

As part of the GeoLectures series, students at Corvinus University of Budapest had a presentation “Housing Flexibility and Subjective Wellbeing in U.S. Suburban Regions” given by Deirdre Pfeiffer, Associate Professor from School of Geographic Sciences & Urban Planning at Arizona State University on the 27th February 2020.

According to Professor Pfeiffer, the main goal of the research was to focus on one role of the housing market, which she named flexibility, taking into account the concept of wellbeing that we know today as happiness. The geographical focus was kept on the Sun Belt region considered to stretch across the Southeast and Southwest.

Keeping this in mind, the students were introduced to the historical background of the problem. Suburban regions started developing in the US in the postwar period with a number of innovations being introduced, such as technological advancements, for example, air conditioning crucially important for the Sun Belt region, and the way it was financed, for instance, banks suggesting cheap loans. As follows, the demand for these areas was created, and diversity of the areas grew significantly, one could clearly see the level of diversity in the Inland Empire region of California, a suburban area in southern California. Another historical turnaround happened in 1970s, a so called Post-Civil Rights era when African Americans, Latinos, and Asians had their rights restored, including the housing sector. Finally, in 2000s in the time of global recession there was another significant change in the US housing market when people could not afford buying houses and paying for them that led to banks taking over those houses. In terms of these historical highlights the Professor introduced her theories.

The students learned that there are two major directions in this research area, representatives of both trying to answer the question if the suburban areas of the US are geography of opportunities or traps that limit people’s opportunities? The Professor claimed that it is possible to find particular windows of opportunities, a particular condition that enables people to thrive that makes her theories stand out. The first project posed a question whether places that allow housing growth from Post-Civil Rights suburbs have more opportunities for people from minorities mentioned above to reach socio-economic wellbeing compared to post-war suburbs? The students were introduced the results for the Phoenix region with a note that the same picture is observable on the nationwide level. According to the outcomes, proportion of middle class families living in poverty within minority groups is lower for Post-Civil Rights suburbs, and the level of segregation is subsequently lower for them.

The second project analyzed the US housing market characterized by massive disruption during the recession period when there was a conversion from owner-occupied to renter-occupied houses. Banks were taking over the houses, and investors were buying them and renting out to reduce the gap between the extended demand and supply. The boom in rental housing market was explained by people’s inability to buy the houses, by the bigger number of young people entering the market, and lack of construction. As a result, a significant growth in single-family rentals was observed from 2005 to 2015.

During the third part of the lecture the students were lucky to be presented the ongoing research that focuses on the growing concerns about the health consequences of car-oriented design features of living neighborhoods, in particular, the garage home. The professor noted that her family lives in such kind of a house, and due to this the topic is of great importance and interest

for her. She came up with three theories saying that garage homes detract from subjective wellbeing, take away nature engagement, however detraction of subjective wellbeing lessens over time due to adaptation mechanism. It was exciting to see the real examples of the research process, and think about further opportunities for research.

At the end of the lecture students were asking questions, making important notices and trying to extend the problem to their areas of specialization, asking about sustainability practices in the suburban areas.

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