

Violence shreds our social fabric

Editorial By Nicholas Dagen Bloom

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NICHOLAS BLOOM

Point of View

The vulnerability of American cities has been revealed many times in the past year. Sept. 11 revealed the potential dangers of skyscrapers and crowded downtowns; the recent sniper shootings around Washington, D.C., highlighted the fragility of suburban peace.

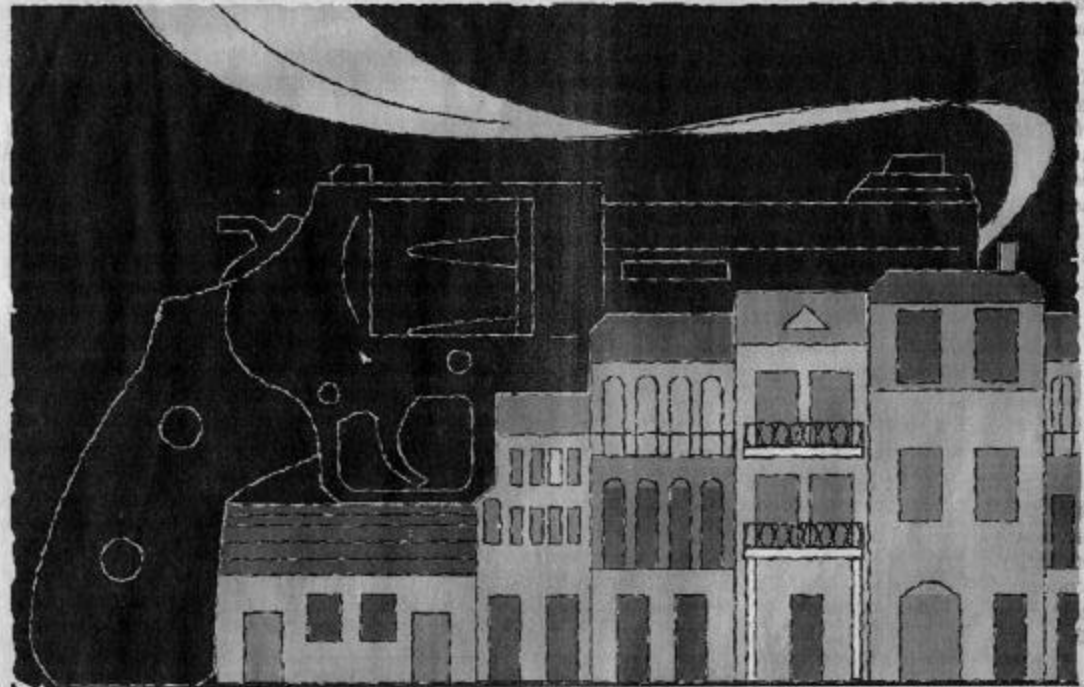
There were voices after Sept. 11 that declared the end of the skyscrapers and even the traditional downtown. The Washington area is breathing a sigh of relief after the arrest of two suspects, but there are some who believe the sniper incidents have revealed the essential anonymity and danger of the vast parking lots, highways, and subdivisions of the American suburban landscape.

Such pronouncements, although dramatic, are misguided. Skyscrapers are potentially dangerous and so are vast parking lots and highways, but all of modern metropolitan life is a gamble that normally runs with impressive efficiency.

The sniper shootings have dramatically revealed the role that violence can play in destabilizing a sense of metropolitan comfort: peaceful suburbs one day, landscape of fear the next. Violence, even if it affects only a small number of people directly, reshapes entirely how people feel about their neighborhoods and regions.

Those who live in traditional urban neighborhoods know this calculus all too well. Some of the loveliest historic neighborhoods in New Orleans and in many American cities are still war zones, and most working- and middle-class families have fled. Houses have fallen into disrepair, school performance has plummeted and shops have closed up and moved with their more affluent customers.

When houses have been renovated in these very same urban neighborhoods,



STAFF ILLUSTRATION BY KENNETH HARRISON

they sell for \$250,000 or more, but before banks and middle-class renovators rediscover older neighborhoods, the "snipers," drug dealers and other violent criminals keep whole districts in a state of terror.

Imagine for a moment that the recent Washington suburban fear was a nearly permanent condition. For many urban citizens, constant fear has been a way of life for decades.

Suburbia is not immune to the spread of this daily terror. The sniper shootings may have revealed the powerful effects of violence on community well being, but they masked the changing nature of suburbia itself. Suburbia is not the idyll of the 1950s, and many of the social problems associated with cities are on their way to the suburban fringe. Many older Washington suburbs, and even some in New Orleans, are undergoing changes that will turn them into landscapes of fear over the next decade, with or without random snipers.

Myron Orfield, state senator from Minnesota, was in New Orleans this week for Tulane's Presidential Symposium on Urban Frontiers of the 21st Century. Orfield has studied urban decline around the nation and finds that 40 percent of our suburbs

are "at risk" because of declining tax revenues and social issues related to racial and ethnic change.

Another 23 percent of new suburbs can't meet the demand for schools and services for the middle-class newcomers flooding in from declining inner-ring suburbs. Sen. Orfield has made a career of explaining to suburbanites and city residents alike that regional cooperation and fairer tax systems (those that don't fund schools out of property taxes) are the best ways to preserve social peace, create good citizens, generate jobs and protect the environment of entire metropolitan areas.

Random violence and terrorism threaten every part of our cities equally. There is no way to design buildings or communities to prevent it; our society is simply too complex and large to prevent random action by lone gunmen. But long-term social violence and metropolitan decline have been and still are a far more dangerous and insidious threat to both the urban and suburban good life.

Nicholas Bloom is an administrator and instructor at Tulane University and the author of "Suburban Alchemy: 1960s New Towns and the Transformation of the American Dream" (Ohio State, 2001). His e-mail address is nbloom@tulane.edu.