



OPINION

# I moved to the suburbs — and lived to regret it: Why NYC will survive

By **ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN**  
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The skyline of Lower Manhattan is reflected in the water before sunrise on July 9, 2020 in New York City. (JOHANNES EISELE/AFP via Getty Images)

Placing odds on New York's survival is a popular pastime lately. "[It's dead!](#)" wrote Manhattan entrepreneur James Altucher. "[Screw you!](#)" replied Ariama C. Long, a reporter in Brooklyn. Jerry Seinfeld [chimed in](#). [Headlines blare](#) about a race to suburbia, where homes are hotter than tickets to "Hamilton," if there *were* still tickets to Hamilton. Seems everyone's trading their cramped junior 4 to live in a house on a street named after a tree.

I'll add my tiny voice to the fray: Move to the 'burbs? Been there, done that. Not doing it again.

In 1992, my then-fiancé owned a house on Long Island, which should've been a deal-breaker. But I couldn't muster a convincing argument for him to move into my beloved West Village studio, a rental with windows in the kitchen *and* bathroom! That's like a house on a cul-de-sac with a finished basement and a two-car garage.

I spent the next two decades out there raising our kids and hating it — not my kids, the suburbs. A month after our youngest left for college, and no longer married, I planted a For Sale sign on my lawn and was back in Manhattan before New Year's. There was no buying frenzy in 2014. I dropped my price twice, got one offer under my ask and grabbed it like a life vest. The house is now valued at 25% above what I got.

I'm no longer in the same shoes as parents raising young kids. Some have fled, if temporarily, to second homes. Others want to leave but can't, or don't want to leave but must. I can only imagine their stress. Yet at this stage of my life, there's nowhere else I'd rather be than here.

In fact, it didn't even occur to me that so many people would jump ship. I was oblivious to the exodus at first, as I was recovering from surgery for a shattered wrist in March. Like everyone, I stayed home, although my focus was less on the pandemic and more on trying to open prescription bottles with one hand. As my post-surgical fog lifted, I noticed there weren't many people left in my building. Where'd everyone go?

I've recovered from surgery but not necessarily from my 20-odd years of suburban life. Odd, as in awkward. From the get-go, I felt I didn't belong. The politics were more purple than blue, the sensibilities more mainstream. It was like being on an endless date with a nice guy who you know deep down isn't the one. Yet it's not something you confide to friends who live there. Where I struggled with a bad fit, they heard the pieces click sweetly into place. I didn't want to be Debbie Downer.

Also, cars were a must, a liability for someone who prefers walking and mass transit. The view through my windshield yielded a parade of tired strip malls, big box stores and one too many Applebee's. Worse, no pedestrians, except in parking lots. After a fun evening in the city, there was the inevitable slog over the river, or under it, which felt like being kicked out of a club. Few sights were sadder to behold than me driving eastbound through the Midtown Tunnel on a Saturday night.

Year after year, I'd look at my contented suburban friends and wonder: What do they see that I'm not seeing? What do they like that I'm not getting? Why can't I be happy here?

To an extent, I made peace with it. I met dear women, now my friends for life. My kids loved growing up there. There are charming country roads, pristine beaches, walkable villages. Yet it's about how we define "home." Suburbanites seek space and comfort. I seek convenience and being in the thick of it.

Dark days lie ahead for the city. But change, while hard, can be good. Perhaps flexible work arrangements will make rush hour less rushed, and maybe Broadway will become [more accessible](#). Outdoor dining has made our streets more festive. [Rents are down](#), which makes this tenant happy.

When my favorite radio station plays a song I don't like, my son might ask why I don't shut it off. "Because I'll like the next one," I answer, and invariably I do. Likewise, New Yorkers are committed to the city even if we don't always love the current tune.

New York exists because we exist. It's a physical manifestation of the millions of us who need its concentrated energy, who crave the magic. If every metropolis was leveled, we'd rebuild them.

I've been back six years and I'm still giddy about it. It's never smart to bet against New York. What will the city look like post-pandemic? We can't know. We're not supposed to know how the magic works. It just does. Stick around and see.

*Bernstein is a writer in New York. Her book-in-progress is about growing up in Far Rockaway.*