

But the strength of his collection is not that it recaptures an actual historical period when kids and their parents were indeed morally superior.

Rather, what is most appealing about *The Book of Virtues* is the idea that children need to learn ethics the same way they learn to walk: slowly, and in a room free of sharp edges. "The reader," notes Bennett, "may notice [*The Book of Virtues*] does not discuss issues like nuclear war, abortion, creationism, or euthanasia. This may come as a disappointment to some. But...the formation of character in young people is educationally a different task from, and a prior task to, the discussion of the great, difficult, ethical controversies of the day. First things first....The tough issues can, if teachers and parents wish, be taken up later. And, I would add, a person who is morally literate will be

immeasurably better equipped than a morally illiterate person to reach a reasoned and ethically defensible position on these tough issues."

Indeed, first things first. Let children first learn that George Washington admitted to chopping down the cherry tree and that honesty is the best policy. Then let them puzzle over the fact that Mason Lock Weems's paean to truth-telling is itself made up and that virtuous living is not a simple, clear-cut matter. As they grow up, their world will become increasingly complex. In its finest moments, *The Book of Virtues* acknowledges there is no street map to the Babylon in which our children will live. The best we can offer them is a compass. ❖

Nick Gillespie is assistant editor of REASON.

## Metropolitan Visions

By Peter D. Salins

**New Visions for Metropolitan America**, by Anthony Downs,  
Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 256 pages, \$22.95

For five decades now Americans have been deserting cities for suburbs—in some places, such as Detroit or St. Louis, in massive waves; in others, such as New York, in a steady trickle. Ever since the trend became so pronounced that it could no longer be ignored, the opinion elite has declared that our cities are in the throes of an "urban crisis," and demanded that the federal government do something about it.

Whether it really amounts to a crisis or not, the rapid pace at which homes, shops, factories, and offices have settled outside the established historic boundaries of cities in that limitless urban penumbra loosely categorized as "the suburbs" has created serious problems on both sides of the city-suburban frontier. The newly settled suburbs have had to confront the monetary costs of new schools, new roads, and new utilities, and the psychic

costs of idyllic rural landscapes giving way to urbanization and congestion. And the cities have had to cope with the consequences of being left with an increasingly unappealing demographic and economic hand as their most prosperous citizens and most successful businesses decamp for the suburbs.

As the dust settles after 50 years of suburban exodus, not only has the cities' share of metropolitan populations fallen by more than 40 percent, but the profile of their remaining residents is disproportionately old, sick, poor, deviant, and criminal. Making things worse, the cities have had to bear a large share of the monetary and quality-of-life costs of caring for their difficult and dependent populations even as the flight of high-income residents and businesses has eroded their fiscal and human resources. As a result, all the major fault lines of American society—rich and

poor, white and black, conservative and liberal, native born and foreign—now run along that invisible but critical boundary that separates U.S. cities from their suburbs.

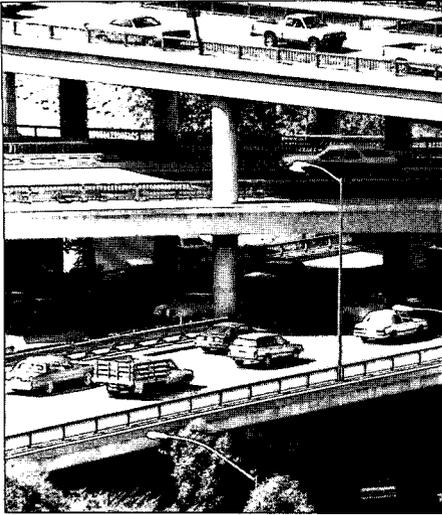
This story of central-city decline and suburban growth is by now a tediously familiar staple of popular perception and scholarly research, amended only by perennial stories of central-city "re-birth" ascribed to various cities when they elect new reformist mayors, are awarded large federal grants for redevelopment, are selected as sites for corporate relocations, or open new airports.

The never-ending urban debate between the political and professional left and right revolves around two issues. First, should we care? Is the decentralization and diffusion of the American metropolis a bad thing, or merely a late 20th-century form of urbanization as natural as the more concentrated variety spawned in the 19th?

The second issue is: If we care, what should be done about it? Should we strive to put the suburban genie back into the metropolitan bottle? Or should we just compensate the cities for their demographic and economic misfortunes? Or should we do both?

Dozens of books, hundreds of magazine and journal articles, and thousands of government and academic reports have been devoted to this debate, yet no consensus has emerged. (I entered this fray with an article in *The Public Interest* last fall, "Cities, Suburbs and the Urban Crisis.") We now have a new overview, *New Visions for Metropolitan America*, by the highly regarded Brookings Institution scholar Anthony Downs.

Downs's book very compactly—but also comprehensively and cogently—encapsulates one side of the urban policy debate: the side that has maintained all along that the decentralization of U.S. metropolitan areas has been a bad thing and that it is high time for us to reverse the process and its consequences with vigorous government action. Downs mounts a concerted attack on five essential aspects of



As Downs concedes, you will never get Americans out of their cars.

the modern American metropolitan paradigm: the endless suburban sprawl of low-density residential development; near-total dependence on the automobile for metropolitan travel; workplaces set in increasingly remote locations; delegation of suburban governments' fiscal and regulatory functions to small, parochial municipal jurisdictions; and the growing segregation of the well-to-do from the poor, and whites from minorities.

Why are those things bad? Downs offers two sets of reasons. The first, expressed in denatured economic terms, revolves around the inherent inefficiency of such arrangements. Low-density development is inefficient in its wasteful use of land. Dependence on the automobile and the long trips made necessary by urban sprawl are inefficient because of the large amount of energy and other resources consumed in travel. And the congestion resulting from the intersection of low-density development and auto dependence is inefficient in its colossal waste of time.

But Downs quickly directs us to the real reason he objects to the modern American urban situation: inequity. In this, he follows in the well-worn grooves of liberal complaints past by lamenting the isolation of poor minority residents in crumbling central-city ghettos. Such people, argues Downs, are inadequately schooled, badly housed, shut out of jobs by geography and lack of skills and

locked in a self-perpetuating cycle of economic and social dysfunction. Downs also laments the fiscal and functional degradation of central-city governments, their limited resources exhausted by futile efforts to serve the urban underclass and unavailable to meet their other residents' more quotidian needs.

Emphasizing the inequity of those arrangements, Downs asserts that they are driven by the preference of most well-to-do metropolitan residents for living in tranquil enclaves of social and racial homogeneity, and their refusal to bear their fair share of community social or infrastructure costs.

Downs goes beyond the traditional liberal lament in offering us what he refers to as "alternate visions" to remedy this metropolitan malaise. Some of his visions are indeed new; others are pulled off the well-stocked shelf of government programs dating back to the Great Society, if not earlier. His visions are arranged in five clusters, each cluster corresponding to one of his generic complaints. Displaying an inordinate fondness for typologies, in the latter part of his book Downs offers the reader a bewildering hierarchical array of policy options and proposals unfolding from his fundamental premises. What it all boils down to, however, is an assault on the basic American metropolitan paradigm.

To reverse suburban sprawl, he would invoke state regulatory powers to increase residential density and set an outer urban growth boundary. Workplace dispersal would be reversed by a mix of regulations and subsidies. While Downs disparages the efficacy of any schemes to get Americans out of their cars, he does suggest government-orchestrated carrots and sticks to make them use their cars more efficiently, through ride-sharing, for example. To counter beggar-thy-neighbor suburban municipal parochialism, Downs would vest development regulations and other relevant local powers in state and regional agencies. And to reverse the effects of race and class segregation he would scatter low-cost housing subsidies throughout

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his now more densely settled and regionally regulated suburban domain.

I share Downs's conviction that, in many respects, the spatial dynamics of American metropolitan areas are unwholesome, and that they are responsible for the decline of American cities. Furthermore, looking at the underlying structure of metropolitan America is preferable to demanding fiscal handouts to cities that would subsidize and entrench their disadvantaged status. Sending federal or state funds to cities has been the only operative urban policy from day one of the "urban crisis" and continues today in the form of the Clinton administration's empowerment zones. Given the futility and bankruptcy of the compensatory strategy, Downs's approach is refreshing.

Where I part company with Downs is in his assumption that the metropolitan dynamics he disparages are the product of natural market forces, and that, therefore, we need intrusive government interventions to reverse them. The simple truth is that the contemporary metropolis is largely a creation of market-distorting government policies and might more easily be reversed by a less-intrusive government presence.

Take suburban sprawl, for example. There is ample evidence that developers, left to their own preferences, would love to build more densely. The denser they can build, the more money they make. Because a large share of their reduced costs would be passed on to home buyers and tenants in a classically competitive urban housing market, most housing consumers, city and suburban alike, would be happy to live at higher densities. They might even welcome the attendant reduction in their travel costs. This is especially true today, as American households are getting smaller and less child-centered.

Other targets of Downs's critique also contravene, rather than reflect, market preferences. Why are workplaces so dispersed in the suburbs? And why do you have to drive three miles to buy groceries or get a haircut? Not because of the market. As in the case of density, developers, employers, and retail entrepreneurs would

happily drop commercial enterprises among residential settlements. What prevents these natural market forces from asserting themselves are local zoning codes, with stringent density ceilings and rigid segregation of diverse land uses. Downs recognizes this, but prescribes the wrong remedy. He would take those regulatory powers away from localities and vest them in regional or state agencies, under the perhaps naive assumption that such larger bodies would pursue more efficient or equitable land-use policies.

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Such regulatory powers are of dubious validity, regardless of their venue. They are neither necessary or beneficial for the protection of public welfare and go way beyond the constitutional limits set by the Fifth Amendment. The correct policy response is not merely to boot them up higher in the governmental hierarchy, but to challenge them in legislative and judicial arenas.

**W**hat about the metropolitan racial and economic segregation caused by the paucity of low-cost housing in suburbia (and the subsidization of such housing in central cities)? Downs's remedy is to deploy publicly funded housing subsidies in the suburbs. This is obviously unrealistic politically, but also unnecessary. I believe that if we let the market operate naturally, plenty of low-cost housing would be developed in the suburbs without subsidies, as it once was (remember

Levittown?). What keeps it from happening today is a web of zoning and environmental rules that discourage or prohibit the construction of small houses on small lots, and unreasonable subdivision regulations that sharply raise the unit cost of sites. One can build a modest dwelling for under \$50,000 in most U.S. urban areas (or deploy a mobile home for under \$30,000), and at generally proscribed densities develop sites for under \$25,000. That translates into \$500-800 in monthly rents or carrying costs, well below the threshold of much subsidized housing.

Another example of regulation that thwarts market impulses and denies countless individuals decent inexpensive housing is the restriction on "accessory apartments"—renting out spare rooms in underoccupied single-family houses. If accessory apartments were openly legal (they exist now in a growing gray market), they would be eagerly embraced by low-budget singles and couples and empty-nest homeowners grateful for the added income.

It isn't just suburbia that would be transformed by letting markets operate more freely. Some measure of the central cities' distress is the result of their own anti-market policies. Conventional wisdom would have us believe that households and businesses intrinsically prefer the remote and disconnected urban hinterland to the heart of the metropolis with its dense transportation and communications infrastructure and its still-extensive stock of commercial and cultural facilities. A good market test of this proposition is to look at the price of land. As it happens, the traditional Ricardian urban land price gradient, with its apex in the metropolitan center and its steep asymptotic slide to the urban perimeter, is still very much with us, broken only by local peaks at major suburban commercial centers.

But if central-city land is so valuable, why is it occupied by slums and the rotting hulks of abandoned factories and warehouses? Because cities have devoted a lot of effort (and federal funds) to inhibit or distort their land and housing markets. Suburban regulations may, to a large de-

gree, have kept the poor out of suburbia and lured the affluent in. But, just as surely, central-city housing and other subsidies have locked the poor in the center city while motivating the affluent to flee. And misguided "economic development" and "community preservation" strategies often prevent the recycling of obsolete manufacturing and housing sites for new residential or commercial uses, even as urban renewal schemes substitute planners' judgments for those of the real estate industry in reconfiguring central business and residential areas.

Other market-disregarding policies have also intensified central-city distress, many of which could be reversed by cities unilaterally without new government initiatives. The bad schools that trap the urban underclass in the lowest tier of the economy, for example, could be fixed without spending more by instituting market-emulating reforms. There is growing evidence that measures like public school choice, charter schools, and vouchers can help even the most disadvantaged youngsters to learn. And other city responsibilities (parks, sanitation, infrastructure, public safety) of particular concern to the remaining middle-income, tax-paying residents could be discharged more effectively and cheaply through a combination of privatization and decentralization.

In a more market-driven urban universe, the kind of metropolitan world Downs favors should develop quite naturally: a denser, more heterogeneous pattern of land use and dwellings, a commercially and residentially vibrant central city, and a spatially integrated and better-housed lower class. Such might very well have arisen in the United States after World War II if a broad spectrum of government actions hadn't subverted it.

But the near-total dependence on cars to get around just about any urban area outside New York that Downs decries is both irreversible and irrelevant to the urban policy debate. As Downs concedes, you will never get Americans (including me) out of their cars. But this does not really prevent the density and development

alternatives that Downs (and the untrammelled market) favor. As in the great cities of Europe, a more urbanized metropolis would merely induce Americans to drive less, keep their cars at home more often (when they walked, for example), or maybe induce them to buy smaller cars that are easier to park.

Downs is on the right track in calling attention to the flaws in the spatial ecology of U.S. metropolitan areas, and in promoting new visions to correct them. He is both naive and off-base, however, in suggesting that new state or federal government initiatives would be feasible or effective. If the suburban upper-middle class has, indeed, been the main villain in designing the metropolitan paradigm, as Downs maintains, there is little likelihood that it will voluntarily or happily accede to its redesign.

On the other hand, if I am right in be-

lieving that the major features of the current paradigm are not natural, but fly in the face of land, housing, and commercial market dynamics, they might be dismantled more easily and effectively by giving market forces greater play. This is not the likeliest of prospects either, but it gains credibility these days from the growing popularity and political respectability of such market-oriented ideas as deregulation and privatization and the recent success of constitutional challenges to zoning and other development constraints. Three cheers, then, for new metropolitan visions, but ones that let Americans keep their cars and rely on the market, not the government, for implementation. ❀

*Peter D. Salins is professor of planning at Hunter College and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.*

## Taking the Popular Out of Popular Music

By Brian Doherty

**Hole In Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music**, by Martha Bayles, New York: The Free Press, 453 pages, \$24.95

**B**ewailing the content and character of American popular music is often a sport of intellectuals and would-be culture critics who try their hardest never to have to listen to pop music. So this book starts with an advantage: Its author, Martha Bayles, is a serious, credentialed cultural critic who claims no inherent antagonism toward popular music. Her stated goal is to grapple with exactly what has happened to her once-beloved American pop to make it ring so harshly in her ears.

Coarse, vulgar, nihilistic, grating, unlovely in every sense—those are the qualities that Bayles hears in today's pop music. The problem, she says, is that the pure stream of life-affirming Afro-Ameri-

can music, which gets a loving historical overview from her, has been polluted by an injection of attitudes and approaches imported from the European modernist avant-garde. She parses out three strains of modernism, which she calls "introverted" (overly self-obsessed, hermetic, unconcerned with connection with an audience), "extroverted" (striking a balance between skilled formal innovation and respect for tradition), and "perverse" (obscene, nihilistic, obsessed with shocking the bourgeoisie). The middle one, she argues, has been salubrious; the first and last have proven venomous to the system of American pop.

Bayles praises the "tough, affirmative" spirit of the blues, and it is in general a