Rethink place, role of Pullman High

By Ayad Rahmani | Posted: Monday, November 25, 2013 12:00 am

Let me pick up where Chuck Pezeshki left off a couple of Saturdays ago (Opinion, Nov. 16). If you didn't read his commentary, he called for moving the high school from its current location to somewhere closer to town. I couldn't agree more but let me add a few more points.

The current school was built at a time when it was almost a moral imperative to divide life between the urban and the suburban. Everything urban was considered morally deficient and everything suburban wholesome. The thinking had been underway since the early '50s when Americans returning from war wanted nothing to do with the city they had come to rely on during the war. The GI bill helped, giving the veteran the ability to start a new life on the periphery with little or nothing down.

Downtowns slowly died and were replaced by urban renewal schemes that razed large sections of the city in favor of windswept parks to mimic the appeal of the suburbs. Long story short they were boarded up and ignored. Schools followed suit, migrating outward but also becoming the badge of honor by parents expressing the way they sought to protect their children's safety and education. The awful part of the story is that they also became the mark of racial and economic segregation.

Being in a small town, Pullman High never really fell under the shadow of this history. But it did emerge from the same ethos that defined that era, including its defensive and exclusionary architecture. The high concrete block walls, the expansive shingled roofs, minimal windows, the prison of a building surrounded by a sea of parking - all that evolved out of an era that equated safety and excellence with separation and isolation.

None of this would have been so bad had it not also taken a toll on the social and psychological well-being of students, ultimately affecting performance. Studies many times over have shown that rather than enhancing education suburban schools exacerbate anxiety and feelings of social inadequacy. Suniya Luthar, a professor from Teachers College at Columbia University found that the pressure to abide by mainstream values has resulted in "suburban students [scoring higher] on substance abuse, psychological anxiety, overall anxiety and days absent from school than their inner city counterparts."

As fortresses of concrete, steel and glass these schools operate as holding pens forcing personal differences onto each other rather than giving them the proper ground to air out their eccentricities. Outside, on the parking lot, the same continues, this time using the car as a status symbol by which to cultivate cliques and further divide the student population.

An urban school wouldn't solve everything, but it could take care of a number of problems. First off, it wouldn't have to be all in one building but spread across a block or two in town, giving students the opportunity to walk and merge classroom education with real-life situations. After school these students could take advantage of the proximity to retail stores and offices to work and cultivate new friends. Structured relationships with these outfits could be formed to help extend lessons learned in the school out into society. Economically the businesses in town would flourish and profit from the sudden

dispersion of hungry, eager and needy teens in their midst, reversing the town's "sclerotic," in Mr. Pezeshki's words, outlook once and for all.

Yes, Pullman isn't Seattle or New York, and thus isn't as burdened by the same urban/suburban divides as those cities have seen over the years, but we aren't that very far either, at least culturally. And at any rate, it is time to revise the way we think of the relationship between high schools and society. If we have $50 million to spend on a new addition, I surely wouldn't spend it on that outmoded school up on that far flung hill.

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