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Ding, Dong, the Dream is Dead

By *Charlie Grantham*

This month we're fascinated with all things community. Many people believe that the "good old American dream" has lost its luster. A three-bedroom home in the burbs, a nice steady job, 2.1 kids, a two-car garage, a grill in the backyard, and all that are floating away. Actually I think we've all known for a long time that the Cleavers, Ozzie and Harriet, and a "normal" childhood are mere fiction.

Today suburban neighborhoods are emptying out. The sub-prime mortgage crisis was only the straw that finally broke the camel's back. Residential developments that were built on an assumption of cheap personal transportation are doomed.

See ["Is America's suburban dream collapsing into a nightmare?"](#) (CNN.com, June 16) if you think I'm overreacting.

But what about central cities? What about the rural, small towns? Jim and I have been on the road for three months. We've visited nine different cities from coast to coast and spoken to hundreds of people. The questions have been the same: "What's our environment going to look like in five years?" "Where are people going to live?" "Where are they going to work?" "How are we going to cope with \$5 a gallon gas?"

There's good news and there's bad news.

The good news first. We believe there will be a resurrection of central cities – if they're willing to make major investments in infrastructure (see ["The Next Asset Bubble,"](#) Portfolio.com, February 4, 2008). No investment, no future. Coastal metropolises will thrive. Midwestern second-tier cities are in deep trouble. Survivor cities will attract two groups: young singles and older empty nesters. Areas with good colleges or universities will be in special demand.

The bad news: the suburbs. Empty, empty, empty. People can no longer live there and work somewhere else. We don't have a clue about what happens to all those houses lined up row after row. First, they were not built to be energy efficient. And they weren't built to last more than 30-40 years tops. Check it out: if your house was built between 1945 and 1990 you may well have a teardown on your hands.

However, we still believe there will be tremendous growth in what are called "exurban" areas. These communities will start to resemble islands separated by large swaths of agricultural land and open spaces. They will be connected more electronically than physically. The limits to development are energy (at an affordable cost); water (watch this one carefully), and environmental quality.

Our picture of the future includes vibrant city centers, empty and decaying fringes, open areas, and then a network of thriving rural "islands." The incredible amount of movement—and energy use—that developed during the late, great industrial age is coming to an end. An economy built around

everyone having a personal transportation device that lives on \$20/barrel oil is no longer sustainable.

Even if some genius invents a car that runs on bovine belches, that won't do it. Our old housing stock leaks energy like a sieve; most existing office buildings eat up electricity like you wouldn't believe; and small, spread-out, stand-alone structures (each with its own parking lot) are simply inappropriate in an age of expensive energy and global climate change.

Not a pretty picture you say? Well, neither was London or Chicago at the onset of the demise of the agricultural age. Yet today those two cities are among the healthiest and most sustainable in the world. See [Caught in the Middle](#), by Richard C. Longworth, for a fascinating account of the challenges and opportunities facing the Midwestern United States, with a detailed story of the rebirth of Chicago as a global information-age city (link is to Amazon.com).

We have been shaping and re-shaping our physical environment ever since Homo Sapiens wandered out of the savannas of Africa tens of thousands of years ago. And we are about to do it again.

Where does this analysis leave us? First of all, it requires a realization that we can't cling to the past; we must embrace the future. And that implies sensitivity to energy use, focusing on environmental quality, and a massive investment in the next wave of life support infrastructure. Not infrastructure to support a gazillion tons of metal running around everywhere, but an infrastructure that sustains communities built to human scale once again.

Let's hope a day is coming – and soon – where we hear words like *village square*, *neighborhood porch*, *people's park*, *biking and walking trails*, *local work centers*, and *café's* dominating our conversations about how humans live and work together.

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Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or James Ware at jim@thefutureofwork.net.