



## New housing construction in Phoenix: Evidence of “new suburbanism”?

Carol Atkinson-Palombo

Department of Geography, University of Connecticut and Patricia Gober, School of Geographical Sciences and School of Sustainability, Arizona State University, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Stereotypical images of suburbs as homogeneous, residential neighborhoods comprised of single-family houses on individual lots have become synonymous with sprawl. Discourses on smart growth, new urbanism, and sustainability promote increasing residential density because housing is such a large part of the built environment. Recent literature has emphasized the potential for denser residential development at the urban fringe contesting the idea of monotonically decreasing density gradients that underpin traditional location models. Analysis of new housing completions between 1990 and 2005 in rapidly-growing metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona, examined changes in the form and location of new housing constructed in 2000–2005 compared to the prior decade, to identify patterns of densification. Features included rapid decentralization of multiple-family home construction, and the emergence of a wide range of multiple-family housing forms at the fringe, including large apartment complexes in accessible freeway locations, high-end condominium developments in high-amenity areas, and subsidized apartments in less-prestigious areas. Densification no longer equates to urban infill, but takes many forms and occurs all over the metropolitan region, especially the urban fringe where “new suburbanism” may be emerging in response to the “sustainability turn” in contemporary planning.

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### Introduction

Over a decade ago, Bourne described how the term “suburbs” was so laden with externally-imposed images, entrenched social meanings and inherited cultural baggage, that it was one of the most widely-used, abused, and maligned designations in the nomenclature of urban studies and planning (Bourne, 1996). He suggested that these images, and the simplistic city-suburban dichotomy, were outdated and increasingly unsuited to the complex realities of contemporary metropolitan life and urban development. Numerous empirical studies have identified suburbs that are substantively different from the images of white, middle-class, residential neighborhoods dominated by single-family houses from the 1950s (Frey, 1990; Mikelbank, 2004; Orfield, 2002; Baldassare, 1988). Alternative descriptors for the built environment have been created, in order to more fully capture the complexity of contemporary human settlement patterns (Lang and LeFurgy, 2007; Lang, Blakely and Gough, 2005).

Theoretical models have framed location decisions in terms of a choice between urban and suburban environments, underpinned by preferences about housing density (Fujita, 1989; Danielsen, Lang and Fulton, 1999b; Lang, Hughes and Danielsen, 1997; Muth,

1985). While these models have the potential to be flexible, land-use change at the urban fringe continues to be associated with population dispersion and low-density development (Bunting, Filion and Priston, 2002; Filion, 2001; Filion, Bunting and Warriner, 1999).

Concern about the ill-effects of sprawl has motivated a “sustainability-turn” in planning theory (Berke and Conroy, 2000; Rydin, 1995; Berke, 2002; Fainstein, 2005). Even though sprawl is a highly amorphous concept that has proven difficult to define and quantify, it has become so pervasive in planning discourses that many land-use and transportation policies enacted in the past two decades bear the specific label of “anti-sprawl” measures (Galster et al., 2001; Pendall, 2003; Wolman et al., 2005; Lopez and Hynes, 2003; Bengston, Fletcher and Nelson, 2004). While smart growth, new urbanism, and the sustainable cities movements all have their own disciplinary foundations and individual nuances, they share the central philosophy that greater consideration needs to be given to how people, the built environment and the natural environment interrelate (Knaap and Talen, 2005; Agyeman, 2005; Alexander and Tomalty, 2002; Banister, Watson and Wood, 1997; Blassingame, 1998). Residential density is an important component of these discussions because housing is such a large share of the built environment (Danielsen et al., 1999b). High-density housing continues to be equated primarily with cities and sustainability (Lang et al., 1997). Sprawl has become synonymous with the stereotypical images of suburbia and represents the antithesis of

E-mail address: [carol.atkinson-palombo@uconn.edu](mailto:carol.atkinson-palombo@uconn.edu)

sustainability (Duaney, Plater-Zyberk and Speck, 2001; Weitz, 2001). The persistent association of “distance from downtown” with low-density development leaves little room for theorization about how urban fringe dynamics might respond to the “sustainability-turn” in contemporary planning.

This paper was motivated by the need to catalogue the growth patterns that have emerged across Maricopa County—at the core of the Phoenix metropolitan area—one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the US (US Census, 2007), encompassing almost 2800 square miles (Maricopa County Assessor’s Office, 2007<sup>1</sup>). Gober and Burns (2002) have presented a model of urban-fringe development using data on housing completions between 1990 and 1998 in Phoenix, Arizona, and those results revealed that the urban fringe was a wide band rather than a narrow line, marching outwards at a rate of up to half a mile per year, and dominated by single-family house construction. Denser forms of new residential development—multiple-family houses—lagged the crest of single-family house construction and contributed to infill. Empirical results lent credence to the image of an urban area growing at the fringe with low-density single-family house construction as so-called “pioneer settlement” and higher-density multiple-family development filling in after the single-family housing wave had passed. Between 40,000 and 50,000 housing units were added to the county’s housing stock in each year between 2000 and 2005, increasing the resident population by more than 100,000 each year (Arizona Department of Economic Security, 2008). This expansion took place after the adoption of smart growth legislation<sup>2</sup> at the statewide level. The empirical analysis presented in this paper updates the earlier study and quantifies whether the type and location of new housing constructed in metropolitan Phoenix in 2000–2005 was different from the prior decade, focusing specifically on whether the location and characteristics of the urban fringe has changed in the first five years of this decade compared to the prior one. Particular attention is paid to the urban fringe because scholars have noted that this area has the scope to more fully represent current market dynamics (see Farris, 2001 and the references therein), and because that is where fieldwork suggested that substantive changes had taken place.

This paper catalogues densification patterns that have occurred in a low-density metropolitan area after the adoption of smart growth legislation and a debate as to whether or not these could constitute the evidence of “new suburbanism” as described by Kotkin (2005). The results of this preliminary research set the stage for more rigorous analyses of discrete policy tools that shape urban form, to understand *why* these changes may be

occurring, and for examining other aspects of suburban transformation, such as the relative importance of environmental values, demographic factors and socio-economic attributes, in shaping residential density patterns. This paper is organized into four sections. In the next section, we briefly summarize the four interrelated strands of literature upon which we draw: planning paradigms and new suburbanism, urban fringe dynamics, housing demography, and research into the changing form and function of the suburbs. Section 3 contains details of our empirical study with background information on metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona; data and methods, which include GIS-based analysis and fieldwork; and the results. Section 4 contains a brief discussion of the significance of our findings, and a discussion about future research that builds upon this study.

## Literature review

### *Planning paradigms and “new suburbanism”*

Suburbia has become virtually synonymous with sprawl, the antithesis of sustainability (Duaney et al., 2001; Squires, 2002; Wolman et al., 2005; Galster et al., 2001). Despite the practical challenges of defining and measuring sprawl (see for example Wolman et al., 2005; Tsai, 2005; Galster et al., 2001), countering both the effects of urban sprawl as well as the process has emerged as one of the primary goals of contemporary planning (Carruthers, 2002; Berke and French, 1994; Gale, 1992; APA, 1997). More compact living arrangements have been offered as one solution to sprawl because housing comprises a major share of the built environment (Danielsen et al., 1999b). Accordingly, higher-density housing features prominently in the principles of the smart growth and new urbanism movements and the drive to make cities more sustainable (Newman and Kenworth, 1999; Handy, 2005; Alexander and Tomalty, 2002; Knaap and Talen, 2005; Haughton and Hunter, 2003). Despite these advances, residential location decisions continue to be theorized as a choice between urban and suburban lifestyles, and preferences for high- and low-density settings, respectively (Fernandez et al., 2005; Filion et al., 1999; Phe and Wakely, 2000), reinforcing the association of the suburbs with low density and sprawl.

While the suburbs have won few admirers among sophisticated social critics and urban scholars, they nevertheless represent the location of choice for over 70% of Americans (Fannie-Mae-Foundation, 1997). The real and persistent appeal for the suburbs is often framed in terms of preference for a detached single-family home in a suburb with good schools (Calthorpe, 2004; Filion, 2003; Filion et al., 1999; Downs, 1994; NAHB, 1999; ULI, 1999). Denser residential development, particularly multi-family housing, is most often associated with inner cities (Glaeser, 2003; Suchman and Sowell, 1997; Danielsen, Lang and Fulton, 1999a; Lang et al., 1997). In contrast, adding higher-density housing to most suburban neighborhoods is seen as a challenge because of long-held fears of what higher-density housing might do to property values and who may reside in such housing (Danielsen et al., 1999b). Others have suggested that the urban fringe may have more potential for incorporating density into the built-environment, given the challenges of adding density to both the core and the suburbs (Farris, 2001). Kotkin (2005) has embraced the notion of capitalizing on opportunities for densification at the fringe by promoting the concept of “new suburbanism” as a planning approach.

*“New suburbanism takes as its premise that the solution to the problems of sprawl lies not in trying to force people into ever denser cities, but in improving on the existing suburban and exurban reality. . . . The primary challenge for planners, architects and community leaders will not be to destroy suburbia but to develop ways*

<sup>1</sup> This estimation of the expanse of the urbanized area is based on a calculation of all land parcels in Maricopa County, Arizona, that are subject to or exempted from property taxes. As this dataset also includes vacant land, the calculation may be an overestimation of urbanized land but has the benefit of not including areas of land that are not developable because of mountainous terrain or ownership restrictions, such as Native American reservations.

<sup>2</sup> The *Growing Smarter Act* was passed by the State legislature in 1998. The Act required local jurisdictions to give greater thought to how and where growth would occur, and how it would be financed. The Act also created the *Growing Smarter Commission* and directed the 15-members to investigate complex issues relating to the impact of new legislation on existing plans. The *Growing Smarter Plus Act*, based on the findings from the Commission, was signed into law in May 2000. *Growing Smarter Plus* included statutory provisions that revised the state’s municipal zoning policies by: requiring large or fast-growing communities to establish voter-approved general plans that include designated growth areas; granting counties the same power as cities to assess developer impact fees, provided the county adopts a capital improvements plan; requiring local general plans to have an analysis of how water supplies will serve future growth; prohibiting municipalities, without approval of the landowner, from designating private lands or state trust lands as open space, recreation, conservation or agricultural lands in order to meet a general plan’s open space and growth elements; requiring municipalities to adopt a citizen review process for re-zonings; authorizing municipalities to designate infill incentive districts and adopt an infill incentive plan to encourage redevelopment in such districts; and requiring authorization for subdivision and split parcel review involving five or fewer lots (APA, 2007).

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