

## Seniors & the City

Affluent, educated retirees are forfeiting a regular tee time in favor of loft living, opera tickets and bistros

By Peg Tyre  
Newsweek



Lisa Wyatt for Newsweek

Oct. 11 issue - When vascular surgeon Dr. Mervyn Burke, 75, decided it was time to retire last year, he and his wife Delores, 77, checked out two retirement communities near their longtime home in Marin County, just outside San Francisco. "They were nice enough," says Mervyn, straining for faint praise. But in his heart, he knew he didn't want to live around old people

24/7. So the Burkes sold their suburban colonial and moved to a 10th-floor condominium in the heart of San Francisco. Delores misses gardening but now spends more time at the symphony and the opera, which she loves. After 42 years in a quiet suburb, Mervyn is charmed by the vibrant street life in his new neighborhood. Housing didn't come cheap, he says, but as active, independent seniors, "this was just the kind of retirement we were looking for."

The Burkes, and tens of thousands of retirees like them, are pulling up stakes in suburbia and fashioning their own retirement communities in the heart of the bustling city. They're looking for what most older people want: a home with no stairs and low crime rates. But they're willing to exchange a regular weekly tee time for a different set of amenities—rich cultural offerings, young neighbors and plenty of good restaurants. Spying an opportunity, major real-estate developers have broken ground on urban sites they intend to market to suburban retirees. These seniors are already changing the face of Ft. Worth, Texas, snapping up condos in the revitalized downtown. "Who ever thought," asks Ft. Worth developer Fran McCarthy, "that suburban flight would be round trip?"

The trickle of older folks returning to the city, which began in the mid-'90s, has grown into a steady stream. While some cities, especially those with few cultural offerings, have seen an exodus of seniors, urban planners say others have become retiree magnets. Between 1990 and 2000, the population of 64- to 75-year-olds in downtown Chicago rose 17 percent. Austin, Texas; New Orleans, and Los Angeles have seen double-digit increases as well. In the next six years, as the 76 million baby boomers begin to enter retirement, downtowns are expected to grow even grayer. "Cities aren't going to replace the sun belt," says Mark Muro, a senior policy

analyst at the Brookings Institution who is studying this urban migration. But for affluent retirees, "city life is an increasingly popular option."

Nobody's calling it the fountain of youth, but there may be hidden health benefits to city living, too. A RAND Corp. study published this month found that suburbanites, who spend long hours in the car, have higher rates of high blood pressure, arthritis and breathing difficulties than their urban counterparts who walk more each day. Ft. Worth banker Tom Lang, 60, moved from the suburbs to the city to ward off another, even more debilitating, byproduct of aging—social isolation. After his son got married two years ago, Lang, who is divorced, realized that he hardly ever saw his suburban neighbors. Lang has many elderly clients and says he's seen firsthand how loneliness can ravage older people as they gradually lose touch with friends and neighbors. These days when he goes to the movie theater near his condo or pops down to the grocery store, "I'm constantly running into people I know." As he ages, Lang says, he hopes the continual interaction will help keep him young.

Retired lawyer Marjorie Watson, 61, says moving to the city kept a health setback from becoming a crisis. Five years after she and her husband traded their single-family home in Chevy Chase, Md., for a two-bedroom condominium in downtown Washington, D.C., an illness left her in a wheelchair. "The stairs in the old house would have been a major disaster," she says. She also found she could get to medical appointments without much trouble.

Major developers are already poised to cash in on the urban migration. Toll Brothers, a company that made billions building luxury suburban housing, is now constructing high-rises in Philadelphia, Providence, R.I., and Hoboken, N.J.; these, they say, will make perfect homes for aging boomers. Some people want to retire to a slower way of life, says Toll Brothers vice president Fred Cooper. "But the generation that is getting ready to retire is very fit, very educated and very culturally active. Many want to stay connected to a city." Del Webb, which built the sprawling Sun City "active adult" communities in Arizona and Nevada, is erecting two urban versions just outside New York City and Washington, D.C., and more are planned.

A condo downtown costs more, but George Keller, 66, a retired Army physicist, says it's a small price to pay to finally ditch his car. Five years ago he and his wife Alice, 64, a retired schoolteacher, sold their home in suburban Maryland and moved to Asheville, N.C. We were "just flat tired of getting in the car to go anywhere" says George. Since they've moved, they've cut their mileage in half. "It'd be even less," George says, "if we didn't have grandchildren in Maryland." Recently they've discovered that disconnecting from their car may turn out to be a survival skill of sorts. When their suburban friends stop driving, says George, "they're trapped." Although they didn't plan it that way, learning to live without a car means "we can keep enjoying paradise for a good long time." Maybe that's what they mean by the golden years.

*With Catharine Skipp*

© 2004 Newsweek, Inc.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6160422/site/newsweek/>