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Golf communities: Moving in, or moving out? - by Daniel Calano

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Weeks ago, I read a story in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) suggesting people were leaving golf communities in order to move downtown to experience more urban living. Like other suburban transplants, they were looking for neighborhood, culture, and entertainment. Frankly, I never understood how people could ever move to a golf community, thinking that the major motivator was a single sport, golf, which in and of itself is a challenge for most. I felt vindicated by the article, since my preconception was that no one could/should leave his or her family home, move to a completely different and unknown place, where everybody was obsessed by golf. As it turns out, I was wrong, some, and so was the WSJ. This is not about golf. This is about community.

As we all know, people have been moving from suburbs to downtown to “replace” neighborhoods they felt they had lost. But the things that created neighborhoods in the suburbs are actually less tangible than place. Neighborhoods are as much virtual, where people relate to one another through schoolchildren, town sports, PTA meetings, church, government and so on. In other words, community is built around relation and family. As families age, children move, and friends leave, people feel the need to restore community, and thus recently move to more urban neighborhoods in hopes of finding it there.

But I needed to address the question of why people moved to golf communities in the first place, and then subsequently left. This winter I enjoyed a few different times in Florida, both working on a project and yes, also playing a little golf. I also visited some friends who had moved there either for the season or for the year, often to golf communities, and I wanted to see how it was working out. I wanted to see if they were leaving as WSJ suggested.

First, to my surprise, there were more golf communities being built all around the area, with a sales pace and price at least equal to or better than last year. How was this possible, particularly when golf nationally has a declining participation rate as a sport?

Then we called some friends to get together for a glass of wine or dinner. We called people who

had moved from a Boston suburb recently to a Florida golf community where they knew nobody and were just starting to play golf. I thought this would be a good test. Once again surprised, we had a hard time finding a date since their lives were completely booked. There was round the clock community activity of golf, tennis, cooking, yoga, and random classes on language, gardening, and “being in the moment”. I was shocked. They had only been there for one season, and told us they had more friends already than they recently had in the Boston suburb. “Bingo!” I thought, (forgive the association). Everybody had moved there as strangers but were completely open to new activities and friendships. They were there to recreate community. Golf was not the driving force. It was merely a social lubricant and a beautiful landscape. Those friends were certainly not moving out to go to urban areas without such community.

So the Wall Street Journal article was not dead-on, in my view. It takes all kinds, and clearly people are moving downtown, but clearly they are also moving to ready-made communities. It’s a matter of finding community whatever the choice. Developers may be over building Florida golf communities, but do not underestimate the drive for ready-made and open communities, with plenty of things to do and people to meet. These places work to solve a problem.

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