Ever since the mid-20th-century migration to suburbia became an exodus, American cities have struggled to avoid becoming careworn relics valued largely for the marquee names they lend to the surrounding "metropolitan statistical areas." Old-guard centers of trade and culture have tried a range of fixes to stave off irrelevance. Following largely unsuccessful vogues for public-housing projects meant to combat poverty and civic centers designed to stimulate business, the most popular fad lately has been to reinvent the city as a tourist destination. Baltimore burnished its waterfront and built baseball's classiest stadium. St. Louis lured a pro football franchise and built 46 percent more hotel space. Cleveland and Pittsburgh remade their grimy downtowns as cultural meccas.

This latest renewal fashion has had, at best, mixed results. The four cities listed above, for example, continue to lose population; between June 1996 and June 1997, Baltimore lost another 16,000 residents. Despite its renewed sense of civic pride, Cleveland's unemployment rate is 3.6 percentage points higher than that of its suburbs, and because of poor mass transit, over half the entry-level jobs in the metro area are inaccessible to central-city residents. "Cities have become popular places to visit," says Fred Siegel, a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute, "not to live." Some Western
The information age may help rejuvenate cities—if they can take care of the basics.
cities like Phoenix and San Diego may seem like exceptions, but their population growth is deceptive. Many have annexed so many outlying areas, and assumed such low population densities, that they are scarcely urban.

A few positive recent trends in cities, such as falling crime rates and balanced municipal budgets, belie a dismal and fundamental trend. Middle-class families—"the bedrock of a stable community," according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's most recent "State of the Cities" report—continue to leave; suburbs contain 75 percent more families than cities, compared with 25 percent more in 1970. For every American who moved to a city in that period, four relocated to a suburb. As those with means flee the city's high taxes and poor schools and services, urban poverty has worsened; in 1990, 14 percent of city census tracts were classified as high poverty, more than double the figure of two decades before then.

Though salvaging the American city as a "place to live" rather than a "place to visit" may seem close to impossible, many experts believe that, for economic reasons, urban life cannot be written off. Some think that if nothing else, rejuvenated cities could alleviate problems created by the vast, haphazard communities that have sprung up beyond their outer edges—a phenomenon known as sprawl. Countless dollars are spent to extend sewer and electrical lines to distant terrain, and dependence on cars has brought smog to once pristine countrysides; the Salt Lake Valley, for example, now has more carbon monoxide in its air than the New York-New Jersey metro area. Livable cities, providing high-density neighborhoods, mass transit, and trillions of dollars' worth of already existing infrastructures, could be a panacea for sprawl's excesses.

But the value of a city cannot be wholly tied to the money it saves or produces. The best economy of a city is the care and culture of men," Lewis Mumford wrote in a 1961 classic, *The City in History*. When a city thrives, it offers diverse experiences that nourish the soul—from people watching in New York's Central Park to strolling among skateboarders on the boardwalk in Venice, Calif.

**Urban parks.** Some theorists contend that the information age is giving cities the opportunity to prove their worth once more. Blessed with the most advanced telecommunications services and with proximity to cutting-edge universities, a few of the biggest cities are reaping benefits. High-tech start-ups, for example, have played a key role in San Francisco's population and job growth. And businesses are flocking to New York City's "Silicon Alley" to take advantage of its extensive fiber-optic-cable networks.

In the short-term future, as E-mail and the Internet help eliminate the daily chore of punching in at corporate head-quarters, a new generation of "teleworkers"—high-tech artisans, Web entrepreneurs, knowledge-based professionals—will have the freedom to live where they choose. And though most futurists have long asserted that telecommuting would signal the city's death, the exact opposite may prove true. "There's a kind of popular wisdom that in the digital information era, place is no longer important," says William Mitchell, dean of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of *City of Bits*. "But if you have locational freedom, you're going to live where it's pleasant." For many, that means a cozy Rocky Mountain hamlet. But others are selecting the city and its amenities—neighborhoods oriented to people on foot, concert halls, museums, the option of ordering up a plate of exotic food at 3 a.m. "We're already starting to see that in Manhattan, in Soho," says Mitchell, "where you get the kind of young high-tech multimedia types who both live and work there. They like the intensity."

According to Peter Hall, author of *Cities of Tomorrow*, the demand for that kind of atmosphere will only increase as information technology spreads. "The more you multiply electronic technology, the more you create a demand for face-to-face contact," he says. "If you plot telephone traffic and air traffic, the graphs are almost parallel. People need face to face." The desire for personal contact
Vancouver, B.C.

As families move downtown, the city prospers

Steps from Vancouver's financial towers, an exotic sound echoes through the lanes of Coal Harbour, one of the city's newest housing developments. It's the clatter of Big Wheels racing up and down Nicola Street, a sound rarely heard in most American center cities. Families are being coaxed into the heart of Vancouver.

Sixty thousand of the city's 475,000 residents live within a 1.2-mile radius of downtown, and that population is growing fast. The trend can be traced back to the "Great Freeway Debate" of the early 1970s. Wary of the impact of freeways on nearby Seattle—where new roads turned to molasses soon after they were built and old neighborhoods died when filled with offices—Vancouver nixed the idea of high-volume highways running through its downtown. Without them as an enabler, Vancouver's urban flight was fairly modest.

Despite commutes made grinding by the lack of freeways, however, families did opt for the suburbs. "Downtown was still considered a place for people on the edge," says Larry Beasley, the city's director of central area planning. In 1991, nearly 9,000 people lived downtown, but they were mostly young singles in the hip West End. Beasley and his colleagues realized that Vancouver's urban life could flower only if the city could attract families. "Part of that was economics, because you have to have a"
full array of consumers," he says. "But part of it was spiritual, too. If you design an environment for children, it will work for everyone."

Vancouver rezoned large strips of its waterfront, formerly littered with rail yards, for new housing. The city mandated that each new project make 25 percent of its units suitable for families with small children. Now, to gain approval, proposals must include on-site day-care facilities and playgrounds. City planners study circulation patterns between home and school and require that walking routes avoid major traffic arteries. Developers have been encouraged to build row houses alongside their skyscraping condos, and about 600 of these modernized "Boston brownstones" have already been completed. They give streetscapes a more human scale—and give families such typically suburban delights as front porches and private entrances. Many of the new buildings are wired with fiber optics, so parents can work at home.

Vancouver's planners also wanted to ensure that the kid-friendly urban lifestyle would not become an elite privilege. Toward that end, the city required that 20 percent of each waterfront property be set aside for affordable, government-built housing. "We're trying to avoid the apparent choice in North America, which seems to be either gentrification or ghettoization," says Beasley.

The new neighborhoods are already reviving moribund parts of town. Next to False Creek North, for example, where 2,820 homes have been built, a once-ratty warehouse district called Yaletown now bustles with pedestrians; shops line the streets, and onetime loading docks have been reborn as cafes. For city planners, however, the greatest rewards are yet to come, when more people choose to live in Vancouver based on the needs of their sons and daughters.

**Minneapolis, Minn.**

**Every home is within six blocks of a well-kept park**

In 1858, when the Minneapolis Board of Trade vowed to create "the finest and most beautiful system of Public Parks and Boulevards of any city in America," some city councilmen balked. The city, they insisted, would never extend for more than 10 blocks in any direction, and nature's joys would always be a short walk away. Why spend public funds on parkland?

The farsighted prevailed, however, and the Minneapolis park system has evolved into what Alexander Garvin, a member of the New York City Planning Commission and author of *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*, calls "the best-located, best-financed, best-designed, best-maintained public open space in America." The city's 170 parks stretch across nearly 6,000 acres of manicured meadows and scenic lagoons. Thirty-eight miles of landscaped walking trails ring downtown, as does a 55-mile "emerald necklace" of parkways. Bicycle paths are pot-hole free and jungle gyms glinten with fresh paint. Lakes are well stocked with walleyes; in winter, many are used for ice-boating. By design, every home in Minneapolis is within six blocks of green space—whether miniature Elliot Park, where Bible college kids sunbathe next to Somali immigrants near the city's Metrodome, or grand Minnehaha, with its cascading falls that once inspired the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Some of the system's success stems from the prescience of its founders; they wisely purchased property for the parks long before land values soared out of the public sector's price range. But an empowered parks board has been the real key. "In most cities, parks are easy targets for neglect," says David Fisher, the sys-
A recent $40 million greening of a stretch of the Mississippi near downtown has already generated nearly $700 million in private redevelopment along the river's formerly blighted banks. Every nickel spent on parks comes back 20-fold in property taxes. "There are plenty of reasons people can conjure up to leave this city," says Fisher. "Our parks are the reason they stay."

Chattanooga, Tenn.
America's dirtiest city worked hard to get clean

Seven Vietnamese officials, urban planners from Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, sit in the basement of the Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce, notebooks open and pens poised. They have come to this southeastern Tennessee city to learn the secrets of a surprising urban renaissance. "We have been all over America," the contingent's leader says through an interpreter, "and Chattanooga is the most beautiful city we have seen."

Longtime residents find it hard to fathom such praise, since Chattanooga was once known mostly for its filth. In 1969, the federal government labeled Chattanooga "the dirtiest city in America." Because of pollution from TNT factories and steel foundries, the usual color of the sky was orange.

Cars were forced to use headlights at midnight so they didn't get lost in smog. "We had a heart-attack situation," says City Council Chairman David Crockett.

They also had leaders unwilling to give up Chattanooga for dead. The city began by empowering the local Air Pollution Control Board, which had been an ineffectual body comprising mostly representatives from industry. The revised board was composed of nine unpaid citizens, whose interests extended beyond ensuring that regulations weren't too burdensome on business. Filters were required for industrial smokestacks, particulates were rigorously counted, and visible auto emissions were banned.

By 1989, Chattanooga was one of the few cities east of the Mississippi River in full compliance with all federal air-quality standards.

But the real turnaround began in 1984 with Vision 2000, a 20-week series of community meetings that sought citizen input on Chattanooga's future. "One of the main themes was getting back in touch with the river," says Gert Spring, founder of the Chattanooga Neighborhood Network. The land along the banks of the Tennessee was little more than a collection of slag heaps and abandoned coke furnaces. Flat on its back—18,000 manufacturing jobs were lost between 1973 and 1983—the city didn't have the resources to clean itself up alone; it needed to forge a partnership with private interests. The city contribut-
ed seed money, road improvements, and an overhaul of the sewers to reduce the flow of wastewater into the Tennessee. The private sector, which has provided 82 percent of the funds for Chattanooga's $366 million revitalization, replaced the riverfront wastelands with a sparkling promenade and lush parkland.

Slowly, blue herons and Chattanoogans alike returned to the river; the latter discovered that underneath the grime lay a city that could inspire civic pride. The section of downtown near the riverfront, once near vacant, now boasts an aquarium and a children's museum and percolates with life. The world's largest fleet of eco-friendly electric buses (most are manufactured by a local firm) hums along the streets, carrying almost 1 million passengers a year. Expatriates have begun to come back, and a population that bottomed out at 119,082 in 1970 is projected to be near 210,000 by 2022.

Visitors like the Vietnamese do not come to see a southern version of Utopia, however. "When they come, they come to see a city that was down," says Crockeet. "A city that was down and had the collective will to get back up."

Curitiba, Brazil
Buses along five axes
knit the city together

Two hours down the coast from São Paulo—whose average rush-hour backup is nearly 60 miles and whose air is choked daily with 5,000 tons of vehicle exhaust—lies Curitiba, a city of 1.6 million. Though Curitiba has a higher number of cars per capita, the city has dodged São Paulo’s worst traffic woes. An ingeniously designed mass-transit network has saved the city from the perils of automobile dependency: Seventy-five percent of the city’s commuters use public transport, and traffic has declined by 30 percent since 1974, even as the population has more than doubled.

Jaime Lerner, a three-time mayor of Curitiba, is currently serving as governor of Paraná state. Perhaps a future president, he is the system’s patron saint. When he took office in 1973, at age 32, the city’s population was swelling by 10 percent a year. Countless roads were on the drawing board. Fearful that congestion would eventually strangle Curitiba, Lerner began planning for mass transit.

Curitiba’s innovative mass transit system

The first stop in his master plan had nothing to do with vehicles, however. He implemented a land-use policy that encouraged growth along five “structural axes,” broad avenues that flare out from the city center like bicycle spokes. An architect by trade, Lerner understood that mass transit would work best if the city’s populace was concentrated along a few high-density corridors rather than spread out in the manner of America’s often haphazard cities.

By 1974, Lerner got to Phase 2—the vehicles themselves. Although well off by Brazilian standards, Curitiba is hardly wealthy. “The city had proposals for building a subway system, but they were talking 70, 80, 90 million dollars a kilometer,” recalls Jonas Kabinovitch, a former aide to Lerner. “We could not afford a subway, so we began with buses”—used in an unusual way.

The center lanes of the city’s corridors were reserved for express buses. Raised, 40-foot-long glass loading tubes were installed at each stop along the axes; passengers pay before entering the tube, and then board the buses’ subway style, through wide doors. That means no waiting in line while someone fumbles for change, no single-file line up a flight of steps. Even at rush hour, loading and unloading takes less than 30 seconds. And the entire system, dubbed the “surface subway,” costs only $200,000 per kilometer to build. (By comparison, the most recent addition to Los Angeles’s Metro-rail cost over 1,000 times as much per kilometer.)

Aside from freeing Curitiba from many of the auto-related troubles common to large cities—per capita fuel consumption is 25...
percent lower than elsewhere in the coun-
try, and the air is among Brazil's clean-
est—the system helped integrate the poor
into the work force. "If you can't get
around, you can't find a job," says Marilia
Aguir, 19, who moved to Curitiba from
Rio de Janeiro five years ago. "In Rio,
there was one bus which passed by our
slum twice a day," she says. "It goes just to
the center and takes hours." In Curitiba,
a one-transfer, 30-minute trip allows her to
tavel easily to and from her job as a do-
mestic servant. The city will soon extend
the network deep into the outskirts and
build a sixth corridor just inside the
southern border, where a new ware-
house-and-office district is planned.

Tilburg, the Netherlands

They really run this city like a business

Reinventing government" has be-
come a catch phrase of America's
new breed of mayors, who apply pri-
ate-sector principles to city manage-
ment. But long before any of them al-
lowed for-profit companies to bid on
sewer contracts, the Dutch city of Til-
burg had refined the city-as-business
concept. Since 1985, the city of 185,000
has been run according to the "Tilburg
Model," a management plan so success-
ful that the city trademarked the name
and sold its ingredients to multinational
accounting giant KPMG.

When the textile industry
on which it depended col-
lapsed in the late 1970s, Til-
burg declined in a manner
familiar to many post-
industrial American cities: Steep
budget deficits became the
norm, taxes soared, and the
civil service grew bloated.

"When I first came here,
there were five bureaucrats drinking cof-
fee and smoking cigarettes watching
three people swim," says Pieter Bax, who
operates four municipal pools. By
the mid-1980s, the Netherlands' national
government was considering whether it
should take over the foundering city.

Tilburg saved itself from intervention.

Streamlining was the first step; the num-
ber of bureaucratic departments was re-
duced from 16 to six, each headed by a
single director instead of four. And by
offering early-retirement packages and
semi-privatizing services such as gas and
electricity, the city slashed its payroll by
almost 1,000—without a single firing.

The remaining workers were instruc-
ted to think of citizens as "customers" and
of traditional city services—marriage licenses, public
parking, even the local mu-
seum—as "products." Every
year, each agency respon-
sible for a product must sub-
mit a minutely detailed
"business plan" to the city.

Bax, for example, estimates
not only the number of peo-
ple who will use the pools he
supervises (this year, 700,000) but also
how many will take swimming lessons,
est in the poolside cafes, or lease the facili-
ties for water polo tournaments. The
plan becomes a formal contract between
Bax and the Social Employment Depart-
ment, which oversees his agency; in ex-
change for funding, Bax agrees to provide
"products" for his "customers." Three
times a year, his plan is reviewed. "If we

Tilburg. Children romp in front of city hall. Running the city as a business has produced budget surpluses and a drop in taxes.
Melbourne, Australia

Smart design fills it with light and makes it livable

Two years ago, when Melbourne won the inaugural Australia Award for Urban Design, doubters outnumbered believers Down Under. The national capital until 1927, Melbourne had slipped badly after World War II, overshadowed by warmer, more scenic Sydney. "Melbourne was a 'dead' city where the bars closed at 6 p.m. and nothing happened on Sundays," says Evan Walker, former minister of planning for the Australian state of Victoria. Souvenir shops did a brisk trade in T-shirts featuring a pitch-black rectangle with the caption "Melbourne by Night."

Today, Melbourne, with a population of 3.2 million, can hardly be mistaken without the addition of a bright epithet—"the world's most livable city" or "the hippest city in the Southern Hemisphere." After a 13-year, $150 million overhaul, Melbourne is the nation's envy. "We had good raw material to work with," explains Walker. Melbourne never tore up its trolley tracks for the sake of the automobile; streetcars still crisscross the city, providing cheap, clean, efficient transport. And as the center of an 1890s gold rush, Melbourne was endowed with a first-rate Victorian building stock.

But those splendid resources were mostly going to waste before Walker and his design team went to work. In 1985, he announced that new buildings in the central business district could be no taller than 31 feet (about 12 stories); skyscrapers could go up only along the downtown's outlying rim.

The initiative worked better than its creators had hoped. The height limit kept rents affordable; small shops and residents were never pushed out by debt-saddled developers who required corporate tenants. Downtown avenues continued to bask in sunlight, rather than becoming dim corridors blocked by walls of skyscrapers. And many of the city's laneways, holdovers from the gold rush days, were repaved with bluestone. Over time, they became prime locations for restaurants and coffee shops.

The height limit was not the city's only useful technique. Postcards $3000, a 1992 program, helped recycle old buildings, many of which were historic gems fallen on hard times. Under the program, Melbourne encouraged developers to take a chance on decrepit structures by reducing land taxes and upgrading the surrounding neighborhoods. The city also offered developers free advice on how to renovate "heritage buildings" and simplified regulations; developers were allowed to use plastic sprinkler pipes, for example, rather than more expensive all-metal ones. As a result, old buildings became Nightspots, artists' lofts, and apartments. Nearly 50,000 people now live in the central business district, a fivefold increase from a decade ago.

In Melbourne these days, there is serious talk of building a 1,500-foot office tower—it would be the world's tallest—to give the city an icon as readily recognizable as Sydney's opera house. The city has already added a mammoth casino and a Formula One racecourse. Such large-scale projects have alarmed some residents. They hope that Melbourne does not stray too far from attending to the little things—laneways, sunlight, beautiful human-scale architecture—that made the city livable.

With Amaranta Wright in Curitiba, Eduardo Cue in Tilburg, and Chris Prichard in Melbourne