

Future is just a suburban ploy

Robert Harley

The suburbs, not the now-fashionable 'densified' inner cities, will be the way of the future, according to United States urbanist Joel Kotkin.

It is the suburbs, and, in the US, the micro-metropolises, that are attracting people with a mix of economic opportunity, telecommuting, affordable housing and lifestyle, Mr Kotkin told the Property Council's Cities Summit in Sydney yesterday.

Which means, for Mr Kotkin, that much of Australian urban and housing policy, with its focus on increasing city density, is misplaced.

"When I came here 30 years ago, I thought you guys got it right ... I think you are getting it wrong now," he said.

"You have to work out a way of making housing cheaper.

"Why do they want to densify great suburbs close to the city where people can raise kids? They are getting densified to a degree that people don't want to live there any more.

"Why are we not thinking about building new cities?" he asked, pointing to the key catalysts of employment and healthcare.

Mr Kotkin is a writer, an "uber geographer" according to *The New York Times*, a Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at the Chapman University in California and a Fellow of the Legatum Institute in London.

For 30 years he has written about urban issues in books like *The City: A Global History* and *The Hundred Million: America in 2050*.

At the Property Council only one expert questioned his view.

The chief executive of the Committee for Melbourne, Andrew Macleod, said as demographics changed, with singles and couples without children set to account for half his city's households in the future, city structure and housing must change.

Mr Kotkin partly anticipated the question. Sure, people would have a different kind of housing as they age, but they don't want to move.

He said the idea of empty-nesters downsizing was one of the "favourite urban legends of our time".



North-west Sydney's Glenwood Park is a good example of suburban bliss. Inset: Joel Kotkin

Photo: MICHELE MOSSOP

"There will be some, but the numbers don't bear it out," he said, pointing out if they did move, the empty-nesters often followed their children.

Mr Kotkin's US numbers support the suburban growth story with the suburbs growing more in 2000-10 than 1990-2000.

(He did not say to what degree that showed the pre-2007 housing boom.)

Mr Kotkin said the CBDs were becoming less economic powerful.

"The jobs growth has moved to the periphery," he said. "The urban core's role will be increasingly symbolic and cultural."

Much of the movement in the US is to small cities, which Kotkin calls "micropolitan" communities.

In 2007-09, many college graduates went to smaller, low-density cities like Austin, Texas, Raleigh, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee.

The internet, and telecommuting, are the game changers.

"Having people commute from

one computer screen to another doesn't make sense ... you can live in Des Moines and do things that you could not do before," he said.

"This will make houses more important, not less important, because you need space to work ... telecommuting gives people more opportunity to become involved with their community."

Importantly for Mr Kotkin, telecommuting also gives people more time to be with their family, reversing the 100-year focus on commuting.

The other game changer for Mr Kotkin is affordability. Smaller communities with cheaper housing have an enormous advantage.

"People want to own a house," he said. "When I saw that Adelaide was more expensive than Seattle, I knew there was a problem," he said.

The problem is "land policy".

Mr Kotkin is an unabashed supporter of the family, a basic unit which he said too often was excluded

from urban study and debate. "It's important to focus on kids because you face a grey tsunami," he said.

Around the world, according to Mr Kotkin, densification is associated with lower birth rates, including, now, in the slums of Mumbai.

He has also noted a change in attitude towards multi-generational households with parents, grandparents and children all living together.

In the 1940s, 25 per cent of US households were multi-generational; by the 1980s the figure had fallen to 12 per cent.

But the latest numbers show a rise, to 16 per cent.

Mr Kotkin is dismissive of the pin-up cities of urbanism like San Francisco, which have "more dogs than kids" or Zurich, which could only be afforded by bankers.

He also acknowledged that much suburban development could be better. The improvement, the suburb of the future, he dubbed "greenurbia".