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'Sunburnt' cities have a shot to remake themselves

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

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ORLANDO — Beyond the gates of Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom Park, the fairy tale stops abruptly — with no happily-ever-after ending.

Foreclosure signs dotting once-booming suburban developments that supported decades of growth here and across the rest of the Sun Belt are grim memorials to the recession and housing bust.

One touch of magic remains: 70-degree days in January.

The balmy climate — one of the biggest draws for Florida and other Sun Belt states — suggests that growth likely will return; the economy will rebound; and millions of vacant homes will be lived in again. But this pause in the boom could be a seminal moment for cities across California, Nevada, Arizona and Florida — all Sun Belt states that grew fast and have been hardest hit by the housing collapse.

Will they allow sprawling housing tracts and gated communities to keep mushrooming in remote suburbs as soon as the crisis ends, or are they rethinking growth the way struggling Rust Belt communities have been forced to?

Cities such as Detroit and Buffalo are trying to adjust to economic decline by shrinking smartly — concentrating development in small pockets and razing abandoned homes to make way for parks.

"There's an extraordinary potential for 'sunburnt' cities to embrace the idea of smart decline" — doing more with less, whether it's fewer people, fewer home buyers or fewer jobs, says Justin Hollander, urban planning professor at Tufts University and author of *Sunburnt Cities*, which was published March 1.

Boomtowns that have been scorched by the housing crisis could learn from struggling Rust Belt communities, Hollander says.

Sunburnt cities have a chance to limit growth for growth's sake by allowing dense

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development and reducing parking requirements to encourage walking, public transportation and more green space, Hollander says.

"In each place there are a lot of opportunities to think smaller," he says. "It hasn't happened yet. Largely, these cities are in denial."

There are glimmers, however, of change. The economic slowdown — coupled with rising energy prices, tight local government budgets and changing demographics — is prompting new conversations that could lead to a substantial change in the future design of Sun Belt cities, says Armando Carbonell, chairman of the department of planning and urban form at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, a think tank on land use.

"Planners around the country see this as opportunity time," he says. "We'll continue to see a lot of growth, but the form it takes could be different."

Different from the gated housing developments that clump homes on cul-de-sacs and along streets without sidewalks, isolated from shops and services. Planners envision the cities of the future as resembling cities of the past: more high-rise apartments, condos and townhouses near transit stops, shops and businesses on street levels, fewer parking garages.

Jim Ley, administrator of Florida's Sarasota County, was assistant county manager in Nevada's Clark County (Las Vegas) — one of the nation's fastest growing throughout much of the past 20 years.

"Communities are at the leading edge of a possible culture change of how we live," Ley says. "It's possible."

Back to the city

In economies driven by housing and construction, the real estate mantra of "location, location, location" has been replaced by "diversification, diversification, diversification."

Here in central Florida, medical facilities and research centers are being lured to reduce reliance on tourism and housing. In [Arizona](#) and Nevada, the chase is on for technology companies. All three sun-soaked areas are wooing solar-energy companies and other renewable-energy industries.

"The discussion is going on about changing the engine of growth from real estate speculation and consumer spending to innovation, technology and export," says [Robert Lang](#), urban sociologist at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

In an area dominated by gaming and tourism, North Las Vegas recently attracted a solar-panel company.

Debra March, a city councilwoman and real estate specialist in nearby Henderson, Nev., says it will take at least two more years for the Las Vegas area to absorb all its excess housing inventory. "We have an opportunity here to rethink our whole community strategy."

For more than 50 years, central cities lost people to suburbia. That's where people headed when they yearned for a big house and a big yard they could afford.

"We got what we asked for," Ley says. "Everybody wanted in the name of independence and liberty a little piece of the farm. They got it."

Now, many have lost it. Sun Belt suburbs have the highest percentage of homeowners who owe more on their mortgages than their houses are worth.

"We have enough large-lot, single-family homes here on the market today to satisfy demand for years to come," says Phil Laurien, executive director of the East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, which covers six counties from Orange (Orlando) to Volusia (Daytona Beach).

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Laurien has seen the suburban flight that caused the decline of many Northern cities the past 50 years, including his native Buffalo.

"It's almost a mirror image," he says. "Down here, the big push for growth in Florida has been in the suburbs, but for the next generation, it may not be in the suburbs. We may be facing the depopulation of the suburbs."

Some bedroom communities are cutting their reliance on housing. One example: Tavares, an old railroad and lumber community of about 13,000 northwest of Orlando. Seaplanes have landed in the middle of Lake Dora there for years, but when the city held a series of "visioning" sessions with residents, the idea of becoming "America's Seaplane City" took off. The city is the first in Florida to use seaplanes as a way to market the community. A \$4.26 million seaplane base and marina opened last April and is now at the center of Tavares' economic development strategy.

"We created a pride and well-being," says former mayor Nancy Clutts.

A culture change

Changing the culture that embraces property rights in parts of the country where space seems endless is a challenge.

"That culture is very much caught in an intertwined relationship between the consumer, the builder, the financing (institution)," Ley says. "It's a culture that has to be undone."

When a community is accustomed to growth, "It's really hard for them to get out of that mindset," Hollander says. "It's hard for them to recognize that conditions have changed drastically and that they're in a position to do something different."

The transformation may be pushed along by:

- Gas prices.** As the cost of a gallon of gas starts to near \$4, the 45-minute commute loses its appeal. Research by think tanks such as the Center for Neighborhood Technology shows that households in distant suburbs spend more on transportation than they save on housing.

- Environmental concerns.** Protecting natural resources and reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil are part of the national agenda. Living in smaller homes near public transit or within walking distance of stores and services can lower energy use and preserve green space by not using up as much land.

- Social and demographic change.** Young adults don't want to live in gated subdivisions far from entertainment, shopping and jobs, according to research by CEOs for Cities, a non-profit alliance of urban leaders. More are delaying marriage and childbirth, extending the time they're likely to want an urban lifestyle. Also, 77 million Baby Boomers are or soon will be empty nesters, and many are gravitating back to urban centers.

"We need to provide diversity in housing, provide choices for young people who say they are not ready to take care of a yard and want to be in the downtown area," says Debra Stark, planning director for the city of Phoenix, where light rail now connects downtown with Tempe, home of Arizona State University, and Mesa. It eventually will stretch northwest to Glendale, another large suburb.

Not just a theme park

The city of Orlando caught on to these changes long before the housing crisis.

"People think of Orlando as a theme park," says Dean Grandin Jr., director of the city planning and development department. "Orlando is a real city with a real downtown, real neighborhoods."

The city has more than 100 lakes, and it has created "villages" around many of them to

shape a sense of place with recreational, residential and job opportunities.

"Everything we do is geared toward further quality of life," Grandin says. "We're not afraid of dense development."

The [Amtrak](#) station is being redeveloped. The new Amway Center, home of the National Basketball Association's Orlando Magic, has opened. A "creative village" that focuses on the growing digital media industry — companies that produce interactive media such as video games or military simulation — has been developed nearby.

Orlando is creating three "medical cities" around hospitals, medical schools and research facilities. Baldwin Park, site of the former Orlando Naval Training Center, now is a city within a city, offering a wide range of residential choices, from custom million-dollar homes to condominiums.

"The unintended consequence of the housing collapse is that it could benefit cities," Grandin says.

Money talks

If environmental consciousness or urban lifestyles aren't strong enough motivations to persuade communities to change the way they grow, the lure of more tax revenue might.

"Suburban development does not pay its way," says Peter Katz, director of smart growth and urban planning in Florida's Sarasota County and an advocate of New Urbanism — the movement that embraces traditional design used before the advent of the automobile, such as stores, homes and parks within walking distance.

Katz showed county officials that 1350 Main, a high-rise development in Sarasota that has commercial and residential space on less than one acre, generates 142 times more property tax revenue per acre than a [Walmart](#) or big suburban mall.

"The mixed-use high-rise pays back the whole infrastructure tab in three years," he says, because roads, power, water and sewer lines already exist. "A suburban housing development will take 42 years."

Shelley Lauten, president of [myregion.org](#), says the mayors and county leaders in 86 Florida cities and seven counties meet regularly to tackle regional issues, including water and transportation — all part of a "How Shall We Grow" plan the organization drafted.

"Florida has always traditionally known cheap housing and cheap labor," Lauten says. "We're all struggling with the same thing ... better uses of land."

She says the region will emerge from the slump in better shape because it is being forced to diversify its economy.

"For me, it's a perfect time to change the mindset," Lauten says. "Think about the lessons of Detroit that did not diversify their economies."

Lang says that Sun Belt states are embracing diversification but don't necessarily see a connection between their challenges and those facing the Rust Belt. Growth will return there, he says, and that's why "a vacant lot in Las Vegas is not a vacant lot in Cleveland."

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