Anti-government conservatives have long ridiculed urban planners and environmentalists for their efforts to concentrate development in urban centers and limit the growth of sprawl. They argue that these 'grand visionaries' and urban planners are attempting to engineer top down control over consumers, who by and large desire the stereotypical American dream: a detached, single family home in the suburbs. Academics like USC's Peter Gordon have argued that

> …the era of strong downtowns dominating the major cities is, with very few exceptions (city quarters with historic districts and some small tourist downtowns), long gone and will never return.

But a new EPA report examining building permit records across the country provides hard evidence that the trend to suburban housing may be starting to reverse itself. Despite the higher construction costs of building in urban settings, the greater likelihood of neighborhood opposition, regulatory hurdles and lack of supporting infrastructure, the data show a new picture of US settlement patterns emerging:

> …there has been a dramatic increase in the share of new construction built in central cities and older suburbs. Specifically, in roughly half of the metropolitan areas examined, urban core communities dramatically increased their share of new residential building permits.

The report demonstrates that in fifteen urban regions across the US, the central city more than doubled its share of permits. It shows that the trend to urban housing "has been particularly dramatic" since 2002. And despite the downturn in the housing market, data from 2007 continue to show the shift to infill development.

What explains this new trend? While there are likely many factors at play, including the efforts of urban planning departments to focus new development in the inner city and investments in downtown-oriented public transit and development projects like convention and sports centers, the true cause appears to be the consumer. As a new generation of home buyers emerges, the old paradigm of a 1950s-style suburban life may be losing sway. Younger families, singles and older citizens in particular are seeing the value of a life free of auto-dependence and within walking distance of urban amenities. And as governments and the market respond to this demand, we are likely to see this new version of the American Dream become more

prevalent.