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More millennials are considering the unthinkable: Life in suburbia

Children change everything, including wanting to live in family-friendly settings

By ALDO SVALDI | The Denver Post | PUBLISHED: February 10, 2020



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

Burak Yorumez, left and his wife Julie, center, holding twin daughters Skyler and Jayden, hang out in the kitchen with their friend Jodi Hunter, right, during a cocktail party at their home on Nov. 18, 2019 in Littleton. Millennials have long shown a preference for urban living. But more of them are leaving the city and moving to the fringes of the metro area. Burak and his wife Julie Yorumez, are one such couple that left life in downtown Denver for a home in Sterling Ranch.

they realized downtown wouldn't be the best spot to raise them. They moved to the suburbs in the summer of 2018 and haven't looked back.

A debate has raged over where most millennials, the nation's largest generation at 83 million strong, will decide to settle down. Will it be downtown areas and nearby urban neighborhoods or in the suburbs and the master-planned communities springing up on the periphery?

Urban studies expert Richard Florida of CityLab has argued that young adults are fueling a renaissance in the nation's inner cities, drawn by the perks that come with density, such as proximity to work, walkability to restaurants and stores, and a vibrant cultural and entertainment scene.

Burak and Julie Yorumez had the urban experience that some Colorado millennials only dream of — living high above downtown Denver in two merged condos on the 35th floor of the Brooks Tower Residences.

"I thought I was going to live there forever," said Julie, a University of Colorado graduate who spent eight years working in New York City and Washington, D.C. Like many young adults who had developed a taste for what city life could offer, she thought nothing else would do.

But after three years of living downtown together, the couple somehow found themselves owning a single-family home with a yard out in metro Denver's far fringes. In their case, it was at Sterling Ranch, a new development with room for 12,000 homes near Chatfield Reservoir in Douglas County.

"It wasn't in our plan," said Julie, sheepishly. But as the couple planned to have children together,

“The data unequivocally points to millennials wanting to live in urban settings,” argues Jason Shepherd, a partner at Denver-based Atlas Real Estate. “The lifestyle of living closer to the urban core, of less commuting, of going with a smaller space is a tailwind that will maintain.”

On the other side of the debate are experts such as Joel Kotkin of Chapman University. His *New Geography* blog points out that the strongest population gains are coming in the suburbs, not the big cities. For every one millennial that settles in an older urban area, another four are moving into the suburbs, where homes are more affordable.

There’s a stereotype that people in the suburbs pull into their garages and immediately shut the door, never engaging with their neighbors. But Burak said the same distancing happens in city condos and apartments.

“We had nearly 2,000 square feet and one million things to do,” Burak said. And yet he and his wife felt socially isolated, knowing the names of only one neighbor, Barb, and the concierge in the lobby.

Now they regularly have neighbors over for dinners. Happy hour on Fridays involves hanging out with 30 friends at the nearby taphouse, minus the worries about a bar fight breaking out. Julie formed a Wine Down Wednesday group that has about 50 women and Burak formed Men of the Ranch, which has 30 to 40 guys who meet once a month.

Burak said the highlight for him came when he organized a block party last summer, thinking maybe 125 might attend. Instead, he had 250 responses on Facebook within two hours and more than 500 people showed up to the event with food, music and bouncy castles.



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

Lucas Hunter, 5, left, eats pizza with his friend Ayla Yorumez, 6, right, at Ayla’s home while her parents host a small party for neighbors on Nov. 18, 2019 in Littleton.

“That was my dream. We are having a block party,” he said. Some of his neighbors came to his side to pull it off when the numbers got big.

The couple said they have found a much tighter-knit and family-friendly community in the suburbs. And they said they are having way more fun than they ever did downtown.

Searching for connections

At the core, the debate may be more a question of age than a generational shift. Millennials are delaying marriage and having children, in part because of the Great Recession and heavier debt loads. But when they do start their families, city life becomes harder to pull off.

“It would be a mistake to treat millennials as a monolithic block that behaves the same way,” said John Hall, head of economic development in the city of Westminster. “There will be some millennials who want to continue to live in the urban cities and some that want to move to more suburban locations as they start families.”

Dustin and Heather Pike, in their mid-30s, had enjoyed the urban life in Miami and San Francisco and when they moved to Colorado, downtown Denver seemed like the obvious choice.

They enjoyed getting cocktails after work and going for brunch on Sundays and not having to drive around everywhere. But they also found it hard to form meaningful friendships.

“We would see tons of people,” Heather said. “But no one is trying to get to know each other. It’s the city mentality.”

And there weren’t many young children downtown, where living space is at a premium and developers aren’t focused on accommodating larger households.

Walkability for a young adult means something entirely different when he or she is holding the hand of a toddler. Heather said she had to stop visiting the Downtown Children’s Playground because her 2-year-old was getting harassed.

“We had some scary encounters,” she said.

The Pikes considered some of Denver’s older neighborhoods but found the homes too small and old to their liking and the social bonds already established.

They also settled on Sterling Ranch, where they quickly made connections with other families moving in. Not only did their social life improve, but so did their son’s. Dustin notes there were a dozen kids in the six nearby homes.

“Everyone is new,” Burak said. “There are no cliques or established groups.”



Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post
Burak Yorumez, right, holding one of his twin daughters Skyler, hangs out in the kitchen during a cocktail party at his home on Nov. 18, 2019 in Littleton.

When she became a mom to twins, Julie said she wanted a community of moms, something she wouldn’t have found as easily downtown. They now have neighbors willing to watch their kids at the drop of a hat or who bring a meal over when they are under the weather.

If millennials gathered in cities to find the connections and sense of community, that same desire may push them to move to the suburbs as they have children.

Designing community

Homebuilders, however, realize they can’t replicate the suburbs of the 1970s and 1980s, with their dead-end cul-de-sacs, wide boulevards of speeding cars, cookie-cutter home designs and big-box retailers swimming in a sea of asphalt.

Communities, even in the already established suburbs, are creating hybrids they think will appeal to young adults. Westminster, for example, is converting its former mall area into a denser “downtown” with an Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, apartments, restaurants and workspaces.

“The unifying principle seems to be around experience, walkability and community,” Hall said.

Essentially, millennials want the best of both worlds — the more affordable and spacious housing and better school districts found in the suburbs and the walkability and bustle of activity that older city neighborhoods offer.

The Urban Land Institute and accounting firm PwC, in their Emerging Trends in Real Estate report for 2020, have coined a term for the crossbreeding that is taking place — hipsturbia.

“Many of these ‘cool’ suburbs are associated with metro areas having vibrant downtowns, illustrating the falsity of a dichotomy that pits central cities against ring communities,” according to the report.

Hall said he learned a lesson on dichotomies after jumping on a pedicab on the 16th Street Mall last summer. The driver had tattoos on his calf and wore a bright pink shirt and shades. Hall pegged him as a millennial urban hipster.

But then he told Hall he had a family and recently moved to the Standley Lake neighborhood in Westminster.

“The market is a lot more fluid than we assume,” he said.

Harold Smethills, the driving force behind Sterling Ranch, along with his wife and children, said his goal was to create a community that allowed for “free-range” children like many baby boomers grew up in.

Safety is a top priority. Street design and traffic controls keep speeds below 35 mph. The wide boulevards and parkways that divide neighboring Highlands Ranch are not part of the plan. Nor are cul-de-sacs.

“Bad things happen in cul-de-sacs,” Smethills said.

Intersections are pinched down in size, which makes them easier to cross. But that created another problem. County snowplows were too big to pass, and smaller ones had to be ordered to keep the streets clean.

Shrubs that grow to only 3 feet in height were planted as a way to improve visibility. Porches on homes make it easier for people to hang outside and get to know their neighbors. There are pocket parks, so families don’t have to hop into a car to enjoy the outdoors.

But the most important thing that Sterling Ranch is building is a sense of community, Smethills said. There is a constant flow of community activities such as Halloween hayrides and a Santa Village, and a community coffee shop and taphouse where neighbors gather.

“Your neighbors are your first line of response,” Smethills said. They are the ones who spot smoke wafting from an emerging fire or find the family pet wandering away.

Smethills’ son, Brock, said walkability is a must in any new community design. Sterling Ranch will intersperse more retail and restaurants throughout its neighborhoods rather than congregating them in big strip malls.

It’s also working hard to get away from relying on chains and to bring in a more independent mix of restaurants and retailers. Home designs are varied and not mass-produced. And Sterling Ranch has 1-gigabit fiber to the home, which has made it attractive to people who want to work at home.