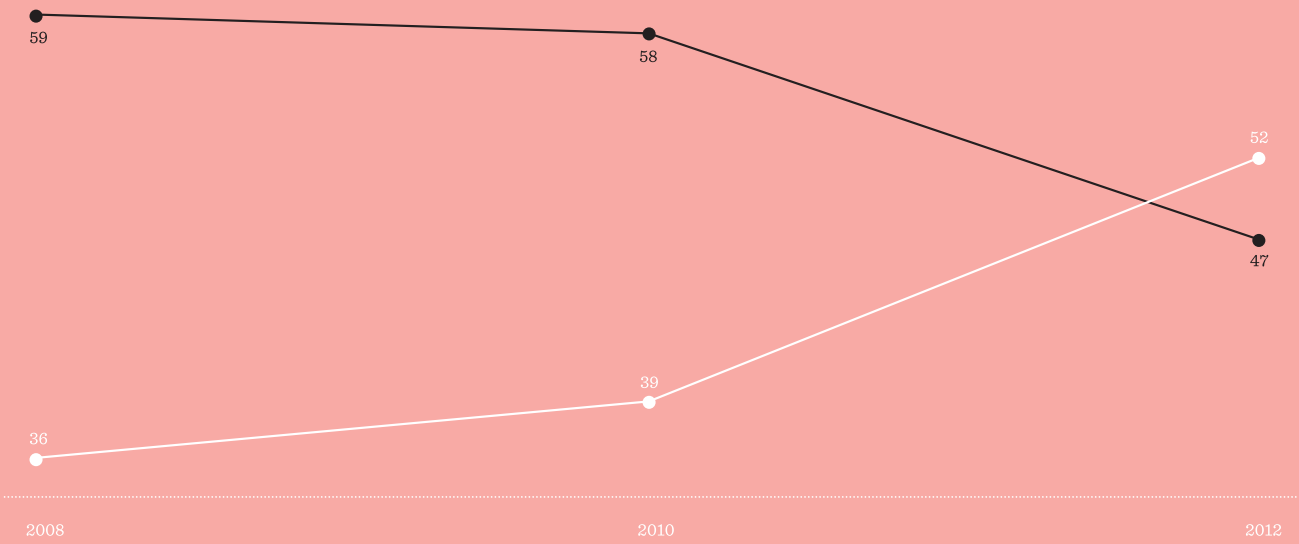


WHAT HOUSTONIANS WANT

**BIG HOUSE AND YARD VS SMALL HOUSE WITH SHOPS NEARBY**



CITE

# IS HOUSTON ABOUT TO EXPERIENCE AN “URBAN RENAISSANCE”?

## FINDINGS FROM THE KINDER HOUSTON AREA SURVEY (1995-2012)

By Stephen L. Klineberg and Emily Braswell

Almost wherever you look these days, scholars and journalists claim that a new interest in city living is beginning to displace the lure of the suburbs. A “great inversion,” according to urban scholar Alan Ehrenhalt (2012), is under way, a re-urbanization of the American city that is rearranging living patterns across almost all metropolitan areas in the country. The most recent findings from the annual Kinder Houston Area Survey suggest that this nationwide shift in living preferences may be occurring here as well, in Houston—arguably the most sprawling, least dense, most automobile-dependent major urban region in the country.

During the past decade and a half, survey respondents living in the suburbs have become more likely to express an interest in moving to the city, while interest among city dwellers in moving to the suburbs has fallen. The research points to two major factors that seem most clearly to be influencing this shift in preferences: the ongoing improvements in the amount and quality of Houston’s urban amenities, and area residents’ increasing comfort with the region’s burgeoning diversity.

### *The “great inversion”*

In 12 surveys conducted over the past 15 years, the respondents from Harris County who said they lived in the city were asked how interested they would be in moving to the suburbs, and those in the suburbs were asked about moving to the city. Back in 1999, when the question was first asked, 52 percent of Anglos living in the city said they were “very” or “somewhat” interested in moving to the suburbs, compared to just 26 percent of those in the suburbs who said they would like to move to the city.

In 2004, the surveys recorded a sudden surge (from 20 percent in 2003 to 33 percent in 2004) in the number of Anglo suburbanites who said they would like to move

to the city (Klineberg and Fitzmorris 2004). That was the year when the Super Bowl was played in Houston’s brand-new Reliant Stadium and the seven-mile light rail line opened to widespread celebration. In the survey the following year, the number of respondents who said they were interested in moving to the city dropped back into the realm of earlier figures (at 22 percent).

Somewhat to our surprise, the urban allure continued to grow during the ensuing years, while interest among city dwellers in moving to the suburbs gradually declined. The earlier figures are now reversed: In the 2012 survey, 33 percent of Anglo suburbanites expressed an interest in moving to the city, but only 28 percent of city residents said they were “very” or “somewhat” interested in moving to the suburbs.

These same years have seen no statistically significant increase in the city’s attraction for African-Americans living in the suburbs, and no meaningful decrease in the percentage of Hispanics in the city who said they would like to move to the suburbs. Why did the largest and most consistent shift in living preferences occur among the Anglo residents of Harris County, and what does that change portend for the region’s future?

Of the seemingly obvious and logical explanations for the city’s new allure, many turn out not to be true. The surveys reveal that the Anglo suburbanites who named traffic as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area were no more likely to want to move to the city than those who mentioned the economy, crime, pollution, or other concerns. Those with the longest commutes were no more eager to move than those who lived closer to work. Suburban Anglos whose jobs were in the city were not significantly more interested in moving to the city than those whose jobs and homes were both located in the suburbs. Having school-age children showed no consistent relationship with an interest in

moving from suburb to city, or vice versa, nor did living in a single-person household.

If changes in family structures, work-related issues, and traffic woes are not reasons for the growing interest in city living, then what is? If Anglos in the suburbs are not being “pushed” by suburban frustrations, what then are the forces that now seem to be “pulling” more of them into the urban core? The surveys underscore two quite different bases for the city’s new allure.

### Urban amenities

In the years since 1995, Downtown Houston has been transformed from a business-only activity hub during the day and a largely deserted urban landscape in the evening into a vibrant blend of business, entertainment, and the first signs of attractive new residential venues (Klaasmeyer 2012). The seven-mile light rail system along Main Street opened in January 2004, linking Reliant Park (2002) with the Texas Medical Center and Downtown Houston, and into the vicinity of Minute Maid Park (2000), the Hilton-Americas Hotel (2003), the greatly expanded George R. Brown Convention Center (2003), and Toyota Center (2003).

That same time period saw the opening of the Bayou Place entertainment complex (1997), the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts (2002), the Downtown Aquarium (2003), Main Street Square (2004), Root Memorial Square Park (2005), the Buffalo Bayou Sabine Promenade (2006), Discovery Green (2008), the Lee and Joe Jamail Skatepark (2008), Houston Pavilions (2008), One

Park Place apartments (2009), Market Square Park (2010), the Houston Ballet Center for Dance (2011), and the Dynamo Stadium (2012)—all (and much more) part of a remarkable and continuing revitalization process.

In the past three decades, Downtown Houston added 6.3 million square feet of office space, 2,700 hotel rooms, 2,200 residential units, and over 70,000 theater and sports facility seats (Eury 2012). The metropolitan center is now home to more than 140,000 jobs, with 4,500 residents in the urban core and another 50,000 living in areas immediately adjacent to Downtown (Van Ness 2012). Nightlife is flourishing as new restaurants, bars, clubs, and entertainment venues proliferate. With almost \$6 billion in new construction since 1995 alone, the city’s urban space is being refashioned in ways not seen since the 1970s, when some of the world’s most gifted architects (Philip Johnson, Renzo Piano, and Cesar Pelli) used this city to showcase their talents.

Have all these new amenities influenced the living preferences of area residents? In 2012, the survey respondents were asked how often they visited Houston’s museums or live theaters, made use of the city’s downtown restaurants or nightlife, and attended professional sporting events. Consistently and unmistakably, the Anglos residing in the suburbs who made more frequent use of these urban venues were far more likely to be interested in moving to the city.

As indicated in the accompanying table, all three types of amenities appear to be equally powerful in luring people to city living. Combining them into one

## DIFFERENCES AMONG SUBURBAN ANGLOS BY THEIR INTEREST IN SOMEDAY MOVING TO THE CITY (2012)

		NOT INTERESTED IN MOVING TO THE CITY	INTERESTED IN MOVING TO THE CITY
How often make use of Houston’s downtown restaurants or nightlife?	Never Several times a year	<b>47.3%</b> 26.6%	<b>11.9%</b> <b>50.0%</b>
How often visit Houston’s museums or live theaters?	Never Several times a year	<b>14.2%</b> 35.5%	<b>3.6%</b> <b>54.2%</b>
How often attend professional sporting events in Houston?	Never Several times a year	<b>36.7%</b> 25.5%	<b>27.7%</b> <b>39.7%</b>
Increasing diversity will eventually become:	Growing problem Source of strength	<b>45.6%</b> 54.4%	<b>7.2%</b> <b>92.8%</b>
Relations among ethnic groups in Houston area?	Fair or poor Good or excellent	<b>56.4%</b> 43.6%	<b>34.9%</b> <b>65.0%</b>
Most who receive welfare benefits are:	Taking advantage Really in need	<b>78.1%</b> 21.9%	<b>35.8%</b> <b>64.2%</b>
Allowing gays to serve openly in the military:	Against it For it	<b>44.0%</b> 56.0%	<b>16.9%</b> <b>83.1%</b>

## Feelings of ease and solidarity with people of different ethnicities, socioeconomic circumstances, and sexual orientations consistently differentiate the potential movers in the suburbs from those who would prefer to stay where they are.

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overall measure, the data indicate that fully half of all the Anglos in the suburbs who reported that they often take advantage of Houston's museums, theaters, nightlife, or sporting events said they would be interested in moving to the city. In sharp contrast, only a fifth of the suburban residents who make little use of these amenities thought they would be interested in such a move. The ongoing urban revitalization has clearly played a role in setting the stage for Houston's "great inversion."

### *Comfort with diversity*

The second lure derives from the very nature of urban living itself. Suburbanites who are interested in moving to the city are expressing a preference for social lives that, as Ehrenhalt observed, "will be lived in a public realm, not a closed-off private one, in a more active and vibrant streetscape and in parks and other public spaces. They will have to do with less private living space and more shared urban territory" (2012: 14).

The willingness to share urban territory with unknown others presupposes a relatively high level of comfort with Houston's burgeoning diversity across its manifold dimensions. Feelings of ease and solidarity

with people of different ethnicities, socioeconomic circumstances, and sexual orientations consistently differentiate the potential movers in the suburbs from those who would prefer to stay where they are.

As seen in the table, suburban Anglos who are interested in moving to the city are far more likely (at 93 percent) than those who are happy to stay where they are (54 percent), to believe that Houston's increasing ethnic diversity will eventually become "a source of great strength for the city," rather than "a growing problem for the city." The Anglos who are attracted to urban living (by 64 to 22 percent) are more likely to believe that most people on welfare are "really in need of help," rather than "taking advantage of the system." By 83 to 56 percent, they are more likely to be in favor of allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military.

Each of the two distinctive "pulls" has a separate and cumulative impact. Anglo suburbanites who are uncomfortable with the ethnic diversity and feel little empathy for people who are poor or gay are nevertheless eager to move to the city if they are frequent users of Houston's urban amenities. Those who rarely make use of the city's recreational and cultural venues are more interested in moving to the city if they feel a sense of solidarity and comfort with the diversity of the urban scene. On the other hand, as we have seen, neither traffic woes and long commutes nor family structures are demonstrably responsible for "pushing" them out of their suburban homes.

The increasing interest in recent years among Anglo suburbanites in moving to the city may well reflect, therefore, not only the increasing quality and variety of amenities and residential opportunities that are becoming available in Downtown Houston, but also a growing comfort with the region's flourishing diversity. The surveys have amply documented that change:

- The proportion of Harris County residents who thought the burgeoning ethnic diversity in Houston will eventually become "a source of great strength for the city" grew from 55 percent in 1996, to 61 percent in 2006, to 69 percent in 2012. In the most recent survey, 49 percent rated the relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area as either "excellent" or "good"—a higher number giving positive ratings than ever before in all the years of this research (affirmative evaluations of ethnic relations were given by only 42 percent in 2011, 37 percent in 2007, and 28 percent in 1997).
- In the 2012 survey, 41 percent said that most people receiving welfare benefits are "really in need of help," up from 30 percent two years earlier. In 2011, 72 percent believed that most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because of "circumstances they can't control," rather than because "they don't work hard enough," up from 66 percent in 2007 and from 49 percent in 1999.
- Virtually every measure of support for gay rights has also increased significantly in recent years. The number in favor of "homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children" grew from 17 percent in 1991, to 35 percent in 2002, to 43 percent in 2012. Support for "allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military" increased from 54 percent in 2000 to 66 percent in the most recent survey. The belief that homosexuality is "morally acceptable" or that it depends on the circumstances, rather than being "morally wrong," grew from 39 percent in 1997 to 61 percent in 2011.

### *A preference for urbanism*

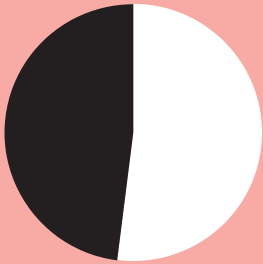
Meanwhile, the evidence of an increasing preference for urban living is further confirmed by answers to another question the surveys have been tracking. In 2008, 2010, and 2012, Harris County residents were asked what they would choose if they could live anywhere in the Houston area. The proportion who said they would like to live in "a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go," dropped from 59 percent in 2008 and 58 percent in 2010 to just 47 percent in the 2012 survey. In 2008 and 2010, 36 and 39 percent said they would opt instead for a "smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces." In 2012, the percentage of Harris County residents who would choose the more urban lifestyle jumped decisively to 52 percent.

Not surprisingly, such living preferences differ according to where the respondents are actually living. Fully 69 percent of the respondents in 2012 whose homes were inside Loop 610 expressed a preference for the more urban alternative, compared to 57 percent of those

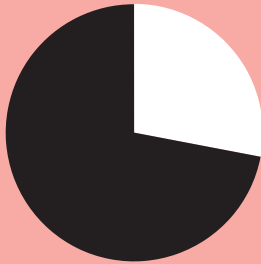
# THE "GREAT INVERSION"

## ANGLOS LIVING IN THE CITY WHO WANT TO MOVE TO THE SUBURBS

1999

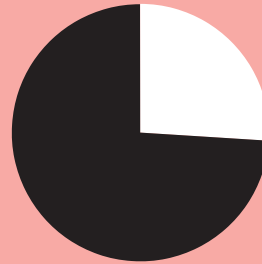


2012

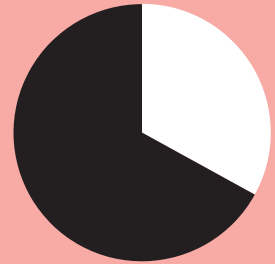


## ANGLOS LIVING IN THE SUBURBS WHO WANT TO MOVE TO THE CITY

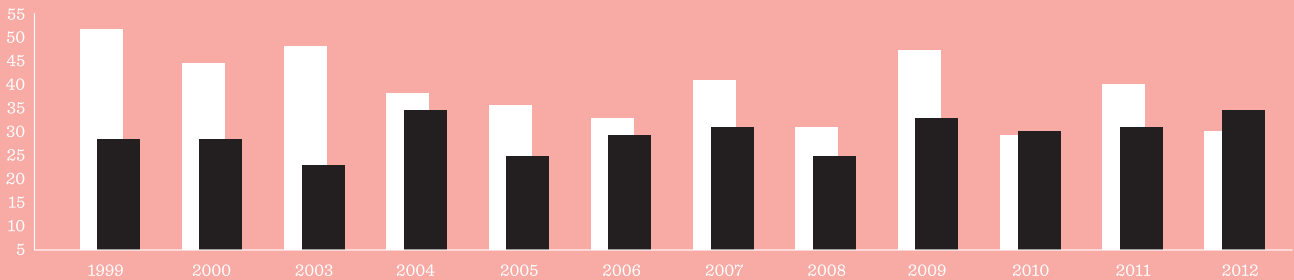
1999



2012



## INTEREST AMONG ANGLOS IN MOVING FROM SUBURBS TO CITY AND FROM CITY TO SUBURBS



## SINCE 1982, DOWNTOWN HOUSTON HAS ADDED

6.3

MILLION SQUARE FEET  
OF OFFICE SPACE

2,700

HOTEL  
ROOMS

2,200

RESIDENTIAL  
UNITS

70,000

THEATER AND SPORTS FACILITY SEATS

## "ETHNIC DIVERSITY IS A SOURCE OF GREAT STRENGTH"

1996



2012



## "PEOPLE ON WELFARE ARE REALLY IN NEED OF HELP"

2010



2012



## "GAYS AND LESBIANS SHOULD BE LEGALLY ALLOWED TO ADOPT CHILDREN"

1991



2002

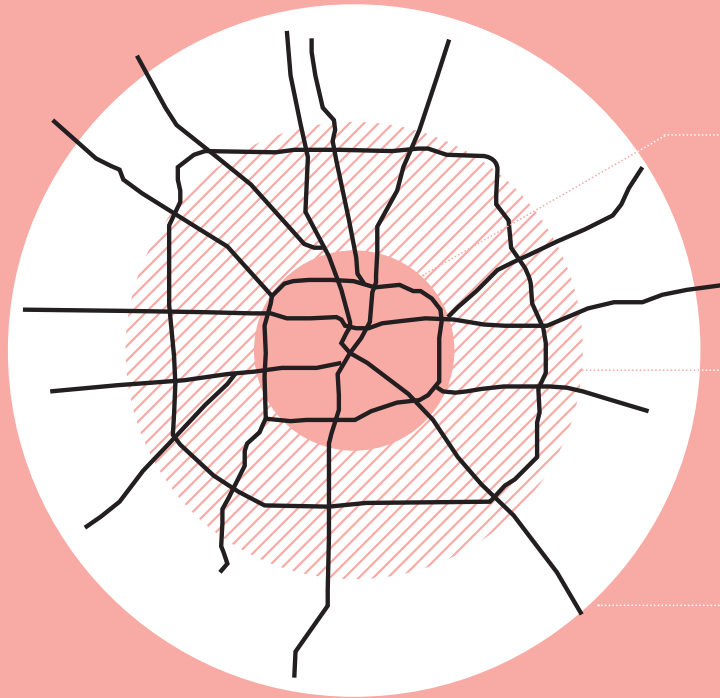


2012

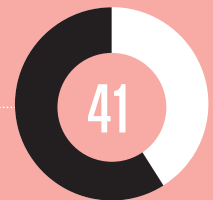
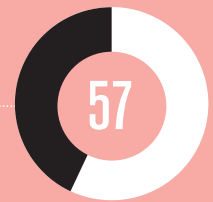
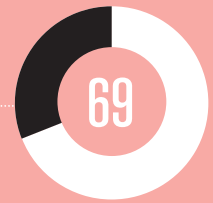


## MAP OF PREFERENCES

Where respondents live



Percent that prefer a more urban lifestyle

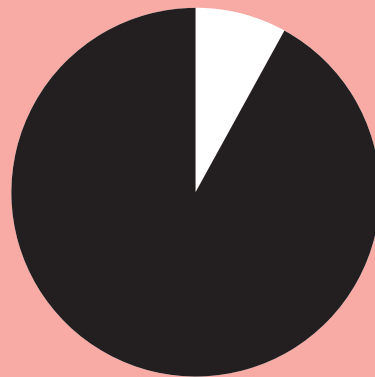


OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS, HOUSTON WILL ADD

**3.5** MILLION PEOPLE

**1.5** MILLION JOBS

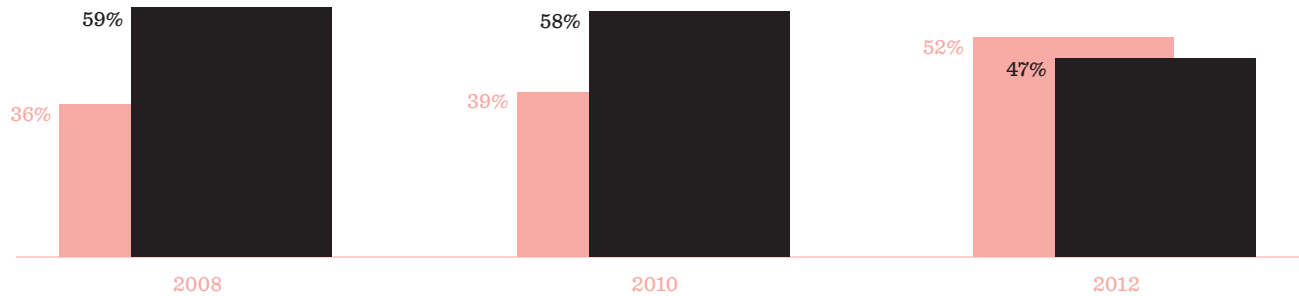
OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, HOUSTON ADDED 1.8 MILLION RESIDENTS,



**92%**  
MOVED TO THE SUBURBS

Many of these new residents clearly preferred the **suburban lifestyle**, but many others would surely have opted for more pedestrian-friendly urban alternatives *if they had been given that choice.*

RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES (2008-2012) - *Single family home with big yard vs. Smaller home in more urbanized area*



living outside the Loop but still in the City of Houston and to 41 percent of those who were residing in the unincorporated areas of Harris County outside the city limits of Houston. Among the survey participants in the nine surrounding counties, the number who would choose the opportunity to live “in a more urbanized area” was virtually identical (40 percent). These are remarkably high numbers in this sprawling, car-dependent city of ours, further underscoring the large and growing demand for more urban lifestyles that now cuts across the entire metropolitan region.

During the next 20 years or so, the Houston-Galveston Area Council forecasts that the Houston metropolitan area as a whole will add another 3.5 million people and 1.5 million jobs (Taebel 2009). How will the region accommodate that growth? According to the U.S. Census, during the past 10 years the Houston metro region added 1.8 million residents, and 92 percent of them moved into the suburbs. Many of these new residents clearly preferred the suburban lifestyle, but many others would surely have opted for more pedestrian-friendly urban alternatives if they had been given that choice.

As some one million additional residents move into Harris County in the course of the next 20 years and if meaningful alternatives to car-centered suburban sprawl are not more widely available, much of the remaining farmlands, prairies, forests, and marshes in the peripheral areas will disappear into subdivisions and parking lots; traffic congestion as well as air and water pollution will worsen; and the region’s overall quality of life may well deteriorate in irretrievable ways. If that happens, can anyone doubt that the prospects for sustained economic prosperity will deteriorate as well? The challenge, as Ehrenhalt and others have observed (Brown 2012), is not in finding people who want to live in more compact, urbanized communities, but in building places

that can accommodate them.

As Harris County’s residents are provided with expanded opportunities for urban living, Houston will be in a better position to capitalize on its burgeoning ethnic and cultural diversity. Its citizens will demand and support continuing improvements in the area’s recreational, artistic, and educational resources. The increasing numbers interested in city living are calling not only for additional amenities in Downtown Houston, but also for the more urban lifestyles becoming available in the new “town centers” that are gradually refashioning Houston’s suburban areas as well (The Woodlands, Sugar Land, and Pearland). If Houston’s business leaders, elected officials, architects, developers, engineers, and neighborhood organizations can capitalize on the new city allure to build attractive and stable multi-ethnic, mixed-use, and mixed-income urban communities throughout the region, these trends bode well for the future of Houston. ●

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