

✖ For those of us who don't live in or visit heavily-foreclosed neighborhoods, we often read the statistics without understanding the physical reality. But environmentally-speaking, many neighborhoods in this country have essentially become ghost-towns. So what do we do with these abandoned properties? Well, for some enterprising [bobcats](#), these now-empty McMansions represent some low-cost lodging (photo to the left). For local governments, however, abandoned suburbs have become redevelopment opportunities. As [Time Magazine describes](#) in an article on the ten ideas that will "change the world":

U.S. Communities as diverse as Lakewood, Colo., and Long Beach, Calif., have repurposed boarded-up malls as mixed-use developments with retail stores, offices and apartments. In auto-dependent suburbs that were built without a traditional center, shopping malls offer the chance to create downtowns without destroying existing infrastructure, by recycling what's known as underperforming asphalt.

The article calls it "recycling the suburbs" and notes that demand for sprawl is slackening as the percentage of families with small children declines. But we've heard predictions of the demise of the suburbs before. At a real estate workshop I attended on Monday, a participant held up a Newsweek article from the last real estate downturn in the mid-1990s. It envisioned the same sprawl-less future and called it the end of the American Dream. Despite current trends, however, it is hard to imagine that future population growth and a new economic cycle will not simply bring about a return to the old business model of sprawling, low-density developments. Without a concerted effort by public officials to eliminate subsidies for sprawl and incentivize more sustainable development patterns, we'll be back where we left off.

So my advice to those bobcats? Don't get too comfortable.