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I Dream Of Denver

You may not know it to look at them, but urban planners are human and have dreams. One dream many share is that Americans will give up their love affair with suburban sprawl and will rediscover denser, more environmentally friendly, less auto-dependent ways of living.

Those dreams have been aroused over the past few months. The economic crisis has devastated the fast-growing developments on the far suburban fringe. Americans now taste the bitter fruit of their overconsumption.

The time has finally come, some writers are predicting, when Americans will finally repent. They'll move back to the urban core. They will ride more bicycles, have smaller homes and tinier fridges and rediscover the joys of dense community — and maybe even superior beer.

America will, in short, finally begin to look a little more like Amsterdam.

Well, Amsterdam is a wonderful city, but Americans never seem to want to live there. And even now, in this moment of chastening pain, they don't seem to want the Dutch option.

The Pew Research Center just finished a study about where Americans would like to live and what sort of lifestyle they would like to have. The first thing they found is that even in dark times, Americans are still looking over the next horizon. Nearly half of those surveyed said they would rather live in a different type of community from the one they are living in at present.

Second, Americans still want to move outward. City dwellers are least happy with where they live, and cities are one of the least popular places to live. Only 52 percent of urbanites rate their communities "excellent" or "very good," compared with 68 percent of suburban-

The American
imagination
still wanders.

ites and 71 percent of the people who live in rural America.

Cities remain attractive to the young. Forty-five percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 would like to live in New York City. But cities are profoundly unattractive to people with families and to the elderly. Only 14 percent of Americans 35 and older are interested in living in New York City. Only 8 percent of people over 65 are drawn to Los Angeles. We've all heard stories about retirees who move back into cities once their children are grown, but that is more anecdote than trend.

Third, Americans still want to go west. The researchers at Pew asked Americans what metro areas they would like to live in. Seven of the top 10 were in the West: Denver, San Diego, Seattle, San Francisco, Phoenix, Portland and Sacramento. The other three were in the South: Orlando, Tampa and San Antonio. Eastern cities were down the list and Midwestern cities were at the bottom.

Finally, Americans want to go someplace new. The powerhouse cities of the 20th century — New York, Los Angeles, Chicago — are much less desirable today than the ones that have more recently sprouted up.

In short, Americans may indeed be gloomy and hunkered down. But they're still Americans. They are still drawn to virgin ground, still restless against limits.

If you jumble together the five most popular American metro areas — Denver, San Diego, Seattle, Orlando and Tampa — you get an image of the American Dream circa 2009. These are places where you can imagine yourself with a stuffed garage — filled with skis, kayaks, soccer equipment, hiking boots and boating equipment. These are places you can imagine yourself leading an active outdoor lifestyle.

These are places (except for Orlando) where spectacular natural scenery is visible from medium-density residential neighborhoods, where the boundary between suburb and city is hard to detect. These are places with loose social structures and relative social equality, without the Ivy League status system of the Northeast or the star structure of L.A. These places are car-dependent and spread out, but they also have strong cultural identities and pedestrian meeting places. They offer at least the promise of friendlier neighborhoods, slower lifestyles and service-sector employment. They are neither traditional urban centers nor atomized suburban sprawl. They are not, except for Seattle, especially ideological, blue or red.

They offer the dream, so characteristic on this continent, of having it all: the machine and the garden. The wide-open space and the casual wardrobes.

The folks at Pew asked one other interesting question: Would you rather live in a community with a McDonald's or a Starbucks? McDonald's won, of course, but by a surprisingly small margin: 43 percent to 35 percent. And that, too, captures the incorrigible nature of American culture, a culture slowly refining itself through espresso but still in love with the drive-through.

The results may not satisfy those who dream of Holland, but there's one other impressive result from the Pew survey. Americans may be gloomy and afraid, but they still have a clear vision of the good life. That's one commodity never in short supply. □