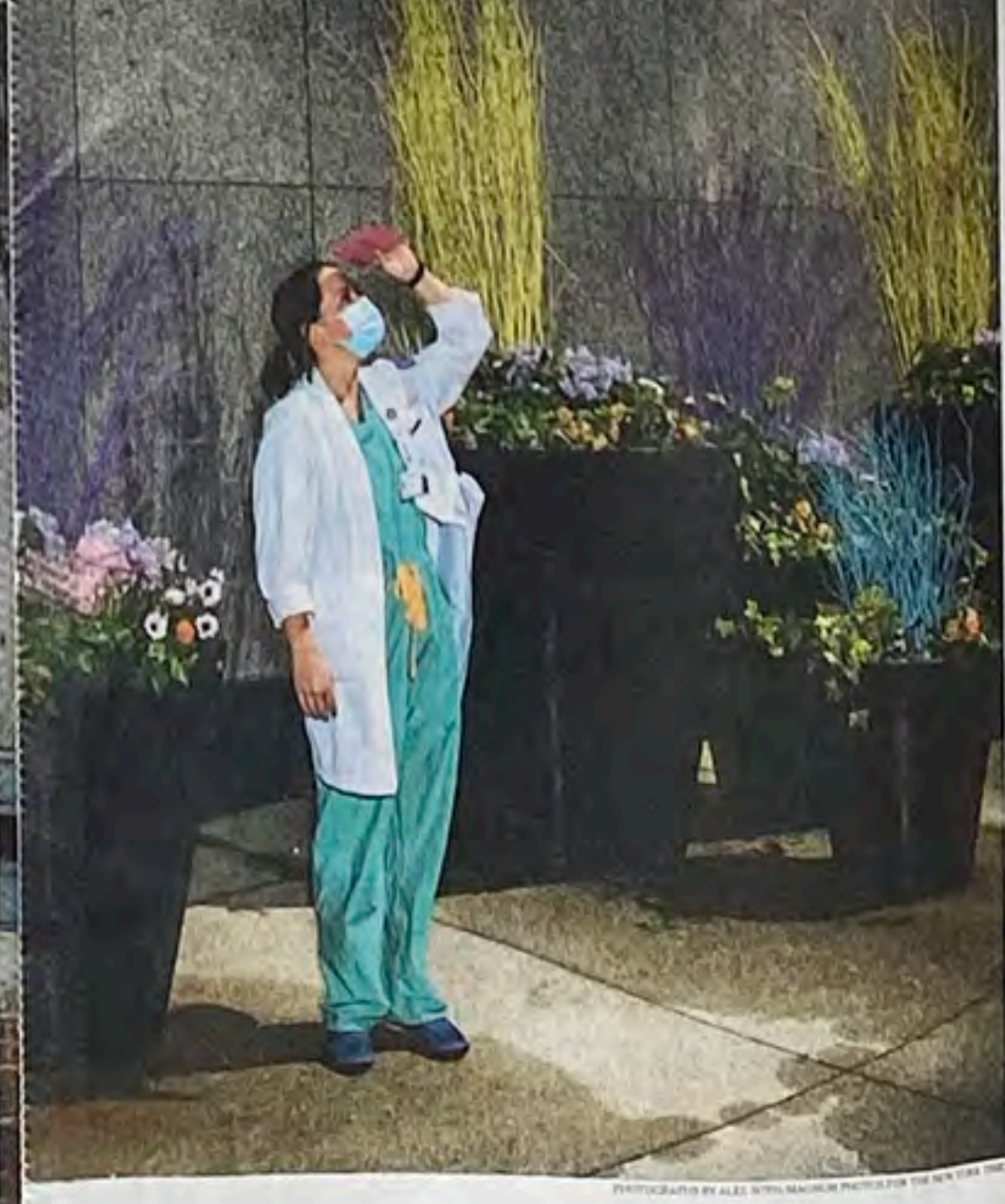
Maya Brodkey
High school English,
Oakland, Calif.

I am a fourth-year teacher at a non-charter public high school in the Oakland Unified School District. It's one of the poorest high schools in Oakland. We have 100 percent students of color and 85 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. During the first 10 years, we were in classrooms full of smoke. Our building is old. It's leaky, the windows don't work. Because we're in East Oakland, a lot of our kids have asthma. A lot of our teachers have asthma. So we're all in there. We can't breathe. You can see smoke in the hallway. We can't dismiss the students without district approval. In other districts, the buildings are newer and that's less of an issue. Middle-class students and white students tend to flock to one or two schools.

As a white teacher with a master's degree coming from a middle-class background teaching in this neighborhood, I got fed the narrative about teaching that Oh, education is the great equalizer, right? That's the narrative that we have as a society. If you work hard enough and you study in school, you can be successful. And then coming into my school, I'm like, Oh, well, that's a lie, right? I have kids who work incredibly hard. And I have kids who have the academic potential to do incredible things, but they have to work 40 hours a week to help support their family.

Even if my students were geniuses receiving a top-notch education, that doesn't change the fact that they live in a two-bedroom apartment with 12 other people; that they hear gunshots every night; that they have a parent in jail or ICE detention; that they don't have food at home. If students' basic physical and emotional needs aren't met at home, how can they succeed academically? We need a stronger social safety net. We need to eradicate, or at least alleviate, poverty to give students like my kids a chance at "making it." I think we need to guarantee a right to good, stable housing.

My kids aren't starting at the starting line. They're starting from 100 feet behind the starting line. And the fact that they make it to the finish line at all is a testament to how incredible they are. My students are incredible in the resilience that they show.





Tola Atewologun
High school
economics, Seattle

I've come to teaching in a roundabout way. I studied public policy and then went to work for the federal government. Eventually I decided to become a teacher. My initial goal was to work at a low-income public school in Seattle, and my first job was just that. After a year, I was let go, and I was picked up by a high-income public school. I've been teaching there for the past two years.

It's largely a different job. The way that I teach is different, the questions that I get are different. These two schools are 15 minutes apart.

At the low-income school, I had students who were homeless. There were all sorts of people with really serious circumstances. And during the school year, I was able to see the effect, was a part of our jobs.

At my current school, the rate at which those issues occur is very, very, very small, even with students who are low-income. One student had a family conversation with me, and he said, "Mr. Tola, my friend's dad does most of the stuff for me."

Poor people from richer places do better than poor people from poorer places, I think the reason is there are more examples set forth by the community at large. If you're a 16-year-old kid in a very difficult circumstance and you go home with your friends, the likelihood that they're in a difficult circumstance is smaller. So you begin to see what a good circumstance looks like.

If you create economic integration, students will see the things that are available, not because I've told them. But because they'll see a dad who lives in a nice house who has been a car-penter for 20 years and owns his own business, or you'll see someone over there who's an officer in the military study taking college classes. Great models of how to succeed in a variety of ways would be more common, whereas the kids at the low-income school see one way to become college. Everything we promote in college, college, college. And I'm a teacher who thinks this college-in-kind mentality is brought with tremendous risk, especially for the most vulnerable. I focus on trying to make sure these trades have tremendous returns.

The spaces that make cities fairer and more resilient.



WHAT HAPPENS IN BETWEEN BY NICHOLAS DE MONCHAUX

piece projects and large-scale plans, of course, arrived with the 1992 Olympics. But their fluid foundation, and that of the urban renaissance that followed, was the welcoming river of public space that flowed through, and connected, the city.

Four decades and a continent away, America's latest Glitter Age has widened divisions in our society, even as the urban landscape often collapses them into a single gaze. From the needle-thin condenser towers of contemporary Manhattan to the needle-strewn gutters of San Francisco's tech-gentrifying Tenderloin, it is hard to escape the prospect of profound inequity.

Until recently, my own journey to work often took me walking through just such a landscape: homeless encampments squeezed to the left of a sidewalk in downtown Oakland, Calif., shiny, shaded-window tech buses killing to the right, those in the middle just trying to squeeze in between. Far too abundant in today's America, such circumstances are also a single physical space, offering radically different opportunities to those who live in them.

Wherever you walked, and whoever you were, it seemed, a graceful and accessible surface was ready to receive you. Show-

ing the enormous potential that our cities have to create opportunity and bring people together. This power, well understood by Barcelona's planners and community organizers as they walked from the shadow of their gray decades, is the ability of physical space to bring many cities together, unexpectedly and instrumentally. And to begin to create out of many cities, one.

Like a chemical catalyst, the sidewalk and the street edge are the surface on which all the atoms of a metropolis come together, reacting with one another and producing energy. In practical terms, this is because public space provides a restaurant owner, some-one pointing dog-walking services, or a midnight clubgoer the chance to meet anybody, with any imaginable result. The equality of access to a busy city street, combined with the creativity and skill required to thrive there, is the meritocratic mechanism at the heart of urban life. Over time, cities developed streets to hold and channel shared infrastructure. But the equal and accessible public space created by streets is the most essential infrastructure of all.

In our current crisis, we see the absence of street life in the devastating effect of shelter-in-place orders on small businesses. But we all feel this loss, with its own devastation, in the joylessness of life

without the serendipity or chance encounters that the city street provides.

Many had already been written about this pandemic period: opportunity to rethink or reimagine cities. But such reassessments mostly revolve our recent awareness about the inaccessibility of downtown and urban life.

The fact that the same forces that bring us together to share and create also create the possibility of contagion is a design problem as well as a social one.

The 19th-century belief that nature is "beyond all art" — spring from poor ventilation inspired Frederick Law Olmsted's design for Central Park in New York and the Emerald Necklace in Boston, among each city's most gracious public spaces. In Paris, cholera epidemics in the 1830s led to the grandest sewer system in Europe — and not incidentally to the grand boulevards and public spaces on top of that sewer system. In Barcelona the same disease, rampant in cramped, lower-class neighborhoods, helped create the vast, open grid of the city's extension, or Eixample, designed by Ildefonso Cerdà in 1859 and finished in 1897 (At the time, because of its resemblance to the avenues of New York City, it was criticized as "too American").

Even today, these projects help embody the idea that the health of a city is connected to every part of a complex metabolism — equal and effective circulation above all. Yet from Mission Bay in San Francisco to Hudson Yards in Manhattan, too much urban investment of the past decade has focused on creating or revamping dense, profitable urban centers, not on improving and expanding the spaces between them. But it is on these in-between spaces — on our parkways, not destinations — that our shared economy most depends.

While it pains me to say it as an urban designer, we often do not need entirely new ideas to improve our cities. But sometimes, we need a crisis. In the past few weeks, to allow for a safer, more widespread and not incidentally more equitable access to open space, cities across the world have closed streets to cars and opened them to pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Oakland has been a leader, transforming 10 percent of its streets into public promenades. San Francisco, New York and others have followed. Already in Seattle, there is talk of making such changes permanent.

The idea that safe, generous and accessible common space is fundamental to public life is as essential American idea — as old as the Boston Common — but if our current catastrophe can help reimagine our cities for decades to come. For in the end, urban resilience is not purely a physical, social, or economic goal. It is one, like well-made streets and sidewalks, that should connect every part of public life.

Today, our common space is more than sidewalks and parks. In these times, cities such as Seattle, Los Angeles and Denver are making municipal bus travel free, to

help essential workers and protect the health of drivers, since riders can enter as the back. This effort should also consider ways the pandemic has pushed. Public transportation is an essential service and an economic engine, particularly when it is cheap and reliable. Some movement by walking and maintaining social distance and wearing masks.

Here, another symptom of this crisis is worth mentioning — the erosion of public life by primarily enclosed indoor spaces. In the past two months, we have learned away from people, interactions and shared life the assurance that the street already gives us, our shared existence. At the same time, we have learned online to try to bring our lives back to the streets — surprise, chance, a loose, supportive web of friendship — that urban life normally brings us.

Yet for all the superficial serendipity of social media, for every online happy hour that somehow avoids being simultaneously boring and stressful, the public spaces of the internet are impoverished when compared with the simple sidewalk. Just like Hudson Yards, our online platforms mostly give us shiny, narrow simulations of public life — but only enough to sustain private profit. And as with any shopping mall, the shared spaces of virtual life are accessible only so long as we support the commerce on which they are sustained. For online spaces, the price is almost always the value of their surveillance of us.

The local controversy around the Google sibling Sidewalk Labs' data-driven "city of the future" in Toronto, which was canceled recently, highlights how quickly we become when the business of information, space and citizenship become more obviously entwined.

Online or offline, a lack of equity and accessibility (and serendipity) has the same effect. The same small-business owner who mourns the current demise of foot traffic also mourns the inevitable algorithms that present content to those who wander on the screen. With the death of unexpected discovery comes the death of creative and economic opportunity in any kind of space. If our newly strengthened reliance on virtual spaces, and their ever more intertwined relationship to public life, makes us demand more accountability and access online as well, then the result will also help ensure our civic health.

There will be more predictable uncertainty to follow for the metropolitan web of physical and digital spaces that emerges from our current crisis — no least from the climate crisis that encloses our current tragedy. Equal, accessible and resilient public space can protect and heal, during a pandemic. Over the long term it will promote the health, welfare and equality of our cities for decades to come. For in the end, urban resilience is not purely a physical, social, or economic goal. It is one, like well-made streets and sidewalks, that should connect every part of public life.

The elites were living high. Then came the fall.



WHY CITIES FAIL BY ANNALEE NEWITZ

ABOUT 3,100 years ago, a merchant in Emar, a trading outpost in what is now northern Syria, sent a desperate letter to his boss, Urutu, who lived in the rich metropolis of Ugarit, a city-state on the coast of Syria. "There is famine," he wrote. "If you do not quickly arrive here, we ourselves will die of hunger."

A long drought had left the hinterlands around Ugarit in a state of famine, wars were brewing, and there may have been plagues as well. Urutu may not have realized it, but he was living through the last years of two wealthy cities, Ugarit and the Greek city-state of Mycenae, that dominated the eastern Mediterranean Sea during what historians call the Bronze Age, from roughly 3000 to 1200 B.C.E.

More than a thousand years before the Greeks invented democracy and the Romans undermined it with imperialism, these city-states of the Bronze Age influenced civilizations in many parts of the world. Homer recorded the myth of the Iliad in "The Iliad" and the Odyssey. Although the rulers of the Bronze Age sometimes went to war, the true source of their might was economic power secured through trade. The final decades of Ugarit and Mycenae tell us a lot about why cities fail — and what survives amid the ashes.

Ugarit and Mycenae were two of the most prosperous kingdoms in a thriving economy that grew along coastal trade routes linking Lebanon and Egypt. Their maritime wealth was secured through trade. The final decades of Ugarit and Mycenae tell us a lot about why cities fail — and what survives amid the ashes.

Ugarit and Mycenae were two of the most prosperous kingdoms in a thriving economy that grew along coastal trade routes linking Lebanon and Egypt. Their maritime wealth was secured through trade. The final decades of Ugarit and Mycenae tell us a lot about why cities fail — and what survives amid the ashes.

AnnaLee Newitz is a science journalist and contributing Opinion writer. She is the author of the forthcoming "Four Lost Cities: A Secret History of the Urban Age."

the outside at Mycenae, so violence must have come from within. Given what's known about these societies, he concludes that the city's lower classes may have gotten fed up and burned it all down. Josephine Quinn, an archaeologist at the University of Oxford, agrees.

Their scholarship puts the achievements of the Bronze Age in a new light. The kings of Mycenae and Ugarit worked with the wealthiest merchants to get rich. They consolidated economic and political power to stamp out competition from smaller city-states or independent merchants. Mr. Cline described a letter from an Ugarit merchant named Sarranu, who reported that he didn't have to pay any import tax when his boats returned from Crete loaded up with grain, beer and olive oil. Apparently tax breaks for the rich are one of the oldest tricks ever invented by the ruling class.

When their cities were swallowed by fire, the Bronze Age ruling classes lost everything, including the subjects they once controlled. Greece's population dropped by roughly 50 percent during this time, probably because of a combination of war, drought and migration, according to Sarah Murray, a classics professor at the University of Toronto and the author of "The Collapse of the Mycenaean Economy."

After the uprisings, the Mediterranean was no longer dominated by cities like Ugarit and Mycenae. Smaller cities such as Tyre and Sidon, which still stand in Lebanon today, emerged from the Bronze Age unscathed and became centers of culture in the region. It was as if the fall of New York and San Francisco left room for Philadelphia and Oakland to take up the slack.

The merchants of Tyre and Sidon thrived in this new world. They were local business owners with no formal political ties. With the collapse of the old kingdoms, they had the freedom to sail unknown seas. Tyre's traders ventured much farther than the representatives of Ugarit ever had, and settled in the territory that became Spain, Morocco and Tunisia.

In other words, the demise of Bronze Age civilization was not an all-out collapse. More accurately, it transformed the nature of political power in cities. Instead of a rigid, international power structure that controlled the whole eastern Mediterranean, there were local governments for each city-state.

One of the reasons historians can tell this transition period is "collapse" is that writing all but disappeared. Ms. Quinn said that may have been another sign of the state's collapse. The kings of Ugarit and Mycenae kept a tight leash on their client states by using written contracts to track their wealth and levy taxes. Farmers and merchants, she said, might have snipped writings things down to evade the kings' control.

Writing returned to the region a few centuries after the fall of Ugarit, thanks to traders from Tyre and other independent cities. They used a form of writing that was phonetic, based on sounds rather than hieroglyphs like Egyptian hieroglyphs. This script, dubbed Phoenician, was easy to learn and easy to adapt to local languages, and it became the basis for the modern Roman alphabet we use today.

As we live through what could be the first big cataclysm of the third millennium, the people of the late Bronze Age have something to teach us. "Invest in the local community, because no matter who is in charge at the top, local businesses are likely to survive," said Ms. Quinn. Of course, she added, the ultrarich companies will survive, too. The biggest traders of Ugarit didn't disappear, because they had political connections in the surviving cities like Tyre. Their fancy homes may have

Modern cities can learn from the fate of the civilizations at Ugarit and Mycenae.

Historians and archaeologists don't know all the reasons these cities collapsed. But there is evidence that, both burned to the ground in the 13th century B.C.E., their palaces toppled and abandoned. There are signs of earthquakes, too. For centuries after these events, there are almost no written records. It was as if literacy and culture evaporated along with the kingdoms themselves.

Until recently, historians blamed this collapse on marauders known as the Sea People. Supposedly, these Sea People sacked the cities, leaving the once-great kingdoms of the Mediterranean to be menaced by pirates or worse. New research has challenged this whole story. Eric Cline, a classicist at George Washington University and the author of "1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed," explained that there is no evidence of invaders coming from

burned down, but they could afford to buy new ones.

Will we face a violent uprising in the wake of economic collapse? Perhaps, but today's 1 percent might not suffer the way Bronze Age kings did. For one thing, local trade networks are no longer as robust as the ones that existed in 1000 B.C.E., when merchants from Tyre traded with nearby villages, who then traded with other neighboring towns. "We really have demolished local manufacturing and supply systems," Ms. Murray said. "It is a bit sad to reflect on the contrast between the Bronze Age case, in which a few elites bore the brunt of the suffering."

These days, local traders and small towns rely on international supply chains as much as the kings of Ugarit did. One thing remains certain. Our survival still depends on sustainable local networks, not tax breaks granted by kings.

St. Louis Whitney Curtis



WHERE THE SIDEWALK BEGINS

"Streets and their sidewalks — the main public places of a city — are its most vital organs," wrote Jane Jacobs, the architect, urban critic and urban theorist, in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities."

The streets of our cities don't just take us from one place to another: they're where we shop, where we play, where we loiter, and where we'll meet once again as we work to bring this pandemic to an end.

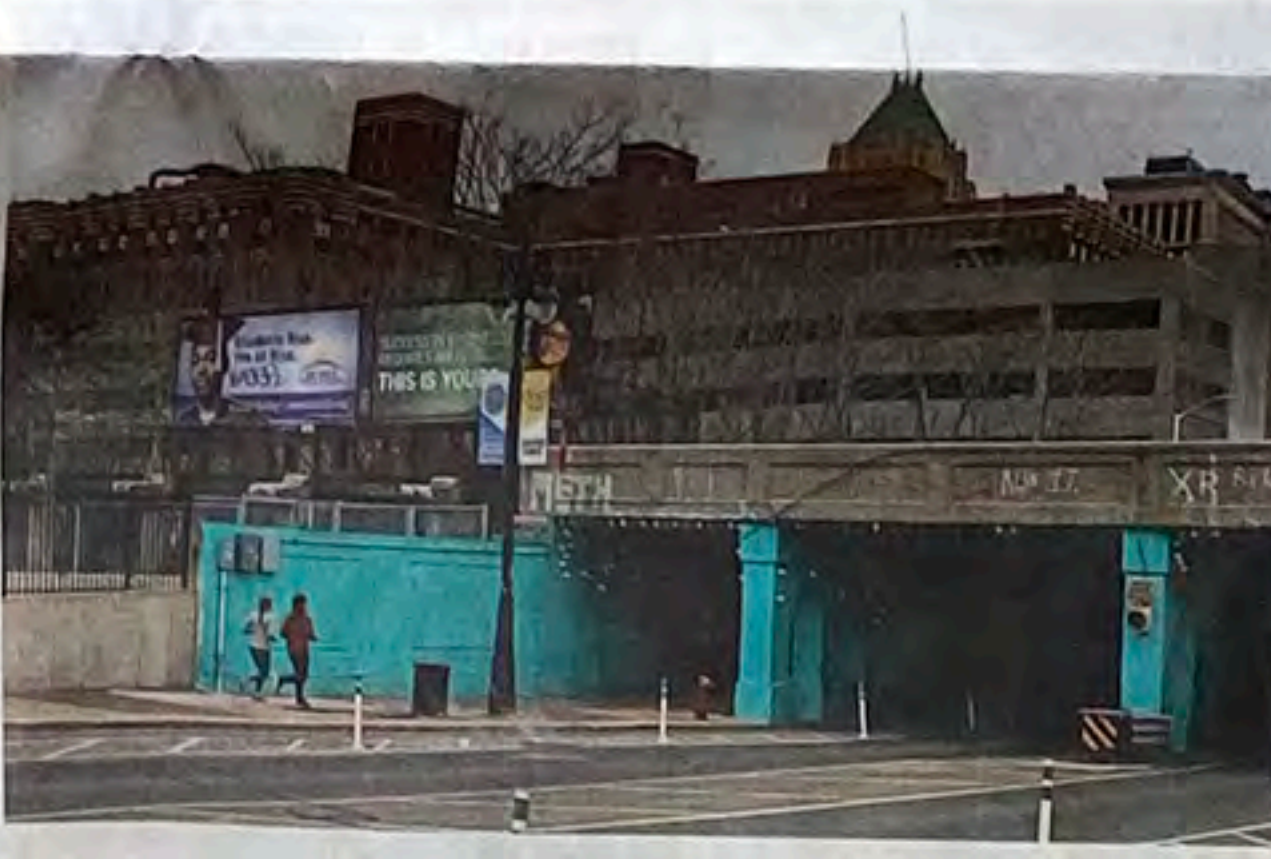
Even as our public interactions are profoundly limited by social distancing, our sidewalks remain the essential stage of public life. Times Opinion asked photographers in Atlanta, Detroit, St. Louis, San Antonio and Washington to shoot the sidewalks around their communities. (You can see more photos at nytimes.com/americanview.) Their photographs show us the landscape of the current crisis, but also, still, the landscape of American life today. In these pictures, we see both home and homelessness, hope and fear, abundant resources and those desperate to find them.

Our streets divide our neighborhoods, and neighborhoods in America have always been divided by wealth, race and class. Yet sidewalks, too, connect — a single surface supporting every moment of our shared life in the city. Sidewalks belong to no one; that is another way of saying they belong to all of us.

Atlanta Johnathan Kelso



Detroit Brittany Greeson

DENSITY IS A HEALTHY CHOICE
BY MARY T. BASSETT

THE image of cities as caldrons of contagion is a very old one. In the 19th century, rapid urbanization was accompanied by literal squalor and

waves of often lethal communicable disease. Life expectancy declined during the Industrial Revolution as cities' populations

ranged.

But in recent years, U.S. cities could boast that the so-called urban penalty had been reversed. "If you want to live longer and healthier than the average American, then come to New York City," Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared. This advantage continued with his successor, Bill de Blasio.

New York had an average life expectancy that was roughly 2.5 years longer than the nation's in 2017, the most recent year for which data are available. This is good news, since most of the human lives in cities, and in the United States, live in cities of more than one million residents.

And then the coronavirus arrived, and New York became a hot spot for Covid-19 cases and deaths. As stay-at-home advisories rolled out, many wealthy city residents fled to country houses, beaches and boats.

Connecting the dots between

population density and viral transmission seems to be simple logic: New York, with a population of 8.5 million, is also the U.S. center of the pandemic.

But everything we know so far about the coronavirus tells us that blaming density for disease is misguided.

New York City Health Department data indicate that Manhattan, the borough with the highest population density, was not the population hit. Deaths are concentrated in the less dense, more distant outer boroughs. Citywide, black and Latino residents are experiencing mortality rates that are twice those of white city

dwellers.

Then there is the rest of the world. While the coronavirus first exploded in Wuhan, a city of 11 million, many "hyperdense" cities in Asia have been able to contain their outbreaks. The virus ap-

peared in Singapore (5.6 million residents), Seoul (9.8 million), Hong Kong (7.5 million) and Tokyo (9.3 million), cities close in size to New York, but with much lower recorded deaths.

California and Hawaii, for example, have high population density — but not the highest Covid-19 mortality rates of the states. Albany, Ga., with a population under 80,000, has among the highest case rates in the United States (many related to attending a funeral).

Cities, large and dense by definition, do not inevitably support explosive viral transmission. But

they do seem to explain clusters of Covid-19 deaths in the United States: are household crowding, poverty, racialized economic segregation and participation in the work force. The patterns of Covid-19 by neighborhood in New York City track historical redlining that some 80 years ago established a legacy of racial residential segregation.

Population density is not the same as household overcrowding. The U.S. census defines crowding as more than one person per room, excluding the kitchen and bathroom. That means a one-bedroom apartment occupied by four people is crowded. In 2013, the Bronx had New York City's highest percentage of crowded households (22.4 percent), followed by Brooklyn (10.3 percent) and Queens (9.3 percent). Manhattan and Staten Island had 5.4 percent and 3.4 percent crowding. (Nationally 2 percent of people live in

crowded households.)

Why are there so many crowded households in New York, including in its less densely populated neighborhoods? The answer is simple: the high cost of housing.

It is no surprise that public health and urban planning have common roots and missions, because the quality and availability of housing, public transportation

and nursing homes can be

terrible. Imagine a low-wage worker who holds two jobs to support her family and pay the rent, who has to work during this pandemic because her job is "essential," who no sick leave. She travels on a crowded bus, puts off medical care because she lacks insurance, and then returns to an apartment crowded with young children and elderly family members. Maybe she fits in on the night shift as an aide at a nursing home.

This all conspires to make her especially vulnerable to the coronavirus — with the result that her household, her nursing home and her neighbors all are liable to become sick as well. In this scenario, "the city" is not to blame for the explosion in cases of Covid-19.

That disease is devastating cities like New York because of the structure of health care, the housing market and the labor market.

High rents are also a principal driver of homelessness, which during this epidemic has proved deadly. Covid-19 has shown how risky crowded settings like homeless shelters, jails, detention cen-

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It's wrong for the 'haves' to seek out remote, isolated housing.

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What I want the woman behind the counter to know.



Ivy Lin
High school science,
Bronx

The ZIP code I teach in is 10453, in the Bronx. It's one of the ZIP codes that has been really hard hit by Covid-19. Many of my students are considered essential workers. Whether it's food, whether it's Starbucks, many of my students work in retail service jobs, so they cannot stay home. When students have their bosses calling them in for eight-hour shifts, and if they don't go in, they're fired, remote learning is really hard for them. They are contributing as breadwinners to their households. Many of their parents work in hospitals and don't really have the option of working from home, either.

Many of my students are struggling with Covid-19. I don't think any of the students at my school have died, but some have become very, very sick. They've lost family members. As a teacher, it's really hard for me to keep on rolling when I realize that my students have so many other circumstances that they're dealing with. I feel like a lot of suburban students and parents are not dealing with that. They're dealing with the challenges of remote learning, but they're not necessarily dealing with the challenges of essential workers.

The Bronx has the highest rates of asthma in the entire country. And asthma often means that students miss school because they get sick with seasonal respiratory illnesses, or a cold might mean that they get a lot sicker. That's not anything that's their fault. It's just the ZIP code.

If I could wave a magic wand, I would make internet access available to all of my students. I also really wish the schools my students attend had less teacher turnover. Students have told me that a lot of teachers who work in the Bronx tend to leave. I feel like the stability of having a group of adults whom they can trust to kind of guide them through the four years is important. I have been teaching in the Bronx for most of my 12-year career.

Teachers, students and parents try their hardest in the Bronx. In fact, I'd wager to say that students here try harder than the average suburban student. But there are so many students who get bogged down by homelessness, poverty, domestic violence and other issues in their immediate environment. My students work very, very hard.



WHERE WE MEET BY MIN JIN LEE

between the front door and the entryway, which was sealed off with heavy plastic. No one could get inside. In that plastic sheeting, in place of an interior door, there was a cutout portal, the size of a pet door flap, at waist level for payments and orders. The dining room was dark, the only light coming from the kitchen.

In no time, a petite Korean woman approached the desk, which served as the counter on her side of the plastic. Even behind the mask, I could make out her pretty oval face, the small chin. Gray T-shirt, black pants, apron and gloves. Hardly a drop of makeup. She was younger than me. I'm 51. Her eyes looked tired and worried.

I felt bad about my tech-savvy, cycling mask that I'd bought on Amazon. All the workers in the restaurant had said that it was too hot to wear. I'd wear it to the store.

There was a tiny wholesale store that sold costume jewelry about 200 square feet. From 1977 to 1989, Monday through Sunday, my parents opened at 7 and closed at 9. To give our mom a break, my two sisters and I took turns working on Saturdays and school holidays. Sometimes,

this. "Hello," I said in Korean, trying to sound cheerful. She brightened, her eyes smiling.

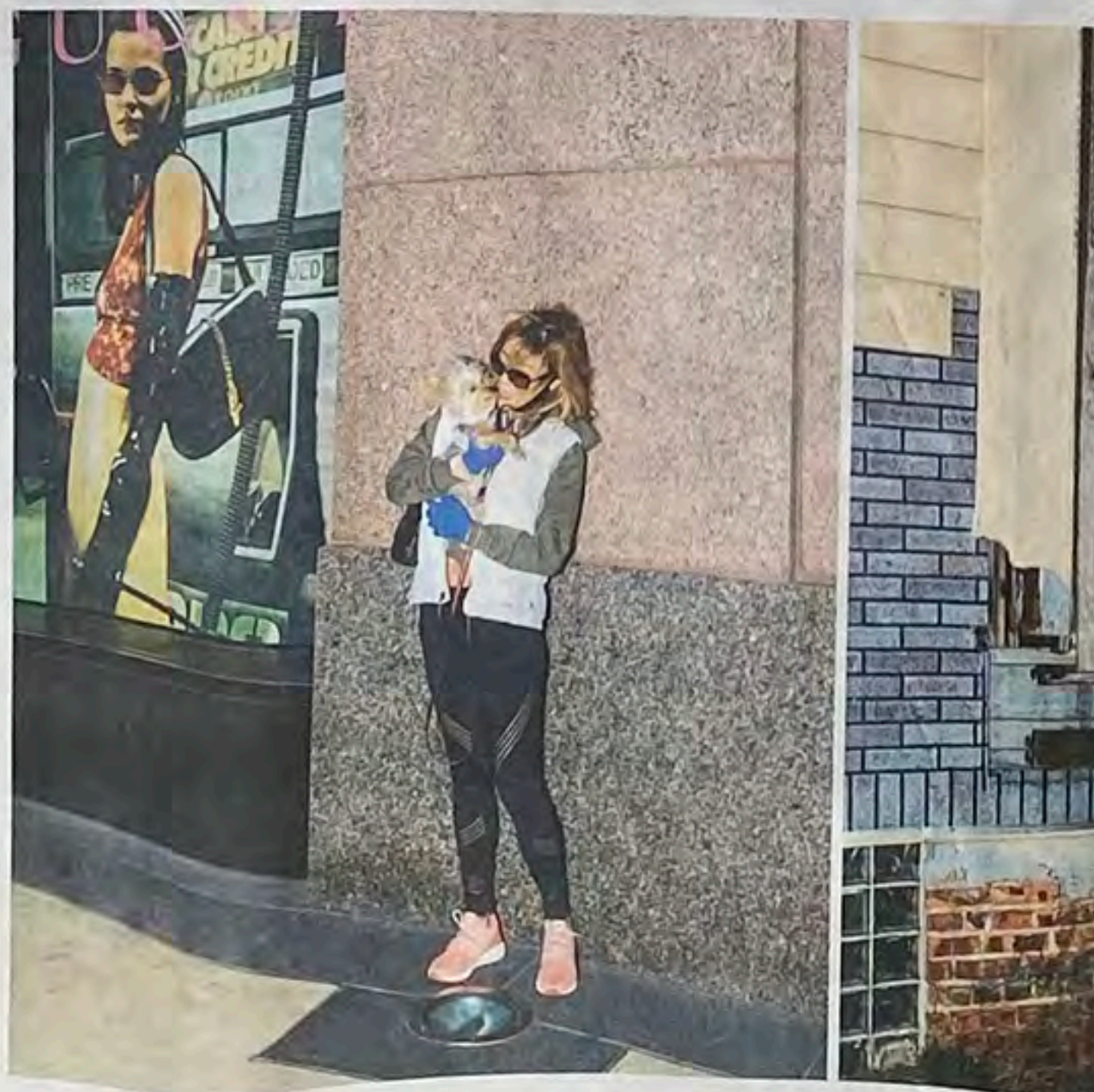
"How can I help you?" I ordered two jajangmyeon.

"Ten minutes," she said, pointing outside.

Arms folded, I waited in front of the restaurant and glanced east. Less than a block away, Mimi Fong's family had a wonderful restaurant, which is now long gone. My childhood friend Mimi and I lived in Elmhurst, Queens, and went to the same elementary and middle schools, and our fathers had small businesses not five blocks away from each other in Midtown Manhattan.

There was a tiny wholesale store that sold costume jewelry about 200 square feet. From 1977 to 1989, Monday through Sunday, my parents opened at 7 and closed at 9. To give our mom a break, my two sisters and I took turns working on Saturdays and school holidays. Sometimes,

Min Jin Lee is the author of the novels "Pachinko" and "The Food for Millionaires."



when I was working and knew Mimi was helping out her father, too, I'd visit her.

Mimi would be perched on her stool by the cash register. If he wasn't busy, Mr. Fong would step out of his kitchen, the size of a New York City closet, and ask Mimi in Cantonese if I'd like something to eat. Sometimes her sisters would be bustling around, and I knew from watching them that if the napkins were folded, the fortune cookies and sauce packets were stocked away nearby, the tea was hot, and the tables were wiped clean, someone in the family had done all that work.

Two blocks west and two blocks south from where I was waiting for my parents' store, it was there, from behind the counter, I learned that a supply chain isn't

We couldn't afford to lose their sales.

I went to college at Yale, and for pocket money, I sold clothing at Ann Taylor on Chapel Street in New Haven. One Saturday, a beautiful woman and her daughter came in for cocktail dresses. They threw heaps of clothes at me, and I arranged them in the dressing room. That month, the sales manager was holding a contest — the best-selling associate would get a cash prize on top of commissions. I wanted to earn that money. Maybe it was a hundred bucks.

The mother and daughter ignored me, so I made myself invisible, trying only to anticipate what needed to be done. The daughter chose two velvet dresses that looked elegant on her.

My residential college, Trum-

There's a Korean phrase that means, I see you're making an effort. I admire your labor.

an abstract concept, a real person forged each link.

Sometimes Harry, my dad's supplier who had a brass jewelry business in Thailand, would stop by. A kind man with a sunny smile, he'd lay out his sample merchandise across the display case. The landlord, Mr. Justin, would pick up his rent check each month. He and Dad got along fine. The UPS man would come daily to drop off and pick up packages.

If I sold a street peddler six pairs of gold-filled earrings at \$1.50 a pair, I'd ring up \$9 on the register. The manufacturer of the earrings charged my dad maybe \$1.50 for the pair, which would mean that \$2.10 was profit, and even as a kid in middle school, I understood what that money meant.

From that profit and whatever else we'd earned that day and in the rest of the month, my folks had to clear enough money to pay rent for the store and our apartment, the salary of their employees, Mr. Shin, who was also given breakfast and lunch, utilities, business insurance, taxes, food, clothing and health insurance.

My sisters and I were always saving things — coats, sneakers, money for lunch. There were businesses, and in each one, there was a counter, and that's where you and I meet.

I hope when we can take off our masks, I get to tell you how much I need you.

We didn't go on vacations. If my parents closed the store, then their customers — gift shop owners and peddlers who sold their wares on card tables in subway stations — would go elsewhere.

bull, was about to host his "Trumbull," so I figured she was going to her residential college's party.

"Are you going to the winter formal?" I asked.

The mother and daughter looked surprised.

"Do you go to Yale?" the mother asked.

I nodded, then turned to clean out the dressing room.

When I rang up the sale, they smiled nervously, embarrassed at their coldness. I felt sorry for them. I could have let on earlier.

The jajangmyeon restaurant door swung open.

The Korean woman in the apron handed me the paper bag and stepped back.

We bowed to each other, the way we might have at a Korean church.

"Su go ha se yo," I said, which translates to "Keep up your hard work," but that isn't it exactly. The phrase is a kindness, meaning, I recognize you're making an effort, and I encourage you to bear up, and it also means, I admire your labor.

My city is five boroughs, and each borough has many neighborhoods, and each neighborhood is made up of numerous blocks, and on each block, there are businesses, and in each one, there is a counter, and that's where you and I meet.

I hope when we can take off our masks, I get to tell you how much I need you.

Why it's better to have more neighbors.

sion. We have an obligation to ignore the impulse to blame density for the spread of the coronavirus and instead use this opportunity to rethink the policies that impede the construction of new housing, at more price levels, in the places where housing is most needed.

This will not be easy. I know from having spent my career on the front lines of this "density" battle. As a young city planner, I wrote one of the first inclusionary zoning ordinances in the exclusionary city of Santa Barbara, Calif. I almost got run out of town for proposing a "density bonus" program that would make it financially feasible for developers to provide a portion of their units for people with low incomes. Later, as a nonprofit housing developer working in prosperous California communities, I spent many nights in City Council meetings working to get apartment buildings for lower-income, older people approved. Underlying the "density" battle was almost always a battle over who has access to the opportunities of a place, cloaked in arguments about neighborhood character and traffic impacts.

Yet this pandemic is reminding us that we need communities where teachers, child- and elder-care workers, nurses, doctors, janitors, construction workers, bartenders, tech executives and engineers all share in the prosperity and the comfort of an affordable home. Certainly, the first focus should be on emergency funding to help families pay their bills and stay afloat. But we also need to plan now for the recovery, to ensure that it is broadly shared.

An important step is simply to permit more housing in more locations. We should put an end to zoning policies that restrict building to single-family homes and stop mandating that lots meet large minimum-size requirements, leading to sprawling, sparsely populated neighborhoods. Rather, we should encourage cities to permit more homes on existing single-family lots, allow apartments in retail districts and near transit, and dedicate excess or underused public property like surface parking lots in downtowns to new housing. All of this can be done without materially changing the look, feel and experience of a place.

The second important step is to reduce the cost and uncertainty of getting a housing project built. It often takes years to get permission to build. Local government processes often allow multiple "bites at the apple" of public comment and hearings for a plan. Sometimes, even when they vote to approve a project, a neighbor or special interest can sue to stop the approval, resulting in further significant delay. These delays add cost and risk, driving up the price of new homes and sometimes stopping projects in their tracks entirely.

Some cities are already making positive moves. Portland, Ore., and Vancouver, British Columbia, led the way on allowing small cottages in the yards of single-family homes. California has followed suit, adding homes by letting homeowners build accessory dwelling units. Los Angeles developed a Transit Oriented Communities plan that reduced parking requirements, leading to over 20,000 new apartments, 21 percent of them affordable housing. State and local governments should continue to press forward with such practices, and the federal government should use resources such as infrastructure funding to these types of actions. (To be clear, public subsidies will still be needed to solve homelessness and house the most vulnerable among us.)

These types of actions, which can be taken now, will lay the groundwork for a broad and shared prosperity. When denser housing is allowed, workers can live closer to their jobs, help save the planet by driving less and pay less in rent or mortgage payments because a bigger housing supply will lead to lower costs. Research shows that children tend to be more successful in neighborhoods with access to high-quality



MORE HOMES FOR MORE PEOPLE BY CAROL GALANTE

THERE are two things we know: The U.S. economy will recover. And the recovery will start in and be strongest in the same cities that were thriving before the pandemic. Economies in places like Seattle, San Francisco, New York and Boston are driven by the innovation, technology and biotech sectors, which are proving to be remarkably resilient to the impacts of Covid-19. Some of the dominant companies in these regions — think Amazon and Google — are even humming along through it all and consolidating market share.

The question is, can this next recovery stimulate an economy that creates opportunity for those with the lowest incomes and enables wealth building for all? Or will it, like the one we've had coming out of the Great Recession, serve only to concentrate gains in the hands of a few? At least part of the answer depends on whether we build enough housing to give an affordable foothold to those who want access to the opportunities these places offer. The key to doing so is to make cities denser, by loosening restrictive zoning that effectively blocks less-affluent American families from improving their lots in life.

Before the pandemic, these same cities and regions were already facing a crisis of crashing housing costs brought about by decades of underbuilding. The lack of affordable and available housing even as jobs boomed meant that higher-income entrants to the market outbid everyone else for the limited options, exacerbating inequality. In the San Francisco area, for example, only one new home was built for every 4.3 jobs created from 2011 to 2017. This underbuilding created untenable and unjust rent burdens on

service and essential workers, some of whom were compelled to relocate to less productive regions. Further, high housing costs impeded lower-income workers from migrating in to take advantage of job opportunities.

The last time we faced a huge need for homes was in the immediate post-World War II era. The federal government kept housing affordable and facilitated opportunity by spurring the construction of a large number of homes through programs administered by the Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Administration. The problem with that strategy, as Th-Nehisi Coates and Richard Rothstein have written, is that this era of development was shaped by discriminatory policies including government redlining, racial zoning and restrictive covenants. These policies led to seg-

Restrictive zoning blocks less-affluent families from the opportunities that cities offer.

regated communities with unequal access to opportunity. Racial inequality isn't the only cost of this prior building boom.

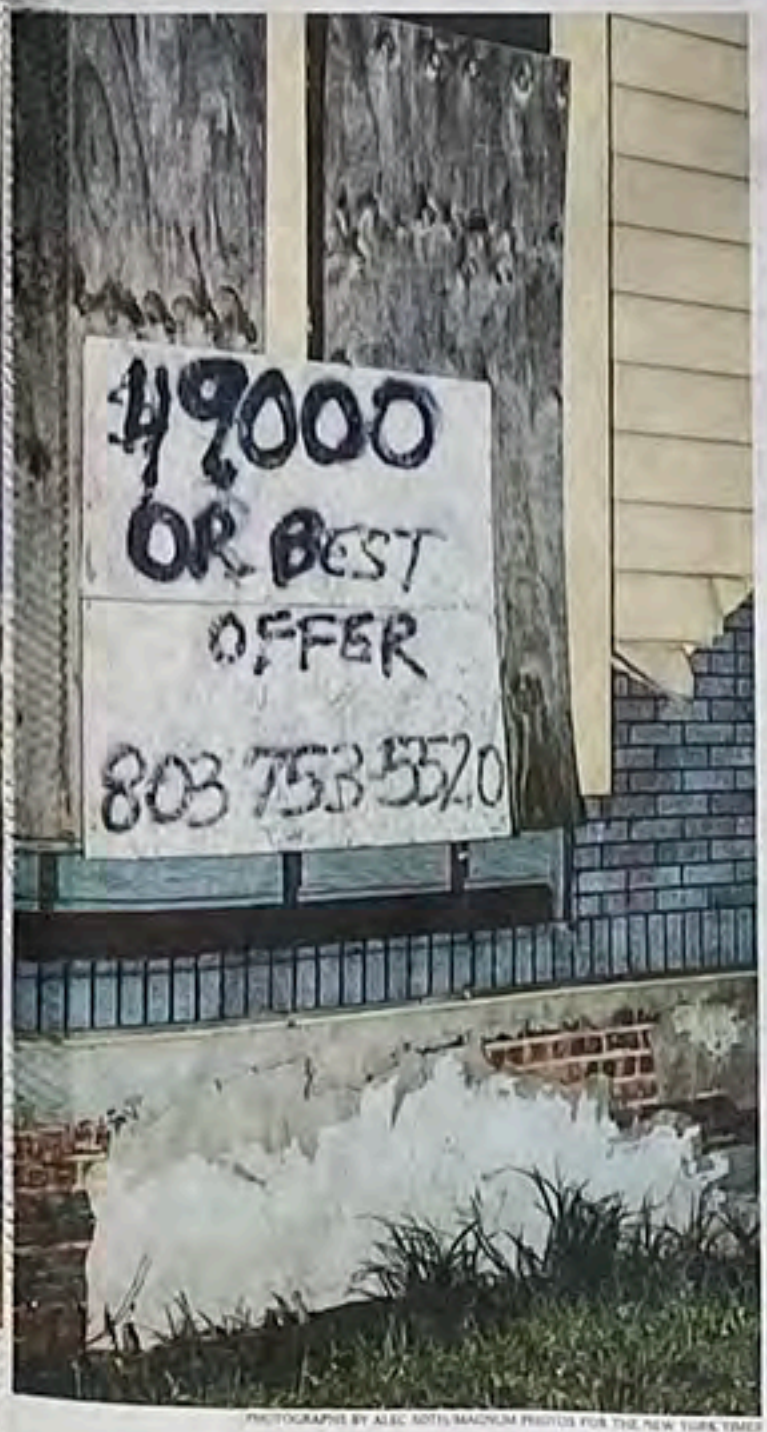
Single-family-home subdivisions are contributing to an environmental disaster, requiring people to commute by car, sometimes two hours each way, while spending carbon emissions. And the dominance of single-family development has only increased in recent decades. Single-family homes accounted for nearly 90 percent of the housing added in the largest metro areas since 1990.

The further threat is that the pandemic becomes a rallying cry to maintain our sprawling neighborhoods designed to foster exclu-

sion. In restricting building, more-affluent Americans are shutting lower-income families off from economic opportunity.

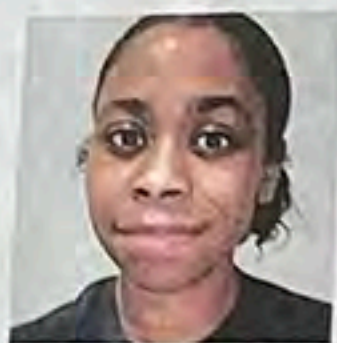
Now is an especially good time to reduce restrictions and allow for denser housing. Construction is hit hard during recessions, and opening up more building opportunities would be a stimulus for the industry, and it doesn't require any extra funding. This would get workers back to work, provide safe and affordable living for those hard hit by this pandemic and get property taxes and other revenues flowing back to local governments for the services communities need. It would be a win for everyone.

Carol Galante is a professor and faculty director of the Turner Center for Housing Innovation at the University of California Berkeley.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX ROYTS/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bay Area billionaires are breaking my heart.



Kinyette Henderson
Middle school
English, Newark

I returned to work at the middle school I went to.

I'm going into my fifth year teaching seventh-grade English and language arts at a charter school in Newark. In terms of demographics, I teach 100 percent students of color. Eighty-five percent of our students get free or reduced-price lunch. These are pretty typical demographics for the inner city.

There's just a connection I have with kids teaching in a classroom where I also had seventh-grade classes. A lot of kids find it interesting that I went there. It's another level of support and trust.

For my students, it's really hard to see people who come from neighborhoods that look like theirs doing different things, or having a career, or having gone to college or different things like that. But with me, they're able to stretch their legs and see someone who grew up in the same area as them. It makes it a lot more immediate.

Students from low-income areas don't have the same ability to see and experience the same vision of life as their richer neighbors. I could be a really, really, really smart kid, but I may still lack certain opportunities that my white counterparts may have been afforded because of their neighborhood. If I grew up where my neighbor was the C.E.O. of a company, that may give me more access to something that's not necessarily tied to my academic ability.

A lot of people have the goal, especially if they live in the inner city, to be successful so that they can get out. A lot of people don't think about the second part of that, which is if everybody just leaves, the place doesn't get any better.

The opportunities I have had absolutely went beyond the opportunities that my parents got. And what I can say is that none of that was easy. I've learned so much on my journey since leaving Newark. I have to now bring that back.



SAN FRANCISCO'S MOMENT OF TRUTH BY FARHAD MANJOO

ONE sun-drenched afternoon last month, I took a long solo bike ride through the San Francisco Bay Area. I rode from my home to Mountain View, near the once-desolate

stretch of marsh that Google has leased from NASA to build a monumental new campus. It looks like a collection of lunar bases made out of origami. Construction has been paused under lockdown, and

on the fetid plains surrounding the million-square-foot project, birds sang and wildflowers painted the horizon, and the trails that run beside the site were packed to socially distant capacity with masked families on foot and wheel.

Bicycles and pets, not sirens and fridge-truck morgues, have become the unlikely icons of the pandemic in the Bay Area. Bike shops and animal shelters say they've been inundated with demand. With the streets free of cars and full of people, the air clean, the cavernous office buildings empty and their endless parking lots turned into carefree pedestrian plazas, you'd be forgiven for mistaking some areas of Silicon Valley under lockdown for outbreaks from the "The Good Place."

On my way to the Google lunar landing base, I passed by Santiago Villa, one of the area's few remaining mobile-home parks. It was built in the 1960s as an affordable retirement community. In January, its residents, who rent the space on which their mobile

homes stand, petitioned the City Council to include trailer parks in Mountain View's rent-control rules.

They're worried that wealthy Googlers looking for a kitschy pied-à-terre near the new campus will push them out. The anger has been rising. Last year, the same City Council prohibited RVs and trailers — many of them used as homes — from parking on the street; a petition to overturn the RV ban will be on the ballot in November.

But as I rode past Santiago Villa, that rancor felt like a remnant of the Before Time. Everything was quiet. Then, from one of the trailers, a jolly trumpet began blowing loudly and out of tune.

It was then that I first had the ghoully idea: Could the coronavirus have an upside, at least in this one place? What if the pandemic and its aftermath lead Googlers and trailer park residents to find common cause? What if, after the virus, the Bay Area's wealthy gained a new appreciation for those who live on its edges, and locally made room for them in this digital wonderland?

I have lived in the Bay Area for almost 20 years, and for most of that time I've felt this place creaking steadily into unhabitability for all but the wealthiest few. We have one of the world's highest concentrations of billionaires, and yet we have not been able to marshal our immense wealth and ingenuity against our most blatant and glaring challenges — including the lack of affordable housing and entrenched homelessness.

But in this crisis, the Bay Area's response was an unexpected success. And that has given a lot of people, including me, new hope about what's possible. Yes, it sounds hokey, but this might be a time for hokeyness.

The first big moment came on March 16, when the six counties around the San Francisco Bay ordered the first shelter-in-place rules in the United States. Google, Apple, Facebook and other large employers ordered all of their employees to work from home, prompting many other local businesses to close up shop. And tech giants set an important example — they made a commitment to keep paying their on-site service workers, even if they could no longer come on-site to work.

San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose secured thousands of hotel rooms for homeless people, away from the streets and the risk of the virus in crowded shelters. Cities opened their streets to pedestrians and bicycles, and closed them to cars. Perhaps most important, officials in the area were the picture of steady leadership.

Farhad Manjoo is an Opinion columnist.

When I despaired about our housing failures, I found myself tuning in to hear the plain-spoken rantings of San Francisco's mayor, London Breed. "This is going to take all of us," Breed told the city in March. "This is going to take all of us coming together and sacrificing so that we get through this."

And it worked. Thanks to some combination of early action, collective adherence to public health guidelines, a reconfigured effort to help the vulnerable and perhaps just blind luck, mass death missed the Bay. By the start of May, fewer than 30 people had died of Covid-19 in San Francisco, in the greater Bay Area, deaths stand around 875.

The toll is probably an undercount, and black and Latino are disproportionately represented in it. Still, compared with the toll in many American metropolitan areas, this ranks as a near miracle. San Francisco's death rate of four per 100,000 residents is one-fourth the rate in Los Angeles, a fraction of the national average, and nowhere near New York's.

In the absence of mass death, people around here have had time and psychic space to imagine longer-term possibilities. If we could band together so quickly to beat the virus, making so many big changes so seamlessly, what else are we capable of doing?

I was not alone in my vague sense of optimism.

In an article on his company's website that went viral among techies last month, the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen characterized the pandemic as a call to arms to rebuild American institutions, including our cities. Like others in Silicon Valley, Andreessen has often been skeptical of government and its champions, but now here he was, cheering them on. "Demonstrate that the public sector can build better hospitals, better schools, better transportation, better cities, better housing," he wrote. "Stop trying to protect the old, the entrenched, the irrelevant, commit the public sector fully to the future."

I heard a similar urgency for grand reform from nearly every Bay Area official, activist and resident I spoke to — even those who had clashed with the tech industry or whose fights earlier seemed unwinable.

Libby Schaaf, the mayor of Oakland, opened up 74 miles of city streets for pedestrians and moved hundreds of homeless people into hotels. She saw the crisis as an opportunity to make permanent improvements.

One extremely shelter required that the homeless be given a guide to house the homeless during the pandemic offer the city long-term leases. "I do not want, at the end of the health emergency, to turn homeless people back out onto the streets," she said.

In April, Ro Khanna, who represents parts of Silicon Valley in the House, introduced legislation to provide greater pay, health care and labor protections to workers deemed "essential" during the pandemic. "When we talk about who are the 'essential workers,' very few people are saying it's lawyers or middle or senior management," he said. "They're saying, we want the person who's delivering our groceries, the person who's keeping the internet open, the electricity flowing, or the person who's taking care of our kids."

In a similar way, the crisis illustrated the importance of keeping everyone healthy — even people who lack a place to live. During a pandemic, the presence of homeless people on the streets created a risk for everyone else in the city. "What this has shown us all is that everyone's health is intertwined," said Abigail Stewart Kahn, director of the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing.

These were all officials and experts — people who might be biased toward finding "silver linings" in any crisis. But was anything really changing for homeless people around the Bay Area? I contacted several homeless people who have been placed in hotels during the pandemic. They spoke rapturously about their sudden fortune in an otherwise grim time.

"Oh my God — I can really breathe and be myself." That was the reaction from a 33-year-old woman who had been living in a hotel for weeks with her 12-year-old son. She asked me not to use her name. Before the virus, they had spent years bouncing from couch to couch around the Bay. Under lockdown, their lives were, in many ways, freer than before. For the first time in years, she no longer felt that crushing dependence on other people. "I can move as the adult I am, and no one dictates what I do or how I move," she told me.

The hotel room has two beds and a private bathroom. It was starting to feel like a kind of home, she told me. "I only wish we could have a deep fryer." It is guaranteed only for three months, but she has begun to see the possibility of a new life in the uncertain distance. "I just know that I am on my way to my place."

As the weeks of lockdown dragged on, San Francisco began to break its heart again. While the number of coronavirus cases and deaths remained low, the full gloom of the coming recession began to descend into view, and with it, the same ageless, endless political squabbles. The basic problem is that despite the region's apparent insular wealth, there were too many people who could not afford to stay in their homes.

The board passed an ordinance to secure 7,000 hotel rooms for homeless people who are now on the street, but the mayor refused to comply. She said it was impossible; the city was straining against its limit already. So far, San Francisco has placed 965 homeless people in hotels, and the city is not sure whether those funds will be enough to pay for the rest.

San Francisco's mayor, London Breed, said that the city was "not going to let anyone get lost in the woods." But she also laid bare how the city's wealthy and its needy

ephemeral our coronavirus-inspired unity may be. "To the extent we have restored faith in what is possible, we have also underscored, sadly, our city's limitations," Matt Haney, a member of the Board of Supervisors, told me. "When I asked the mayor about her dispute with the supervisors, she was cordial but clearly annoyed. Annoyed that the supervisors hadn't considered the limits on the city's capacity. Annoyed that she agreed with them — more homeless people could be taken off the streets if only she had the funds or the people to make it happen."

The federal government has promised to reimburse cities for part of the cost of housing the homeless, but Breed says she is not sure whether those funds will be enough to pay for the rest.

"This fight hinges on the usual things — money, willpower, staffing and basic municipal capacity. But it also lays bare how

home prices remain high, and housing slips further out of reach for everyone else. Those who are housed are fully aware that they're one thread away from losing that housing," Kishel said.

San Francisco and other Bay Area cities have imposed temporary moratoriums on evictions caused by virus-related economic disruptions. But those will expire later in the year, at which time a wave of tenants may be kicked out of their homes unless they can pay months of back rent. At the same time, the virus has given more political ammo to those NIMBYs who have long opposed urban density and blocked the construction of more housing.

All is not lost. I do feel a renewed sense of pride and possibility about the Bay Area — the way our leaders responded to the virus did strengthen my faith in our local institutions, and we certainly seem better equipped to address long-term challenges than I once thought we were.

There might still be a window for substantive action. Our local governments can use the new leverage to push for bold ideas — among other policies, a plan for rent relief, rather than simply an eviction moratorium, so that more people don't lose their housing.

I'm also waiting on the city's billionaires to open up new floodgates of generosity, at least for mitigating the immediate pain of the crisis. Jack Dorsey, the chief executive of Twitter and Square, recently pledged \$1 billion to coronavirus relief. But of the nearly 100 billionaires reportedly living in the Bay Area, only a handful have donated to the city's coronavirus relief fund. Mary Kate Baccus, the director of external affairs at Compass Family Services, a nonprofit group that helps homeless families, told me that with a few big checks, the Bay's wealthiest could instantly make a difference.

But I wouldn't be surprised if we — the people of the Bay Area, our lawmakers, our billionaires and our ordinary, overburdened citizens — end up squandering this moment. Rebuilding a fairer, more livable urban environment will take years of difficult work. It will require sacrifices from the wealthy. It will require a renewed federal interest in addressing the problems of cities. It will require abandoning pie-in-the-sky techno-optimism.

This isn't a problem that will be solved by flying cars; it will be solved by better zoning laws, fairer taxes and, when we can make it safe again, more public transportation. We will have to commit ourselves to these and other boring but permanent civic reforms.

I'm hopeful we're up to the task. We cannot go back to the way things were. But as the immediate danger of the pandemic recedes, it will be all too easy for many of us to do exactly that.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY M. HARRIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

them. Even after the huge effort to move people into hotels, there are still thousands of homeless people on the Bay Area's streets, and little prospect that many will be housed anytime soon. My hopes for inspring leadership began to fall apart when a fight broke out recently between San Francisco's Board of Supervisors and the mayor over how many more homeless people the city could house.

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ALEX SOTTI/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The cruelty of education's geography.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE THE PROBLEM
BY REBECCA SIBILIA

navirus hit, and the economic fallout from the pandemic will demonstrate exactly how flawed this system is. Sales, energy and income taxes are plummeting, and these are the receipts that states use to close the property tax gap across school district borders. Without intervention, we will soon watch education budgets for middle- and lower-income communities unravel.

But if we envision a new map of property taxation for schools — one in which district borders no longer define “local” for the purposes of education dollars, we can tap into funding that is already in the system and offset this chal-

County pooling around Fayetteville, Ark., would deliver more money to 84 percent of low-income students. In the Kansas City suburbs, more than three-quarters of all students would benefit. In Johnstown, Pa., 86 percent of nonwhite students could gain access to the money that is already in their neighborhood. And back in Camden, 69 percent of low-income students would benefit from this change.

Reimagining school-funding geography would bring two distinct benefits. In the short term, we could find the money to buffer the impact of impending state cuts. On a longer-term basis, we could start to truly balance cross-border funding inequities and take on the racial and socioeconomic segregation that these borders enable and protect.

By expanding the definition of “local” just a bit, without finding any new state revenue or increasing any local tax rates, we can immediately get more money to a significant majority of all children. Under this kind of new nationwide map, 69 percent of all of the country’s children — and 73 percent of minority and 76 percent of low-income students — would get access to about \$1,000 more in local property tax funding.

This money is not insignificant. It would enable distance learning by covering the cost of a Chromebook and home internet access for every student who stands to gain funding. Alternately, the average district could use this new money to hire five mental health counselors and five remedial edu-



Amir Tehari
High school
economics,
Sacramento

My students do not normally advance beyond where they were born. The story of ZIP codes is a story of dreams stolen away from children.

I’ve been teaching for about seven years. I grew up in Sacramento County, down the street from where I currently teach.

I work at a low-income school. It’s a really diverse school. That’s something I really enjoy. I think there is a huge benefit to having great diversity. For the students, that helps them understand the world better from first-person experience. They meet so many students from other countries.

A lot of students who come into our high school are very behind. We spend years trying to catch them up. The dropout rate at the four-year-college level is astounding. Some for family reasons, others because they just couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. Students who are the first in the family to go to college have no academic support.

I think it’s important to look into the fundamentals of the students’ environment from an environmental science perspective. Are there heavy levels of lead exposure from lead paint? What is the pollution exposure in the area? Because there is a lot of scientific evidence that high rates of pollution and things like lead paint can be detrimental to students and their ability to learn.



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