Bellevues I Have Known: Reflections on the Evolution of an "Edge City"
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SOMETIMES I PICTURE Norman Rockwell walking down Main Street in the town where I grew up, puffing on his pipe as he tips his hat to friends and occasional strangers, pausing to converse with more than a few, maybe even sketching Dr. Brobst in his home doctor's office. I am sure the famed illustrator never visited my hometown, but now I realize that it was his kind of place. Spreading out from Main Street, modest frame homes appeared amongst vacant fields and small wooded lots. Here and there a church steeple peeked above fir trees and maples. The red brick rectangles of our grade and high schools faced each other across School Street, of course. People knew each other. Life was neither exciting nor dull. Yet, my hometown was as comfortable and secure and friendly as any small town might be in the 1930s.

The small town of my childhood was Bellevue, Washington. Yes, that Bellevue, with over 100,000 residents, glass-encased high rises, fashionable boutiques, architect-designed homes, and parking garages infested with BMWs. A condominium has replaced my family's bungalow on the southwest corner of 100th Avenue Northeast and Northeast Fourth Street, and four blocks north the soil of our wartime Victory Garden lies buried beneath the multilevel Bellevue Square parking garage. The four school buildings I attended have not been merely demolished but eradicated. The shell of the building that was my parents' ten-cent store has been enlarged into an Italian ristorante on a schizophrenic Main Street torn between quaintness and sophistication.

My generation has lived through and expected change even rapid change but transformation can be so total that it virtually erases what went before. Nowhere is there a more graphic example of this than in Bellevue. There have been four distinctly different Bellevues, three of them telescoped into the six decades of my lifetime. Earlier residents knew Bellevue as a pioneer village, while I have experienced Bellevue the small town, Bellevue the burgeoning suburb, and now Bellevue the metropolitan "edge city." Beyond mere nostalgia, Bellevue's history reflects the broader scope of America's urban growth because each of the four Bellevues has coincided with and symbolized a trend characteristic of our maturing nation.

A PIONEERING PHASE THAT began in 1869 saw a tiny village rise along Meydenbauer Bay on the eastern shore of Lake Washington. By 1886 the place had become "Bellevue," a not uncommon French corruption of "beautiful view." A few stores, churches, schools and community clubs served the needs of the developing town.

By the time of my childhood Bellevue was well into its second life, a small town similar to thousands of others across the nation that have been romanticized and ridiculed by the likes of Hamlin Garland and Sinclair Lewis, by radio soap operas, Norman Rockwell paintings and Andy Hardy movies. In the 1930s
many locals commuted daily to the city just across the lake, but few would have called Bellevue a Seattle suburb. It was a distinct place, a small town that seemed separate from the larger world.

On one corner of Main Street and Bellevue Avenue (now 100th Avenue Northeast) stood a frame grade school enlarged since its 1892 beginnings, on another corner the three-story Masonic Hall, and on a third the European-style Wegner's Inn that catered to round-the-lake tourists. The fourth corner held a couple of decaying vestiges of early stores. From that intersection Main Street sloped eastward four blocks past a medley of store-fronts and "connected building blocks to Bill Stennett's Shell station on Lincoln Avenue (later 104th Northeast and now Bellevue Way Northeast). On up the hill the Gothic outlines of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church marked the south end of the ridge east of town while the boxy bell tower of the Congregational Church defined the north end. Townspeople mainly lived north and west of these axes, some in fine homes on the slope above the bay, most in simple frame structures. Everyone knew or thought they knew or at least knew about everyone else. The passage of years may have romanticized memories and softened the reality of life during the Great Depression, but Bellevue was nevertheless a good place to grow up, better perhaps than we realized.

Where Main Street met School Street (now 102nd Northeast), Meta Burrows’s Lakeside Drug Store was everybody’s meeting place. There we took our prescriptions and purchased household necessities. But the dominant feature at Meta's and the center of town activities was the long soda fountain counter. For youngsters a stop there was a special treat, but on those round red stools oldsters gathered to visit, gossip and doubtless conduct business and reach agreements on civic affairs. Who can know all that transpired there? Many city centers of today seem contrived and artificial, but for Bellevue in the 1930s and 1940s, the natural heart of the town was clearly Meta's fountain; did not similar shrines dot the nation?

In the basement below the drug store giant printing presses rumbled and whirred amidst sights and smells of sticky black ink when Al and Elinor Whitney put out the Bellevue American once a week. Bill Crooker's grocery across Main Street was better organized and more modern than the crowded jumble at Henry Stream’s market farther down. Most families probably shopped at both; owners and clerks knew us all, maintained credit accounts, and delivered. For that rare meal out, adults might visit Mae Carter's tearoom on the first floor of her Victorian gray home, which boarded whaling men from the little fleet that wintered on the bay. Families more likely devoured hamburgers, French fries and milk shakes in booths at Mrs. Mennefee's down around the corner. Ed Jenson's small barber shop, with its red and white pole out front, looked as if it had come straight out of a nursery book; Louis Contento's shoe repair shop was pungent with the odor of polish ingrained in the woodwork; and we learned to endure pain in the narrow dentist's office. But to kids the most foreboding and interesting storefront on Main Street was the tavern, its door cracked just enough to emit the aroma of stale beer and tobacco smoke; what mysterious goings-on took place behind those painted green windows?

Houses were scattered among vacant lots, small orchards and berry fields. The wooded lot next to my house was a place to hide out, build camps and pick wild blackberries, trilliums and hazelnuts. We had Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls and school activities, and we played with friends, but organized games or leagues were unknown. On the fringes of town and in the rich soil of Mercer’s slough were small truck farms, many run by Japanese Americans, and Sydnor's blueberry farm shone purple on the eastern hillside each summer. When the little whaling boats, repaired and clean, took off for Alaska each spring, we who stayed home felt a personal tie to the distant northland.

The big yearly event was the Strawberry Festival, held on a June weekend. Its fame attracted thousands of out-of-towners, including the governor, Seattle's mayor, and a well-remembered Indian chief in full regalia. The Women's Club hulled gallons of local berries, which they spooned over shortcake and topped with real whipped cream. A royal court of high school girls reigned over festivities that included motorboat races and
carnival rides. At Sunday dusk the Strawberry Festival ended with glorious fireworks sometimes sponsored as the familiar orange logo at the finale revealed by the Shell Oil Company.

Civic pride bristled when Bellevue was identified as being just south of Kirkland or north of Renton, larger towns we were linked to by automobile roads. The trip to Seattle by passenger launch or auto ferry could be an event. During my childhood the ferry docked at Medina, two miles away by car or an elderly blue bus. Then came a 20-minute ferry ride to Leschi Park on Seattle’s lakeshore and the cable car that clanged and jolted over hills and a trestle or two to Second and Yesler. Watching the conductor struggle with clutch and brake levers was sheer entertainment. Conventional streetcars continued the journey uptown.

Our community had its share of social divisions, quarrels, jealousies and a tiny collection of busybodies and characters. Yet we who lived in small-town Bellevue knew who we were and what we were and that we belonged. Life carried a sense of identity along with security and certainty. I remember mothers nodding heads one September that third grade would be a good year because we would have Miss Rudolph, and everyone expected to learn high school math from Mr. Odle. The mythology of small-town America usually brings to mind villages in New England or the Midwest. In the far Northwest, Bellevue was as representative of small-town America as a community could be.

World War II brought change. Over 50 Japanese-American families, including good school friends, were moved away, to their loss and ours. The old Main Street school housed a small army unit, the former whaling dock became a Coast Guard station, and a strange aircraft warning tower appeared atop Downey’s Hill north of town. The tiny Houghton shipyard five miles up the lakeshore expanded beyond belief and employed many Bellevuites, including women, while others traveled south to the Boeing B-29 plant at Renton.

A SINGULAR EVENT PRIOR to Pearl Harbor combined with postwar adjustments to bring about unimagined permanent change. In the summer of 1940 a four-lane highway on floating concrete pontoons linked the east side of Lake Washington to Seattle. Eastsiders had urged its construction and we proudly thought it "our bridge." That bridge and the end of the war helped turn small-town Bellevue into Bellevue the suburb of the metropolis across Lake Washington.

On March 26, 1953, the Bellevue American announced Bellevue’s incorporation with the headline "WE'RE A CITY." But a small item on that front page made the transition personal: "Death Takes Audrey Smith." All my young life "Aunt Audrey" had lived kitty-corner from our house. She was that strong and sturdy person at the heart of numerous town and family activities. We ran to this registered nurse with cuts, bruises, aches and pains, sure that she would know what to do. Her front bedroom periodically became a maternity room where many Bellevue babies, my younger brother among them, were born. Audrey Smith organized and led the Camp Fire Girls in Bellevue, helped found a local league of Seattle’s Children’s Orthopedic Hospital, and aided in wartime civilian defense. But her primary role rested in being a source of advice, solace, medication, strength and cheering up. Every small town, I suspect, has such a person, but they became harder to distinguish in citified suburbs. More than formal political action, her passing alerted me that Bellevue was no longer the small town I had known.

After the war families across America had turned away from Depression and wartime deprivations to begin new and better lives, often outside but close to large cities. The post-war dream of a single family home with a two-car garage, a barbecue pit and a basketball hoop surrounded by gardens seemed easily possible on the east side of Lake Washington. There ample and attractive land was only a bridge and modern highway away from Seattle; Bellevue was as close to downtown as many residential districts within the city.
NEW HOUSING WAS highlighted just north of traditional Bellevue by a development appropriately named Vuecrest. This planned subdivision covered 80 acres on slopes Pat Downey had homesteaded and where Japanese and American truck farmers had recently raised berries and vegetables. The hillside offered an all-embracing view of lake, city and mountains. Previously, views had rarely been considered essential to homesites, our conventional homes faced each other across streets. Now view became central to the design of a neighborhood where roads wound in circular contours below the crest of the hill, with many homes positioned for the best viewspots. The main entrance identified Vuecrest as a special place: rounded brick walls invited drivers up a gently curved roadway with shrubbery in the median. Water, sewer and underground power lines but not sidewalks were integrated into the Vuecrest scheme.

Architect-designed houses were required to meet certain restrictions. Often more expansive than those we had known, their construction blended brick, wood and glass, and many had dramatic hidden entrances, low roof overhangs and wide windows. Gardens were carefully landscaped. Developments like Vuecrest would soon become commonplace, but in the late 1940s the concept of a pre-planned and refined neighborhood was new radically different from small-town Bellevue.

Many who moved to Vuecrest and similarly planned neighborhoods were young professionals just starting careers and families. Unacquainted with one another, they first sought to create the sense of community longtime residents had taken for granted. To most older residents, the newcomers scarcely seemed part of the "real" Bellevue, for their focus tended toward Seattle. Yet these new residents would substantially alter their adopted community.

The shopping area changed. Early on, longtime resident Jim Ditty built a cluster of stores and Kay Neumann a lumber yard and builders' supply store on opposite corners of an intersection a quarter mile north of Main Street. These stores aimed to serve automobile customers in contrast to the traditional Main Street, which was amenable to walkers. As close as they were, the two developments were not designed to accommodate easy pedestrian traffic between them.

Near that same intersection the Burrows and Warren families had lived and raised apples for several generations. But the family of Miller Freeman, a wealthy Seattle publisher and eastside resident, envisioned a large shopping center on this property. Frederick & Nelson, Seattle's leading department store, branched into suburbia to locate the flagship store of the new Bellevue Shopping Square, which boasted of space for 500 cars. On the perimeter appeared the Bellevue Theater, our first permanent movie house, and the Kandy Kane, a coffee shop that rivaled and then replaced Meta's fountain as the meeting place of Bellevue business people. The most striking feature of the perimeter was the Crabapple, a no-table restaurant that attracted diners from throughout metropolitan Seattle. The entrance circled an ancient madrona tree. Its limbs reaching out to greet people and twinkling with thousands of lights each Christmas, the madrona came to symbolize the new Bellevue, even more than the Square's official symbol, a "forest spirit" hewed from cedar by Dudley Carter.

"[D]edicated to the belief [that] people living in the suburbs and country are entitled to the same conveniences of cities without the inconveniences of cities," the Bellevue Shopping Square aimed to answer every retail need. An early addition was the Food Center, which advertised "one-stop food shopping," soon joined by clothing stores, a pharmacy, a camera shop, an appliance store, a barber shop, and eventually J. C. Penney's. One of the nation's earliest shopping centers, Bellevue Square was a prototype of later ones and was eventually transformed into an elegant indoor mall.

The surge of population and business necessitated further change. Bellevue extended across hills to outlying areas where new housing and business districts appeared. Streets were surveyed and paved and sewer, water and power lines constructed. Bellevue's streets seemed perpetually torn up as one aspect of the new
Suburban Bellevue took on an air of pleasant sophistication as its small town atmosphere evaporated. A golf course abandoned during the Great Depression was exhumed and given new life, and a second was built east of town. In 1948 a one-time barn became The Surrey Playbarn, one of the Northwest's early community theaters. The former Strawberry Festival was a wartime casualty; an arts and crafts fair that started in Bellevue Square boasts of being the grand-daddy of similar events sprinkled throughout the region. At the head of Meydenbauer Bay, where city people had come to Wildwood Park for outings in early days, the newly prosperous built a yacht club. Riding clubs and "horsy" neighborhoods appeared in vanishing rural areas. "Over the bridge to gracious living," beckoned a promotional brochure. Yet, the old Bellevue was more than a vestige; old-timers might long for the former, simpler time, but many hesitantly entered into the newer activities, proud that their community had been discovered.

WHEN BELLEVUE INCORPORATED in March 1953, it had 5,940 residents. By 1960 there were 13,000, and over the next decade the population increased more than fourfold, making Bellevue the fourth largest city in the state. The population reached 80,000 by 1980 and passed 100,000 in the mid 1990s. Annexations stretched city boundaries and added citizens as Bellevue acquired whole new subdivisions Lake Hills being the largest—and crept east to touch Lake Sammamish. As early as 1956 Bellevue received "All-American City" recognition for ably handling rapid growth.

But its orientation remained toward Seattle. Automobiles commuting across the floating bridge replaced the former ferry run, and morning and evening runs of the Overlake Transit System were crowded with Seattle workers. In 1963 a second floating bridge linked nearby Evergreen Point with Seattle. Interstate 405 later sliced through Bellevue and enabled north-south drivers to bypass Seattle while enhancing eastside travel.

PERHAPS BELLEVUE WAS predestined to pass from small town to suburb, but the most recent phase that of a relatively self-sufficient metropolis or "edge city" was not inevitable. Bellevue was rapidly outgrowing its strictly suburban orientation to become a distinctive metropolitan center; it dominated the east side and influenced other cities, including Seattle. New subdivisions, often planned with meticulous care, burgeoned east of downtown as did shopping centers highlighted by the Crossroads. Complexes of businesses and office parks sprang up. The construction in 1956 of the Puget Sound Power and Light headquarters in downtown Bellevue introduced an era of multistoried office buildings, but its four stories were soon dwarfed. Puget Sound Power and Light also foreshadowed the presence of other firms headquartered in Bellevue. Downtown developed a cluster of sleek high rises, some on hillside settings that accentuated their height. Indeed, "downtown" spread dramatically up and over the ridge to the east, then downward toward the I-405 freeway. New businesses stretched along the Bellevue-Redmond Highway abbreviated in these hurried times to Bel-Red Road and around the intersection of the I-405 and I-90 freeways.

There were other urban symbols. First-class hotels and a convention center appeared just off I-405 along with a distinctive city hall. The weekly Bellevue American, mainstay of the small town and suburban eras, merged in 1976 with a Kirkland newspaper to become the daily Journal-American, a sturdy alternative to the old-time Seattle dailies. Overtake Hospital, which opened in 1960, expanded into a major regional facility. And there was the burgeoning of fast-food restaurants, gas stations, used car lots and mini-malls. The erstwhile suburb also had its own ring of suburbs. Residents no longer needed to go to Seattle for the daily necessities; indeed, Seattlesites increasingly came to Bellevue to work and shop, and for medical attention and other services.
The 1990 census confirmed impressions that Bellevue's population had become increasingly cosmopolitan. During the 1980s the minority population increased at twice the general rate until almost 15 percent of the people and one of every four school children were of minority races, largely from Asian and Pacific Island countries. Over 11,000 residents spoke a language other than English, and almost half of those had limited English-speaking ability. The city established a Cultural Diversity Task Force that few would have thought necessary a few years earlier.

Distinctions between neighborhoods of greater and lesser affluence became more noticeable, but home ownership remained high. Along the lakeshore and in such suburbs as Medina and Hunts Point, new homes were increasingly palatial. However, neighborhoods such as Lake Hills, built during the suburban era, marked much of the community, their ranch style and split-level homes clustered on winding streets and ubiquitous cul-de-sacs. Near downtown, condominiums and large apartment buildings often catered to a citizenry older than the general population. But if the median household income in Bellevue ($49,831 in 1996) was comfortably higher than King County as a whole, more and more citizens lived below the poverty level. Growth presaged other problems of increasing traffic, crime and educational needs for adults. Moreover, business people and planners now voice the worry of older cities that Bellevue's "downtown" has come to lack a sense of identity.

Changes in the workplace were arguably even more defining. Traditional suburban areas had been "bedroom communities" emptied each morning by commuters bound for work, shopping and school in the nearby metropolis. By the middle 1980s demographers noted a new trend: more and more eastsiders were remaining there to work in stores, office buildings, distribution centers and light industries. Both established firms and new ones opened corporate headquarters in Bellevue, including several of the region's largest. Before it crossed city lines to Redmond, Microsoft began its rapid climb to software supremacy in Bellevue. Moreover, Bellevue became a popular destination for shopping, dining and entertainment as well as host of conventions and trade shows. Bellevue has the business and the busyness to suggest it is a city in its own right. One could and doubtless many people do live, work and play in its environs without ever going to the larger city whose high rises are visible on the western skyline.

A 1991 BOOK BY Joel Garreau, a Washington Post journalist specializing in urban sociology, popularized the term "edge city" to describe a new urban center close to a well-established city but having distinct urban characteristics and a high degree of self-sufficiency. Garreau's "full-blown Edge City" had to:

- Contain at least five million square feet of office space and 600,000 square feet of retail space,
- Have a workday population that marks the location as primarily a work center rather than a residential suburb,
- Be perceived locally as an end destination for a wide mix of daily activities including work, shopping and entertainment,
- Have been essentially residential or rural 30 years earlier.

Garreau identified 123 edge cities across the United States, but in Washington only Bellevue met his criteria. As if to confirm the choice, the author in 1991 keynoted a three-day conference on the "Emerging City" at Bellevue's new luxury hotel, the Hyatt Regency.

A stroll along today's Main Street helps define the Bellevues I have known. Main Street languished while suburban growth shifted the town's business and social center northward. Now "Old Bellevue" is
experiencing a renaissance. It remains only two lanes wide with parallel parking spaces, but one is quickly caught up in the rush of traffic. Venerable buildings stubbornly remain among those of later origin. A massive condominium complex engulfs the McKee Block where seven storefronts retain their familiar images. Main Street shops are upscale and fashionable. One can buy an espresso in several, including the old bus garage, Louis Contento’s former shoe shop, and the present-day tobacco store where Pentecostals once held Sunday worship.

The 1892 school building that later housed offices of the newly incorporated city was replaced in 1965 by a Chevron station. The 1916 structure that was my father’s hardware store before my time is now a bicycle shop painted a brilliant green. Up the street, Mae Carter’s old house is obscured behind a nondescript building from the 1950s; a used book store occupies the front room where she served meals. Meta’s Drug Store has long been occupied by The City of Paris, which sells elegant bath furnishings. A few blocks north, School Street has been closed and the buildings we attended torn down to make way for "Downtown Park." This expanse of lawn, footpaths and gardens centering around a gently flowing, circular canal and a broad waterfall may well become the refreshing and elegant park in the heart of a metropolis that its designers intended.

Toy’s Café, long ago the Bus Station Café, is the oldest continuous business on Main Street. Two doors away, family members still operate the Bellevue Barber Shop that Norman and Ward Russell opened in 1947; their collection of high school yearbooks lines one wall. Across the street in its old location the tavern from my childhood retains its former role, but with a difference. It has expanded a storefront west from the original corner. Large clear windows have replaced the dark green panes and create an open, airy atmosphere where young professionals and college students enjoy tostadas and Mexican beer beneath an array of hanging piñatas. Perhaps the tavern as much as anything symbolizes the changes in the Bellevues I have known. The ghost of Norman Rockwell visits Bellevue today only where his illustrations grace prints, coffee mugs and greeting cards in up-scale shops.

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