

Chapman, J. David. (2025). *subURBAN! Reimagining the Suburban Downtown*. Edmond, OK: Clear to Close Publishing.

First of all, this book is a joy to read. Although Chapman is a professor of business, *subURBAN* is clearly addressed to a much broader audience than his fellow academics. The tone is personal, lively, and engaging. At the same time, this book tackles one of the most pressing but often overlooked challenges of American development: the reinvention of the suburban core. Where earlier scholarship has focused either on metropolitan centers or the decline of rural communities, Chapman directs attention to the vast swaths of American life organized around *suburban* municipalities. These spaces have traditionally been designed for cars, single-family zoning, and commercial sprawl. His work contends that the long-term viability of these communities depends on transforming their downtowns into walkable, mixed-use, and culturally vibrant centers. A main theme of this book is how city leaders can build *resilience* in their communities. As Chapman notes, “Resilient cities are not necessarily the wealthiest, but they are the best organized” (p. 208). This book is a plan of action for such local-level collaboration to succeed!

One of the distinctive strengths of the book is its reliance on an ethnographic mode of inquiry reminiscent of Richard Fenno’s classic “soak and poke” method of participant observation. Rather than approaching suburban transformation solely through statistical models, policy reports, or secondary literature, Chapman grounds his analysis in his own extended engagement to improve the City of Edmond. He walks its streets, patronizes local businesses, and regularly participates in public meetings and town events. He immerses himself in the lived experience of residents and local leaders. Chapman even served as an elected member of the city council in the very community that he analyzes here. At the same time, Chapman is himself a successful real estate investor who specializes in the development of Edmond’s downtown area. These unique perspectives allow him to capture the textures

of suburban life—the skepticism of homeowners toward redevelopment, the aspirations of city officials, and the cultural meanings attached to suburban downtowns. In doing so, Chapman’s work extends a tradition in political science that values observation and presence to bridge the gap between policy vision and everyday democratic practice. He does not describe himself this way, but Chapman is an activist at heart. But he works within the established system of community leaders and stakeholders because he is one of them. He frames his calls for action through this deeply personal narrative.

From a political science and public policy perspective, the book makes an important normative contribution. Chapman emphasizes how suburban form is not merely an architectural or planning question but one that shapes civic identity, social cohesion, and ultimately democratic vitality. In his telling, revitalized suburban downtowns can provide public goods by fostering participation, economic resilience, and inclusivity. This framing aligns his project with broader currents in New Urbanism and smart growth policies, while situating suburban design firmly within debates about governance and democracy.

This book convincingly addresses many of the practical realities of suburban governance. Chapman acknowledges citizens’ resistance to change as well as how entrenched zoning codes constrain redevelopment. As a partial solution, he points to the importance of approving variances as the situation warrants (p. 52). Political scientists would note that suburban governance often magnifies collective action problems, with competing interests undermining comprehensive planning. In this respect, *subURBAN!* risks offering a vision that is aspirational. He continually points to the city of Edmond as a concrete demonstration of what is possible. However, he avoids discussing the distinctive edge that Edmond has over most other cities in Oklahoma. Chapman mentions only briefly in passing, the unique struggle of how a municipality in Oklahoma must rely almost exclusively on sales tax for its revenue (p. 133).

Interstate 35 intersects Edmond making it a prime location for retail sales from outsiders. Also, the book does not mention the rare advantage in Oklahoma that the City of Edmond has in retaining its own municipal electrical system and the accompanying cash flow. Most Oklahoma municipalities rely on electrical power from investor-owned utilities such as OG&E and the Public Service Company of Oklahoma (PSO).

The book inspires with its imagery of revitalized suburban spaces. Chapman's call for reimagining the suburban downtown is best viewed as a manifesto, but it also offers a practicable agenda. The book's strength lies in its capacity to provoke debate. By foregrounding questions of equity—Who benefits from suburban redevelopment? Who is displaced?—Chapman raises essential issues about whether suburban revitalization can genuinely advance inclusivity or whether it will reinforce patterns of exclusion through rising property values and gentrification. In doing so, the book contributes to ongoing policy conversations about how place-making intersects with social justice. He offers the city of Edmond as an exemplar for other suburban municipalities. In sum, *subURBAN!* is best understood as a vision-casting text. It offers an imaginative and accessible framework for what suburban downtowns could become but leaves the task of navigating institutional complexity, political feasibility, and distributive justice to others. Political scientists and policymakers alike will find the book a stimulating starting point. Its greatest value lies in encouraging community leaders in their difficult follow-up work of transforming vision into actionable governance strategies.

Perhaps because of its central focus on walkability *downtown*, Chapman does not spend any time examining Edmond's impressive system of extensive sidewalks and trails linking the major parks and neighborhoods through the university and central city. However, he does devote a whole chapter to the City of Edmond's remarkable collection of public art and plans for future expansion. He also fully addresses the contentious issues surrounding park-

ing. Taken together, these discussions underscore how symbolic amenities and practical infrastructure both shape the identity of a suburban downtown.

As a self-published book, it sometimes suffers from the lack of professional editing. For example, his prefatory text comes under the heading of “Forward” and the author probably meant, “Foreword.” Even here, most editors would recognize that forewords are usually written by someone other than the author. “Preface” would be the preferred term here. Chapman maintains a perspective of progress as a main theme throughout this book. In that light, “Forward” is an apt title for this introductory section. But even in this “Forward” section, an editor would not likely miss the two times that Chapman uses “principals” rather than the correct term in this context, “principles.” In addition, there are no in-text citations or footnotes. Readers must dive into the “Reference List” on their own to make educated guesses about which work mentioned there links directly to the text. For example, Chapman asserts, “Studies have shown that communities with well-funded schools tend to have lower crime rates” (p. 8). What studies? Perusing through the references at the end does not yield an obvious answer.

Chapman’s *subURBAN* is a wonderful primer on the politics of reinvigorating local downtown areas. It is of particular interest to scholars of urban politics, local governance, and public policy, as well as practitioners seeking to rethink the suburban built environment. This book will become one of the main supplementary texts in the next *Urban Planning and Politics* course that I teach. Students will appreciate this book’s novel feature of using numerous QR codes throughout to help readers quickly link to relevant information on the web. The nice assortment of pictures sprinkled throughout yields a welcome vitality to this work. Students can also take advantage of the callout boxes and glossary to nail down definitions of relevant concepts and planning terms. Chapman hints at the possibility of a second edition (p. 237). He should strongly consider the addition of an index as a feature that would

be of great value for both students and scholars.

Finally, the book chronicles the important developmental evolution of one of Oklahoma's most successful cities. It will continue to be a resource for Edmond community stakeholders and a benchmark for other local governments. This book successfully encapsulates contemporary thinking among urban planners and how it has played out in one suburban community.

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REFERENCES

Fenno, Richard F. (1978) *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Boston, MA: Little Brown.