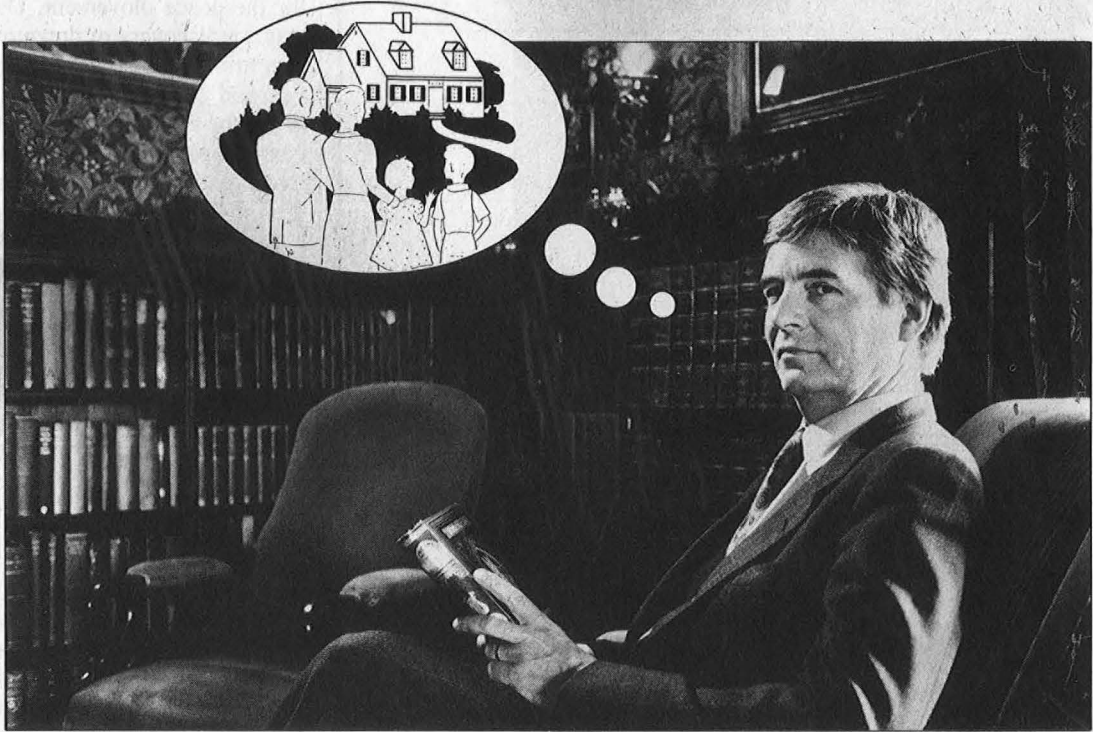


# SECOND THOUGHTS

Yes, suburbia, this is the column you never thought I'd write. / by Peter Desbarats



Desbarats: "In the 21st century, will I find myself visiting grandchildren in the suburbs?"

Thank-yous after speeches are even more difficult to make original than introductions. I had just finished my save-our-downtown routine for a group of local history teachers the other night, when the thanker looked at me with a combative glint in his eye.

"I guess you'd call me the original polyester man," he grinned unapologetically. Then he launched into an aggressive and entertaining defence of suburban living in London. He liked his modern house and all its gadgets. He loved his two-car garage. He adored supermarkets and shopping malls.

Everyone laughed, but a little too heartily – the way we do when someone is telling jokes about really serious things. And since then, I've been having second thoughts – not about my preference for downtown living but about the whole controversy. It's apparent that the debate between downtown and suburbia has become one of the great issues of our time, but why? What does it say about us?

Our ancestors didn't bother about it. They devoted most of their time to arguing about religion and sex. You were supposed to practice one but not the other. Now we don't seem to care who does what to whom – even to God, unless it's someone really important, like a presidential candidate or a TV evangelist.

We've settled all the big questions, or ignored them, so

the smaller ones loom large. To smoke or not to smoke? Frozen food or fresh? Compact discs or analog recordings? These are the subjects that now divide humankind. And the greatest of these is whether to live downtown or in the suburbs.

For many years, I've been a firm believer in downtown. I've had the kind of unquestioning faith in downtown that people used to give to religion. It *has* been a kind of religion for me and in its service I have willingly donated large sums of money to support a priesthood of real estate agents. I have sung the praises of downtown as lustily as a street-corner evangelist. I have been a missionary to the unconverted, particularly in the pages of this magazine, which is distributed mainly in the suburbs.

(In fact, the income statistics in my own downtown residential area are so erratic that neither I nor my neighbors are privileged to receive *London Magazine*. I can help produce it but I can't receive it because advertisers aren't interested in my neighborhood and its wretched socioeconomic profile.)

This faith has been with me since adolescence, ever since I realized that my parents lived in the suburbs. In fact, their's was the first suburban generation. When they were children, people lived either in the city or the country. There was no in-between. When my parents and their contemporaries discovered suburbia, they thought

they had gone to heaven: trees, green grass, fresh air, detached houses and a train station at the end of our street in Montreal West.

How much of my rejection of all this was the old business of simply wanting something different? My own generation was too young for war and too old for the peace movement. Our crusade was a rediscovery of downtown. If our parents had striven for space, we yearned for cramped and cozy. The furniture they had thrown out in disgust we paid thousands to re-acquire. Even garages became expendable, although not cars, except for the real zealots. For years, I've parked on what used to be a Victorian garden in front of our house.

But recently my behaviour has been less consistent. I've been rattled by the discovery, inevitable I suppose, that my children don't share my aversion to the suburbs. After all my diatribes about shopping centres, I've found myself sneaking into Masonville Place on the pretext that only there can I find a favorite shaving cream. If there's no one around whom I know, I'll even grab a fast slice of pizza. While I'm loyal to Covent Garden Market on a Saturday morning, I sometimes go on shopping binges at Loblaws or the A&P. When I'm feeling totally depraved, I even read *The National Enquirer* with a supercilious air while I'm standing in the check-out line at the supermarket.

And then, the other night, I actually found myself applauding with all the others after the polyester man had thanked me. There I was, grinning away and shaking hands with this high priest of heresy. What was happening to me?

Loss of faith in mid-career is a terrible thing to cope with, but I haven't completely fallen apart. You'll still find me manning the barricades in front of the Talbot Block, or what's left of it, and defending the virtues of small, fresh, ancient and expensive. I have a terrible feeling, however, that the polyester man may be not a quaint hangover from the past but – I don't want to even think about it – the wave of the future.

In the 21st century, will I find myself visiting grandchildren in the suburbs and trying to explain, unconvincingly, that I'd driven out from the once-gentrified slums of the inner city only to borrow the latest issue of *London Magazine*? ■