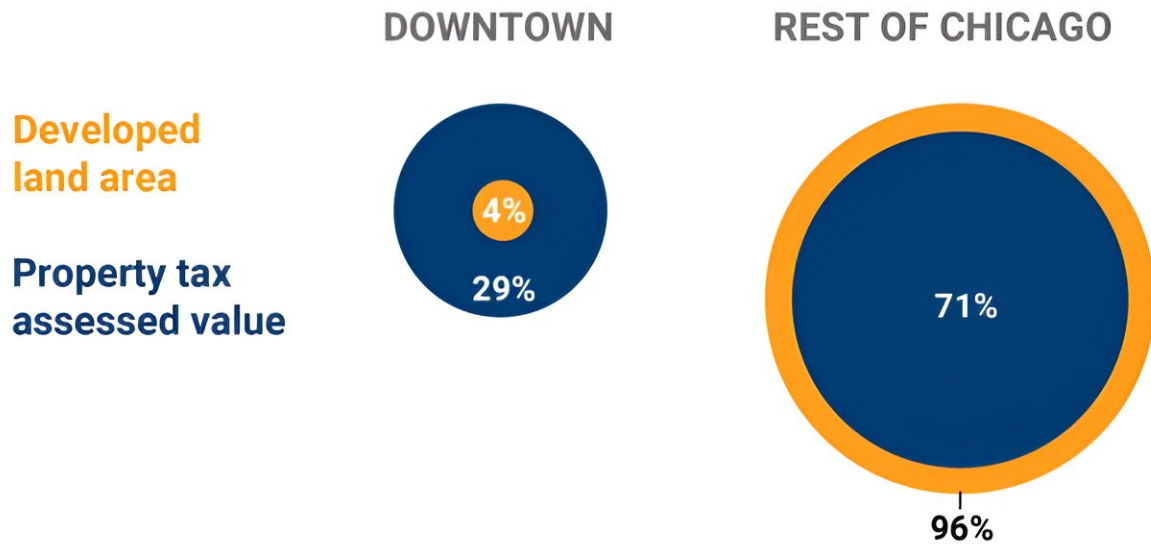


Q&A: Urban doom loop—what it is and how cities can stop it

August 17 2023, by Taylor McNeil

FIGURE 2

The productivity of downtowns is illustrated by the ratio of land area to tax assessed value



Source: Brookings analysis of USGS National Land Cover Database and Zillow ZTRAX Data

B | Brookings Metro

Credit: Tufts University

Recent images of downtown San Francisco—emptied of office workers now dialing in remote and filled with wandering homeless people—has struck fear for the future of urban areas. A Columbia University professor coined the term "urban doom loop" for the downward spiral some cities seem to be on, as workers don't return, retail businesses shutter for lack of customers, residents flee to the suburbs, and city tax revenues decline, leading to fewer services, and then fewer residents.

Stories like those about failing urban centers are "filling some urban observers with existential dread," according to a recent Brookings Institution report.

"While the notion of the urban doom loop makes good headlines, I don't see it as something beyond our control," says Jon Witten, a senior distinguished lecturer in the Department of Urban and Environmental Planning and Policy (UEP) who has taught at Tufts for 36 years. "We're not a leaf in the wind here. Cities, towns, and regions control the narrative; they just need to do so."

Tufts Now spoke with Witten, a land use planner and lawyer, to learn more about the state of American cities, including Boston, and what they need to do thrive.

Tufts Now: In the 2000 to 2020 period, a number of cities across the country grew and became magnets for people moving into urban areas. What made those cities grow like that?

Jon Witten: There were a number of reasons, but a big one was the demand for high-end housing from young professionals moving into cities, because that's where the jobs were. But post-COVID-19, cities began to falter—much like we saw in the 1960s and 1970s—and people,

at least for now, are clearly leaving cities, citing the availability of remote work and a general sense that congregating hundreds of people in a downtown office skyscraper may no longer be a workable model.

The question now is, where are these folks going and how do cities survive without them? That's where this kind of pejorative statement of urban doom loop comes in.

Are people moving to the suburbs? And if so, what are the consequences of that for cities?

In many parts of the country there has been a shift back to the exurbs and the suburbs, coupled with federal and state disinvestment in [urban areas](#) like we saw in the late 1960s and 1970s. That retrenchment evoked the infamous 1975 New York Daily News headline "Ford to City: Drop Dead."

While I don't see ongoing events being that dramatic—many cities appear to be recovering post-COVID—the definition of the urban doom loop presumes that as more residents leave the city and less development occurs, the revenue stream—the property tax—diminishes, often rapidly. The doom is the loss of revenue, and the loop is the vicious cycle that becomes difficult to stop.

From a [city planning](#) and municipal governance lens, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. New residents—taxpayers—resist moving to the city as governmental services are diminished or disappear—the [public schools](#) aren't sufficiently funded, public playgrounds and [open space](#) aren't maintained, and so on—and yet the very revenue needed to make the city attractive again is simply not available.

What other challenging issues do cities face?

Every city and town has been negatively affected by COVID, but in some cases, COVID sadly highlighted just how bad things were prior to 2020. Public transportation provides a telling example. Before COVID, for example, getting from the suburbs to the urban downtown was a challenge in most cities in the country. We've historically ignored this simple question: If I'm living in the suburbs, how do I get to the city for work?

Putting aside many urban planning stereotypes that cities are good and suburbs are sterile and bad, if commuters trying to get to work in the city can't reasonably do so, at some point they will stop trying. That is the real urban doom loop.

That isn't caused by public health crises, but rather by the lack of political courage and investment to tether the city to where people want to—or have to—live.

Boston has been on a loop of doom for decades, not because of COVID or some external force beyond the state's control, but rather because the state refuses to think regionally and recognize that for Boston to thrive, the suburbs and remaining rural portions of the state must do so, too.

Is that true of many American cities?

It is. Los Angeles, of course, is the king. New York comes a close second, but every major U.S. city has suffered from the disinvestment, or lack of initial investment, in public transportation, such that getting from the suburbs to downtown, and vice versa, is only slightly better than intolerable.

In Washington, D.C., the metro system extends farther and farther out as the suburbs expand into

Maryland and Virginia—is that better?

No, that's just as bad and shortsighted. Where's the plan, what's the goal, and where's the courage to say that not every square foot of a region needs to be paved over and accessible to developers?

The D.C. approach has set a dangerous precedent for urban transportation in the U.S. Fueling land development and unfettered speculation by laying out more and more rail lines without first having a plan to ensure that impacted cities, towns, and regions are prepared for what will follow is irresponsible.

Are there urban centers where the cities have emptied out and the suburbs now are the economic centers?

Yes, and that's not uncommon, especially with mid-size cities such as Cleveland and other "rust belt" cities, where the center city has really struggled since the 1960s and 1970s. But in many of these cities, and Cleveland is a good example, the impacts to the center city were often mitigated by investment—public transportation and otherwise—to create what was labeled as an "edge city."

These areas, often within the historic city limits or close to it, provide a tethering of suburbs and the urban core. Edge cities aren't without problems; the land they're developed on was the suburban fringe or rural countryside, and are now the site of office parks and retail shopping malls.

So I'm not championing this idea at all, only recognizing that the decline of urban centers, whether historic or due to a post-COVID doom loop, has historically led to alternative patterns of employment, housing, and related development and revenue-raising approaches.

I've read that one solution to empty office towers is to turn commercial real estate in downtown areas into housing. Would that help?

Converting office to residential space is certainly a good idea in isolated instances, but once again the doom loop concern is triggered. If we're losing office space, then we're losing employment. Building more housing will satisfy developers, speculators, and bankers, and those who argue that all we need to do to fix our housing problem is build more housing.

But housing for who? Retirees? Maybe, but I don't think so. It's a marketing ploy—because where are people going to work? Not in downtown anymore.

Can urban planners help with job creation in cities?

As a planner and one who's had the honor of teaching at UEP for the past three plus decades, I'd be the first to say that urban planners can offer a lot of good advice and technical expertise, but at the end of the day, land-use decisions are political decisions. If state and local political leaders have the courage to think forward—plan—the answer is yes.

If, on the other hand, political leaders respond to the issue du jour—today "badly needed affordable housing," tomorrow "badly needed jobs," and thereafter "badly needed something else"—I think the answer is no.

Urban planning must be comprehensive, inclusive, and holistic. To avoid a doom loop, state and local leaders need to accept the reality that urban planning and urban governance is complicated and requires comprehensive thinking. Trying to address Boston's or New York's

housing shortage or transportation woes isn't an isolated task solved by simply building more housing or more roads or expanding rail lines.

What do you think Boston can do to try to avoid the doom loop?

I suspect Boston will survive the ebbs and flows of post-COVID impacts given the city's history—we've had bigger troubles before this one—and the large presence of nonprofit and governmental agencies that provide a reasonably secure employment base not tied to a particular industry or service.

I think the question isn't so much about Boston's future as it is the region's. If train service is nonexistent or dysfunctional, if the state remains beholden to the real estate industry, and if the agenda is not being set by comprehensive statewide, regional, and urban plans, then I think we are in big trouble.

Cities and towns aren't like leaves in the wind, helpless against the forces of nature. We are totally capable of creating and making good use of comprehensive plans. But that requires political courage that we haven't seen in Massachusetts. This remains one of the few urbanized states that has rejected comprehensive land-use planning and substituted in its place an endless whiplash of crises, many real, but also many exaggerated by those who profit from them.

What do you see as the future of downtowns? Is it potentially optimistic?

I'll stop teaching the minute I think there's no reason for optimism. We put ourselves in this predicament and we can get ourselves out of it. Urban planning dates back literally thousands of years.

Some plans have obviously failed, badly, but many others are inspirational and models for how society can function collectively and equitably. It's a never-completed task, of course, but the effort is worth it, and not only because the alternative is so much worse.

The alternative is that cities and towns do nothing and simply let the free market—the development and real estate industry—dictate the future of our old and new urban centers. Such an outcome may be supported by some economists espousing laissez-faire principles, but when it comes to rational decisions regarding limited land and natural resources, I think it hopelessly naïve and shortsighted.

More information: Report: www.brookings.edu/articles/bre...s-shared-prosperity/

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: Q&A: Urban doom loop—what it is and how cities can stop it (2023, August 17)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2023-08-qa-urban-doom-loopwhat-cities.html>

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