

WE WANT ANSWERS

## Leigh Gallagher

Author, *The End of the Suburbs*; assistant managing editor, *Fortune*

**Your new book says the American Dream is in the middle of a major shift—various forces are making the suburbs unnecessary and undesirable. That's tough talk from someone who grew up in Media and whose parents still live there.** [Laughs] That's true. I had this almost comically idyllic childhood. I had a boss in New York who once came to visit me and had dinner with my parents, and from that moment on, he would chide me: "How's everything in Grover's Corners?" Because Media is really this unique place. It's got all these ingredients that a lot of suburbs don't have—a trolley, a courthouse, a 1927 vaudeville theatre. It's built on certain urban-planning principles that got thrown out and replaced by what we more commonly see today, which is sprawl.

**Are you more bullish on Media than on cookie-cutter suburbs?** Absolutely. I know my title is *The End of the Suburbs*. And the end of the suburbs as we know them is indeed happening. But there's a revolution happening in our suburban communities right now. Hundreds of developers are trying to renovate existing suburbs to make them more like places like Media. So there's this revolution afoot, and some suburbs will do really well, and some won't.

**You originally set out to write about the Great Recession, but instead ended up focusing on cities and suburbia. What happened?** When I stumbled across the data in the housing domain, I was really struck by how much that data was pointing to a major shift. It was a much bigger idea, given how much the suburbs have meant to our society and our country and our way of life.

**You're right; the suburbs are about how we live—kids, green lawns, Schwinn bikes. Are you wistful we may lose that?** Yes. But we've already lost a lot of it. We live in this play-date culture. Kids aren't really running around

serendipitously for three hours, waiting to be called in for supper.

**You cite the shrinking size of households and the millennials as two factors driving the change.** Single-person households are the fastest-growing kind of household. In many suburbs, there are actually more baby boomers and seniors than there are young families. And the young family is the glue that holds the suburbs together. Millennials don't really have any interest in this kind of cul-de-sac life. They're not saying they hate suburbs entirely, but they want to be someplace where they can walk everywhere.

**Even Toll Brothers is focusing on cities.** In 2003 they started a division called Toll Brothers City Living. And as you know, the company was born and grew to success on the suburban luxury megahome. That was its bread and butter. But they started building the city living division, and now they have the Naval Square development in Philadelphia. And they're in Williamsburg in Brooklyn, they're on Park Avenue—they're planting roots all over New York City and adapting each building to its micro-neighborhood.

**We need a new nickname for what they're doing. From the people who brought you the McMansion comes ... Right. The McCondo?**

**You finish the book talking about how, 100 years ago, no one imagined cities turning into slums the way they did in the '60s, '70s and '80s. So we're at a similar moment now?** Yes. In 1910, nobody saw what was going to happen to the suburbs. Just like now, things that most people think are unimaginable could very likely take place. It's possible the furthest suburbs will become ruins or slums, or both. And there may be a time, not too far from now, where we say, "Oh, I can't believe we thought this was never going to happen."

—TOM McGRATH



PHOTOGRAPH BY GENE SMIRNOV