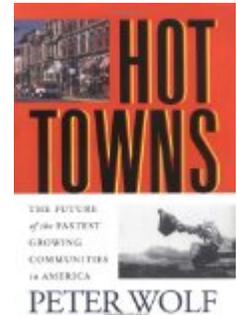


Peter Wolf. *Hot Towns: The Future of the Fastest Growing Communities in America.* New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999. xi + 283 pp. \$27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-2696-6.



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Published on H-Urban (December, 2000)

Future Urban Growth Can Be Smart Growth

In the 1950s, John Kenneth Galbraith led a parade of scholars who called attention to the nation's growing affluence and assessed its impact upon American society. In the decades that followed, many members of that expanding middle class, along with their postwar children, continued to augment their incomes and exploit the booming economies of the Reagan and Clinton eras to improve their quality of life by relocating to new types of residential areas. This book examines that trend.

Noted policy analyst Peter Wolf marshals an impressive array of statistics to explain where growth is occurring. He also provides an excellent overview of the various types of urban entities that have appeared in recent decades, including the exurbs, edge cities, college and vacation "micro-metropolitans," and other types of urban places. Equally impressive is his discussion of the forces driving people into America's "fifth wave growth towns," which he defines as a community where population is accelerating at two to four times the national average. Wolf credits much of this hot

town growth to the "fifth migration," the term real estate forecaster Jack Lessinger coined in the 1980s to describe the millions of retirees and baby boomers, who have used their burgeoning wealth (household incomes often exceed \$100,000 annually) to finance a massive exodus out of America's traditional cities and suburbs. Wolf credits cybernation, especially the PC, ATMs, Fax machines, the Internet, and related technologies, with awarding fifth wavers a range of new residential options, including more distant suburbs, places within smaller communities at the far edge of or between metropolitan areas, and even remote cities and towns "that offer environmental advantages." At the same time, he recognizes that not all fifth wavers have headed to the periphery; some have moved back to the Georgetowns and Mannhattans to enjoy the museums, theaters, trendy restaurants, and revitalized atmosphere that gentrified neighborhoods offer.

Wolf devotes part of his introduction to a brief explanation of all five migration waves -- from Europe to the colonial East, to the West, to the cities, to the suburbs, and now, to the hot

towns. Part of the problem, however, is Lessinger's simplistic concept, which Wolf needs to refine. While the author observes that fifth wavers prefer cities with growing job and housing markets, he needs to be more clear about recognizing that many other groups besides fifth wavers are also moving into hot towns and contributing to these markets. Since the 1970 census, every boom town in the Southwest has experienced significant movement of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. Some of these migrants have been affluent, but many have not. The point needs to be made more clearly that affluent fifth wavers spawn a substantial service sector for gardening, repair, restaurant, maintenance, and other low-paying jobs. Moreover, Lessinger's simplistic set of migrations obscures the existence of other important population shifts. In 1975, for instance, Kirkpatrick Sale observed that between 1940 and 1975, the movement of forty million Americans from the Frostbelt states to America's Southern Rim marked the greatest migration of human beings in world history -- a fact obscured by Lessinger's tidy framework, but nevertheless a flood tide affecting Wolf's argument.

In places, the author needs to be more careful with his terms. He refers, for instance, to Summerlin (in the Las Vegas metropolitan area) as an edge city and then bemoans the "sterility and place-less-ness of most edge cities and the absence of public gathering places such as churches and parks [that] make them unattractive domains in which to live and work" [p.100]. But Summerlin (including Del Webb's Sun City within it) is, at least at this writing, less of an edge city than a series of master-planned suburban communities that really do not suffer from these shortcomings. On the contrary, resident polls indicate a high level of satisfaction.

To be sure, Wolf is no advocate of edge cities nor is he fond of traditional automobile suburbs, where "of the land not consumed by streets, more than two-thirds is devoted to private yards." He

complains that this lack of space leaves children "no close-by public space to meet and play in;" so they play in the street. Of course, many play in friends' yards, parks, public school yards, and elsewhere. As a baby boomer who grew up in Long Island, space to play never seemed to be an issue for me. Playing in the street was more common in New York City's inner suburbs (which Wolf prefers) than its outer ones.

That said, the author's expertise as a land planner and policy analyst inform his sections analyzing why many of America's former boom towns have decayed. But the book's real contribution lies less in Wolf's diagnoses of these old towns than in his prescription for the new ones. He argues persuasively that "smart towns" can grow without sprawling and without destroying the qualities that made them attractive in the first place. Increased use of mass transit, long term planning, ensuring public-private collaboration, preserving historically significant places, enhancing town centers, and protection of wetlands, forests, and scenic vistas have all been part of the reform litany over the years. But his emphasis on aesthetics, using tax revenue to acquire nearby open land, and controlling tourism merge together into a powerful argument that America's growth towns should heed. As one might expect, Wolf supports Portland's twenty-year effort to limit metropolitan sprawl. Indeed, Portland serves as a convenient paradigm for the author's contention that cities can grow substantially without mushrooming chaotically in all directions. One should, however, be mindful that the political dynamics in Portland are not necessarily present elsewhere. Each boomtown develops within its own context where natural environment, history, political culture, and myriad other factors combine to shape perspectives about the future. Witness the case of Las Vegas, a metropolis consisting of four cities, several townships, and one powerful county, where the development lobby has largely frustrated efforts by state legislators and some concerned citizens to impose a "ring around

the valley." Growth advocates have included the city's leading newspaper, local politicians, and a variety of conservative groups, as well as some casino executives (anxious to preserve Nevada's low gaming tax rates), who are convinced that growth pays for itself by expanding tax bases.

Wolf's informative volume not only provides a useful overview of urban migration patterns and policy considerations in late twentieth-century America, but its provocative style and cosmopolitan scope will appeal to all readers who are concerned about implementing the principles of intelligent growth in a society where political clout and fast-buck development have been the rule for more than two centuries.

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Citation: Eugene P. Moehring. Review of Wolf, Peter. *Hot Towns: The Future of the Fastest Growing Communities in America*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 2000.

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