

# The Early Bird vs the Night Owl

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Sunday, 24 February 2008

"Our downtown is attracting lots of Young Professionals"

"We are focusing downtown development on attracting new Bars and Restaurants"

"We need to focus on bringing in Upscale Bars and Restaurants, Bistros and Boutiques, and High-End Shopping so that our city attracts more Young Professionals"

Thus spouts the city manager or planning bureaucrat as he prepares his jingos to launch into 2008. In their zeal for "new" "urbanization" (contradictions when occupying the same sentence, in my opinion) and "density" or city-friendly growth, many towns and mid-sized cities are catering their development schemes and priorities toward the Night Owl - that active, childless, liberal youth so coveted by marketers and demographers (mostly due to their propensity to save little and use debt copiously). This zeal is influenced mostly by the self-serving spouting of that demographic itself - who like to preen their shiny feathers and receive heaps of praise for their messianic redemption of many a decaying cityscape over the past couple decades.

Richard Florida has been a big help in this. He has toured the world convincing city planners that if not for debt-laden, alcoholic youths, our cities would be wastelands, and failing to remain at the beck and call of this fickle, transient class threatens the future viability of every city on Earth. In many cases, the foremost promoters of this development priority are dot-com sellouts and slightly-older-than-they-wish-they-looked pop-culture philosophers who strive to recapture their own youth (or maintain swift denial of its departure). In their admiration for the perceived freedom exemplified in the hip youth culture of today, with its carefree and copious decadence, they ruthlessly ignore the fact that their coveted demographic is neither lucrative, moneyed, industrious, nor beneficial to their city neighborhoods, compared to their peers in the soccer mom set, senior set or teeny bopper set.

The fact is, the Night Owls among the 21-34 youth contribute far less to the vitality and variety of the urban landscape than the Early Birds sandwiching them in on all sides.

As I left my San Francisco apartment one Saturday morning at 5.45am, on my walk to the bus stop I passed half a dozen other people, on my mostly-residential street. Out walking the dog, out for a stroll, or heading somewhere for work or play, as I was. Once on the bus, heading for the Amtrak station, I see people at just about every bus stop: service workers, construction workers, students, old ladies. Out the window, I see well-populated open restaurants, lighted windows, construction traffic, crowded Starbucks, and well-trafficked, staffed, and open convenience stores and pocket groceries. Busy streets and sidewalks. Even at this hour.

Yet this is the city that planners and developers are ignoring - these are the people they overlook in their meetings and whose opinions and needs they sacrifice at the altar of the courtyard condo complex with rear parking garage and ground-level chain retail.

The people who populate the city streets at this hour matter. Honestly. Yet their numbers are almost entirely devoid of the "young professionals" demographic. That set is still in bed, working off a hangover, likely to skip breakfast, make their own coffee, hop into their Mini Cooper and get out of the City for the weekend. The people who make the city work at this time of day are those last, but still numerous, vestiges of the urban working class and urban middle class. It is sad that our planners ignore their importance.

There is a whole supporting industry behind the very existence of a diverse and working city - something subsidized redevelopment and binge-and-purge suburban development miss out on. The working class matters - they keep the city running behind the scenes so that the young professionals and the tourists have pretty buildings to gawk at and lattes to lap up.

Retirees are a huge part of our urban population, and will become an even greater part of it in the years to come. Despite the impression that old people hate the city, with its noise and crime, surely the future of gerontology lies in an urban setting: where old eyes can have access to public transit, and where large institutional hospitals can try out cutting edge experiments in rejuvenation and preservation of life.

Like young professionals, the old spend a lot of money and have few family obligations for that money. Unlike young professionals, their wealth is real and often based on solid lifelong saving and investing, rather than an inflated housing market, over-extended tech labor market, or copious credit card balances. Old people do matter - advertisers hate that, of course, since old people are much harder to market to.

Red-Eyed moms are up all night with children, raising the next generation, wiping their bottoms, preparing them for school, Sunday school, Saturday activities, taking them for walks, to the park, fixing their food, housing them and caring for them and educating them. Soccer moms matter. No matter how much more "disposable" income childless youths might possess, soccer moms probably still spend more money, and that money is just as green. The very idea that money spent on family disposables is any less disposable than the money spent on \$30.00 drinks and plasma TVs baffles all but the slickest marketing guru.

Before sunrise on Saturday, not one of the people I see are a Young Professional pulled from the pages of a redevelopment plan, heading for his power breakfast or office temple. This is, in fact, the rare time of day when one can bear witness to the wondrous variety of an urban landscape without the plastic sameness of the young professionals and their ubiquitously monotonous clothes, hair, bars and restaurants on all sides. It's the last glimpse at the real urban middle and working class. The streets at this hour are populated by the every day, the unexciting, the boring majority, the mature, the industrious, the diverse.

In their zeal for the romanticized version of an urban setting (which never really existed), cities are clamouring for an unsustainable environment, dominated almost wholly by mobile, transient youth. Proof that such a city never existed can be found in any urban history book, which are generally dominated by the stories of how some city played host to and dealt with immigrants, poverty, disease, economic uncertainty, old buildings, old people and children needing an education. This focus on the Night Owl and his constant need for newer, more expensive and more stupidly-named bars and restaurants is a mostly-recent phenomenon.

It is also a rather futile focus: history shows that this is a subsidy for a single, already-wealthy demographic. Piling money into the decadent youth of a class who is more likely than not to eventually leave the city and relocate to the suburbs in time to squirt out a late baby and settle down to a normal middle-class life after the liver is healed, is patently wasteful of any city government guilty of it. It's yet another subsidy cities today throw at the suburbs: "send us your youth so they can party - we'll build their playground, then send them back to you when they're ready to be productive and pay taxes". It's little wonder city finances are in the dumper.

Planners today are ignorant or dismissive of the Early Bird; ironically a phenomenon and demographic much easier to satisfy with the skillset and resources of city governments for centuries. This demographic is also more reliable in its behavior and much more sustainable in its spending habits: they are not geared to the housing market, arbitrary high-end fashion trends, or the share price of Google.

Focusing on red-eyed mothers, retirees, service workers and blue-collar commuters would provide a much more sustainable focus for the cities and neighborhoods of today. The main obstacle to effectively doing this is that city managers and bureaucrats are convinced that these demographics don't "like" the urban setting. This is strange, since they are not only a majority of most city populations, but also a population with the least amount of choice when it comes to their environment. They go where the work is, or gets stuck where they have a home or a family. They are not fickle and in constant need of taxpayer funded diversions and redevelopment schemes (maybe just a housing or food subsidy - something a little more forgivable than lining the pockets of condo-churning developers). Yet they continue to be largely ignored in comparison.

The historical population of the diverse and dense city was the working class "everyday man". The wealthy were the ones who desired to get out of the city - to escape their inferiors. Today, managers are designing their cities exclusively for the wealthy and mobile, under the insane impression that the working classes would only move into cities under duress (true, perhaps - but the concept of "choice" is not as cut and dry with the working class, either - not everyone has choice when lacking the wealth of the young professional class), or with expensive and unrealistic services and inducements (schools, transit and housing, oh my!). Strange that this impression is so common, since every day their controller writes out a new stack of checks to committees, developers and planners seeking to "revitalize" a working class area into the next hip yuppie playground; channel a bike path through a park for spandex-laden professionals to streak through enveloped in a cone of self-righteous indignation at the pedestrians they pass; or direct subsidies to the chain stores they seek to attract to shiny new buildings which replaced dowdy but fully-occupied old mom-and-pop shops.

The poor, poor privileged class which is today's urban professional is the same blight it was in the 80s. Nothing Richard Florida says to the contrary will change that. No amount of subsidy or redevelopment legalese will convert a diverse cityscape into a permanent yuppie paradise. The Night Owl is too drunk, too fickle, and too - well... young - to be the savior of the city. We need every type of person to make that happen - especially the elderly and parents and families.

The truth is, the majority of us wake up before the young professionals on Saturday mornings, and we need our cities to work then, too.